

THE A. J. LLEWELLYN SAMPLER Snippets and Stories from 2007 to Now

by

A.J. LLEWELLYN

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Dear Readers,

This is a selection of excerpts from nineteen of my published books, including five published with my cherished and adored frequent co-author, D.J. Manly. There are a few short stories, and Rentboy, Phantom Lover #5— an entire novella— from my best-selling paranormal series.

I've also included the first chapter of my upcoming book, a gay mystery called Love, Lilac and Lusio.

With over 300 M/M books published, it was hard to choose what to put in here so please forgive me for the fact this does not reflect the entire body of my work.

I have tried to include a variety of stories from fantasy, paranormal, ghosts, goblins, fairies, sci-fi, werewolves and vampires – all of them with very happy endings.

My hope is you find something you enjoy. Please drop me a line and let me know!

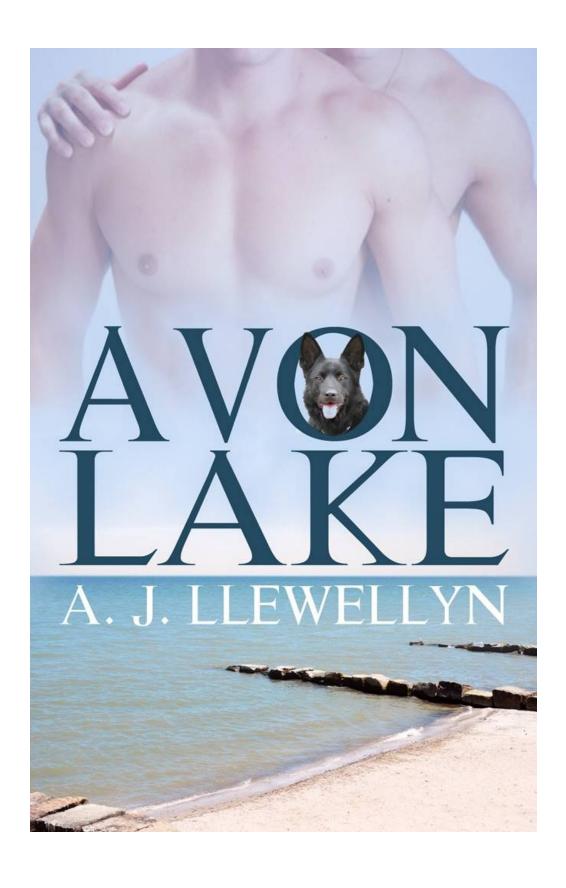
With much love,

A.J. xo

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BOOK PURCHASE LINKS/ARTIST/ PUBLISHER INFO ABOUT THE AUTHOR OTHER BOOKS BY A. J. LLEWELLYN



AVON LAKE

Detective Rhyen Devito is struggling to recover from the death of his work partner, Nico. To his parents, Nico was just a dog, but to Rhyen he was the most trustworthy partner who gave him unconditional love and total support. This was more than any two-legged partner ever gave him. After Nico's full-honors funeral, Rhyen transfers temporarily from the hectic Toledo K-9 unit to the more tranquil Holland village division. He surprises himself by answering a humorous online ad penned by a guy who might just be the answer to his romantic dreams.

Miguel Castro has had a hard time since moving to the U.S. from Argentina. His longtime lover was violent, and Miguel sought legal protection after recovering from his injuries. Now located far from the west coast in beautiful Avon Lake, he misses only one thing. Companionship. He's attracted to Rhyen the moment they start talking. He knows Rhyen is grieving the loss of Nico and his heart aches for the guy

When Miguel invites Rhyen to go beachcombing with him, he hopes that sparks fly...the good kind.

CHAPTER 1

Rhyen Devito didn't believe in love at first sight. He didn't believe in miracle soul mates or that it was possible to exchange kisses that lasted all day. He didn't believe in long-range plans that involved plane travel and family members who posted every single smile on social media. And, more than anything, he did not believe *any* of the goopy stuff people posted in online ads.

And yet, he'd responded to Miguel's "Come Beachcombing with Me this Sunday" line three minutes after he'd seen it.

How could he resist a guy who left him rolling with laughter on the kitchen floor? He'd had to reread a couple of passages over again to make sure Miguel really had written, "I'm looking for someone authentic. Guys who lie or fart like Clydesdales need not apply."

Miguel, who said he was thirty, and living in one of Ohio's Lake Erie seaside towns, admitted to not being perfect. "For the record, I have a bad habit of cursing. I have constant, impure thoughts. Oh, and I once stole a fish when I was five. I took it to the beach and released it to the sea, not realizing that sucker was never gonna come back from the dead. Did I also mention I'm not very smart sometimes?"

The guy was endearing and Rhyen went for it. Then he sat back in his chair, freaking the hell out ever so quietly in his Nightingale Drive apartment. This was the most exciting thing to happen to him since he'd broken up with his lover, Frank.

Rhyen celebrated his bravery by brewing a fresh pot of coffee. He kept his computer turned on, hoping he'd get a response soon, and then fretted that his own reply might have been too bland.

Then he started to worry about the ad itself.

Being a lifelong worker who didn't spend much time at the ocean, Rhyen wasn't even sure what beachcombing was. He assumed it meant walking along the sand and looking for washed-up treasures, but panicked when he thought more about it. What if "beachcombing" has a new, secret, dark sexual meaning in this online dating world? What if it means getting myself tied up? Maybe they slather honeycomb on me and biting insects are allowed to crawl on me?

At the age of twenty-eight, Rhyen had been out of heavy rotation for five years, thanks to his relationship with Frank. Now that they'd been apart for a year, he figured he needed to bring his cock, and his winter clothing, out of storage.

And for the first time since the death of his work partner,

Nico, something within Rhyen stirred with...what was that? Hope?

He took a deep breath and read the ad again, twice. Rhyen liked Miguel's way with words. He'd hit the SEND button before he even thought about Googling the words "beachcombing" and "sex slang" together. It was so unlike him to proceed without caution. Rhyen was a relentless Googler. Came with being a detective on the Holland Police Force. With an "average" crime rating, Holland wasn't exactly a hotbed of mayhem and murder, but his team had plenty to do.

They spent their lives tracing a ton of felons for crimes like unpaid child support, drug charges, Failure to Appear in court, and his least favorite and thankfully infrequent, Criminal Sexual Assault of a Minor.

Being a cop didn't make him wish for much spontaneity in his personal life. His job gave him plenty of that, so he craved sedate routine in his off-duty hours. But Miguel's ad had taken him by surprise.

Rhyen sat at the kitchen table again, sipping fresh coffee. He peered out of the window at the lake in the center of his apartment complex's luxurious grounds. Anguish tugged at his heart. Normally he and Nico would be having breakfast together. Five months had passed and it still hurt like hell not to be grilling the big guy turkey bacon and giving him Probiotics.

Maybe I should take a morning walk. No. He couldn't bear to be out there. It wasn't the same without Nico.

He took a deep breath and Googled "beachcombing," and it appeared to have the same meaning it always did. Good to know that some things didn't change. It seemed to have a lot of rules, though, which surprised him.

Why hasn't he responded? How long do these things take anyway? Did I sound pathetic? Stupid? He'd seen

Miguel's photo and the dark, curly-haired dazzler with the chiseled cheeks was gorgeous. Rhyen couldn't have been more opposite. His hair was light brown and short. His sister said he was born looking like a cop, but he'd taken her advice and hadn't mentioned he was a cop in his email to Miguel.

"Nobody wants to date lawyers, cops, or IRS enforcement agents," she'd informed him. Rhyen wasn't sure those things were true, but was encouraged by the fact that Nina had met her own husband on the dating site Rhyen had been scrutinizing for over an hour. She'd signed him up for a thirty-day membership as a birthday gift.

"Make the month count," she'd said earlier that morning when she called to wish him a happy birthday. "And for God's sake, get some, will ya?"

But Miguel didn't respond right away and Rhyen prepared himself for a long, rough day on duty. It had been five months of days like this, now he came to think of it.

Losing Frank had been awful, but ever since the death of Nico, he'd taken himself out of the K-9 Unit in Toledo and moved temporarily to the Holland division. He was officially mulling over whether he would return to K-9 or stay in Holland. He didn't think he could handle having a new dog partner. Nico's murder had devastated him.

Why did I have to go think about that? Rhyen had taken down all the photos of Nico. He'd put away his partner's leash, collar, work harness and bulletproof vest. He had tons of T-shirts the department had given him in honor of Nico's life and work, and though he'd given many away, Rhyen had kept a few for himself. He walked into the bedroom, and in spite of all his promises to himself, pulled one from the top drawer of his bureau. He wept as he held the blue fabric in his hands. This was how his days often

started. He stared at the giant dog paw stenciled on the shirt, the words *Gone But Not Forgotten* around it. Beneath it was written, *Officer Nico. End of Watch June 12, 2015.*

His funeral had been attended by hundreds of people. The haunting bagpipes playing "Amazing Grace" still reduced him to rubble when he remembered them. They came to him even in sleep. When he went back to Toledo to shop, or visit his favorite gym, locals still stopped Rhyen on the street, expecting Nico to be with him.

"Half of you is missing," people said.

It felt that way, too. In truth, the loss of Nico hurt more than the loss of Frank. Frank was still alive, if Rhyen chose to contact him. But he didn't. Nico had always had his back. Rhyen had always protected Nico, too, but blamed himself that a street thug they'd been chasing on foot turned and shot his beloved partner.

Both a shop assistant and Nico had been killed by the assailant for a pair of stolen Samsung Galaxy Tab Pros. It's my fault. I sent him into that building after the suspect. Nico's dead. And he's never coming back.

Rhyen could still hear that single gunshot ringing in his mind as he folded the T-shirt and put it back in the drawer. His hand hovered over the bulletproof vest for which Nico had been fitted only six days before his death. Nico had been so proud of that damned thing. Unfortunately it couldn't save him because the assailant shot him right in the face. He fingered the vest and ran his hands over the other items in the drawer. The kong Nico had loved. There weren't many toys Nico could play with because he ate them all up, especially tennis balls. But he'd adored the hard plastic sumo wrestler Frank had given him, and the orange shark with a fin that squeaked. Nico had been so young, and with his hard work schedule, Rhyen had spoiled him with toys. Rhyen had kept a few and donated

the rest to the department's other dogs. He focused next on the other treasure in the drawer, the American flag given to him at Nico's full-honors funeral by city of Toledo.

Nico's ashes were in a metal urn by his bed. In life, Nico had always slept on the bed with him. Sometimes, when the nights became truly terrible, Rhyen was convinced he felt the dog's footfall on the bedding. Once, he'd been certain Nico even put his head on Rhyen's shoulder, the way he always did.

Nighttime brought the cruelest hours, with the chase replaying over and over in his mind. Then the gunshot. Then Nico's agonized whimpering.

Sometimes Rhyen replayed the funeral where he'd given one of the many eulogies, then had to walk past the other K-9 officers and their partners with Nico's ashes in his hands. He'd endured the service attended by K-9 units from both Ohio and Michigan, praying he wouldn't cry in public. The hardest part had been returning with his partner's remains to their work vehicle, the sound of "Taps" accompanying them.

The other police dogs had whined. They seemed to know one of their own had fallen. Rhyen had started the car and turned on its lights. Glancing in the rearview and side mirrors, he'd watched the dogs pacing, their whines intensifying to mournful barking as he rolled forward. His only thought was that Nico would *never* have moved out of position without Rhyen's permission.

Anguish consumed him knowing how much Nico had loved their new Ford Interceptor. That day, Nico rode in it for the first time without giving a lick to Rhyen's face, or resting his head on his shoulder.

There was no sneaky drive-through for Rhyen and Nico to indulge their love of McDonalds' soft-serve ice cream. Rhyen had broken down emotionally heading home when he saw the city's flags flying half-staff in Nico's honor. They would do so until sunset. He'd been forced to pull over at one point, sobbing his heart out.

The only thing that saved Rhyen's sanity was the knowledge that the gunman had been killed by another cop right after Nico was shot. Rhyen couldn't have lived with the knowledge that the guy was out there, somewhere, running free.

Scheduled to train and work with a new partner soon, Rhyen was mentally and emotionally not ready. He couldn't look at the online photos of the new puppies ready for work, sent to him by Von der Haus Gill German shepherds in Wapakoneta, the breeders who bred and trained police dogs. An anonymous donor had offered to pay for a new dog. It was generous, considering K-9 training topped out at around fifteen thousand dollars.

Rhyen hadn't said "yes." Or "no." He'd said he'd think about it. Guilt had crippled him for months. Guilt was normal, the department's therapist had told him. It was normal but not correct. "It was a one-off. This doesn't mean your next partner will die in the line of duty." Melissa had tried to convince him that murder didn't happen much to cops in Toledo. The last on-duty death had been in 2007.

Rhyen had no idea why Nico had to be the one that broke the record.

Now, he pulled himself together long enough to shower and dress, then checked his online mail.

Still nothing from Miguel.

Losing Nico had meant a lot of free time Rhyen neither wanted nor realized would happen. It had been a huge adjustment. His sister and new brother-in-law, Otis, had come for the funeral and stayed a few days. Otis was a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-

Champaign, a five-hour drive. He had been a great comfort. It had helped having them around. Both were dog lovers and Otis was a sweet guy. He'd lost his wife and son in a childbirth gone horribly wrong, so he understood loss.

Nina had given him the strength and desire to live again. "You will get through this," he told Rhyen. "You will never get over what happened to Nico, you'll just learn to live without him."

He'd understood so much, and so had Nina. Their parents, who lived in Florida, said, "It's just a dog." But Nico wasn't. It had been hard for his parents to accept Rhyen's sexuality and they'd always been distant since he came out to them. They had liked Frank. Actually, they liked his parents and blamed Rhyen for his relationship breakup, because Frank's parents no longer wanted to play bridge with them.

It couldn't be helped. It wasn't Rhyen's fault that Frank had a roving eye. He'd fallen for somebody else during a three-week IT assignment in Michigan.

And people say Nico was a dog. Frank was the real dog.

Nico had helped Rhyen's broken heart in the months following Frank's defection. Work and his partner's care had been Rhyen's life for the last two years. When they weren't on assignment, he and Nico often visited schools around the state to educate children about the K-9 Unit. They also took courses every week for everything from bomb and drug detection to tracking training, K-9 tactics, and fire safety. Nico had excelled in bomb and drug detection.

When he'd become fully grown enough to be fitted for a bulletproof vest, he and Rhyen had begun an intensive course in drug detection. Nico had sniffed out traces of heroin and cocaine in the most unlikely places on and off duty.

The dog never stopped working. His life had been one of such high pressure, that Rhyen had worried about Nico's lack of fun. Though he seemed to thrive on their schedule, Rhyen tried to make up for it with long hikes in Swan Creek Preserve.

Am I ready to open my heart and love again? Man or dog?

He powered down the laptop and went to work, convinced his superiors had given him the most mind-numbing tasks as a way to snap him out of his depression and send him back to the real world. Holland had a small force of eleven officers and three detectives, including Rhyen, and Toledo was working with a skeleton staff at the best of times. He'd been given another month to decide his fate.

Sometimes I just can't even think straight. But he knew he'd have to return to normal duty soon, especially when he took note of today's assignment, which involved the exciting job of supervising female minimum-security prisoners conducting leaf-collection duties. Yeah. That'll take my mind off things.

The police departments in and around Toledo had beefed up security in the wake of a serial killer who'd murdered four women. Holland was a fairly safe community, but still, it was Rhyen's responsibility to protect his charges. As he accompanied the street teams collecting leaves, his mind wandered. He'd ask himself why he'd even want to date Miguel, who described himself as an out-of-work actor and writer whose current job as a restaurant waiter was temporary.

Rhyen had always fallen for business men. Intelligent, serious guys. Well, Frank had been intelligent. He'd also been a dick. Miguel, however, seemed full of fun. And that

was another puzzle. Something about Miguel drew him in, and that evening, as Rhyen enjoyed pizza and gyros with a couple of his off-duty buddies at Zaza's, he found himself excited at the prospect of an email waiting for him when he got home.

He hadn't thought he could muster the enthusiasm for a birthday celebration, but it turned out to be an evening of laughter and crazy stories with his workmates. Joe Stafford, the officer who'd shot Nico's killer, gave him a wonderful gift. It was a photo he'd taken of Rhyen and Nico the day of their first joint assignment together.

"I remember that morning." Rhyen's memories brought some smiles. He and Nico had rescued a young woman being beaten by her boyfriend. Nico had caught the attacker's shirttail in his teeth and the guy had screamed like a teenage girl.

For the first time all day, Rhyen didn't weep at the thought of Nico. He was deeply touched that Stafford had given him such a caring present. "Was he ever that small?" Rhyen asked in wonderment. He studied the framed picture, remembering how Nico's right ear often flopped over when he was a puppy. That was cute, but even then Nico had the intensity he held until the day he died.

"He loved you." Joe's voice was tender.

"Thank you for helping him." Rhyen suddenly realized he'd been crying after all, as a tear fell down his chin.

"It was my honor." Stafford's voice cracked as he squeezed Rhyen's shoulder. Stafford's K-9 partner, Luigi, had been shot at before, but had never taken a bullet. Now all the human cops were scared. It could have happened to any one of their partners. Or themselves.

They talked of other things, such as the Toledo cop caught on tape having a meltdown. "Crazy Toledo Cop" had been uploaded to YouTube and was cringe-worthy

viewing. As they watched the five-minute video on Stafford's cell phone, Rhyen couldn't help but reflect that even though the city was only ten miles from Holland, Toledo seemed like another planet sometimes.

They ordered coffee and ate some of the chocolate cake the guys had bought him. They presented the cake with a host of lit candles. Of course, they showed their juvenile side by having stuck in candles that refused to go out.

It was the best laugh Rhyen had had in ages. And best of all, he even got to take the rest of the moist, gooey fudge cake home.

"Come back to Toledo soon," Stafford urged as they all exchanged hugs in the parking lot. In moments like these, Rhyen was certain he would. Soon.

The moment after he walked through the door of his apartment, he checked his emails. Miguel had contacted him. As Rhyen munched through the rest of the cake with lashings of Tillamook ice cream, he composed a response.

They exchanged many emails over the next two hours and, high on chocolate, Rhyen told Miguel he was a cop.

Miguel wrote, "You look like one in your photo."

Over the coming days, Rhyen and Miguel revealed more details about their lives. Though their backgrounds were different—Miguel was from Peru—they had one thing in common. Both had former lovers who'd left them. This led to two weeks of text messages and phone calls, and finally, Miguel said he was living in Avon Lake, Ohio, a beautiful town on Lake Erie.

"It was everything I was looking for," Miguel said. "A return to simpler times." Rhyen had heard of it but had never been there. Lake Erie had many small towns dotting its coastline, but Frank hadn't been much of a beach guy,

and in the three years they'd lived in Toledo, the only beaches they'd visited had been the Bahamas and Vero Beach, Florida, where they'd visited their respective families. Both sets of parents had settled there after finding townhouses in the same senior-living complex. Now it seemed like the Hatfields and McCoys, with neither couple speaking to the other.

As he talked to Miguel, Rhyen Googled Avon Lake, and the images online reflected what Miguel said of the place.

Avon Lake—like many places in Ohio, and Michigan, that were called lakes—were also referred to as beaches. Most of them tucked into the greater confines of the Great Lakes. Avon Lake was a hundred miles east of Holland. It would take an hour and a quarter to drive there. Not far at all, yet from what Rhyen could see, it also might have been another planet. A much nicer planet than Toledo.

A pang of regret that he'd never taken Nico to the beach hit him hard. He sucked in a deep breath and focused on his research. Avon Lake seemed too good to be true.

The idea of hand-dipped ice cream cones in an old-fashioned soda fountain appealed to him.

"It looks so cool. Oh. You have everything there except crime!" Rhyen said during one of his calls.

Miguel laughed. "When was the last time you visited a beach?"

"I went to the Bahamas with my ex a few years ago. That was before I got my, um, dog."

Miguel said, "I hope you don't mind, but I Googled you. I am so sorry about your partner. Nico was a very special officer."

God, I like you already. "Thank you for calling him an officer."

"Well, he was. I watched his funeral service. I don't mind admitting that I cried when you walked to your patrol car with his urn. The other dogs whining and barking for him really affected me."

"Me, too." Thank you for not saying "It's just a dog."

"You must miss him so much."

"I do." Sometimes he could talk about Nico. Sometimes he couldn't. This time he couldn't. I didn't have enough time with him. I wanted him to retire with me. I wanted to grow old with him. Stop. Enough now.

For the first time, a different thought entered his mind. Maybe I need to return to K-9. I want a new partner. I'll make sure we get crumbly, cranky and fat together.

"I'm thinking about going back to K-9," he said aloud.

"You mean you left?"

"Yeah. But they have a few puppies they want me to meet." He gulped. *Man, I am cheating on Nico. How could I do that?*

"Oh, that sounds adorable. And it's the best way to honor his memory." Miguel's tone was gentle. "I can't imagine what you've been through losing your partner in such a violent way. I'm so sorry, Rhyen."

"Thank you." He didn't think Miguel knew what had happened. "Hey, you know, I checked out Avon Lake and you have an official 'very low' crime rate. Nico would have hated that. He always wanted to catch bad guys."

"Well, we know how to make a little trouble here now and then."

I bet you do. From the photos Miguel had sent him, one hell of a hot Latin man waiting tables in a restaurant in Avon Lake. I bet he makes plenty of trouble just walking along the shoreline. I'd crash my car if I saw him strolling by...

"Come visit me," Miguel said. "You'll love it here, I promise."

Online searches showed Rhyen that Miguel was

probably right, but Rhyen didn't commit right away. He wasn't ready yet, and besides, taking a trip—even one just over an hour long—to meet a guy seemed a little... desperate. After their conversation, he Googled the picturesque town again to see it had boardwalks and plenty of outdoor activities. Well, Holland was famous, too, for its heritage as a Dutch-populated community. It was also home to an antique popcorn factory.

"I Googled your village," Miguel said when they spoke again the next morning. "Have you been to your famous popcorn factory?"

"Yeah. I chased a couple of bad guys from there." Rhyen laughed.

"So what's antique, the popcorn machines or the food itself? Antique popcorn isn't tasty."

"No, it isn't." Rhyen laughed again. "They do pop fresh corn there. They give you a bag to eat as you take the tour. They gave me an extra big one."

"Was this before or after you chased the bad guys?"

"Before. They were robbing a bank nearby. This was before I had my K-9 partner." No point telling Miguel he'd been in Toledo the last three years because of Frank's work assignment. Up until then, Rhyen had lived in Chicago his whole life. He'd uprooted to Toledo for Frank, who'd then left him. *Man, I am such a loser*. "The owner gave me a fresh bag of popcorn as a reward."

"Better than a medal."

"It might have been if he'd put some butter on the popcorn!" Rhyen joked. "Hey, maybe you should come and visit Holland."

A pause. "But you just said the popcorn's lousy."

Rhyen laughed a third time. "It's not bad. Besides, we have other attractions." He held his breath, aware of the loaded message.

"I will, one day. But I work seven days a week at the moment. Please come and visit me. We'll have fun."

Rhyen hesitated. "Have you met anyone else from your ad?"

"Two guys. And they were weird."

"In what way?"

"One of them told me he wanted us to exchange blood in some strange knife ritual. I sent him straight home. The second one was a guy obsessed with fitness. I couldn't imagine having sex with him. Our first date was at the gym. I got all sweaty and out of breath. And not in a good way."

Rhyen couldn't help smiling. He already knew that Miguel's last lover had split a year ago. The guy had come back a couple of times, but as Miguel put it, "Absence made the heart grow extremely hostile."

He'd moved to Avon Lake to work in an old friend's restaurant. "I've done better writing here than I did in L.A.," he said. "Rhyen, I really want to meet you. Bring some popcorn. I'll let you know what I think of it. I'm very honest when it comes to snacks."

Rhyen laughed once more. "Maybe I will." The idea that somebody might snap up this sweet guy niggled at him. "I have to go to work now. You want to talk tonight?"

"Can't wait."

They said their farewells and Rhyen went to work smiling. Maybe the fresh lake air would make a nice change from being in his little village. He had begun to look forward to his late-night conversations with Miguel. And the morning ones. And the constant texts and brief calls they exchanged during the day.

He'd been unable to sleep after Nico was killed. It had taken a lot of effort to give up his late-night TV and Tillamook ice cream habit. Talking to Miguel made him happier than he cared to admit. He made Rhyen laugh and

seemed to get a kick out of it.

Rhyen enjoyed their newfound friendship and tried not to think that maybe it would become more. *I could always use a new friend*.

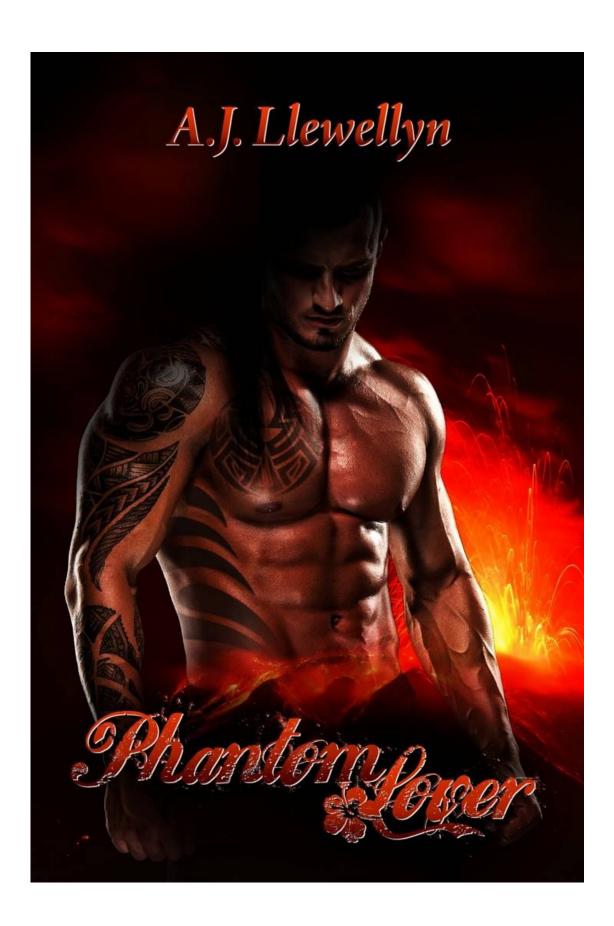
An hour later, Miguel called him. "Why don't you come for the weekend? We could have dinner Friday night. I work evenings this weekend, so we can hang out. I really want to take you beachcombing. It's a different world here. You'll feel like you've stepped back in time. Avon Lake is like a town out of the 1940s."

It didn't take much convincing. Rhyen had already scoped out the place. The idea of a weekend away had increasing appeal. He'd been depressed for too long, but his thoughts raced. Rhyen didn't want to stay with Miguel. What if they hated each other? Should he go for dinner Friday or Saturday, then drive home?

"I was thinking, there are some wonderful beach cottages with apartments for rent all along the lake." Apparently, Miguel was a mind reader. "My landlady has several of them. She has a fully furnished two-bedroom apartment available in a cute cottage a few doors down from me. It's the entire bottom floor. It's gorgeous here right now. The lake has a fantastic view all the way clear to Cleveland. She'd give you a great discount for a weekend, especially since it's out of season. You can check out her properties online."

"I'll do it," Rhyen said. "I'll be in touch."

"Very cool. And don't forget my popcorn."



AWARD-WINNING SEX SCENE FROM "PHANTOM LOVER"

Hawaiian hula dancer Bobby Kikawa has deep fantasies about the alluring, mysterious Kimo Wilder, a gifted kahuna and kumu hula, a hula master. He becomes even more fixated after Kimo poses for an erotic painting called Phantom Lover. He plans to seduce Kimo even though the man is straight, married and known for his extreme loyalty to his wife.

Alone on a hot night after dance rehearsal on the big island of Hawaii, Bobby manages to persuade Kimo to let him service his neglected, extremely hungry passions. When the young dancer awakens a part of Kimo that nobody else ever has, Bobby both fears and welcomes the incredible power Kimo has over him. The legendary dancer inserts himself into Bobby's life, but not everyone is happy about their burgeoning romance.

Things go from one extreme to another with interference from family and friends. Are the men prepared to sacrifice everything for each other? Their redhot fling threatens not only Kimo's marriage but Bobby's sanity when he discovers Kimo is a "Keeper of Secrets" in the Hawaiian culture...a man born of fire and hidden, taboo, dark magic the ancient Hawaiians called Lua...

He took me by the hand and we clambered over Madame Pele's hardened stones into the more recent floes we Hawaiians call *pahoehoe*. It is the closest thing you'll see to an eruption, without actually witnessing an eruption. When Mauna Ulu erupted a few years ago, it opened a giant hole in the lava field, creating a brand-new crater, which the average tourist knows nothing about, so only the locals and dedicated volcano chasers go there.

I knew it was no casual stroll during the day, let alone at night. One wrong move and we'd be the first live human sacrifices Pele would be receiving. This was my first visit and my eyes gaped as I stepped on still-moving lava and steam steeped around my shoes.

"Take your clothes off," Kimo said.

"What? Here? What if somebody sees us?" The park would be alive now with park rangers, even devotees of Pele wanting to bring her gifts.

"That's part of the thrill, but she won't let that happen. Pele protects her children. Quickly now, baby." Kimo was already removing his jeans and sporting a handsome boner.

He put our clothes on the puddling lava field. "I want this to be as comfortable as possible for you. Lie down."

I admit I was terrified, but I wanted to trust him. He put me on the pile of clothes and it wasn't too bad. In fact, my body seemed to mold into the softened lava. It was like being on a very warm, spongy, but solid waterbed.

Then I moved my arm up, but there was nothing there. I was right on the lip of Pele's fiery new home.

"Madame Pele loves sex," he said. "Orgasm is the beginning of creation. What an offering, eh? I'm letting her watch me fuck my beautiful boyfriend. My beautiful, horny boyfriend. Like granddad, like grandson, Bobby." I couldn't speak.

"Let me look at your ass." He was between my legs, my knees pinned to my ears before I could respond.

"It looks real tight. Sure you can take me?" he said finally.

"I've only had one guy fuck me. My ex." The man with the midget dick, but I didn't say this. I just reached up, laying little kisses on his powerful chest. Our bodies melded toward one another. His skin turned golden as the sun said its last goodbye.

"Are you comfortable on your knees like that?" I asked.

"It feels like I'm on fire. I'm so turned on, baby, I don't know what to do with myself."

I moved his hand to my cock, which was more than ready for him and he looked pleased that just the nearness of him could arouse me the way it did. He quickly ran his hand over it, moving up to my belly.

"Oh, Bobby...I can't wait to fuck you. But I also want to make you feel good...within reason. What would make you feel good?"

I knew enough about Kimo to know that he was such a sensualist, he wouldn't want to miss out on anything that would heighten this experience. His fingers moved lightly over my chest and stomach muscles, he seemed relaxed and ready to play. His thumb and forefinger closed over one of my nipples, which he could see was hardening.

"This feel good?" His voice was a grunt. I could tell he really was getting turned on.

"Oh yeah," I said, hoping I wouldn't come before my great Phantom Warrior Lover could get that massive cock inside me. "Between what you're doing to me and the lava moving underneath me...it's amazing."

"Good." His fingers moved to my other nipple, the one that always make my cock stiff as a board.

"A-ha!" His huge smile revealed those perfect teeth, even in the dark. "Nipples do nothing for me," he said, rotating his index and middle fingers over the nub that was enjoying his attention. "You want me to suck it?" His voice was a guttural whisper.

"I'd love it," I said as he dropped his head, sucking the nipple into his mouth with such ferocity, I almost leapt into Pele's smoldering crater.

"Yeah, I do want to fuck you." His hand moved down to my cock, which he didn't touch. It throbbed and bobbed but his hand moved around it, to touch my balls and then drop down to my ass.

My legs opened and he ran his index finger along the crack, his eyes deep and black as he looked at me. I raised my mouth to his and, for a moment, I thought he would refuse. And then he did. He nudged me back with

his forehead, keeping up the fingering on my ass, his thumb rubbing lightly at my ball sac.

"I like the way you feel. I like your smooth, soft skin. God, you wax completely down there? My wife could learn something from you. She's like a Rasta down there."

We both laughed and he kept touching and stroking me. "You feel different to women. Different, but good. You want to come before we start? I don't want to put my cock in you and have you come before I can give you the goddamn thrashing you deserve."

I nodded and his hand went to my cock and he started moving his massive fist up and down on the shaft. He wasn't gentle, but he seemed to be spellbound touching another man's prick.

"Come all over my hand," he said. "I'll use it to lube myself up."

"I don't like lube. I like it the hard way."

He liked that, I could tell. My ass was going to spoil him for his wife, for any woman. "Do you now?" He chuckled.

"You never jacked a guy off before?"

"Never needed to." He shrugged. "I've always had plenty of women. Until I got married."

I was panting now. "Nobody ever wanted to suck your cock before?"

His fingers were squeezing the head of my cock. *Oh, put your tongue in,* I wanted to say, but I didn't.

I watched Kimo Wilder, with his hand around my cock, the concentrated way he was urging me to fulfillment and the ecstatic smile on his face when he achieved it.

"You little cocksucker." He grinned. "You came all over my hand."

My heart pumped crazily and he put two fingers to my throat. "That's good." He counted the beats. "Let's see how hard you come with my cock in your ass." I went to turn

over.

"Oh no. I want to fuck you like a woman."

"You can get into me deeper this way," I lifted my ass to him. He got between my legs. I saw his huge cock eager for its cave. He was like a dog in heat. He needed to fuck. He wanted to fuck. And then his hands were stroking my ass. His tongue dipped down and flicked a couple of licks at my asshole.

My hands grabbed onto the nearest fat ropes of *pahoehoe* I could find. His long tongue flicked out and that was the first time I saw it was tattooed. That put my dick into instant hardness, but he changed course.

"What's the tattoo on your tongue?" I was in heaven now. "King Kamehameha." His hands moved to my feet, holding them in a reverent way, licking the toes on my right foot, then my left. His mouth sucked, licked, ate its way up my thighs.

"And now the King will make you come." He paused in his activity to stare down at my butt hole, as if wanting to prolong the moment he took possession of it, yet taking great pleasure in knowing it was his for the taking.

"It's yours, Kimo," I said, when one hand grazed against it.

I saw the look of primal, burning lust on his face when I said that. I reached up to stroke his big, strong arms, his shoulders, his beautiful face. His tongue snaked out to lick my fingers, then he went back to what he really wanted.

His hands held my legs to him and I realized I was making a racket because just inches from my butt cheeks, he said, "All that noise and I'm not even inside you yet."

The realization of what we were doing seemed to hit him. He looked at me and smiled. He was at my ass now. His tongue went to my asshole and he began to lick and suck at it, trying to get his tongue inside me.

He lifted his face again. "You taste so good. I never even want to eat my wife's ass. What have you done to me, mahu?"

I didn't respond because I was torn between trying to relax and enjoying the licking and sucking and getting that beautiful, massive monster inside me. His tongue dipped down again and I stroked his gleaming black hair. I wanted to hold his head to me. There was time enough to get bossy with him, I decided, sighing with pleasure as I watched Kimo Wilder eating out my ass. He licked me like I was a woman.

His woman.

He stopped. "Does this feel good?"

"Yes, oh, yes."

"You're not going to come again, are you? I don't want you to come until I'm inside you."

I hadn't even thought about how hard my cock was. The tip was reaching for the sky, purple-red, anxious for release.

"Don't touch it. I'll last."

"I don't know that I can't touch it," he said, in wonderment. "It's so pleased to see me."

He dropped a small, possessive kiss on the shaft and went back to my asshole. I almost jumped from the thrill of having this magnificent warrior's mouth back on me, licking me with all the passion, all the concentration he normally gave his wife. Kimo kept at it and it was becoming harder and harder not to come. I focused on breathing, on not doing anything that would take his mouth away from me.

His tongue laved my ass. I felt myself getting wetter, more open and he sensed it, too, moaning into my deepest recesses.

He raised his head again and snarled, "You're mine now, bitch. If I fuck you, there's no going back."

I grabbed his huge tool then, pointing it exactly where I needed it. We were clear now. I wanted his cock. He wanted ownership of me.

He let me guide him to me, then brushed my hands away as he slowly entered me. The pleasure-pain engulfed me as Kimo Wilder eased himself into me.

"Oh God, you're so warm in there. I had no idea." He took his time, working his way into me, until my body accepted the biggest thing it had ever had inside it. "You're so tight, Bobby." He rotated his hips and the jolts of pain as he stretched and pulled at my ass muscles shifted to something else. Then he took that massive cock out of me. "No, no," I screamed. "Don't take it away from me!" And he thrust it back into me again.

"Beautiful mahu, you have no idea how good this is."

"I can make it better." I started to contract my ass muscles and a look of astonishment crossed his face as he roared to an orgasm, sending his red-hot lava spilling into me. My cock jerked with the weight of him on me and I reached down to pull myself off, but he was man enough to move my hand away.

"No, no, I want to do it." He pulled on me in the way men jerk themselves off.

"No, like this." Since I had to teach him. I like the hand curled around the prick, up over the head. He understood at once and took great delight in watching my own release as he slowed down the ass fucking he was giving me.

"I want to stay inside you. I want to do it again. You love getting fucked, don't you?"

"I love getting fucked by you." I surprised him by raising my head with him still impaling me and I licked his nipples.

"Oh...oh...shit, that's good. Oh fuck...that one, baby. That one, *mahu*, the left one."

Indeed, his left nipple was distended now and I sucked

on it, knowing what messages it was sending to his cock. Fuck the *mahu*.

He started again in slow, circular, hula motions and I wished I could watch his ass muscles moving as he sawed in and out of me again. Nothing else mattered but this feeling of ecstasy we had created and I met each of his lunges as his cock got harder and harder and he pulled it all the way out, only to give it right back to me again. He threw my legs over his shoulders, holding them to him, giving him leverage, but also bringing me closer.

There was such fierce absorption on his face, a passion I had never seen before. His mouth opened and I rose to meet him. If there was resistance at first, it soon melted away as I sucked on his whole tongue and he dipped forward to feed it all to me.

Again I was teaching him. He could fuck my mouth with his tongue, bringing us both more joy.

He took his mouth from me, forcing himself down on me. I loved the feel of his hard, masculine body on mine, then he started to suck at my nipples, moving away again, intent on watching how it looked to find his cock in another man's ass.

A crack of thunder. The skies opened up in a firework display of fire and lightning.

"She's here!" Kimo shouted. "Oh, Pele," he chanted in Hawaiian, screaming into the vast space of stars and sky, alive now with her own power play.

A strange, beautiful nightglow filled the sky and I looked up to see millions of twinkling stars as my lover kept up a blistering pace inside me. I felt like Pele's lover, Kamapua'a, had come back to mortal form, fucking me with his huge cock-tusk, letting her feel our eruptions, sharing the moment we sent each other out into the abyss.

"Oh, Pele, giver of everything!" Kimo screamed as his

fingers curled over my cock again and I wished he wouldn't, because I didn't want to come again until he was ready. I wanted to ride that wave with him.

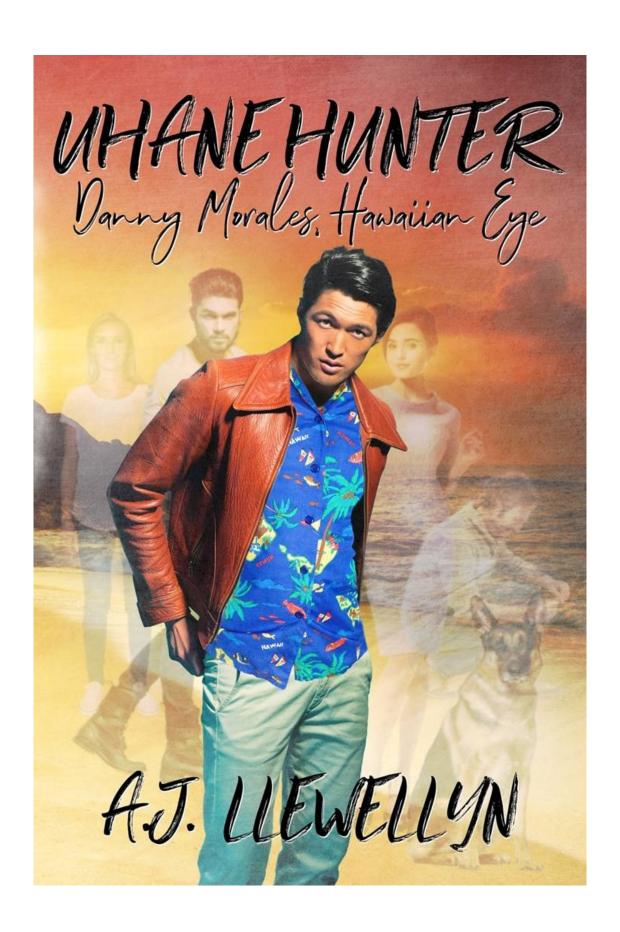
I grabbed his ass, afraid he would take that blazing tusk from me. The sensation of being pushed into me harder made him come with another shout, taking me across the riptide of fire with him. I rewarded him with my own orgasm, sending the juices up and over his firm grip.

"Oh, baby." He kissed my face over and over. Our bodies shook. Neither of us wanted to move, but we had to get off that crater. The others would be worried about us.

"We could sleep here, except we'd freeze to death." Kimo's voice was gentle as he took his cock from me. "I wish I could breed you. We'd make fine babies. You make me come so hard."

He hovered over me kissing me, but we had to get moving. We dressed quickly, laughing as we tried to find our scattered clothing and pulled the bedding of jeans out of the soft lava.

"We left our marks," he said.



WAIT FOR ME

(Short Story From : Uhane Hunter, Danny Morales, Hawaiian Eye)

PI Danny Morales gets unexpected advice when he helps Honolulu detectives in a murder investigation – from another killer.

It was gonna be a weird day. Nine A.M. and I already knew it. Don't ask me why, because the sun was shining and the tourists walking by my Waikiki storefront office looked smiling and cheerful. Not one of them had stopped to ask me for directions, or to inquire whether I sold package tours. And not a single one had enquired about zom zoms, whatever the heck they were.

I should have been pleased. I'd completed two investigations and made my clients happy. Not to mention my bank account. But a private eye is usually content only when they're hot on the trail of a bad guy. I, Danny Morales, now had time on my hands. And for someone like me that was never a good thing. I eased back in my swivel chair and scrolled through my cell phone messages. I'd received a text from the security department of the revamped International Marketplace. Did I want to pick up some extra cash patrolling the tourist-packed, open-air mall?

No, I did not. I glanced up at the walls of my office and knew I shouldn't put off repainting the place. The white paint I'd bought cheap at a discount hardware store hadn't covered the garish, animated sea animals that the previous tenant, my buddy, Charlie, had painted on them. A strange, toothsome, grinning shark was clearly visible

and when the sun hit it, he was, to be honest, off-putting.

I ignored the faint urge to paint over him, and opened an unread text message. *Huh*. Charlie. I hadn't spoken to him in months and hearing from him always brought mixed emotions. I was afraid he wanted the storefront office space back. Then I was afraid he didn't.

Almost a year ago, Charlie, an old Punahou School classmate, and I, had swapped lives. I'd moved from Kauai and gave up a stressful job as a detective in the cold case unit that covered the whole island. He took over my sweet Hanalei Bay condo and retired from selling vacation and time share packages, and I took over his storefront location.

I'd also moved into his Waikiki condo in the building that housed my office. Sometimes I missed the peace and quiet of Kauai. Sometimes I didn't.

We need to talk, the text read. I'm on my way to see you. On his way? What does that mean? Is he flying out here? Before I could thumb-text him back, a voice said, "Hey, Dan."

I glanced up, and there he was. Charlie. All aloha shirt, straw hat, and sunshiny smiles. But the smile didn't touch his pale blue eyes. He lumbered in and shot a fleeting look at the shark on the wall. I tried to ignore the pang of guilt surging through me. I didn't paint the shark. And it wasn't my fault that a real, live one chomped off Charlie's left arm and part of his right foot.

He was as trim and sun-ripened as ever. At the age of forty, he looked older than I did, but I'd never gone for the sun-bake-until-you-resemble-a raisin lifestyle. I don't remember his hair being anything other than pale blond interwoven with gray. The only change was that he wore a gleaming gold band on his right hand. A wedding ring. That was new. And a *huge* surprise. I'd always taken him for a

lifelong free spirit. Charlie caught my glance and this time his smile was sincere.

"Hooked me one fine wahine, brah." He swung himself into the seat across the desk from me. He walked with the aid of a prosthetic limb so well that unless you knew his story you'd never know one of his legs was fake.

"How'd you manage to land yourself a live one, Charlie?"

"I don't know." He looked as shocked as I felt. "I never thought I'd meet anyone stupid enough to take me on."

"Congratulations. May she never wise up."

He nodded. "Thank you."

"I think marriage suits you."

He frowned. "What makes you say that?"

"You're softer around the edges somehow." Before he could take offense I asked, "Can I get you some tea? Coffee?" I kept both in thermoses in my office.

"Coffee might be nice. Guess it's too early for scotch."

Oh, no. Something's wrong. I ignored the remark and got up from the chair. I poured us both a cup. I held up cream and sugar, but he shook his head.

"How's it going out here?" he asked, sipping the coffee the moment he took possession of it.

"Not bad. And you? How is life in the nether regions?" He didn't respond as he stared at the shark again. "I like what you've done with the place."

"I didn't do much, Charlie. And it needs another coat of paint."

He leaned back in his chair. "My pals at HPD tell me you're a breath of fresh air down here. They say that people think you're an undercover cop and crimes of opportunity have dropped, thanks to your presence."

This was news to me. Honolulu Police Department had a satellite office across the road farther up on Kalakaua Avenue, right on the beachfront. We had little

communication, but it was true. More people crushed into this one section cradling Diamond Head than the rest of the island put together. Though the compliment tickled me, it also flabbergasted me.

"Wow." I shook my head. "I thought I had nothing more than novelty value. I constantly get asked if I'm selling timeshares."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. I paid for a bunch of ads way in advance. They'll run out soon."

"Oh, and people stop by and ask me if I'm selling zom zoms. Did that ever happen to you?"

He laughed so hard he sloshed coffee from his cup and almost snorted some from his nose. "They're still doing that?" His crinkly blue eyes sparkled with mischief.

I stared at him. "That was you?"

He shrugged. "I had no idea the joke would keep going. Just for laughs I spread the word and now there's a whole app dedicated to the sale of zom zoms."

"Do zom zoms exist?"

He looked at me. "You're the only guy on the island selling them, Dan."

"No wonder people get huffy when I say I don't have them." I twirled my cup in my hands. "I hate you a little bit right now." How can I kill that app?

He put his cup on my desk then brushed some imaginary speck off his aloha shirt. He slid his hat back from his forehead. Charlie leaned his elbow onto my desk and his face fell. Something was up, just as I'd thought.

I frowned. "What's going on?"

"Well, now." He took another slug of coffee and set the half empty cup on my desk once more.

"Spit it, Charlie."

"My new wife's mother was murdered two nights ago." I gaped at him. "Oh, man, I'm so sorry. Here in Waikiki?"

He nodded. He looked so woebegone I thought he might cry. He stared at the desk, looking more upset than the time the shark took his body parts. In fact, a bunch of us had been out surfing and a big wave hit him. He went down then rose to the surface. He'd coughed and spluttered, cracking a few jokes as he made his way over to the rest of us.

"I think something bit me," he'd said as blood filled the choppy ocean water.

He'd never been one for high drama. Now he looked devastated.

"Charlie, what happened?" I asked. When he said nothing, I tried again. "Were your wife and her mother close?"

He blinked. "Yeah. Tanika comes here once a week to shop with Hiroko. Hiroko Kwan. That's her mother's name." He reached for the coffee and took another slug, putting the cup back on the desktop with great care. He scratched his cheek. "It's unbelievable." He sat back in his chair.

"So what happened?"

He shrugged. "Tanika comes here. She takes Hiroko to lunch, handles any problems she has with her condo. Tanika stays the night and flies back to Kauai the following day. She was supposed to be here visiting her mom the night Hiroko was murdered." His blue eyes swam with unshed tears. He swiped at them with the back of his hand. "I could have lost the only woman I ever loved, Dan. If she'd been in that apartment, she'd be dead, too."

The words hovered between us. "Why wasn't Tanika here that night?" I kept my tone gentle.

He swallowed. "She came home because our new dog got loose and she couldn't sleep thinking that Poppy was out there in the dark all alone. It's my fault. I took Poppy for a walk on the beach. She heard something and took off.

By the time Tan came home, Poppy was back. Tan called Hiroko. She wasn't worried at first, but her mom hasn't returned calls for two days now."

Charlie heaved a sigh. "She's a manic Facebook user and she has a daily blog for senior citizens. Both have been dormant for two days. Her voicemail filled up and we really started to worry. We called Hiroko's neighbors but couldn't get hold of anybody. The building manager's at some conference in Maui until tomorrow so we flew here early this morning and let ourselves into the condo."

He lapsed into silence. Shock seemed to have caught up with him.

"I'm so sorry, Charlie. What happened?"

"We walked in and knew right away something was wrong. The place was trashed. There were piles of things in the living room, like somebody planned to take them but got interrupted. The place was a mess, which isn't like Hiroko at all.

"Tanika rushed into the bedroom. She couldn't find her mother at first but then she started screaming. I ran in there and we found her in bed. She was a small woman and the room was in such disarray it was easy to miss her. She was under the covers and a pillow was put on her head."

I knew from experience that a suspect who covered up his victim that way felt some guilt and didn't want the dead person "looking" at them.

Charlie looked at me. "She was killed in a horrendous way. I respected Hiroko. I liked her a lot. She's a beautiful mix of Hawaiian and Japanese and a kinder woman I've never met, apart from Tanika. Hiroko does—did— so much to help people. She shouldn't have died this way. She shouldn't have been alone."

He struggled with his cell phone and put it on my desk.

He pecked out his pass code then tapped the phone, scrolling through images. Charlie pushed the phone toward me. My God. That poor woman had been beaten to death with some blunt object. The right sight of her head was caved in. From the neck down, she was clothed in blue pajamas with a Chinese collar spattered with blood.

How do you know she was murdered two nights ago?" I asked.

"That's what the cops say." Charlie had taken several photos and explained as I studied them.

"She has twin beds in her room. Hiroko's been widowed two years now and hated sleeping in the queen bed she shared with her husband, and so she got the twin beds." He paused. "Somehow, it's even more pitiful seeing her in that tiny bed all beat up."

"Of course it is." I flicked through the images. Hiroko's bed had been taken up with a couple of drawers, the contents of the drawers tossed everywhere. Her body had been shoved aside and covered up not only with bedding but her own possessions. As Charlie had said, it was easy to miss her at first.

The second bed was covered in broken and smashed drawers stacked on it. I squinted at the bedding. Drops of blood were visible. I glimpsed back at Hiroko's death bed.

"The police are there now and Tanika is with them. That's why I'm here. I need your help."

"I'm here for you, Charlie. What can I do for you?"

He took a deep breath and a single tear rolled down his weathered cheek. "The police say there are things about this case that are identical to an old, very old, cold case going back to the 1970s. 1976 to be exact."

"What case?"

He shrugged. "It got no PR. The tourist commission wielded a lot of power in those days. But there were six

burglaries, two included homicides. Nobody ever knew who the suspect was. There was no DNA back then."

"This case will undoubtedly reopen the investigation if there are similarities," I said.

"There were things that were never leaked about this case. What if it's the same guy?" Charlie looked helpless.

"But that was forty years ago. It can't be the same guy," I blurted.

"Maybe not. But you're the best damned cold case cop in the islands, and this was a brutal murder. I'm no criminal genius but either this guy's back in business or somebody's copying his style."

"But I'm not a cop anymore. I quit the force, remember?"

"Please Dan, I'm begging you. Go check it out. Lemme know what you think."

I opened my mouth. I wanted to say no. But I couldn't. How could I?

"They're waiting for you," he said. "HPD knows I'm talking to you. Say you'll come."

I looked outside at the sunshiny day. "Okay, Charlie. I'll do it. Where is the building?"

He gave me an address on Helumoa Road.

That gave me pause.

Back in the seventeenth century, Helumoa Road was a coconut grove that belonged to Kakuhihewa, the chief of the island of Oahu. According to my schoolboy history lessons, he'd been fond of human sacrifices. By day he killed people to appease his war god to give him power. By night, chickens would come out, pecking at maggots feasting on dead bodies.

Helumoa means chicken scratch.

All these years later, people are still being sacrificed. But for what?

Why had Hiroko been murdered? Guess I'll soon find

"Let's go," I said.

I was surprised to find a police car rolling up outside my office. The vehicle stopped and a pair of uniformed officers got out and introduced themselves.

"CID asked us to come get you," Officer Jimenez, the better-looking of the two said. The dark-haired, dark-eyed hottie shook my hand a little longer than he needed. Then again, this was perhaps wishful thinking on my part. I hadn't had a date in over a year and I'd come to Waikiki with a broken heart just ripe for repair.

Jimenez returned to his position behind the wheel, Officer Ruiz riding shotgun. Charlie and I climbed in back. Not for the first time since he'd walked into my office, I felt that my friend looked older than his years. I understood why now. As a cop I'd dealt with many men who fell apart when they were unable to help or save the ones they loved. Charlie seemed shattered as he stared out of the window.

"Hawaii's become a bad place," he muttered, as the car sped down the easternmost end of the island and circled back up Kuhio Avenue.

I didn't want to tell him that it had been that way for decades. We had the highest rate of unsolved major crimes in all of the United States and more criminals disappeared to the Hawaiian Islands than anywhere else.

Tilting my face to the sun, I regretted not taking the mall cop job then realized it was a terrible thing to think. Charlie was my friend and needed my help.

In spite of its gruesome history, the present day Helumoa Road played host to a couple of expensive boutique hotels and a few high-rise apartment buildings. Backing onto the Royal Hawaiian Hotel and the lush grounds of the island's most upscale accommodations gave it a genteel feel. I wondered why somebody would pick a low-key apartment on that street. Did the killer know Hiroko Kwan? Had he followed her home? What had she been doing the night she was murdered?

Charlie and I stepped outside the moment the police vehicle pulled up at the Hale Maluhia apartment building. Hale Maluhia meant peaceful house. Clearly incorrect right now. Police vehicles and an ambulance stood out front.

The few passersby on the street didn't even look at them. Maybe they thought they were fake vehicles from the TV series *Hawaii Five-O*.

I turned to examine the hotel across the road and another apartment building. No sign of security cameras. As Officer Jimenez led us inside, I did notice the intercom to the right of the front entrance of Hale Maluhia. A uniformed doorman hovered inside the doorway. *Strange*. With two sets of security measures, how had the suspect entered the building undetected? I began leaning toward the theory that Hiroko knew her assailant. Or had he come via the back entrance? Were there security cameras there?

Take a breath, I cautioned myself. Most of my P.I. assignments had been routine. Man, I miss homicide cases more than I thought. I had lots of questions but no answers. And it got my juices flowing.

The lobby was quiet except for our presence. We rode the elevator to the fifth floor in silence. Charlie stared at the ascending numbers in that numb, transfixed way people get. The doors opened and we moved into the hallway.

I was certain I detected the metallic tang of blood on the air. I searched the ceiling and walls for security cameras. There were four that I noticed in the brief space between

the elevator and Hiroko's apartment two doors down to the left. At the entrance, Officer Jimenez announced, "This is Danny Morales, sir, at your request."

What a surprise. The man who turned to face me was Sergeant Angelo Cortez from Honolulu's Criminal Investigation Division. He spent much of his time traveling the island teaching some of the outer regions' divisions the finer points of the nine details the CID covered. These included murder, robbery, assault, sexual assault, domestic violence, child abuse, financial fraud and forgery, auto theft, and white collar crimes.

I wondered how many of these crimes Hiroko's murder involved.

"Good to see you again, Danny." Angelo stuck out a beefy hand and shook mine. "Thanks for coming. This is a bad business. Thought of you right away."

Thanks a lot! We'd worked on a case in Kauai together a couple of years ago. I wondered if the unusual aspects of that homicide were the reasons why he wanted me here now. I opened my mouth but Angelo seemed in a hurry.

"I'm not sure how much Charlie told you but Mrs. Kwan's murder has a lot of similarities to a cold case that's still on the books."

"He mentioned that, but he gave me no details."

"I promised I wouldn't." Charlie's voice came from behind my left shoulder.

Cortez grimaced. "I don't want to tell you too much. I'd rather let you have a wander and give me your thoughts." He gestured to a uniformed officer who handed me a pair of paper booties. I shoved them over my Timberlands then accepted a pair of latex gloves, which I pulled over my fingers. With a nod from Cortez, I entered the apartment. He and another officer trailed me. "I'd like your observations as you go." Cortez added, "Please," when I

glanced back at him.

The officer accompanying us was Jimenez. I wasn't sure if I was pleased or not. My hormones liked it a whole bunch, but my mind was on the job.

I stood inside the entrance and observed up close the mayhem I'd seen in the photos.

"Is she still in bed?" I asked.

When Cortez frowned, I said, "Charlie took photos and showed me."

Cortez looked pissed. "You see the body?"

"Not at first. I wouldn't have known there was anyone in the bed if I hadn't looked closely. But Charlie did take one of the victim with the pillow removed from her head. Something about it bothered me. If she's still here I'd like to see her."

Angelo nodded. "She's still here."

I checked around the living room. I was aware of the er, deathly quiet, even though there were two uniformed officers standing near the entrance of what I suspected might be the kitchen. The apartment overwhelmed me with its astonishing array of bric-a-brac. I had an aunty who decorated this way. Not an inch of uncovered space. I took my time absorbing it all. Antique Japanese dolls stood in glass cabinets. Matching candlesticks decorated the dining table, the coffee tables and the tops of several curio cabinets.

One candlestick from an obvious pair atop of an upright piano was missing. I could see the faint dust ring left by its absence.

Piles of furs and jewels remained on the floor.

"He had a lot of time to go through everything," I said, turning to Cortez. "He was in no rush, yet left all this stuff behind."

I blinked. I knew now how the killer had entered the

apartment, but didn't want to say anything yet. I passed through to the bedroom and noticed the shattered glass on the floor by the foot of Hiroko's bed.

HPD's crime scene unit investigators moved away from the beds as I approached. I knew a few of them but kept my focus on the victim who lay on her left side just as she had in the photo. I peered down at her crushed skull. The whole right side of it had been smashed in absolute fury, yet little blood was on the crisp Japanese-style collar of her pajama top.

"He undressed her. Probably after he hit her a couple of times," I said. "She may have been dead or just knocked out. I suspect he undressed her so he could rape her then redressed her."

"Right," Cortez said.

I glanced at her legs. They were in a cycling position. Maybe she'd woken up and prepared to run when he attacked her again. "The murder weapon was the missing candlestick from the living room." I caught a glimpse of it on the other bed and gestured to the blood-soaked broken pieces. "He got mad because the candlestick broke. He had to finish the job with something else."

One of the crime scene guys gaped at me.

My confidence grew and I said, "I think he took something out of the second drawer on the bed here."

Cortez lifted the first drawer. I was surprised to find no weapon in the second drawer.

My confidence took a nosedive. "That's weird. I was sure there was an object. Heavy." I tried to focus on the visions in my mind. I looked around. "I think it was a vase."

A murmur went around the room. "How'd he know that?" somebody whispered.

"That's right. We found a jade vase," Cortez said.

"The killer used it and tossed it back in there." I flicked an

accusatory glance at him.

Cortez's cheeks flamed as he put the drawer back on the bed. "My fault. I wanted to make sure you got fresh impressions. You're doing great." He blew out a sigh. "As usual. You er, feel anything else?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking he was angry because he didn't find more cash so he hit her again and again. I—"

I glanced at the balcony door leading off the bedroom. I walked over, slid it open, and let myself outside. In spite of the smell of death in the bedroom, the scent of island flowers carried on the breeze. Leaning against the low wall, I looked down at the street. I had a feeling the killer had sat in his car for a long time watching the building. He saw the lights went out and took his chance. I shook my head. How vulnerable we all are, really. I also felt he'd been here before. I knew a lot then that I hadn't known before. Cortez joined me.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Why do you think he targeted her?"

"He didn't. Not really. He knew the building. He goes for buildings you know."

"What makes you say that?"

"I have a feeling he's been here before. Knows there are a lot of rich, elderly folk here. He may not have killed before." I took a deep breath. "But he'll do it again, I'm sure."

"How'd he get in?" Cortez asked from behind me.
"There's nothing on any of the security cameras inside the building. There are none out front but there's a couple of detectives checking with the hotel across the road."

"If that hotel has them you should see him coming up here," I said.

"Coming up here? What does that mean?"

I turned to look at him. Nobody was there. I closed my eyes.

It hadn't been Cortez. It had been a damned ghost.

I gritted my teeth. This was why Cortez invited me here.

He knew the dead talked to me. Literally. "You still here?"

"Yeah," the voice said.

"I can't see you."

"That's because I'm dead, fool."

I almost laughed. I tried to sharpen my focus and saw his shimmer. It almost broke my heart to see how young and handsome he'd been.

"So. You're dead. I mean, really dead."

"Yeah. Nice of you to say so." He stood, all dressed in black, strange mitten-looking things on his hands.

"He came up the same way you did," I said, as a second voice spoke.

"Who you talkin' to?" Cortez asked, stepping out onto the balcony. He gave the space beside me a weird look.

"Not sure yet," I said.

"Has he given you information?"

"Yeah." The ghostly shimmer stopped. *Time to get back inside*. I closed the balcony door once Cortez and I were in the bedroom.

"What did you mean by the cameras will catch him coming up here? I heard you talking to...whoever you were in ah, contact with."

I nodded. "A ghost. Yeah." The knowledge sat heavily with me.

"He came up from the balcony?" Cortez asked, pointing over my shoulder.

"Not this one. The one off the living room. He climbed up the building from street level. You're looking for someone young and very agile. He's in very good shape, but he has a crippling case of diabetes. I'm certain he's robbed here before and he'll hit it again. If I were you, I'd keep unmarked vehicles parked on the street. He'll show up again. Very late at night."

Cortez stared at me. "He climbed up the fucking building? Damn." He walked off to the living room and I followed.

A chill tickled the back of my neck. "He's local," I said. "Probably got a long list of breaking and entering." The sensation of ice rain shot down my spine.

Cortez opened the balcony door and stepped outside. "How'd he do it?"

"I'm thinking special gloves. You might find traces of a sticky substance on the brickwork out front." The chill had stopped. I relaxed and felt I could breathe again since I was ghostless. For now. "Just like the guy in the past did." I paused. "Did you find an empty glass in the kitchen sink?"

"How the hell do you know that?"

"I just got a glimpse. Like I said, he's diabetic. He needed insulin. Usually carries it with him but thought he'd be okay. He doesn't even bring weapons. Likes to travel light. He uses tools at his disposal once he enters a residence. That might also be part of his MO. Using the victims' own possessions to hurt them. Stress elevated his blood sugar levels. Something went wrong in the bedroom."

"You think she woke up. The medical examiner said the same thing."

I nodded. "He really took his rage out on Hiroko. He was on the verge of a diabetic coma. That's why he left everything."

We walked back toward the kitchen. "He drank some water. You might get DNA off the glass but I suspect he washed it. He kept his gloves on so there might be traces of glue in the sink."

"You're amazing, Danny." He frowned. "Are you okay?

You look so pale."

"I'm okay." I looked at him. "Give me some time and I can probably tell you the name of the suspect from the cold case."

"Is that who you've been talking to?" Cortez looked a little frightened.

I nodded. "I think so."

"Is he here now?" Cortez gazed around in a fearful way.

"Yeah. Probably."

"Probably? You don't know?"

"I don't feel him. It's not like I press a button and the ghost speaks," I said, trying not to sound huffy.

"Sorry, I know. It's just wow. You've given us a lot of information. He was probably here and watched the whole thing go down with Mrs. Kwan."

"Yeah."

"That's..." Cortez waved his hands around, as though casting for the right words. "Unreal. That's what it is. It's just unreal. Because this apartment was the location of the last of the cold case crimes. I thought maybe the old guy was back."

"Not the way you think," I said.

"He's definitely dead?"

"Yes."

"What does he look like?" Cortez asked.

"Handsome. African American." I paused. "Oh, I have a feeling he was military." I narrowed my gaze. "Maybe ex military because of his diabetes." I glimpsed images filled with fear and horror.

"What?" Cortez asked.

"He was a great athlete. He played football. I see him collapsed on a field. It ruined his career."

Cortez stared at me, transfixed. "Is this him?" He flicked through his cell phone and showed me an image.

I squinted at it. "No."

"Rats."

I shrugged. "Gimme some time. Maybe something will come to me."

"I feel like I caused all this," he blurted.

"You? How?"

"I've been teaching forensic science classes at the community college. Adult students are the best. These people are really into it. Anyway, I taught a class and mentioned cold cases, using the Waikiki Wingman as one of them."

"The Waikiki Wingman?"

"That's what we called him." Cortez looked at me. "He got into some buildings that were impenetrable. Or so we thought. My head is spinning at the thought that this guy scaled tall buildings on the outside. Like some kind of Spider-Man."

"Yep. He did. And you have a definite copycat. Check out your students. And keep this crime scene's details close to the vest."

Cortez looked devastated. "Of course. But I can't help feeling like I opened a can of worms." He gave me a strange kind of look, half worried, half hopeful that he hadn't done it.

"Consider the can opened and the worms are out having a field day," I said.

Cortez rolled his eyes. "Thanks a bunch."

"No problem." I gave him a smile and left the apartment, the weight of the world on my shoulders.

Down in the lobby, Charlie and his gorgeous bride who was way too lovely for a roué like him, greeted me.

"Thank you for helping us." Tanika hugged me. She seemed impossibly thin and frail, her pale skin almost blue under her eyes. Unbearable heartbreak will do that to a

person, as though the emotional damage leaves bruises visible on the face.

"I'll do my best," I said.

Officer Jimenez appeared and gave me a look that made my toes smolder in my shoes.

"Sergeant Cortez just called me. He asked me to take you to the station. Would you mind coming with me?" he asked.

Charlie shook his head, taking his wife's hand in his. Her eyes flickered in grief.

"I can't leave her here," Tanika whispered.

"Come on sweetheart. Let's go." Charlie shot me a glance and I realized the CID wanted Hiroko Kwan's nearest and dearest out of the way before they transferred the body to the morgue.

Tanika went meekly enough but her sobs tore at me. I walked back toward my end of town, feeling restless and crummy. I grabbed The Bus on Kalakaua Avenue and twenty minutes later arrived back at my office. A pair of tourists stood, noses pressed against my window, their hands cupped around their eyes.

"I don't see anyone in there," the man said.

Without missing a step I walked right by them. They were zom zom seekers, I was sure of it. I strode into the hotel and took the elevator up to my room. The top two floors were reserved for long term rentals. I unlocked the door and stepped inside. Only a long, hot shower and putting my clothes in the washer would improve my sagging spirits.

Murder is never a nice way to start the day. I checked the time on the kitchen clock as I dried off and pulled out a beer from the fridge. Damn. It was only eleven A.M. Too bad. Nothing else would take the crud off my soul.

I sat on the sofa in my underpants and debated watching

TV as I sucked down my beer, but I couldn't be bothered picking up the remote. Dealing with the dead always had this effect on me. The load of their earthly departures burdened me until their cases were solved. Sometimes they spoke to me. Well, they spoke to me often. I'd come here to escape them, but somehow found a cavalcade more of them here.

Draining the bottle I reasoned with myself that the likelihood was that I'd see a lot more of 'em too, considering how many unsolved crimes we had on the books in Honolulu.

I put on fresh jeans, an aloha shirt, socks and shoes and headed to the parking garage. I had no pending cases and no reason to sit in my office. I fished out my car from the mess of vehicles packed bumper to bumper and headed downtown to Young Street. The beer had calmed me. It would take a twelve-pack to affect me. I felt hungry and happy to have made a contribution to the Hiroko Kwan case.

I found parking at an hour meter outside a questionable-looking building next to Spero Spera, my favorite café and sandwich shop in town. This end of Young Street was a mess of demolition and long-term construction. The only construction I was interested in right now involved the careful assembly of a mixed avocado sandwich. The house specialty was a monster of a thing that sold for almost ten bucks and worth every penny. I walked inside and ordered from the bar. The place was almost empty. I'd beaten the lunchtime rush. I opted for a bottle of mineral water and loitered at an empty table taking in the café's motto written on a chalkboard:

"As long as I breathe, there is hope."

How true. I glanced around the place, appreciating the soothing, uncluttered Japanese-style decorating. I didn't

recognize the few people tucking into their food. I also detected no ghosts. *Thank God*.

And then, two uniformed police officers entered and I don't know whose smile was wider, mine or Officer Jimenez's.

"This seat taken?" he asked, pointing to the one opposite me.

"It is now," I said, cringing at my own lame efforts to act smooth.

He grinned. "Cool." He glanced at the other officer. Heck, what was his name? I'd forgotten. "Get my usual for me?" Jimenez handed a twenty dollar bill to his partner. Gomez? Garcia? Ruiz. That was it. Ruiz.

"Sure." Ruiz flashed us both smiles and a few moments later my sandwich arrived.

"Hey, I'm getting the same thing." Jimenez laughed.

I didn't want to be rude and start without him. "Split this with me," I said. "And we can share the other one when it comes."

"Sounds good to me." He got up and returned with a clean plate from the counter and I loaded a teetering sandwich half onto it.

"How do you think they get this to taste so good?" he asked before taking a bite of the mixture of avocado, vegetables, bacon, cheese, ham, eggs, pickles and a sauce that invaded my dreams at night.

"I don't know, magic I think." I took a bite of my half. Man, it was good. We ate in silence a moment and I took a break and glanced at him. "What do I call you? What's your first name?"

He blinked. "Um. Rafael."

Oh, what a gorgeous name for a gorgeous man. "Rafael," I said, hoping sprouts weren't sticking out of my teeth. I ran my tongue across them and took another bite

of my sandwich.

He leaned closer to me. "Can I ask you a question?" "Sure."

"Were you talking to a ghost in that apartment?" Here we go. My last lover left me because of the things that went bump morning, noon, and night.

"Yes."

"That's so cool." He leaned back a moment. "My grandma has the gift. She's Japanese. She fought it all her life. Now she says things that have all of us shaking in our shoes."

"I don't sense any danger around you," I said.

"She says the same thing." He smiled, and damn him, somehow he didn't have anything green between his teeth. "Tell me, is it true that you had a Chinese woman's ghost actually hire you for a job?"

"Yes. It's true." The memory of Sachi Hammond still hurt my soul. My work for the cold case unit in Kauai known as *Ke 'Ahi Pio'ole* – The Fire that Never Burns Out – still clung to me like a second skin. I hadn't even known Sachi was dead when she hired me. My secret sorrow since her case, my first one in Waikiki, was that I had no chance to save her.

I couldn't save Hiroko Kwan either.

As long as I breathe, there is hope, I reminded myself. Jimenez's partner returned to the table. "Mind if I join you?"

Yes! "Not at all," I said, as he pulled over a third chair.

"You were incredible in that apartment," Ruiz said, and shook my hand. The images flooding my mind terrified me. I saw him shooting somebody. How recent was it? I flicked my gaze away from him. I'd let Cortez know.

"Thanks," I said, aware of my slow response. We finished our sandwiches in awkward silence, filling the spaces with generic observations of some of the problems facing cops and private eyes.

"I'm gonna go outside and call my wife," Ruiz said. He gave me a smile. "Nice talking to you." He rushed outside as the music on the sound system changed. I recognized the old Eddie Kamae song, *E ku'u Morning Dew*. I resisted the urge to play air ukulele, or to sing along. Maybe the beer affected me more than I thought, because the mournful love song had me wanting to dance with Rafael.

"I love this song," Rafael said, his tone tender. "There's an aspect to it. I don't know. Don't you think sometimes you meet people and it's the wrong time and you want to say, wait for me?"

"Yeah," I said, surprised.

"This song was the first one I learned on the guitar," he said. "My teacher told me Hawaiian songs have layers of meaning. She said that in Hawaiian culture, morning dew represents young love. She always said it was temporary, that love doesn't last."

"I disagree."

He smiled then. "So do I." He glanced over at the door. "My partner was being nice, giving us a moment. Any chance I can see you again?"

I didn't hesitate. "Yes." I slid him my card and he gave me his.

He jotted his cell phone number on it. "I'll call you." He took off as his partner hovered outside.

I went out to my car, noticing that I had three minutes to spare on the meter. I drove back home, dropped off my car and figured I'd hang out at the office until five.

When I walked inside, something seemed off. I had no idea what.

A smell? A feeling? Something in between. Holy crap. It was a ghost. A bad one.

The sensation didn't leave me all afternoon. But that's all it was. An inexplicable sense of something not being right, but not visible, either. I'd always been taught that the most important things in life, and criminal investigation were invisible to the eye, but I hated the feelings that I had. When I analyzed it I realized it was fear. I didn't think about it too much but when Cortez called me around four, we talked, and he told me he'd be placing unmarked cars outside Hiroko's building. I mentioned my concerns about Officer Ruiz.

"That's interesting," he said. "You shook his hand and you had a vision of him shooting somebody?"

"Yeah."

"I'll look into it. Anyway, thanks again for your help. Let me know if you get a name on the dead guy." "I will."

We ended our call and I gave myself permission to blow off the rest of the day. I went upstairs to my apartment, changed, took a run along the beach then stopped to listen to the homeless musicians murdering *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. I returned home and showered and changed. Depression filled my soul. I was alone with the sick feeling I had, the knowledge of what I had to do. I read for a while, absorbed in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, the biography of Thomas de Quincy.

It had the effect I wanted. I heard the noise on my balcony a little before eight. I was surprised it was so early. I hadn't expected him to try and break in before midnight. I looked over at the curtains and watched in fascination as they moved. He walked in, surprised, I guess to find me

looking at him.

He was all dressed up for a hot night of scaling buildings, robbing, and possibly killing. I gazed at his hands. Black gloves held huge suction caps, as did his black shoes. He stepped inside.

"Well this is awkward," I said.

"How the hell did you know it was me?"

"I just knew, Rafael." I shook my head. "I guess you were right about morning dew. And love. It's all so temporary, isn't it?"

"But how did you know?" He was angry now, looking around for some object with which to knock me senseless I guess.

"You look just like your father."

His face went pale.

"Don't bother looking for a weapon. I hid everything you could possibly use."

He sneered at me. "I came prepared this time. Nobody will ever figure it out. Why did you have to be psychic? I was really attracted to you." He pulled out a knife from a slim fanny pack strapped around his waist. "I won't rape you. I don't want the world to think the new Waikiki Wingman is gay."

"But why?" I asked. "Why did you start this life of crime?" "I'm about to lose my job. You figured out I'm diabetic. It's gonna come out and I'm having dizzy spells. Vomiting." He moved toward me, knife in hand. I saw it all then. As he lunged at me, I threw him off. My front door flew open and Officer Ruiz rushed in, gun in hand. One shot was all it took and Jimenez went down like a creepy-looking tree.

Cortez and his men came in. "I freaked when you told me what your thoughts were on the phone," he said.

I looked at Ruiz, kneeling beside the partner he'd trusted. He looked devastated. I knew already he'd never get over this.

"Rafael's father did his robberies for years," I said. "He didn't disappear. He was killed. I got a clear vision his ghost laid out for me. The apartment we were in today wasn't his last crime. He went over to Maui and staged robberies in a new condo complex. He got shot by a woman who was wide awake when he broke in. He survived but wound up a paraplegic. He moved back here. He and his wife had a lot of kids. Rafael is the youngest. They never tied Rafael Sr. to the cases here on Oahu."

I swiped at my throat. Rafael had nicked me. Blood trickled down my neck.

"You should let the paramedics take a look at that," Cortez said. A beat. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. I'm gonna take a walk. I need some air." "Don't go far. I still need to talk to you."

I nodded and walked out into the hallway. Neighbors filled the narrow space, everyone pointing and staring at me. And then, there he was.

Rafael.

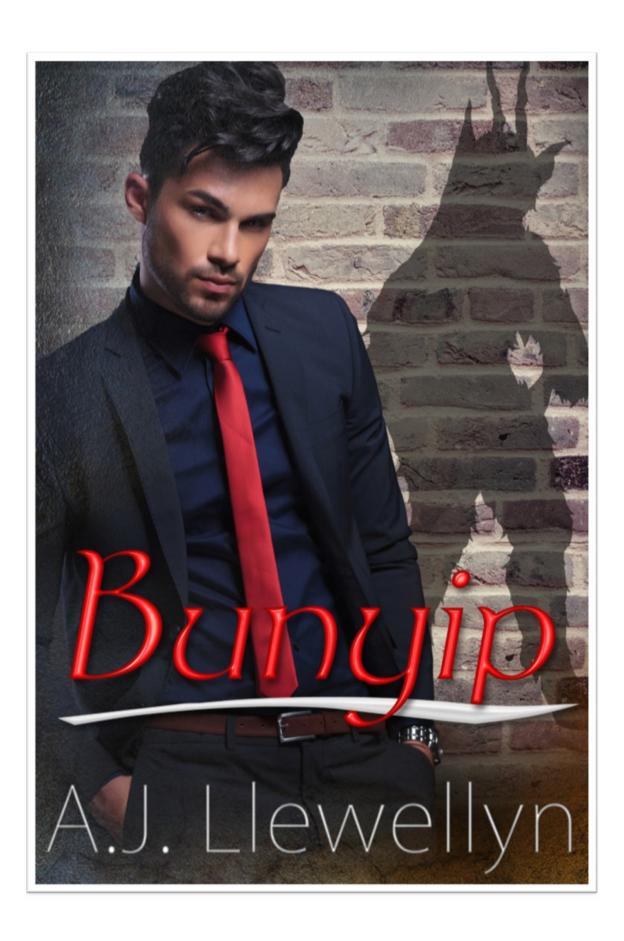
It was weird seeing him in spirit form. I'd learned a thing or two about ghosts and knew that he must have really liked me to appear so soon.

"I want you to know, if I'd had any idea I was going to meet you, I wouldn't have done this."

What could I say to that?

"I wish I'd waited for you," he said.

That stopped me. "I do too," I said, and left him there, stuck between worlds, a million light years away from me. I pressed the button for the elevator wishing it would take me not to the street but to a galaxy, far, far away.



BUNYIP

(Love Me, Love My Monster, Book #1 PET MONSTERS)

Forensic audio specialist Steve Maddox is a busy guy who has no time to date. Balancing a strenuous work schedule and time for his cat and dog, he's ecstatic when his best friend, Silvana, organizes a gay speed dating event, bringing into his life the magnetic and handsome criminal defense attorney, Alexio Manolis.

The two men hit it off instantly, with sparks bouncing off the walls of the Petersen Automotive Museum where the event is being held. Their conversation crackles until Alexio says he has a pet—a bunyip named Norman. Steve feels a little stupid. What the heck is a bunyip? He has no time to ask, though, since he's onto his next "date."

Alexio, however, pursues Steve and the two men start dating. Meanwhile, Steve googles bunyips and discovers they are mythical Australian creatures of Aboriginal legend. It's just impossible. Does this smart and sexy attorney really have an imaginary, violent pet? Or is "bunyip" slang for something else? Alexio is tight-lipped and keeps putting off the meeting between Steve and his elusive pet. Soon Steve starts to worry when Alexio disappears into his basement all the time and has savage scratches on his body he says Norman gave him by accident.

Is Steve's fantastic, hot new lover absolutely crackers, or does the cantankerous bunyip actually exist?

CHAPTER 1

As first dates went, it wasn't bad. The guy had his own hair and nothing seemed to be nesting in it. Steve glanced over at the guy three seats down who was savagely scratching his head. Unlike *him*...

Steve refocused on the guy in front of him. James Cabot had a decent set of teeth and wasn't checking his cell phone every fifteen seconds. He seemed to be smart and even had a pretty good sense of humor. They both also had elderly dogs and seemed to share the same thoughts

about how hard it was to see their best friends being in pain.

So, what's wrong with him? Steve Maddox immediately chastised himself. There doesn't have to be something wrong with him just because the others have all been crackers and weiners. We've had a really nice conversation!

He leaned back in his seat and scribbled a pencil note next to James Cabot's name. He scanned the list in front of him. Five down, seven to go. He was about to ask for the man's number, even though it was against the rules.

"All right, kids, move it along please!" Silvana Fowler, the woman running the speed dating program kept to the rigid schedule as promised. Ten minute dates and she flipped each participant to the next table. So far, only James was even remotely compatible.

"You're nice," James said as he got to his feet. "I hope you ask for my number." Just as Steve was about to say he would, James added, "I hope you don't have cats though. I'm extremely allergic. And I believe they are very bad luck."

I knew it! I knew it! I knew something was wrong with him! Steve's hand hovered over the list of names, his smile in freeze mode until James moseyed over to the next table. Steve crossed his name out and heaved an inward sigh.

"Hi," bachelor number six said. He was dressed in tight black jeans, a Metallica T-shirt, black leather jacket and studded wrist bands. His long black hair was straggly. He wore black nail polish, which Steve kinda liked, and smelled strongly of cigarette smoke, which Steve didn't.

"My name is Cole and I thought I'd be a lot more nervous than I am." His Adam's apple wobbled dangerously in his throat, giving lie to his words. "Hi, Cole. I'm Steve and I can see you're nervous. I am, too." He smiled, trying to help the man relax. His voice echoed and he wondered, yet again, if selecting LA's Petersen Automotive Museum had been the best choice for a gay speed dating event. Maybe Harriet thought the macho element would assuage some of the male egos. She'd have done better staging this thing at the zoo, since it was a gay animal lovers dating event.

Heavy Petting, as she'd dubbed it, had sure brought the geeks and weirdoes out in force. They were sitting among the racing cars of Formula 1 legend Phil Hill. The exhibit had been extended through May and Silvana thought it was cool to host a speed dating event in the middle of some of the fastest vehicles in American history. Yeah, right. How many of these guys even knew who Phil Hill was?

Steve sipped his soda water and watched a man two seats down and wondered what the hell he would do with a guy wearing a purple tunic, tan ankle socks and black, lace-up shoes. The guy adjusted a gold paper crown on his head and waved his scepter around as he chatted animatedly.

Silvana had been right to only provide tea, coffee, and soft drinks for the event. Who knew how the man with the paper crown would behave with a bit of alcohol in him? The...er...king had somehow managed to convince the man sitting opposite him to get down on his knees.

The entire room stopped buzzing as the king placed his scepter on the man's shoulders as if he were knighting him.

Geez, the freak flags are flying tonight...

The noise level rose again and Steve focused on Cole. "So, tell me about your pet." *Might as well cut to the chase.* Don't want another cat hater.

Cole gazed at him. "You're handsome." His unblinking stare was a little unnerving.

I bet you have reptiles. "Oh...well, that's so kind of you, Cole. Thanks." Steve would have classified himself as reasonably good-looking with his short brown hair, blue eyes, and fit body. He just worked too damned hard and was inclined to be picky. "Um...do you have a dog or a cat?"

"Neither. I have a snake. How old are you?"

Why am I not surprised? "I'm thirty. You have a snake? What kind?"

"A pit viper. And before you ask, I feed him live mice and he often sleeps with me. And by the way, I'm twenty-five."

Holy shit. Scratch this lunatic. He looks a lot older than twenty-five. Steve counted the seconds as Cole rambled about his heavy metal music career, how the drummer in his band, called Smashing Eggs, kept missing gigs. Mistaking Steve's miserable silence for avid interest, Cole warmed to his apparent favorite topic, his snake, whose name was Fork, for his adorable forked tongue.

That's it. I officially want to kill myself. Somebody shut this guy up!

Steve glanced around the second floor of the museum's Hot Rod section. His gaze fell on Hill's 1962 Ferrari GTO that he'd apparently driven at Le Mans that year. He knew this because he'd read the sign posted next to the shiny blue racing car. He'd done a little bit of homework just in case one of his dates was actually a car fanatic.

He fidgeted as Cole fretted about his snake's moodiness. "Fork ate my hamster and it moved inside him for ages. He seemed really uncomfortable."

"Who? The snake or the hamster?" Steve didn't care to hear any of this. His gaze had shifted to Cole's left hand that had two distinct puncture marks. It also looked swollen.

"You noticed." Cole shrugged. "Fork's a good boy. He didn't mean to bite me. I surprised him when I reached for the remote to change the TV channel. He's all about *Dr. Drew.*"

God, help me. I wonder if the keys are in Phil's Ferrari? I'd drive right down the fucking stairs and out onto Wilshire Boulevard.

"He's bitten me twice... Well, three times, but the first time was by accident. I was trying to milk him for antivenin."

Steve didn't know what to say to any of it. He simply wanted the man to move on. Cole mentioned his plans to move to Chicago in two years. Steve hoped he'd move a lot sooner than that. He relaxed when Silvana finally rang the bell for the next flip.

"I'm totally putting you down as a guy I want to date," Cole said. He stood, gazing down at Steve. "I'd love to suck your cock. If you want, I'll meet you in the parking lot. I've got the black Hummer out there." He stuck his tongue out and Steve almost jumped to the ceiling. Cole's tongue was long. Really long. And he'd had it tattooed to make it look like he had...a forked tongue!

Steve hardly took in a word the new guy said. The man in the purple tunic was raving about how he was the reincarnation of the Egyptian god Ra. Steve fretted about Cole and how he could possibly slip out the back entrance when all this was over and he could avoid the guy.

He glanced over at Cole, who seemed to be nodding and listening to his new date. *Maybe he'll forget about me.*

The reincarnated Egyptian god would have been a lot more entertaining had he not been confused about certain key points in his incarnation as Ra. Steve had read a lot of fiction about Ra, since Egyptology was one of his passions, but quickly lost interest when "Ra" claimed that the ancient Egyptians invented pizza delivery.

Cole's head swiveled in Ra's direction and the two men seemed to bond.

Hallelujah. Steve contemplated getting up and walking out. Too late. His latest date took the seat opposite him.

"Hey there." This new guy looked pleasant. More than pleasant, actually. He looked exotic...European, with a three-day growth and longish dark hair that accentuated his liquid brown eyes.

Steve had missed the man's first name, but caught his first question, "What do you do for a living?"

Not very smooth. "I'm a forensic audio specialist," Steve said. Only two men had asked so far, and both had seemed stumped by his response.

"Oh, how cool. I just worked a criminal investigation with one. A fine fellow. You work in a small group so maybe you know him? Oliver Mance?"

Steve gaped at the man. "He trained me at Quantico."

The man grinned. "He's quite the legend."

Yep, he sure was. Steve's former boss had been one of the experts who'd enhanced the cockpit recordings of Flight 93, the hijacked plane that crashed in Pennsylvania during the horrific events of September 11, 2001.

Steve squinted at the guy. "I'm sorry, what did you say your name was again?"

"Alexio." The man's face registered a flicker of disappointment. He glanced to the right as if he felt he should move on already. Shit. Steve felt awful now. He'd just blown it. Here he was, an audio specialist who hadn't been listening!

"I'm sorry, Alexio. You took me by surprise. I'm anxious to hear about your criminal investigation. Are you a detective?"

Alexio smiled then. Lord, have mercy. This guy was *hot*! He shrugged, looking bashful. "I'm a lawyer. Please don't hold it against me. A couple of guys here looked at me as if I was about to sue them."

Steve laughed. "I won't hold it against you."

Alexio looked relieved. "I'm a criminal defense attorney."

Fabulous! You have a job! Score! "I like that. By the way, doesn't Alexio mean defender in Greek mythology?"

Alexio gave him an appreciative look. "Yes, it does. My family is Greek. I'm a first generation American. Born and raised in Chicago. Moved here a few years ago. How about you?" He gazed across the table at Steve.

Steve felt a frisson of attraction. No. Not a frisson. His entire soul was doing funny things, pinching Steve from inside his skin.

"Born and raised in California. Please don't hold *that* against me. I know all the locals are supposed to be wackos."

Alexio gave him another gorgeous smile. Steve got so lost in the man's lips and teeth, he was so mesmerized he almost missed Alexio's next question.

"Do you still work for the FBI?"

"No, unfortunately. I loved my work there, but I got an offer too good to refuse from a major motion picture company. I work a lot in the digital arena. We're catching up with the Internet pirates."

Alexio grinned. "That's what William and I worked on. A big case involving pirated DVDs washing ashore in China." He paused. The more Steve looked at him, the more handsome Alexio seemed. He could have been a model had he so chosen.

[&]quot;Steve, you do love pets?"

[&]quot;Absolutely. I have a dog and a cat."

[&]quot;I love both." Alexio glanced down the row of men to his

left. "I was beginning to think this would be the worst evening of my life. Some of these guys don't even *like* animals." He titled his head. "The guy next to me in the checked shirt? He went into great length describing how he's an amateur surgeon."

Steve stared at him. "That's scary. Did he tell you what that means?"

"Oh, yes. He's de-skunked a few skunks."

"Oh, my God!"

"Yeah, I know."

They smiled at each other.

"What about you?" Steve asked, anxious to steer the conversation back to a happy track. "What kind of pets do you have?"

"A cat and a bunyip."

"A bunyip?" Steve had no idea what the hell it was and only hoped it wasn't a snake that liked to bite. Or went bonkers for TV doctors. Maybe a bunyip was a colloquial word for a rabbit.

Before he could ask for further details, Silvana called for the next switch.

"Fuck the rules." Alexio's voice came out in a growl as he slid his business card across the table. "You're the most interesting man I've met in this town in the last two years. Call me. I want to see you again, Steve. Soon."

Steve's hand closed around the card. "I will."

He watched the man stand and move away from him. Alexio lifted a hand in farewell, their gazes holding for a few seconds before he blew past the rows of tables. Man, he looked good in his vintage jeans. He filled them out really well. Steve liked the guy's confident swagger and wished he could leave, too, but Silvana was his best friend and she'd damn well kill him.

"Hi," the next guy said, interrupting his reverie. "My name

Forty-five minutes later, Silvana was aglow with the success of her first gay dating event. Up until now, Silvana, one of LA's top party planners, had worked for big-league clients such as former state governor Schwarzenegger and had handled huge events like the Governor's Ball for the Academy Awards ceremonies. She also organized private events for the richest people in showbiz—all over the world. Most of her personal friends were successful gay men who couldn't meet a decent guy. And most of them had pets. She decided she had to focus her talents on matchmaking since she was, quote-unquote, "sick of the bitching."

Sure there had been some worms in the woodpile but she'd done a pretty good job of pairing up some of the guys, to hear her comments via the feedback forms.

"I told you it would work." She squeezed Steve against her comfortable bosom for the fourth time since the participants had been forced to leave. Skunk Boy and sun god Ra had left hand-in-hand and the snake guy had found true lust with a gay Hell's Angel type of guy.

"He wasn't a Hell's Angel," Silvana scoffed. "He's a successful business manager."

She was miffed that Alexio had taken off so soon but said she'd noticed the sparks flying between him and Steve.

"Really?" Steve tried not to get too excited. His last relationship had been a catastrophe, not made easier by the fact that the man had been promoted to Steve's department and now worked in his office.

His fingers closed around the business card in his pocket. Was it too soon to call? Yes, fool. Call tomorrow.

Have a little bit of dignity...

"I didn't even think he'd come," she said. "Eric really worked on him."

"Eric did?" That was interesting. Eric, Silvana's husband, was a big-ticket attorney in a corporate office in Century City. "Do they work together?"

"Yes, and he really likes Alexio. I didn't know if you two would hit it off. I thought he'd go for that TV actor."

Steve's hackles rose. "The really flamboyant guy in the see-through red shirt? How'd you figure they'd get along?"

She had the grace to wince. "They got chatting as soon as Alexio arrived." Steve's spirits sank. Did Mr. I'm-too-sexy-for-my-shirt also have Alexio's business card in his pocket?

"Hey, he liked you. He left right after he spoke to you," she soothed. "He didn't need to meet anyone else."

"Yeah, either that or he went home to find his disco shoes for the other guy."

Silvana laughed. It was infectious. Steve's spirits rose again as his fingers rubbed along the edges of the card. It was stupid to worry about a guy he'd just met.

Her cell phone rang. She checked the readout. "That's my man. You want to have a glass of wine and some tapas at The Little Door?" Silvana asked.

Steve did. He knew his dog would want to go out for a walk the second he got home, but he longed to hang for a while with Silvana and talk about the evening. Besides, it was a good way to ask Eric a few questions about Alexio.

"How did a few of the total whackos get into the group?" he asked as he helped Silvana and her assistant break down the tables and chairs from the event. As Steve folded up each piece, Silvana's gloved assistant, Ignacio, carried them down the stairs to the truck positioned in the loading dock at the back of the building.

She bristled. "What whackos?"

"The guy in the purple tunic."

"He's a trust fund baby and has about twelve million and change in the bank."

"That'll perk up snake boy. I saw they really hit it off."

Her eyes narrowed. "Snake boy? You mean the lead singer of Smashing Eggs? That's the hottest podcast band in the world, baby." She moved her hands to her hips, tapping a well-shod heal on the waxed museum floor. "Who else is a whacko, Mr. Persnickety?"

"Erm...the amateur surgeon?"

"Say, what?"

"Miss Silvana, I take the trees now?" Ignacio pointed to the cluster of ficus beside him. Silvana had thought of everything.

"Yes, thanks, Ignacio." She returned her attention to Steve again. "Who said he was an amateur surgeon?"

"Guy in the checked shirt."

"Small goatee?"

Steve nodded. "He's a plastic surgeon. A famous one. He does vaginal rejuvenation. I think he makes like a gazillion a week and that's his sense of humor."

"Not very funny."

She shrugged. "He's a doctor. Not a stand-up comic."

He helped Silvana carry her box files to her car. He had parked behind her and followed her up to the Third Street restaurant that had become their favorite go-to wine bar. Before he got out of the car, he took the business card out of his pocket. His full name was Alexio Manolis. The card listed his office address, telephone number, cell phone, message service and his email address.

He slipped it back into his pocket. It took everything in him not to call the guy. No. He had to play this one right. There was something special about this guy. As he got out of the car, Silvana approached him, linking her arm through his.

"When are you going to call him?"

"Tomorrow."

"Too soon. Call him Wednesday."

Hell no he wouldn't wait an extra day. He smiled at her as he held the restaurant door open for her. Eric was already there in the corner of the bar. He hugged Steve and passionately kissed his wife, handing them each a glass of wine. Steve sniffed.

"Cos D'estournel," Eric said. "1998."

Steve glanced at the chalkboard above the bar. The bottle had cost his friend two hundred and sixty four dollars. It was divine, but he'd sip it slowly.

"How'd it go?" Eric massaged his wife's delicate shoulders. Steve marveled at how Silvana could turn elfin at a moment's notice. In her professional life she was a pocket rocket, able to make grown men squirm in their Florsheims with her demeanor. In her private life, she was a helpless pixie. Poor Eric was so in love he couldn't see straight. It was scary, but then love was like that. It made a person act in truly mysterious ways.

"Our boy hooked up with someone," Silvana informed her husband. Eric grinned. "Really? Who's the lucky guy?"

Steve watched Eric slather olive tapenade onto a soft-looking hunk of bread and pass it to his wife. She ate it from his fingers. He kept watching Steve.

"What gives?"

"It was Alexio." Steve waited for a response.

"Alexio Manolis?" He cut a glance to his wife. He seemed pleased. "I've been telling her for months we should hook you two up."

Steve couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Why didn't you set something up sooner?" He swallowed a mouthful

of wine to stop himself from saying something he'd later regret.

"You were all hung up on that guy at the studio. I didn't think you were ready."

She had him there.

"There's also the issue of the bunyip," Silvana said.

"Don't start," Eric warned. He gave her an odd look.

"Yes, what about the bunyip? What is a bunyip anyway?" Steve asked.

Husband and wife gave each other the kind of significant look that meant a lot to them but excluded the rest of the world.

"Don't," Eric said a second time. Her response was obscured by a blast of laughter from some people beside them. Her cell phone rang. Silvana checked it, then beamed at Steve.

"It's Alexio."

Steve longed to ask Eric about the bunyip, but realized he'd get more out of Silvana. She took the call.

"Hi, Alexio." She paused. "I'm glad you did. He really liked you, too. What?" she paused again and glanced at Eric, who was pouring them all a little more wine. "Actually, Steve's right here. We're with Eric at The Little Door. Care to join us for a drink?"

She held the phone away from her ear. "I think he just hung up on me."

"What'd he say?" Steve asked.

"He said he wanted your number. I guess you can give it to him yourself. I suppose we should get a table."

They had snagged a booth in a quiet section of the restaurant away from the bar, when Alexio arrived. His gaze connected with Steve instantly as he approached the

table. They smiled at each other. Steve stood.

"Hey," Alexio said, extending his arm and touching Steve's back. They sat next to each other. Steve was aware of the man's close proximity and realized nobody had dazzled him like this in a long, long time.

"What are we drinking?" He reached in front of him to turn the bottle around, reading the label aloud. "Cos D'estournel. Grand Cru Classe, Saint-Estephe. I'm sure it's fabulous, not that I'd have a clue."

Eric laughed and poured him some.

"Very nice, very smooth," Alexio said after his first sip. "Do you like it?" he asked Steve.

"I do, actually." He was certain Alexio had shifted a little closer to him Then the man's arm shot around his back, resting against Steve's hip for just a moment.

Across the table, Eric looked stunned.

Alexio moved his arm away again and picked up a menu. "What do you recommend?" he asked Steve.

That you put your arm back around me. "Well, I like the mussels."

"They do look good. Want to get some of the Mediterranean appetizers?" Alexio glanced over at Eric. "If that's okay with you and Silvana."

"Sounds great to me." Silvana's voice had a strange tone to it. She was trying to appear festive, but she seemed... nervous. What the hell was going on?

Eric ordered for the table since he knew the wait staff well. Their waiter called him by his name the moment he arrived.

"What kind of a dog do you have?" Alexio asked Steve. Steve looked at Silvana from the corner of his eye. Why was she acting so jumpy all of a sudden?

"An Australian shepherd," Steve said.

"They're wonderful dogs. I had one for a long time.

They're youthful, enthusiastic dogs, right to the end."

"Yes." Steve's heart gave a twinge. His wonderful golden girl was struggling with severe arthritis. He hadn't stayed out so long since she'd started having problems. He'd booked the dog walker to take her out, but Chloe fretted without Steve being close to her. It was as if in her diminished capacity, she'd regressed to puppydom.

"I didn't mean to upset you." Alexio touched his hand. "Is your dog having problems?"

"Yes. Today was a good day." He left it at that because the food had started to arrive and discussing Chloe always unraveled him. They'd been together fifteen years. His cat, Scarlet, was young and healthy. Thank God.

"It's hard, I know." Alexio's voice was soft as he picked up a piece of pita bread, spread some taramasalata on it, and handed it to Steve.

"This is my favorite thing in the whole world," he said of the pink-hued roe dip.

"Mine, too." Steve went to take it, but Alexio held it to his lips. Steve took the piece of bread in his mouth and ate it. He watched Alexio lick his fingertips. It was such a turn-on.

God, he is hot. I wish he was licking me.

Alexio picked up the wine, pouring some for Silvana, Steve, and Eric.

He's perfect. His manners are impeccable. Why is Silvana so worried?

The bunyip. It had to have something to do with that.

Steve couldn't stand it anymore. He quietly excused himself. Alexio stood with him, concern on his face.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, I just want to wash my hands. Be right back."

He raced to the men's room, where he did wash his hands, then, back in the hallway, he grabbed his cell phone from his pocket and accessed the Internet.

Steve Googled bunyips. He gasped when he read the Wikipedia definition. No. It couldn't be. He checked again. *Shit.*

He slumped against the wall. How could this happen? How could this...be?

According to the article he had in front of him, bunyips were mythological creatures spanning back to the time of Australian Aboriginal legend. Some claimed they were based on actual animals. Some said they were demonic spirits.

Nobody, however, could decide on what an actual bunyip looked like. Some escaped convict way back when claimed to have seen one, but the man had been rescued by an Aboriginal tribe that fed and cared for him. They might have given him hallucinogenics, for God's sake. His opinion couldn't really be trusted.

According to the drawings Steve saw, bunyips sometimes had the head of a dog, dark fur, a horse-like tail. Sometimes they had duck characteristics with webbed feet. Some came with fangs. Some looked cute. Some looked damned frightening.

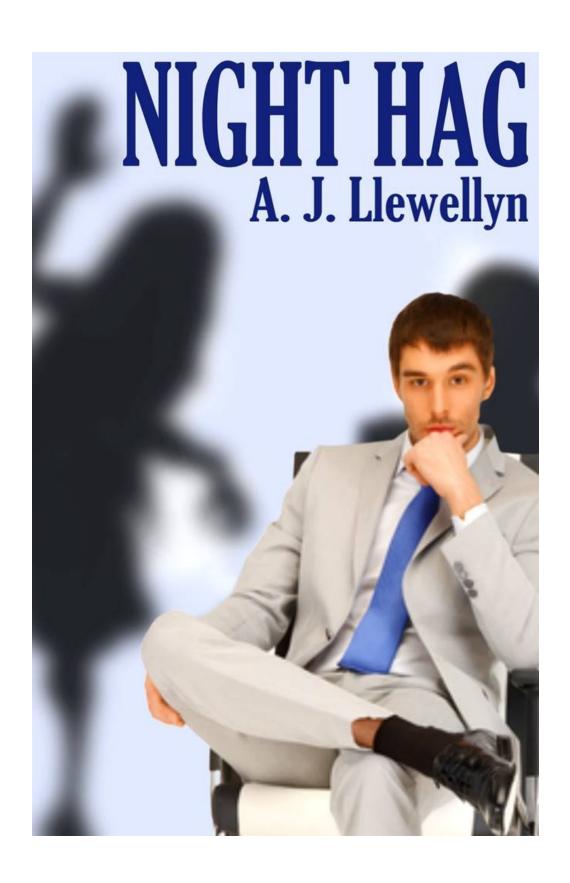
God!

Sometimes they appeared to have tusks and resembled seals or manatees.

The point was this. If they ever existed, it was over a hundred years ago. If they were ever real. The other point was also a sad, tragic fact. The hot new guy sitting out in the restaurant waiting for him thought he had one of these...imaginary creatures at home.

For a pet.

Fuckity fuck. I knew there was something wrong with him.



NIGHT HAG

(Love Me, Love My Monster, Book #2 PET MONSTERS)

In the idyllic seaside town of Half Moon Bay, just outside of San Francisco, Gideon Hunter has just met the man of his dreams in Jory Wyatt. But how can he start something with Jory when Gideon has a monster of a problem? His newly adopted five-year-old daughter has some issues, and Gideon can't even begin to cope with her little... idiosyncrasies... let alone fall in love. Not only that, but Jory has a few things to deal with himself. Namely his 175-pound dog Renaldo. Unfortunately, Gretchen has become attached to Renaldo, and the big drooling beast seems to have become smitten with her, too. Jory has waited a long time for somebody as wonderful as Gideon to move to town. But can Gideon be as amazing as he seems? And is it true what their mutual friend Steve Maddox says about Gideon's cute yet serious daughter? That she's some kind of actual monster? Steve should know, especially since he has an unusual creature of his own... Norman the bunyip...

CHAPTER 1

It was a meeting of devious minds.

At least, that's what Gideon Hunter thought as he took in the strange group of men that made up the first-ever meeting of the North Beach Gay Exotic Pet Lovers group. He scratched at the hives that had started to form on his chest. He always got hives when he got hot. And when he got nervous.

Gideon wasn't really a willing participant of this meeting. In fact, through his inclination to say yes to his friends, he was the host that hot, humid August evening in Half Moon Bay.

California was in the midst of both the worst drought in history, and a record-breaking heat wave that had even managed to ramp up the normally mild climate of the tiny beachside town thirty-eight miles south of San Francisco.

Gideon cursed himself for the umpteenth time for allowing his new best friend, Steve Maddox, to talk him into hosting this bizarre pet circle.

"It'll be a blast," Steve had insisted.

It sure was. Like a gale-force inferno from one of hell's own ovens, the steamy evening temperatures just wouldn't cool off, in spite of Gideon's well-placed oceanfront digs.

"Great house," one of the guys suddenly said, wiping his brow. "Bad luck about the A/C."

Wait until they found out the toilet wouldn't flush.

He began to wonder if these problems were frequent and that was why he'd gotten the two-bedroom, one-bathroom house at half its normal cost. For two thousand dollars a month, the turquoise-painted clapboard house with wraparound porch and insane amenities—such as an outdoor brick oven and a Jacuzzi—were his for the next two years.

Then, he had an option to buy, or renew the lease at full market price, which was closer to four thousand.

Right now, however, as sweat trickled down his neck, he wasn't sure he'd last the summer, let alone two years.

He nursed a glass of pinot noir and gazed around the cluster of nervous men chatting over wine and crudités. Some of them weren't bad looking. Gideon privately thought he was a good-looking guy. At thirty-two, he had a full thatch of brown hair that got unruly unless he kept it trimmed, and brown eyes that seen too much drama and way too much disappointment in the dating pool. Only one guy appealed to him, but he was in a chair across the room. He had long black, well-groomed hair and blue eyes that seemed too beautiful to be real. He caught Gideon's stare and gave him a smile. Oh, he was a looker that one, and he seemed to be taking it all in. He'd said little since

he'd walked in, beyond the fact that he owned a dog.

"A big one," he said. Gideon would have asked more, but the others lost interest immediately. They were only interested in exotic creatures, apparently. And they all used water, or the lack thereof, as the pivotal topic of discussion.

"My snake, Romeo drinks a lot of water," one man said. This guy looked like a Alice Cooper's even more eccentric brother in a macabre get-up that involved a lot of sagging spandex, leather, metal studs, hair extensions and smudged kohl around his eyes. "Is that normal?"

Gideon shifted in his seat. The searing heat contributed to the discomfort of the boring conversation. It shouldn't have been boring, because this was, according to Steve, a meeting for a select group of gay men who had an unusual trait among them.

They each collected and kept dangerous, exotic animals.

That was all fine and dandy, except that Gideon didn't think a snake was terribly exotic, until he learned that Mr. Lycra, AKA Matthew, had a special snake. A pit viper, one of the most venomous reptiles on record.

"I bought seven of them on eBay before they stopped the sale of live animals," Matthew said. He looked disgruntled as he tossed back stringy tendrils of damp black hair from his face and neck. "There are a few underground online forums where you can buy and sell snakes, but half the time you find you're being set up by some undercover fed, or—" He gave a dramatic pause and held the gaze of each man in the group before continuing. "—you negotiate to buy some sweet little rattler and the fool on the other end gets seller's remorse."

A murmur went up in the room. They were all familiar with the pleasures and pitfalls of buying and trading exotic pets.

Gideon used to collect amphibians. His passion had been poisonous yellow frogs. He'd particularly enjoyed raising and protecting golden yellow frogs. They were friendly, pretty little things, but they secreted an alkaloid from their skins that had enough toxin to kill ten to twenty men, or about ten thousand mice.

In all his years of collecting them, he'd shared them with few people. Not many men understood his passion for frogs. And after he had a terrible accident with a small poison dart frog that jumped out of its cage, he decided they were too risky to keep.

Oleander, the frog, had leaped out of his tank when Gideon was cleaning it one morning. Gideon caught him and put him back in, but his protective gloves had a tear he hadn't seen before. Oleander's toxins, though not as dangerous as the golden yellow frog's, had entered right into his blood stream, making him feel woozy. His heart raced and he thought he might be having a heart attack. He drove himself to the hospital and spent a night under observation.

He gave up wanting to nurture these endangered creatures, but he still loved them. That's how he chose to view his perilous pets. They were in crisis, and they needed him. He needed to give them love. Gideon had let them all go, all seventeen golden frogs in six different species, to the L.A. Zoo. For Gretchen. He rarely talked about his adopted, five-year-old daughter to anyone. People just didn't understand. But Steve understood. He'd gotten it right away. He had an even more unusual being in his life. The most exotic pet Gideon had ever heard of...

Spiky-haired, rotund, Number 69 football jersey-wearing Alun, who'd driven all the way down from Bodega Bay, ninety miles north of San Francisco, for the event, brought me back to the conversation. He shot his hand into the air

like an over-excited school kid. Everyone looked at him.

"I just got a text." He waved his cell phone around. "My court date is set for November nineteenth." He'd seemed oddly super-excited to be here from the moment he'd walked in the door twenty minutes ago. It hadn't started well. He'd commented on the smooth flow of traffic, but then complained about the heat in Gideon's home, tugging at his collar.

"Y'always keep it so warm? I can't do that with Ajax in my house."

A few sips of Blue Moon pale ale and he became the class clown. Maybe he didn't get out much with Ajax in his life. Alun grinned now, which seemed weird considering he might lose his pet.

"If I wasn't so well connected up in Bodega Bay, they mighta shot my baby cat," Alun said, stroking the small soul patch on his chin.

Baby cat? Ajax was a full-grown, two-year-old male mountain lion, which he kept on the second floor of his Gulf Harbor condo. Much to the consternation of his neighbors who feared the savage creature, Ajax was fond of yowling, screaming, and ripping up things.

His favorite hobby was consuming his neighbor's pets.

According to Alun, this happened often since Ajax had discovered how to let himself out of the backdoor.

Gideon knew all about the lion because there'd been a news report the previous week after Ajax took himself off for a walk one sunny afternoon and, oh dear, managed to maul a few more pets and claw at a couple of parked cars.

"He was only trying to play," Alun kept saying. But Gideon had seen the footage. The big cat had left a trail of blood and had required surgery after he'd eaten the chrome-plated aluminum jaguar emblem from the hood of a pristine 1974 E-Type convertible.

"The owner of that damned car's still crying," Alun told us, his face sagging for the first time.

Gideon fidgeted in his seat. He began to sweat. He knew all about rare vehicles, having just unloaded one. He listened now as Alun tried to defend his animal parenting.

"Ajax is a good boy. He just doesn't know his own strength." He whipped through a series of gruesome surgery photos on his cell phone, which he passed around to the others to see.

By the time Gideon took hold of the phone, he saw Ajax's stomach contents unloaded onto a metal tray. The hood ornament was there, along with the lid off a coffee pot, several toothbrushes, and an undigested small animal. Gideon winced, and handed the phone back to Alun.

He knew the mountain lion had made it through surgery just fine but was proving to be a major headache at the San Francisco Zoo where he was under quarantine restriction. The court hearing would decide if he would be humanely euthanized or relocated to a wildlife refuge.

"I'm sure one of the wildlife refuges would take him," one of the men soothed. His name was Roy, and he was the only one who didn't moan about the heat. He kept monitor lizards as pets and kept his home at a minimum of eighty degrees for them, year round.

Yeah, right, Gideon thought. I'm sure they're all lining up, clamoring to take a big cat used to television, chocolate, and with a penchant for snacking on cats and kittens.

"I hope so," Alun said, his face registering some actual grief. "Poor Ajax." Alun gnawed at a celery stick, then double-dunked the stalk into the ranch dip, before waving it around. "They just don't look after him like I do. They won't even give him blood Popsicles. And he's used to having six a day!"

Oh, boy, is he a weirdo. I mean, blood Popsicles? What

kind of animal had sacrificed its blood to sate the, er, baby cat's hunger?

Nobody said anything for a moment. Squeamish looks passed across a few men's faces. They had no reason to be so easily offended. A few of them had already admitted they fed live mice and rats to their pet snakes. A few said they bought bags of them frozen at Petco.

"You'll take him some Popsicles as a special treat," Roy said.

Privately, Gideon suspected that the perpetual heat in Roy's home had gotten to his brain.

Something felt off about all of this. Steve was muttering into his phone now, looking worried. Gideon heard him say, "Harriet" who was his best friend. And Gideon knew Harriet was a matchmaker. Why was Steve talking to her now?

"Say, this isn't some crazy kind of intervention is it?" Alun suddenly asked. Apparently Gideon wasn't the only one who sensed that something was weird about this meeting.

Everyone looked at each other. The twelve gay men sitting in a dispirited group were dealing with some serious issues. Their favorite icons, actors Robin Williams and Lauren Bacall had recently died. Not only that, Doris Day, the ultimate gay man's icon, had failed to appear on the balcony of her bedroom at her eleven-acre Carmel valley estate to wave to her chorus of gay male fans as she did every birthday. Most of the guys in Gideon's living room had driven up the coast to glimpse their favorite, reclusive star.

When she failed to appear, rumor among the hundreds of men who'd showed up to pay homage to Miss Day, was that she was ill. Gideon had seen footage of her coming out onto one of her upper floor balconies to wave at her loyal fans. Anything, he supposed, to get them off her property. Steve's friends had called him, sick with worry and very disappointed about the fruitless, long drive, only to miss the legend's brief appearance.

He'd jumped at the chance to organize this evening's festivities, urging them to drive a little farther up the coast —ninety-four miles to be exact—to Half Moon Bay.

And here they were, along with some other men Steve had roped into the group.

"Don't be stupid," Steve said to the room. "It's not an intervention. It's a party!"

He turned his back and muttered into his phone once more. "What do you mean you can't find it? It's right here on Cabrillo Highway! You can't miss it. It's the *only* ugly turquoise house in the county." He glanced at Gideon, who cocked an eyebrow at him.

Steve thinks my house is ugly?

Gideon sighed as his friend flashed a guilty look at him. "Please tell me you've got the cocktail fixings," Steve muttered into the phone before ending the call.

"What's going on?" Another member of the group asked.

"Yeah, what gives?" yet another one wanted to know.

Gideon wasn't sure why he'd been included in this meeting. Steve said it was to bring together men who kept exotic pets. But Gretchen wasn't a pet. He loved animals, he just didn't keep any because his little girl was a handful. And boy, was that the understatement of the year.

He turned his attention back to the conversation.

"Any news on Benny and Max?" Matthew asked.

There would have been fourteen men here tonight, except Benny and Max were in the hospital after being attacked by their pets. Apparently these best friends had been running an ad-hoc wildlife rescue operation. It had started with one exotic animal. Didn't it always? They soon found that word spread and people started dumping their unwanted beasts on the couple.

Until a few days ago, they'd been housing eighteen rare Bengal tigers, seventeen lions, three leopards, six black bears, three mountain lions, three grizzly bears, two wolves, two monkeys, and a recently acquired baboon. That baboon must have felt so outnumbered.

Over the weekend some intruder opened the cages and the animals got loose. Except the baboon, who refused to run with the pack. Turns out he was a she, and was very pregnant. She was now in a legitimate refuge, along with the grizzly bears, monkeys, wolves and leopards. The other poor creatures were still being hunted. Some had already been killed by the authorities.

Steve and Gideon had a lot in common. Like the others, they'd had unusual pets in their lives. Well, Steve's lover, Alexio, owned the allegedly mythical bunyip named Norman, and Steve had inherited the creature once he and Alexio moved in together.

Privately, Gideon thought Alexio was a bit well, um, ah, a bit of a head case. He'd been to Alexio and Steve's home several times now and he'd sneaked down into the basement where Norman lived in a sort of expansive swamp. Apart from the place stinking something fierce, Gideon hadn't noticed anything unusual. Certainly no mythological mix of a dog and crocodile with dark fur, horse-like tail, flippers, gigantic horns, or a mouth shaped like a duckbill. Nothing like that at all.

Not that Gideon said so. He pretended when Steve took him down to formally meet Norman, that he was able to see him. In spite of Steve's nuttiness, Gideon valued the friendship. He admired the fact that Steve loved his man so much he humored his belief in Norman. Or, had Steve started to believe in him, too? Gideon couldn't decide. In the short time he'd known Steve, Gideon had told him all the secrets of his life. He'd told him *everything*, and Steve

still liked him. That kind of friendship was priceless. If Steve could accept Gideon for all his little quirks, he could accept Steve, too.

"Isn't Norman cute?" Steve had asked.

"Adorable." Gideon had lied, hoping that God wouldn't come down and smite him on the spot. Not until he'd had sex again. At least one more time. Then God could smite him. If the sex was bad. If the sex was good, they'd have to re-negotiate.

A knock on the kitchen door made everyone jump. Although there was a front door, almost everybody missed it and used the one that led into the kitchen.

"She's here!" Steve trilled. He bolted for the door and let Harriet in. She looked a bit disheveled as she stumbled inside, a large paper carry bag torn from the bottom. Blood was smeared across her face.

A glassy-eyed Harriet pointed a shaky finger outside. "I nearly got mauled by a bear!"

There was a moment of silence followed by the man with the long black hair and blue eyes shrieking, "Renaldo!" He slammed his martini glass to the coffee table, shattering it. He raced outside, the others following hot on his heels.

"I swear he was going to kill me," Harriet kept muttering.

Outside on the artfully distressed wooden sun deck, smashed liquor bottles glittered under the moonlight, the contents seeping down through the slats to the ocean rocks below. Gideon quickly realized it was a Bloody Mary mix that Harriet had on her face, not blood.

A gigantic animal cowered against the rock wall of Gideon's patio, where its owner had left him tied up to a railing.

It was certainly not a bear. Gideon blinked. Its fur was long. Black around the head, tapering off to a golden tan at the tale, the poor thing cringing now was a massive,

gentle-looking dog.

"Is that a Leonburger?" he asked the man, who flopped beside his pooch and cuddled him.

"Renaldo!" the guy kept bleating, rocking himself against the dog that smelled of booze. Gideon reached down to pick up some broken glass from one of the liquor bottles and Renaldo snapped at him.

Gideon pulled his hand back, shocked that such an innocent-looking creature could be so ferocious.

"He has a toothache," his owner said. "I didn't want to leave him at home. He's scheduled for dental surgery in the morning. I thought he'd be okay out here."

"We need to move him," Gideon said, as the others began to pick up glass shards. "He could hurt himself." Gideon estimated the dog weighed around a hundred and seventy, maybe even two hundred pounds.

The dog looked at him as Gideon knelt beside him and removed some glass from his coat. This time, the dog dropped his mouth open and gave Gideon's hand a big, fat lick.

"We need to clean up and I don't want him stepping on glass." Gideon pointed toward the house. "Let's put him in my bedroom for now."

"How will we get him there?" somebody asked. "There's glass everywhere."

"Daddy?"

Gideon looked up to see his little girl walking from the front gate toward him. She'd been crying. Behind her stood the elderly couple he'd come to rely upon since moving up to Half Moon Bay.

"Mary. Louis. Is everything okay?" Gideon asked, as his daughter Gretchen raced into his arms.

Renaldo barked at the elderly couple, seeming to sympathize with Gretchen.

Gideon's daughter shrank in his arms. He only became aware then of two police officers standing behind Mary and Louis Brown.

"We had to bring her home," Mary whispered.

"Why?" Gideon asked.

The gray-haired woman looked wretched, tears pouring down her face. "I've been reported by one of the parents I babysit for."

"Reported for what?" Gideon shifted his daughter from one hip to the other. She was distraught, and he was surprised when Renaldo's owner lifted her from his arms.

"Let's go inside, poppet. My name is Jory Wyatt, and my dog's name in Renaldo," the man said. "Have you ever met a Leonburger before?"

Gideon became distracted, though grateful that Jory had commandeered Gretchen and took her inside the house with the lumbering giant, Renaldo. Gideon had never exposed Gretchen to many animals. She had a heart of gold but tended to play rough with them. Renaldo, he hoped, might be an exception.

With his child out of hearing range, Gideon put his hands on his hips. "Why have you been reported?" He glared at the cops, who looked a bit sheepish in the face of the elderly woman's distress.

"I take photos of the children I look after," Mary said. "I text them to the parents to let them know the kids are happy and having fun."

"Yes, I know you do." Gideon nodded. "I love when you do that with Gretchen. She cherishes her time with you, and those photos are very dear to me." He frowned. "What's going on?"

"One of the parents claimed I was taking inappropriate photos of their daughter."

Gideon stared at her. "Impossible."

"Of course it is!" Louis Brown finally spoke. "It's ridiculous. The police just invaded our house with a search warrant looking for kiddie porn." The old man looked incredulous.

Gideon had only just become aware of Harriet standing beside him. She looked glassy-eyed with the revelation of such juicy gossip.

"I'm in trouble," Mary wailed. "Gideon. What am I going to do?"

He sprang forward and took her into his arms. She was bone thin. He'd known this since the day he'd met her, but in spite of her apparent fragility, she'd always seemed so strong and resilient. Now, she was a wreck.

"We have to take her in," one of the uniformed officers said.

Gideon couldn't believe any of this. So far, this whole evening would go down as the night from hell.

"You're going to arrest her?" Gideon was shocked.

"Pending any charges that might arise from our search."

Gideon had heard enough. "I'm an attorney and I've accepted work as an assistant prosecutor in San Francisco. As an officer of the court, may I represent Mr. and Mrs. Brown, and can I keep them here, pending your findings?"

The cops exchanged looks. "Hold on," one of them said, and retreated, making a call from his cell phone.

The other cop backed away a little. He seemed embarrassed to be here.

Mary Brown pushed herself away from Gideon and looked up at him. "Gideon. You can't do that!" She dropped her voice. "You weren't going to take that job. You were going to stay home and write."

It was true. With the unexpected windfall he'd just experienced, he'd hoped to quit working, but had been

approached by the mayor's office in San Francisco to take part in a new team of prosecutors handling criminal cases. He hadn't said yes or no, but he might just have to take it now. He hated seeing anyone railroaded. All his life as a criminal defense attorney he'd been forced to work with clients who took plea deals admitting to crimes they hadn't committed because government prosecutors warned that taking a lesser sentence spared them the risk of a jury not believing them. This new task force would work for fair trials. He sighed. *Man, oh man. Why didn't I just stay inside with Gretchen and watch one of her DVD's?*

The officer returned. "The Browns can stay with you, but they are not to leave until you hear from us." He didn't look happy. Maybe he'd hoped to rope in a genuine pedophile. He retreated with his partner, and Gideon waited until he heard them slam the doors to their vehicle.

As he led the Browns inside his house, glass crunched under their feet. He'd have to finish cleaning up. With Harriet trailing them, Gideon put his arm around Mary's shoulder and whispered in her ear, "Mary, I need to ask. Is there anything the police will find in their search?"

"Nothing," she said. Her face wobbled. Uh-oh. Cloudy with a strong chance of tears.

"Nothing?" he repeated.

"We've got a copy of a video of *Deep Throat* we've been keeping since 1972. It's a collector's piece," Lou said, looking embarrassed.

Gideon tried not to laugh. He wondered what the cops would think of their solo piece of vintage porn. "Are they likely to find it?" he asked.

"No. It's hidden inside a fake cupboard in our garage," Lou said. "They'd have to take it apart brick by brick to find it."

Gideon was stunned. "Why on earth are you keeping it if

it's hidden like that?"

"I couldn't throw it out!" Louis looked outraged. "Mary had a cameo in it." He seemed so proud. "That's porno chic she did. She gave it all up for me, when she could have been a big porn queen. To me, it's a reminder that underneath it all, my sweet old gal is still a bit of a naughty girl."

A cameo. Gideon didn't even want to think about exactly what Gretchen's favorite babysitter had done in the movie. Not that he was a prude. They walked into the house, Harriet grinning.

"She's a sly old one, isn't she?" She watched Mary and Lou join the others in the living room. She touched Gideon's arm. "Never mind. We still have some booze, and I know you made canapés. We'll salvage this evening yet. Go entertain your guests."

Renaldo's owner approached Gideon, a mug of hot chocolate in his grip. "I should introduce myself. My name is Jory Wyatt." He shook Gideon's hand. "I broke your martini glass and I apologize, but I panicked when I thought my dog had been injured."

"Please don't apologize. I would have panicked, too. Thank you for being so sweet with Gretchen. It's nice to meet you." For the first time, Gideon realized the shaggy-dark-haired guy with the piercing blue eyes was not just good looking. He was drop-dead handsome.

"I cleaned it up, and I'd be happy to buy you a replacement. It looks like it might be vintage."

Gideon chuckled. "Yes. Vintage Ikea. Please don't worry about it."

Jory inclined his head toward Gretchen's bedroom. "Your little girl is tucked up in her bed watching *Beverly Hills Chihuahua*. It's Renaldo's favorite movie."

Gideon grinned. He got a kick out of the idea of that huge

dog enjoying the antics of a tiny, fictional one.

Jory didn't smile. He looked serious when he said, "Gretchen wanted a cup of hot chocolate. I hope you don't mind that I made use of your kitchen."

"Mind?" Gideon had never met a man who'd even dream of pouring a glass of water for his kid. "That was so thoughtful of you, thank you."

Jory beamed finally. It lit all the corners of his face. "Here. You take it to her. I brought the ingredients for scorpions. I think it's about time I unleashed them. That ought to put everybody in good moods."

"Great. Thanks again." Gideon went off to see his daughter, who lay against her pillows. She had her arms around the massive dog, who snored gently against Gretchen's raven hair.

"I love Renaldo, Daddy. Can we keep him?"

Gideon's heart gave a leap. "No, darling. He belongs to Jory."

Her grave eyes stared up into his. "But I love, him, Daddy."

He had no doubt that she did. Gretchen loved everyone and anyone she met. She became so attached so easily. He wanted to give her everything. Renaldo snored like a steam train, making Gideon and Gretchen smile. He seemed to snore with the rhythm of the ocean.

Gideon couldn't fit on the bed with the cuddly duo, but his heart melted anew as he gazed down at the little girl he hadn't even known existed until a few months ago. Now he couldn't imagine his life without her. He would do anything within his power to protect her. Gretchen's long, black hair fanned out against her pillows and soft, pale-pink cotton sheets. She had the palest skin, dark, dark eyes and a smattering of freckles on her nose. She looked out of the window and up at the moon, her very favorite thing. For so

long it had been denied her, and knowing her constant need for it, he hadn't put any window treatments in her room.

Moon glow became her.

Mary walked in and put her hand on Gideon's shoulder. "How pretty she is. Can I sit with her until she falls asleep?"

Gideon knew that Gretchen would drift away in no time. He allowed her to watch the movies he'd already seen with her, and which soothed her. Anything with dogs or cats were her favorite, especially if the animals overcame a boo-hiss villain.

When he first took custody of her, she'd been afraid of everything. Frankly, when he learned what he now knew about her, he'd been afraid, too.

"Okay," he said, as Mary drew forward his favorite rocking chair. He kissed his daughter's cheek. "I'm just in the living room if you need me, sweetie."

"I love you, Daddy."

"Love you, too." He bent and kissed her again, as Mary leaned back into her chair. She was exhausted, he could tell. He left Gretchen alone with her babysitters and went back to the living room. All conversation seemed to stop. Everybody looked at him.

"Care for a scorpion?" Jory asked him. He sounded strained. "They're supposed to be drinks that are shared." Jory rose from his chair by the fireplace and joined Gideon. "But I figured none of us feel cozy enough to share...yet." He gave Gideon a wink and handed him a cocktail glass. Gideon sipped at it.

"Delicious." He found himself a seat near Jory, beside Louis, who was practically licking his near-empty glass.

Gideon felt the lethal cocktail hit him in a pleasant way. Maybe he shouldn't drink, in case the police showed up to arrest the Browns.

"Man," Alun suddenly said. "I thought I had an unusual pet. Is what Steve told us true, Gideon?"

Gideon froze, his glass at his lips. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled. What the hell had Steve been telling them? He was aware of everybody's gaze on him, and locked glances with Jory, who gave him a sympathetic smile.

"I don't know." Gideon hoped he'd been able to disguise his fury. "What did Steve tell you?"

Louis Brown looked like an excited rabbit, his nose twitching a little. Oh, God. What the hell had Steve done?

Steve flapped his hand. "Sweetie, I was just telling them that I think you're a little bit in denial about Gretchen."

"Denial? Who me?" Gideon was desperate enough to attempt a pathetic joke. "Isn't that a river in Egypt?"

"Oh, God." Steve shook his head. "You need to face facts. You have to admit what she is."

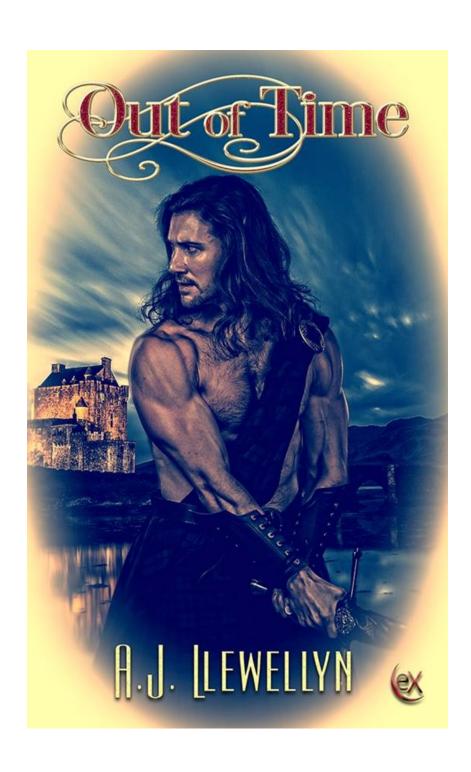
Gideon shook his head. This was worse than the time his Aunt Marie outed him at his sister's sweet sixteen birthday party.

"You have to admit what she is," Steve repeated.

Have another scorpion, Steve. Sheesh. Gideon tried to avoid the avid stares of every man in the room. Harriet looked mesmerized.

"Well, you said she isn't an animal, and she's not human, so what is she?" asked Hugh, lifting his head from the scorpion that sloshed over the rim of his glass, through his fingers, and onto the hardwood floor.

"She's a monster, that's what she is." Steve nodded vigorously. "She's a little monster."



OUT OF TIME

Biologist Arlo Perez has spent his whole life avoiding decisions, confrontations, anything concrete. Anything resembling a commitment. When his lover, Miguel, dumps him, a depressed Arlo decides to put down roots in Merced, a small California town nestled between Yosemite and the old gold-panning country region. There, he secures a new fellowship at a college and looks forward to adventure and fun.

But just as he's getting used to normal, he gets a whole lot more than he bargained for.

One day when his car breaks down, Arlo winds up at the mercy of a deranged garage owner in Port Hueneme. And somehow, he finds himself tossed back in time to an era of knights, dragons, and pit fights. Suddenly, he's in Mexico, 1867, and there's only one way out—fight or die.

Can Arlo get himself out of this horrible and confusing mess? Can he stop feeling out of place and out of his senses? Or is he completely out of time?

CHAPTER 1

"Well, are you going to do it?" Aunty Margie asked me. "Are you going to book it?"

My finger hovered over the "send" function of the Zim Ride website. Damn it. Procrastination had been my lifelong handicap. It didn't help that I detected the sadness in her tone, but I couldn't help it. I had to get out of here. Aunty Margie's typical, open-mouthed breathing started to annoy me. I used to find it endearing but now it irritated me. Man, I was becoming a crotchety old geezer, and I was only thirty-one.

"Arlo, are you always this indecisive?" she asked. "Or are you being cheap?"

"Cheap? Me? Yes." I stifled a sigh and wished, not for the first time, that I were a rich man, but I'm not. If I were, I'd have my own car and I wouldn't have to haggle with people, negotiating a shared ride in their vehicles.

This one looked good. Man, did it look good. First of all, there was no way I'd get home to Merced any cheaper, I had to admit. And then there was the car itself. The guy had a Daimler, of all things, that he needed to transport to Northern California. He had three spots in the vehicle. Two were taken. I'd be the third, and last.

If I were a rich man, perhaps I'd believe in intuition, hunches, and that sort of stuff. But when you're poor, you can't afford those luxuries. Living by your wits is cheaper, and so, you get desperate. You tend to make stupid, dumbass decisions. Not that Zim Rides are bad. Heck, they're great. It's just that being, as I said, poor, I tend to fly by the seat of my pants, operating on my wits, but unfortunately, these questionable talents don't actually *take* me anywhere.

I wind up haggling on zimrides.com, a new trip-sharing site that helps you hitch a ride anywhere you want, with a bunch of strangers. At very low prices. I had to admit it was a fantastic bargain. All I'd have to do was chip in twenty-five bucks toward gas and pay for any snacks I wanted during the trip. The driver guaranteed me one stop between Los Angeles and my new hometown of Merced. A sleepy town a hundred and fourteen miles south of the state capital of Sacramento, it had been hard to find anyone tootling up that way, but Graham, the driver, assured me it was no problem to drop me there.

Nothing could beat the price, and I'd been hunting since I booked my first-ever Zim Ride down here two days ago. Until my friend Josie mentioned it, I'd never heard of the site. Now I was dreaming of road trips all over the country, for nominal prices. Where had this thing been all my life?

I knew I had to act fast. So why was I reluctant? Why was I worried? What was bothering me that I couldn't put

my finger on it? I couldn't even put it on the send button.

"Well?" Aunty Margie prompted.

Well? The Daimler guy typed on the screen.

Talk about being ganged up on. Sheesh. I'd already typed the word yes, and this time, I hit send.

I smiled at Aunty Margie, but a feeling of dread crept over me. I've seen plenty of movies about hapless passengers getting hacked up by drivers. As a teenager I saw the movie *The Hitcher* and sat in frozen terror as actor Rutger Hauer thumbed a ride from a guy and calmly told him he'd just dismembered the last guy who gave him a ride.

"I want you to stop me," he'd said. Those words still haunt me.

When the driver managed to push him out of the vehicle, Rutger hitched a ride with a pretty girl, then tied her between two semi trailers and tore her, screaming and crying, into pieces.

Then I remembered the episode of *I Love Lucy*, where she and Ethel hitch a ride to Florida with a very strange woman they start to believe is a hatchet murderess.

That damned Graham accepted me as a passenger, then changed the departure time. We messaged back and forth about where we'd meet. I already knew from my first booking that nobody gave their exact addresses when arranging a pick-up. We agreed to meet at the gas station kitty corner to my mom's over-furnished townhouse on Coldwater Canyon.

I wouldn't be able to get out of dodge for five hours, and after the worst New Year's Eve on record, I couldn't wait. I had promised myself I'd be back home in Merced before the New Year began, but like so many of my promises to myself and others, I fell short of the mark.

It would have been easy to slip away the day before had

I not discovered the foreclosure notice lurking at the bottom of the clothes dryer. Man, oh man, had that bummed me out. Nobody had told me. When I confronted Aunty Margie who shares the premises with my mom, who is her older sister, the poor thing began to sob.

"Oh, thank God," she'd said, throwing herself into my arms. She was so thin I was afraid if I hugged her too hard that I'd break her spine. Now that I had possession of all the facts, I had to get out of here before I said something I'd regret.

Or, maybe wouldn't.

"Were you this sketchy when you were involved with Miguel?" Aunty Margie suddenly asked me.

"Sketchy?"

"Yeah, sketchy. You duck and weave like a boxer." She waved a wrinkled hand in the air. "You judge us, Arlo. You distance yourself. You get snarky and panicky. How the hell did he put up with you?"

How the hell did she have me so pegged? "Takes one to know one," I retorted.

Aunty Margie blinked. "You're right. I asked for that." She pushed back at her curly black bob of a hairdo that hasn't changed since I was a toddler except for the increasing gray strands through it. "It's a family trait."

Yeah, and didn't I know it. My mom had this gene the worst. After a whirlwind courtship and turbulent marriage, she'd pushed my dad away with her constant criticisms. He returned to his home in Santiago de Querétaro, Mexico twenty years ago, though they never actually divorced. She still pretends they're together. It appears that in her mind, he's just enjoying the eternal sunshine of a perpetual vacation.

I'd just spent Christmas with him, and to be honest, it was the best time I'd ever had with him. Mind you, I hadn't

seen him for eleven years, and I was surprised when I'd received his invitation. I'd just returned to California after years of extensive research in Latin American countries. I had no idea my dad was even familiar with the Internet, let alone tech savvy. We Skyped a couple of times and he sent me a plane ticket. Getting to Santiago de Querétaro had taken a day and a half, but somehow the cleanest, safest city in all of Mexico seemed familiar, though I didn't think I'd ever been there before.

Being with my dad had been amazing. I look just like him. What's scary is that my sister, Woody, moved to Mexico a couple of years ago to live with him. I'd had no idea that he owned three major seafood restaurants, and my sister had been managing one to great culinary acclaim.

Huh. The whole trip had been a surprise, especially when I learned my dad still loved my crazy mom. And she is crazy. She named my sister after the folk singer Woody Guthrie, and me after his son. Both are famous for their songs of social injustice. I say she made a mistake naming us after these tortured souls. I blame our names for our lifelong restlessness.

But Miguel... My lovely Miguel. He would just say I was once again shifting blame. "Make a decision," he'd always say to me.

It was a good thing I didn't have to decide if I could stop a serial killing hitchhiker. If he said, "I want you to stop me," I know I'd torture myself with wondering if I should, and how.

Visiting my dad had set of an atomic explosion with my mom and aunt. I had no choice but to travel up to LA to spend New Year's with them.

And now, this. They were about to lose it all and I had no idea how to help them. Once again, I dithered. Should I

call my dad? Or not? Should I try to get a loan to help them? Mom hadn't paid her mortgage in more than two years, and with the added fines, filing fees, and penalties, she owed the bank nearly two hundred thousand dollars.

The twelve grapes I'd consumed on the stroke of twelve—an old family ritual for prosperity—still stuck in my throat. Aunty Margie had begged me not to let on to Mom that I knew about the foreclosure.

"I've pleaded with her for two years, loan modification, loan modification," Aunty Margie kept saying. "Now, we're going to lose everything."

The more I learned, such as the phony financial consultant Mom had given thousands to, bankruptcy, unpaid loans, and the unpaid mortgage, the less I was able to cope.

Back home I could think more clearly, maybe seek legal advice and make a plan. I'd contact Dad and tell him I needed the money, but he wouldn't believe I needed that kind of cash. I don't have much stuff and I've spent my life traveling from one jungle to another, studying amphibians. I had to come up with a clever ruse. He'd never help my mother. I secretly think he's waited all these years, hoping she would fail and have to go crawling back to him.

I had just until January twenty-third to save her, all while pretending that I didn't know about her problem. Man, it was hard to think with eleven dogs and nine cats in the house. My mom's Chihuahua, Juan, had the right idea. He kept himself hidden under a throw rug in the corner of the living room. The better to pretend none of this was happening. I looked around for Juan's blanket. Where was he? Maybe I could hide with him. After all, misery loves company.

Uh-oh. It suddenly occurred to me that I'd forgotten to include my friend Josie in the Zim Ride, but she'd indicated

earlier she wanted to stay a little longer. She'd really embraced my womenfolk and had promised to keep their secret safe. Not the one about the imminent foreclosure, but their work. Mom and Aunty Margie ran an unofficial refuge for battered women and their pets. They were part of a network of women across the city who took in emergency cases. Most shelters won't take pets and I knew that pets, as well as children, were the hidden victims of domestic abuse.

Which explained the menagerie in the townhouse due to be sold by the bank on January 23 via auction. That gave us twenty-two days to come up with a plan. I was fresh out of those. Scraping together twenty-five dollars for a Zim Ride was the best I could do right now.

Arlo Perez, richest guy in the universe.

That's what my dad had called me just two days ago.

Rich, because I had an education and scholarly accomplishments, but my studies of wild Amazonian amphibians hadn't translated into money. I'd just accepted a fellowship at University of California at Merced. With a stipend of thirty thousand dollars a year, a campus apartment, small office, health benefits, and extra research and travel expenses, it was the best offer that had come my way in a long time. But none of this would help my mother when she was about to lose her home. I wouldn't receive my first stipend until the middle of the month and that would be a spit in the bucket for her.

I couldn't do anything until she stopped eating grapes and fantasizing that this was going to be the best year *ever*. And it was too bad, because I thought we'd had the best time in recent memory. As usual, I cooked, and it was one of the tastier turkeys I'd prepared. Really. The Brussels sprouts weren't great. Hard, almost raw, in fact, but the entire household ate them. Oh, my God. They were

mercy eaters! Even my aunt, whose new dental implants had been bothering her.

Mom, however, had zeroed in on Josie, the crazy blonde chick I'd brought with me. She kept asking her how we'd met.

"A café in Merced," Josie and I reminded her repeatedly. As I listened now to Mom's conversation with Josie, I was aware that it was a repeated one.

"We met at a café called Coffee Bandits," Josie said with infinite patience. "I think that was rather apt, don't you?" She let out a tinkly laugh. Everybody on the premises, eight people in all, seemed coffee-obsessed. We'd run out twice, and I'd gone out and bought fresh supplies. It hadn't been easy negotiating the construction zone outside but I'd been keen to check my cell phone messages. I still couldn't believe my recently ex-lover Miguel hadn't at least sent me a text. Giving him up had been worse than giving up cigarettes.

"Oh, he's a bandit all right," Mom said. She laughed and wagged a finger at me, her numerous new-age bracelets clanging on her spindly wrist. If she'd spent less money buying superstitious crap and more paying her bills, she wouldn't be in her current predicament.

I took a look around at the women to whom she'd given refuge. Even Josie's sharp edges had softened under Mom's care. Mom was a natural-born caretaker. Dad told me it both chafed and thrilled him that she was so maternal. I sometimes think he resented me and Woody trampling his romantic idyll with her in sunny LA. I glanced around at the Mexican and Aztec masks on the walls. The ancient pots and archeological finds were probably worth a fortune, but it was too late to rustle up a fire sale.

"Do tell!" Josie said, with another musical laugh. I'd only met her a month ago. It had been a strange encounter. She seemed familiar, but I didn't know her. She'd zeroed in on me at a table at the café, and engaged me in conversation so quickly I assumed she was coming onto me.

"I'm gay," I told her. She just laughed at me. She was sunny and blonde. Not my type. I liked them dark-haired like myself, and with a bit of extra, er, artillery. But Josie seemed fine about hanging out with me. She'd been fantastic in fact. I was still getting over the shock of the collapse of my four-year relationship with Miguel. I'd thought we could survive anything. I was wrong. We'd survived food poisoning in the Amazonian jungles, snake bites in Peru, outrun violent bird poachers in Bolivia, but apparently Miguel couldn't handle the idea of life in Merced, a small town in Northern California.

Often called the Gateway to Yosemite, its quiet, natural surroundings appealed to me. I thought Miguel would love the location. Merced was also close to the old gold-panning areas and the hot new wine country places. Being a writer, I truly thought he'd dig it. He always said he wanted us to settle down. Now suddenly, he didn't.

The UC Merced campus was the first research university opened in the new millennium, and I wanted to be a part of it. I'd had no idea he really meant it when he'd said, "This time you've gone too far."

I waited and hoped. And became fast friends with the very pushy Josie.

We'd attended operas and ballets together, art museums, and now, she'd put up with my family.

For the last three years, I'd been traveling. Being in one place was already stifling me, but the truth was, I had yet to spend even a full week in Merced. Man, sometimes I wished I'd stayed in Ecuador.

Although I now had a fellowship at UC Merced, it was

really a place to hang my hat and call myself a professor. I'd planned to use the gig as the reason why I would miss every family holiday meal for the next twelve months. I couldn't skip New Year because I'm a schmaltzy putz, and besides, my mom and aunt, who hated each other, weren't getting any younger. They were skinnier than ever, scrimping on things like food, but splurging on stupid things like phony spiritual bracelets and crystals. Then there were expensive flowers for the table, and bottled water.

Now there's a scam if ever I've heard of one. Bottled water! I drank straight from the tap and I hadn't fallen down dead. I've drunk water from Amazonian rivers. I've used water when people told me it was deadly. All right, I've had a stomachache or two along the way, but I'm fine.

More than fine. But my mom and aunt are Russian Jews. With my Dad being Mexican, growing was not so much like the Hatfields and McCoys, but the Hatfields and McCoys armed with sharp knives and potty mouths.

"I'm coming with you," Josie suddenly said.

"No. You can't. There are no more seats."

She gave that tinkly laugh again. Why did she always find me so amusing? After a significant pause, she said again, "I'm coming with you." No trace of merriment this time. I knew that tone. I'd heard it once before.

I closed my eyes remembering how we'd taken a day trip down the coast before Christmas and my car had broken down in Port Hueneme.

Josie had been absolutely furious at first. She wanted to go home, in spite of my suggestion that we stay until the car was fixed and enjoy a day at the beach.

"No," she said. "We will leave now." She suggested a Zim Ride back to Merced. That was my first experience with the company, though that trip cost me forty bucks. I'd paid

for both Josie and me.

I was forced to leave my car in Port Hueneme. It's still there, actually. But with the steering column busted and the engine having exploded, it's no use to anyone. I told the garage owner, Ron Webber, that he could sell it. I'd give him the pink slip. He'd been moaning so much. Damn. I kept forgetting to mail him that thing.

Josie was a stone mason by trade. I liked her unusual occupation, and like I said, she was fun. She had taken her real estate exams. I wasn't sure why. I thought she should be making a fortune being a stone mason. I imagined even if she came in with the highest bid, men would fall in love with her.

"I don't want to work that hard," she said whenever I brought it up.

She never seemed to be working, and I didn't understand it, but when her holiday plans fell through, I felt bad for her. I brought her down here and, of course, Mom and Aunty Margie liked her instantly. It was scary really. They clung to her like limpets, and she kept giving me these vacant, semi-terrified glances.

We all sat down to lunch. Mostly leftovers, but pretty tasty. Cathy, a feisty hairdresser who had left her husband after one split lip too many, kept wondering how he was faring without her.

"He's not a bad guy, you know," she said. "He just can't handle his booze."

Josie snorted. "I bet he's fine. I can just see him now, asleep on the sofa with *Judge Judy* blaring on the TV."

Cathy shot a petrified look at her that might have said, "Wow, how do you know what he's like?"

We ate in silence for a while, then Mom started peppering Josie with questions.

"How did you meet my son?" she asked. Oh, boy, her

short-term memory was shot to pieces. No wonder she was in her current predicament. How long had she been this forgetful?

By now, Josie had motor-boated her way through three glasses of red wine and was feeling no pain. As a matter of fact, she was the life of the party.

"I'm not his girlfriend," she said, attempting to whisper. "He's gay, you know."

"I keep hoping he'll come back to our team," Mom said.

"You're drunk," I said to Josie.

"I'm not drunk. Far from it." She swayed a little and, as she leaned toward me, I nudged her elbow, gently, and her almost-full glass toppled onto Mom's tablecloth. Mom and Aunty Margie screamed. The wineglass, though ugly as hell, had been a wedding gift for my mother and she fell apart when it shattered.

"That was the last of the set!" she screeched. "My God. My marriage really is over." She picked up a piece of glass and sank into her seat, weeping.

"No, you're not drunk," I muttered, hauling Josie to her feet. "Get packed. We're leaving."

"Leaving? But I haven't had any chocolate pie yet and it looks delicious."

"Get packed." I gave her my most furious look.

She knew things were bad with my mom falling about sobbing. I emptied the table of its dishes, carrying everything into the kitchen.

"It's okay, it will come out," Aunty Margie tried to console my mom. "A bit of salt will take that red wine right out!"

"Fuck you! What do you know, you old crone?"

Aunty Margie just kept picking up glass shards. She was used to mom's tirades. They weren't for the faint-hearted.

Josie backed away. The gloves were off now. So were the smiles and sweet-old-lady, gentle voices. I'd warned Josie my womenfolk were mad. She was about to see some neutron bombs detonating. She must have suspected Mom was winding herself up for a full-scale meltdown, because she reached into her jeans pocket and grabbed her cell phone. She began manically texting, scurrying to the bedroom.

I hauled the wine-sodden tablecloth into the kitchen where I doused it with salt in the kitchen sink. I lamented the fact that I'd picked out the bottle of Coppola cabernet sauvignon myself and it had set me back eighteen bucks. My mom stood beside me, carrying on about spilled salt being bad luck. She clutched her tiny, nasty little Chihuahua in her grip. Juan, who growls at everybody except my mom, curled his lip at me.

What the fuck.

The salt turned pink as it soaked up the red wine.

"Isn't that seven years bad luck chucking out all that salt?" Mom asked her sister.

"No. Breaking a mirror is seven years bad luck." Aunty Margie stuck her head under my left arm and peered into the sink. "It's working. See? Arlo knows what he's doing."

She lifted her head out again, gave me a wink, and picked up the tiny hand vac she and mom used for crumbs and what-not.

"You move so slowly," Mom griped at her, which was really unfair.

Poor Aunty Margie had to give up her dog walking services when she'd fallen and broken her left hip walking a pit bull puppy for a client. She'd recovered from that and went back to walk the same dog and fell a second time, breaking her other hip and a kneecap. She'd had surgery but walked with a severe limp. She's so frail now she can't walk any more dogs. She can still feed and tend cats, but three-quarters if her business is gone.

She'd then lost her apartment when her landlord sold his building. He'd given her and all the other tenants three grand apiece for relocation fees, but she hadn't been able to find any place to live in a hurry. Mom had invited her to stay. It was always supposed to be temporary, but Aunty Margie was forced to dip into her three-K bounty and has never been able to scrape the funds together to move. As much as Mom berates her, those two old ladies need each other. My aunt helps with the bills and shops like a champ.

But still, she hobbles, and it wasn't fair of my mom to belittle her.

She knew she'd gone too far with her complaints about Aunty Margie's lack of speed. She said nothing as I rinsed the dishes in the second sink, and loaded them into the dishwasher. I shook off the salt from the tablecloth and poured a second, equally generous amount onto it again. The salt started turning pink right away.

"It looks like Himalayan sea salt," Mom said, smiling at me. She could never apologize. Her way of doing so was to be sweet. It wouldn't work with me. I wrote out instructions for her to follow on how to clean the cloth because I knew she'd forget, and half the time she can't hear anybody speaking anyway.

"I got us a ride that leaves in five minutes," Josie said, coming into the kitchen. Her face was red and blotchy, her tone stiff. She'd been crying. I'd hurt her feelings, and ruined New Year's Day, too.

"The driver's picking us up at the Arco station on the corner," Josie said. Her gaze shifted from side to side. She was lying. She always did that when she lied. I didn't care. Lying was my minor in college, herpetology being my major.

"Right." I hustled up the stairs to grab my backpack. I'd taken out two shirts and ironed them. One was on my

back, the other I took off the heavily scented, pouffy coat hanger and stuffed into the backpack. I picked up my Spanish-language copy of *Love in the Time of Cholera* and stowed that, too. Once I grabbed my toothbrush from the bathroom, I was good to go.

Outside, on Coldwater Canyon, my mom and aunt cried. Their rescues remained in the condo, forbidden to walk outside in case their abusive spouses had tracked them down. But I was willing to bet Cathy would be home by dinnertime. She was already having escapee's remorse.

It was unusually cold for LA, and the entire street had become a concrete nightmare. It had once been filled with cottages and orange trees and now it was all condos and a tiny wedding chapel called The Little Brown Church.

Mom's spidery fingers clutched at my skin and clothing. Juan the dog clutched at the hem of my jeans. Josie and I hugged them, and my aunt, then went on our way. We shouldered our backpacks and picked our way across the debris of wooden planks, past brick pallets and around traffic cones. The farther we got away from my mom's townhouse, the easier I found it to breathe.

"What kind of car does our Zim driver have?" Josie asked.

"A Daimler. So there really isn't another car coming any minute?"

"I'm afraid not."

I blew out a sigh. How would I explain her presence to Graham? I'd forgotten to jot down his details so I could send him a text.

"Sorry I got drunk," Josie said. "I just couldn't stand the tension in the house anymore." She gave me a long, sorrowful look. "How the hell did you put up with that your whole childhood?"

"'Twasn't easy." I tried for humor but felt crushed. I

thought she'd liked my family. She sure acted chummy with them. Something had shifted though. Josie felt distant. Maybe I shouldn't have burdened her with the news of the foreclosure. She hadn't been very sympathetic, now that I thought about it, but then again, there'd been so much going on. Who wanted drama for New Year's Day? And poor Josie had gotten a boat load of it. I felt guilty now. I glanced over at her. Though she was standing right next to me, she might have been hundreds of miles away.

"I'm sorry," we said in unison. We exchanged looks and burst into laughter. It was weird how she read me sometimes and I, her.

"So," I said, "we never got dessert. Can I buy you an ice cream cone?"

"Yeah!" Her face lit up. "I love gas station ice cream cones."

We crossed the blacktop into the station office. It was filled with treats of every kind. I bought us each a gigantic drumstick cone and we sat on a bus stop bench outside and munched our way through them.

"I never got to try the pie," Josie said.

"You wouldn't have liked it. My aunt's secret ingredient is tofu."

"No, it's not." She looked at me, the tip of her nose and top lip smeared with chocolate.

"I assure you, it is."

"You're just saying that."

I shrugged. "I didn't tell you before because I know how much you hate that stuff."

She shook her head. "Wow. You saved me from that one, bro." She ran her tongue around the top of the cone. Had she been a guy, I'd have thought it was the sexiest thing ever. Josie was an unusual woman. Staggeringly beautiful with dark skin, blue eyes and hair that went naturally

blonde in the sun, she could have been a model, but had a thing for stonework.

I knew very few women in California who ate red meat and didn't give a fuck about their carbon footprint. It was what attracted me to her as a human being. That, and the fact that she'd grown up in Peru, a country where I'd spent my last three years of college studying frogs and the strange fungus that has spread through South America and was rapidly destroying colonies of them.

Josie not only spoke Spanish, but also Quechua, an aboriginal language from the Amazon basin. Most of my work had been in the jungles there and I learned to speak it. It had been a shock to meet Josie and be able to revive my knowledge of the musical words.

"I shouldn't have yelled at you," I said. Chocolate always made me mellow and feeling lovey-dovey. Some people got confessional after a glass of wine, me, I got high from cocoa.

"Ah, I shouldn't have had so much to drink."

I yawned and stretched and checked my cell phone. We had four hours before Graham arrived and then about a four and a half hour drive to Merced with the current traffic ahead of us.

I was surprised how fast the hours whizzed by. The Daimler screeched to a stop in front of us and a curly-haired guy got out from behind the wheel. He was middle-aged, grumpy looking, with flyaway brown hair that needed a decent relationship with a hairbrush, and a stained T-shirt that was so dirty I couldn't tell if it was white or beige.

Two other guys were in the car.

"You're in luck," Graham said. "Somebody bailed." He gave Josie an up and down glass that to me assaulted her visually, but she seemed happy.

I wedged into the backseat beside the two other guys

and handed over fifty bucks to Graham.

"It's only forty," he said, snatching the bill from me. That surprised me. I knew gas prices were low, but we were really getting a bargain. Josie seemed awfully friendly and cozy with him, giving that maddening laugh as he handed me ten dollars change.

As we took off, I closed my eyes, my refuge for journeys my entire life. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy meeting new people. I did. But frankly, I was exhausted. I let my mind drift as the cold sun kissed my eyes.

I awoke an hour later and sat up with a start. "What the fuck?" I said. "Where the hell are we?"

"Almost in Port Hueneme," Josie said, looking over her shoulder at me.

I gaped at her. "What the fuck are we doing here?" I blinked in the hot sun. We were miles out of our way. We should have been on the Five Freeway heading north, instead of being on the coast. I knew all too well how far the detour was. Merced was a good four and a half hour drive from Port Hueneme.

Oh, God. There was the gas station where I'd left my car. Graham pulled in and stopped at a gas pump. That was weird. He still had a quarter of a tank of gas.

"Why did you do this?" I wailed at Josie.

She ignored me and got out of the car. I got out, too. I'd suddenly realized the two guys in back were also getting out and, oh, hell no, Ron Webber, the garage owner was swaggering toward us.

"So," Josie said. "I got him here. Can I go now?"

"What?" I asked, craning my neck to see between the shoulders of the two guys who'd ridden in back with me.

"Don't you wanna see the fight?" Ron drawled to her.

She yawned. "Not particularly. "I bet he won't last long, anyway."

"What? I said again. I had to be dreaming. Yes! That was it. None of this was happening.

Ron looked at me. "You got away from me last time." He wagged a finger in my face.

"What?" I repeated. Jeez, Louise, it seemed the only word in my vocabulary. "What are you talking about?"

"The knight battles," Ron said. "Are you really this dumb?"

"Are you kidding? Knights? What kind of knights?"

"Come on, Arturo, modesty does not become you." The garage owner flicked a hateful gaze over me.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Look. I know I owe you money and I forgot to send you the pink slip, but my name is not Arturo."

Ron gave me a nasty laugh. "I sold that car, Arturo. And it really was a lemon." He shook his head. "But the chick that bought it likes it, so she's got me working on it."

"But you don't have the pink slip and my name's not Arturo." Why wouldn't he listen to me?

"Yeah. Right." He arched a brow at me. "All it took was a bill of sale and a forged signature and the vehicle's all mine. Now get in the arena, you stupid ass." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

The two guys beside me grabbed my arms and began to drag me.

"Josie!" I screamed, but when I turned, she was getting back into the Daimler. She didn't look at me as Graham peeled away with a squeal of tires before she'd even closed the door.

Holy shit.

The two men I'd been sitting with dragged me into what looked like a barn. They gave me a mighty shove and I fell

flat on my face in the weirdest smelling mud I'd ever come across.

Pain radiated down my neck and arms. My body sagged in the mire. I worked hard to lift my face and, when I looked up, I blinked, and blinked some more. Blinded by the thick, soupy, foul mud I couldn't believe what was coming for me, as in right at me.

Lots and lots of dragons.

Fire-breathing dragons.

And there was Miguel walking through the middle of them, dragging his left leg behind him. He was covered in blood and seemed half-dead.

What the hell was he doing? He was a writer. He had enough trouble working up the enthusiasm to go to the gym let alone fight.

A roar went up and I realized there was a huge crowd of people. The dragons' heads went up and fire shot into the sky. The sudden burst of heat made my eyes burn and my skin twitch with discomfort.

"Miguel," I whispered.

He looked at me, myriad emotions flickering across his face, and he fell down in a heap at my feet.

The two men hauled me into the center of an arena. I blinked, and swallowed, and wanted to cry. One crumpled man in chain mail lay huddled against a fence. There was blood in the dirt and a roar went up in the crowd. I freaked out when the biggest man I'd ever seen in the scariest-looking chain mail lifted a massive sword and said, "I want you to stop me."



RENT BOY, PHANTOM LOVER, #5 ENTIRE BOOK

Kimo Wilder, Hawaii's number one hula dancer and powerful kahuna, is booked into a lavish hotel in Maui during a July 4th weekend break...with a Rent Boy. Would he really cheat on his beloved husband Lopaka? With their baby twins on the way, Kimo has always been the model of the doting husband and parent.

With the sound of the surf crashing around Kimo's hotel room and the family on its way to visit him, will the Independence Day fireworks display, set for sunset, be the only explosion Maui's going to see over the weekend?

CHAPTER 1

The high surf churned dramatically against the jagged lava rocks lining the cove just fifty feet away from the two-story villa on the grounds of the Kea Lani Hotel at Polo Beach. As I neared the front door, I took a deep breath. *Boom!* One huge wave shot into the air making me jump as I glanced back at the limousine that had picked me up and brought me here. The driver was pulling away in a slow, sedate fashion. I was sorry now that I had not taken more than a few sips of the champagne he'd given me and I stepped forward, knocking at the front door.

"Come in," a voice said from the depths of the villa that I knew the occupant was paying over a thousand dollars for a single night's stay. A hefty amount that did not include what he was paying for my services.

I opened the door and found him sitting on the sofa, his steady gaze on me. A warm, gingery smell drifted over to me from a vase of cut tropical stems. I couldn't take my gaze from each new thing I saw. The living room of that

elegant, beautifully furnished house was huge, with all the doors and windows open to the ocean breeze. The crashing surf left a fine sheen of moisture on a *koa* wood dining table.

"Are you my rent boy?"

I was so shocked at his abruptness, the way he came right out and stated things, that I smiled to cover my anxiety.

"Yes."

He remained sitting, a magnificent, regal presence, dressed in an impeccable suit that, owing to his massive, six foot, four inch frame, he must have had custom made. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, fingers steepled under his chin just staring at me.

"You're lovely." He got up and walked toward me with the gait of a dancer, which of course he was. A wonderfully muscled man, Kimo Wilder was the premiere hula dancer in the Hawaiian Islands. He was also openly gay, married to his co-star, Lopaka, and yet he was here in Maui booking an afternoon rendezvous with me.

I smelled the salt water from the ocean, felt a flicker of ocean spray on my face. We were so close to the lava rocks and black sand carried down by a volcanic splurge from Haleakala over a hundred years ago that I felt we could easily be carried out to sea with the rising of the tide.

My gaze took in the heavy, black tattoos inking the entire right side of Kimo's body. Not that I could see much of them now except on his hands and face. But two nights ago, I'd had a ringside seat at the theater, watching him stalk the stage in a tiny loincloth, knowing he'd handpicked me for a hot, sexual tryst.

Kimo took my breath away with his long gleaming hair held back with a strand of shiny *koa* wood beads. I felt the contained menace oozing from him as he circled me. I was wearing exactly what he'd demanded that I wear. He'd sent a driver with a suit, shoes, socks and the most amazing underwear I'd ever worn in my life. Lace briefs for men.

He put his hand to my crotch. "You're not hard." His fingers searched for the outline of my cock and my gaze fell on a chunk of lava rock at the foot of the lush green garden just beyond the large windows, bursting with birds of paradise, giddy, gaudy *heleconia* and jade. The foamy water worked at the rocks, the way Kimo Wilder was working at me. He grunted when his persistent strokes got me hard.

"Success at last," he whispered and took his hand away, continuing his rhythmic circling of me.

I understood in that moment how animals in the wild felt when ravenous predators circled them searching for the weak spot, watching, waiting for that perfect moment to strike. Kimo leaned forward and, with both hands, pulled the silk jacket from my body. It fell in a soft puddle on the floor.

"You have a nice, tight ass." His voice was at my ear as his right hand fondled my butt cheeks. "And you are absolutely straight?"

"Yes." I was trembling now. I'd heard he packed a huge poker in his pants. What the heck was I getting myself into?

"Then why are you willing to let me fuck you?" His voice was at my other ear. It was disturbing, yet also very erotic.

"When I heard it was you..." I shrugged.

He stopped circling me. "You've never had a man want to fuck you in the ass before?"

"Once or twice."

"And yet you never did it?"

I shook my head. "No."

"So women hire you as an escort and what...there is a

man involved?"

"Occasionally there is a husband wanting to watch me fuck his wife."

Kimo stood in front of me, smiling. "I bet they do...and then they want to fuck you, too." When I nodded, his hand shot back to my cock.

"Your name is Agapito. Is that Spanish?" His voice was low, almost hypnotic.

I nodded again, but this time, I found my voice. "My parents were Spanish Andalusians. I was born in Ceuta."

"Ah...yes. Near the Strait of Gibraltar. A city of Spain but fully autonomous. An intriguing part of the world, Agapito."

I was impressed that he knew his geography. "My family moved here when I was very young. My name, Agapito, means beloved."

A sly curve upward of his lips and he took his hand away from my now rigid cock. "Well, let's see if I make you feel that way before our time is up."

He reached out one long finger and touched my lips before moving across the room and I let out a breath. Relax, I told myself. He won't bite. At least, I don't think he will... I watched him open the fridge and extract a bottle of Veuve Clicquot Demi Sec champagne. My God, that cost over five hundred dollars, that bottle. He opened it quickly, not popping the cork, but twisting it off, handing me a glass and indicating for me to take a seat in one of the huge wing chairs.

Kimo took his place back on the sofa and sipped at his own glass. For the first time, I realized he was barefoot and, up close, I could see his tattoos extended to his feet. The champagne was dry, very dry, and good. I started to relax completely and I looked at his handsome face. Why had I agreed to let him fuck me?

The dizzying fragrance of lilacs hit me and like a drunken

mosquito, my focus drifted to another huge, glorious vase. This one was filled with lilacs and matching live orchards spilling out over the coffee table, tortured willow shooting in different directions. How apt, I thought. I looked like the total package. Slim, well toned, good looking in an exotic way, but inside, I was a wreck. I felt Kimo's gaze on me, his stare so intense it was like being under a heat lamp.

He put his glass on the table and, in one swift movement, was over to me. He knelt between my legs, his hands running up my thighs. His left hand sported at least three wedding rings, and I saw a glint of tiny diamonds on one band. But it was his closeness that threw me. Just inches away from him, I saw his eyes were actually black. He was very intimidating, even when he was being affectionate and sensual. He aroused something deep and primal in me. I felt some deep-sea creature within me unfurling from a long, dormant sleep.

"What about your husband?" I blurted.

He stopped what he was doing, his forehead furrowed. "What about my husband?"

"Does he know what you're doing?" I regretted my words at once. I'd broken rule number one. Never ask them personal questions about spouses, especially when they're paying top dollar to stray on them. I'd read everything I could on the man to glean as much information as possible about his likes and dislikes. He and his husband flew well below the radar, though, despite having a hit performance show in Honolulu five nights a week. A lot of curiosity, not many facts. They were in Maui for a two-week long stint at the Maui Myth and Magic Theater while the long-running, resident show *Ulalena* was taking a break.

I managed to snag a ticket from a street vendor in Lahaina, who flogged everything from boat tours to convoluted condo time-shares and was as captivated as the rest of the crowd in the theater. I'd been awed by the sheer physicality of Kimo Wilder and was stunned that he was booking a male escort, or, as he had referred to me in our brief phone conversation and in person, his rent boy. From everything I had read and heard, he and his husband Lopaka were a solid couple, happy, reclusive people, with a huge property in the mountains both here and on Oahu. I knew they had at least three children and there was rumor of twins on the way via a surrogate.

They earned big money that they poured into their own school for island-born children, focusing on the ancient Hawaiian ways. They gave their time to children's charities and hospitals. They were the Brad and Angelina of the gay world. And here Kimo was on a holiday weekend with a rent boy.

His expression was unreadable, but I sensed a flash of anger as he leaned away from me and topped up his glass. He set the champagne bottle back on the lava coaster on the koa wood coffee table. He did not refill my glass, but took a sip of his and his gaze moved back to my face.

"Stand up." I was expecting the words, *now get out*. Instead I got, "Take everything off except your shorts." He sat back watching me take off the elegant shirt, the black leather belt at my waist. As I dropped my pants and kicked off the shoes and socks, a flicker of fire danced in those expressive eyes. He held his hand toward me. Drawing me to him, he licked his lips as he admired me in the blue lace briefs with the black trim.

The box that had arrived at my hotel room had read *Hidden Vestments*. A quick look online and I learned these briefs cost three hundred dollars and were made exclusively for men. The company made silk and lace underwear out of vintage French and German lace and

silk. They even made wedding dresses for gay men and I wondered if Kimo's husband had worn one of them on their wedding day.

"Turn around." His honeyed tone surprised me and had me spinning around for him. His free hand cupped my buttocks one at a time and I was surprised that I was starting to enjoy his touch. "Sit on my lap."

He leaned back as I sat on him, my legs tucked into his body. His body felt as hard and muscular as it looked and once muscle in particular seemed to be getting very hard in his pants. I felt...at peace, and yet, still overwhelmed by his presence. With his left arm around me, he reached forward again with his right hand and picked up his champagne glass.

Kimo held it to my lips. I sipped, then turned back, watching him take a mouthful himself, his lips framing the glass exactly where mine had. It sent a little thrill of expectation through me. I took the glass from his fingers for something to do and his hand rested on my flat belly.

"Do you give all your clients this much trouble? Do you ask your female clients so many questions?" he asked me, a vein of humor back in his voice.

"Not always. I'm usually not interested in the women I..." His hand was moving across my nipples now, taunting and teasing each one, sending ripples of surprise and pleasure through me. It was hard to finish my sentence. "I'm not often intrigued by my dates."

"And I intrigue you?"

"The cute ones always do." Cute? Am I high? What the hell am I saying?

He chuckled. "So, I'm cute, am I?" His hand stopped moving, his eyes boring into mine. I felt like he could see right through me, demanding truth, extracting answers.

"More than cute."

He grunted and his gaze went to the glass, which I held to his lips. He drank from it and I took a long look at the tribal tattoos on the right side of his face. I knew these all had some strong, spiritual significance and, up close, they were, frankly, frightening. I sensed the power and danger of the man and almost dropped the glass as his tongue shot out and swiped its way across my lips.

"Tilt your head back," he murmured. As I did, his tongue ran across my jaw line and down my throat. I couldn't believe how good it felt to have another man lick me this way and, when he moved to my left nipple, capturing it in his hot mouth, I lost control of the glass, the champagne spilling to the floor.

"Give me your mouth."

I arched my head back and his left hand held my head to his as he kissed me, his tongue moving in and out of my mouth, his lips claiming mine. One kiss and I felt ravaged by him...my God, what was it going to be like when he actually fucked me?

I dropped the glass when he moved his hand back to my cock. His touch was insistent, assured, and I hardened quickly for him. Everything he did to me shocked me, yet electrified me. He picked me up then, carrying me up the stairs. I am not a small man, but he made me feel as light as the lace on my briefs as he swept up the stairs with me, a grim expression on his face. He dropped me on a huge bed. He got between my legs and lowered himself on me, his mouth back on mine again. Oh, I couldn't believe I'd missed those lips for the brief moment they'd lost contact with mine.

Our crotches connected, our cocks rubbing against each other through all that fabric.

"God...I haven't humped since I was a teenager," I gasped. My mind flew back to a scene on my aunt's

couch...with a boy I'd gone to school with.

"Man or woman?" Kimo's voice was in my ear.

"Oh...a man..."

"You didn't give yourself to him?" he asked, his hands and mouth all over my face.

"No." I couldn't tell him of my secret shame, being ostracized by family members. I'd yearned for a man's touch but settled for women. I'd honestly forgotten about all that until now. My teenage crush had been a Fijian and Hawaiian boy named Krishna. Our brief, confusing tryst had resulted in his family moving back to Suva.

Kimo seemed to sense my anguish because he stroked my face, whispering things in Hawaiian. He knew the language much better than I because I didn't understand the words but I knew he was being sweet, tender. I knew he wasn't saying, "You're an ugly asshole." I detected a few words I did understand *kuipo*, which meant spicy and *ipo*, meaning sweetheart.

For so long I'd felt guilty nursing my private desires. Maybe he'd sensed it? I knew he was a deeply spiritual man.

"I want you naked," I told him. He leaned up, losing no time in removing his clothes as I writhed underneath him, trapped between his powerful thighs. He wore black Calvin Klein boxer briefs and, as I helped him get his trousers off, I was shocked at how huge his cock was. I wondered where he hid it all when he wore that tiny red loincloth on stage, but then he lowered his body to mine again and my fingers flew to the massive arms holding his body off the bed. We both looked down as our cocks connected again.

It was a kick hearing nothing but the slash of waves and our quickening breaths, our mutual sighs of increasing pleasure. He took his mouth away from mine for a moment to bend and suck my nipples again and I let my fingers move down to touch that huge, thick cock that was making mine come alive in a way no woman ever had.

CHAPTER 2

He got off the bed for a moment and I felt instantly chilled when that hot, commanding body was no longer pinning me to the sheets. His cock was rigid in his tight boxer briefs and my gaze remained fixed on his crotch, my breath coming in short, hard gasps. All he had done was kiss and touch me, but I felt dazed and stunned. I was aware of the bedspread, a vintage quilt by the looks and feel of it, hot and drenched under my body.

Kimo came back to the bed with cool hand towels soaked in lavender water. He ran one cloth over my face and body and, when he got to my own straining erection, his fingers lightly played over the lace fabric and then his lips fell on my cock, covering it with kisses. My hands, which had been playing with that long, silken hair, fell to my sides, my arms splayed out as he lifted my ass off the bed.

I watched as he tongued and kissed my cock, his mouth moving a wet, scorching fire path down to my ass, and my legs opened up in a helpless, hungry way as that long tongue flicked at my asshole through the lacy material. I wanted no separation, nothing keeping him from me, but he dropped my ass on the bed with a bouncy thud, a smile back on his face.

"Sure you've never done this before, Agapito?" His gaze was on my cock, which was itching for release, begging for his mouth to be back on it.

"Please, suck me, Kimo," I begged, thinking this would get him back into action.

He laughed instead. "I'm going to suck your cock, be sure on that. I bought you a present. Let me find it." He got off the bed again and was back within seconds, a huge, clear lei box in his hands. He gave it to me and I sat up on the bed with some difficulty. My hard-on was making me uncomfortable in that lace. But my fingers worked at the ends of the box, opening it to reveal an astonishing red lei, thick as a man's arm. It was made of firecracker flower.

"I don't think I've ever seen anything quite so...lovely." I marveled at the workmanship, the tiny red bells of the flowers with their orange and yellow hearts peeking with such natural perfection out at the world. Whoever made this was an artist.

"Happy July Fourth, Agapito," Kimo whispered, removing the lei from the box and slipping it over my neck.

"Mahalo, thank you," I managed to say as his unrelenting mouth clamped back down over mine. I saw the thick black eyelashes on those all-seeing eyes close like a curtain as he gave himself up to physical bliss. His hand went straight back to my crotch and I jumped off the bed. Talk about firecracker. I was ready to go off and he knew it. Holding me up to his own strong body, he ripped down the quilt, and cool sheets greeted us underneath. They felt new and I knew they were expensive. I could tell just by touching them.

He lowered my upper body onto the sheets, and now my ass was in his hands again and I gave out a little cry when his fingers started ripping at the lace boxers I was wearing.

"No! Please don't Kimo. I want them...I want to keep them. I want them as a memory of you."

He smiled. "Oh, I'm going to leave you with plenty to remember me by...deep inside your belly, Agapito."

"Please..."

Our eyes met again and he shook his head. He honored

my wishes though and slid the lace down my thighs, tossing the pants to the floor. His gaze lingered on my body. He licked his lips and went straight back to work on my cock, sucking the head of it into his mouth. I was so busy squirming around on the bed I didn't really watch what he was doing. I only knew it felt...incredible. He took his mouth away from me and I almost cried in frustration. No woman had ever sucked my cock that way, with complete ownership, or with such...reverence.

"You like what I'm doing?" he asked, looking up at me.

"Oh...yes...yes...don't stop."

He was kneeling between my legs, and I watched him pick up my ass again, like I was a ripe juicy melon he just had to have. I felt his hot breath skim my inner thigh as his tongue shot straight to my asshole. I wasn't breathing heavily now, I was letting out strangled sounds of sheer torturous pleasure as his tongue buffed me in a way guaranteed to have me humping his face.

And then he lifted his face away from me again. "How about that? You like that, Agapito?"

"Si, si, me mola..." I panted.

"Me mola means...what?"

I smiled then. "It's Andalusian slang. It means I like it."

His mouth went straight back to sucking my cock and he worked me with that concentrated way of his. I felt my orgasm bubbling up in me and the firecracker lei around my neck fell back against my face. I looked up to see my ass high in his hands. The spicy scent of the flowers filled my mind as I came in Kimo Wilder's mouth.

Even when my explosive orgasm subsided, he did not release me. He simply lowered me again to the sheets, nudged my legs apart with his hands and went straight back to work with his tongue on my ass.

He licked my balls and ass, then came back to my

sensitive cock head, knowing he'd driven me wild. He took himself away from me one more maddening time and ran his hand down my body. Reaching across the bed, he picked up a glass of champagne and held it to my lips. I guzzled thirstily. Then a thought came to me.

"Didn't we leave that downstairs?"

His sly smile shut me up. "I had an extra bottle waiting up here."

My hands shot down to his crotch and I found myself sliding those shorts down his muscular, rippling thighs. Kneeling on the bed between my legs, he took a long drink of champagne and looked at me. My gaze was fixed on the massive cock between his thighs. It terrified me to think about having it inside me, yet, I wanted it more than anything I could remember.

"You are so beautiful, Kimo."

"Thank you, Agapito." He held the glass to my mouth again and I drank from it, but I'd lost interest now. I was fixated on this man's body. And I was eager to explore him.

"Not so fast." He laughed when my head went to his crotch. "I want you on your knees. Come on, right now." He didn't have to tell me twice. I was ready for whatever little treasures his mouth and hands had in store for me and, within seconds, his tongue, cold from the champagne, was flat against my asshole, licking and suckling at me. I pushed back against him as he immersed his tongue inside me.

"Oh God..." I whimpered when his tongue was replaced by a finger.

"You ever had a woman put her finger inside you?" he asked me as he moved it around. It felt a little uncomfortable, but also good as his finger hit one spot inside me that felt just incredible.

"Agapito?"

"Yeah...but she didn't know what she was doing."

He laughed and took his finger out, replacing it with his tongue. *Yes!*

"You ever had a woman eat your ass out before, Agapito?"

"Once...twice...I was too afraid to ask her to do it again. I was embarrassed."

"You didn't want her to think you were gay?"

"No...not that...I liked it. I...I'm the one who provides pleasure usually. I don't..." He was working two fingers into me, licking around me what that fire-hot tongue of his. How could I focus when he was doing things to me I was going to remember for the rest of my life?

"You don't what?" he prompted.

"I don't tell women what I like. I give them what they like."

"Do you like what I'm doing now?" Two fingers were buried inside me and I had to force myself not to scream for his whole hand to be in there.

"Yeah...but I want your cock in me."

"You'll get it." He moved up behind me and I thought when he took his fingers away from me he was going to stick it straight in. But I found his tongue roaming my ass again, his searing kisses peppering my back. And then I felt it, his scorching, leaking cock following the path of his mouth. What an amazing feeling, that cock sliding over my back. He took hold of the lei around my neck, holding it like a horse's reins as he stroked my back with his rigid cock and I felt his balls slapping against my butt.

"Turn over, baby."

I turned and he released the lei-reins as we leaned into each other, fully naked together for the first time. I gave myself willingly to this man, allowing his hands and cock to touch me, stroke me, and I grabbed onto his cock as his fingers worked expertly over mine. I came in a blinding

array of colors as he coaxed and urged fresh fireworks from me.

He bent down to kiss me and I begged him for his cock. He allowed me, once I'd come for him, to get between his thighs and lick him. He was as excited as I was when my mouth made contact with that leaky cock head of his, and I heard the sounds he made as I licked around the huge head. My tongue slithered down over the long shaft.

I stopped. His husband's name, Lopaka, was tattooed down the length of it. The reminder that this beautiful piece of man meat belonged to somebody else stopped me, but only for a moment. I was anxious to claim a little of it for myself.

Glancing up at him, I could see Kimo was entranced at my clear enjoyment of tasting my first piece of cock. I slid my mouth back to lick the head of his shaft, aware of his full attention on me. I took my time, savoring the flavor of his pre-come, which was surprisingly sweet. Outside the windows, I heard the rhythmic sound of the surf and relaxed, enjoying this new and dangerous experiment, licking and sucking him in time to the waves.

I wondered when he'd last had sex with his husband, then brushed the thought from my mind. I wanted him to forget about his husband, and with my mouth full of his cock, I glanced back up at Kimo, who smiled down at me.

"Agapito, I want you. I need to be inside you." His fingers swept back strands of damp hair from my face and I felt a momentary qualm that I had not given him pleasure with my cock sucking. The anxious way he eased me back on the bed, nudging my ass with his cock head, I knew I'd fired him up plenty. He wanted to come inside my ass. He just couldn't wait any longer.

Imprisoned under his great body, I stroked his scorching hot arms, my fingers delighting at the tension in his muscles. He gave me his mouth again and, as I wrapped my legs around him, our hard cocks jutted at each other. He pushed himself away from me.

"You sure about this?"

I nodded. We had already talked about no condoms, and I'd submitted to a blood test, but I wasn't afraid of anything contagious. I was afraid of pain. I was afraid of wanting him in spite of the pain, and I watched him dip his head down to my ass again, my legs reluctantly releasing him. His tongue and mouth sent sparks of wild euphoria through me, my ass wet and ready. Yet, as his cock poised at my asshole, he looked into my eyes to make sure I wanted this.

My head tossed back and forth on the bed as he slowly entered me. The pain was so immense I felt he would rip me in two. He took his time and kept asking me if I was okay.

"Yes...yes...don't stop. I don't care if you hurt me. I want you inside me, Kimo."

My hands flew to his face, and he kissed me. I tasted myself on his tongue and I felt him searing into me. He bent down to take my left nipple into his mouth and my cock started a dance between our bellies.

"Yeah...oh yeah..."

I couldn't stop my mantra, and then he was all the way inside me. The pain was still there, but he started to fuck me and I wanted to be the best, tightest, hottest little fuck he'd ever had, so I concentrated on not showing him pain, only lust for how good it felt to have his cock plowing my ass.

He fucked me for several minutes and kept pulling almost the whole way out, then coming back home to me. I gripped his hips. It hurt like hell when he withdrew and I could control his movements better. My feet slapped at his ass as he plunged into me harder and harder.

He put his mouth to my ear. "I'm gonna knock you up, rent boy." He came so hard I could feel his heart beating against my shoulder and then I was coming, too, all over his belly and mine. He let me feel his full weight finally and, when we'd both calmed down, he kissed me, his cock taking a breather inside my ass.

And then his cell phone rang. Kimo eyed it, flicking a glance back at me.

"Don't move." He remained inside me as he answered it, and I heard a little voice.

"Daddy?"

"Everything okay, baby?" Kimo asked, turning his face away from me. He was listening with great concentration. I couldn't hear the child's voice from the phone anymore. "I love you, too, baby." Kimo snapped the phone shut and turned back to me.

He didn't look at my face. His gaze went back to my nipples and he was still hard, like a granite block inside me. He licked and sucked my nipples and came back to my mouth again. After a long, wet kiss, he started to laugh.

"What?" I asked, stroking his cheek, the right cheek with all those tattoos. He closed his eyes and my fingers traced the marks of his marriage and parenthood on the delicate eyelid.

"A man can't even sneak away to fuck his rent boy without his children having mini meltdowns."

Pangs of anxiety flooded my body.

"Settle down, my darling. They're okay. However, our little playtime is over..." He kissed me with tenderness and our mutual fire lingered. "For now. Tonight though, I want another romp with Agapito."

"Si, senor."

Kimo threw back his head and laughed. "Lopaka, you are

something else. I love you so much...this fantasy was the best one of all. I *loved* it. I really got into this...I really felt like I was fucking you for the first time." He fingered the lei I was wearing. "My hot little firecracker."

"I have to learn more Andalusian slang." I grinned up at him and Kimo smothered me with kisses.

"Yeah...that was a nice touch, baby. When you kept asking me about my husband...man...I really got swept up in this little game and I had to keep reminding myself...my hot little rent boy *is* my man...*my man*..."

Our eyes met, our passion renewed. I never got enough of him. He read my mind, he always could, it was one of the things we shared.

"Oh, my love..." His mouth covered mine and I had to fight from crying when he pulled out of me. In spite of my protests, his cock was no longer a physical part of me.

"It's not running away, my love. It's all yours." He kissed me again. "I don't just love you when I'm inside you, you know."

"I know."

Kimo was looking at me with such devotion, I knew he would have been inside me once more if the sound of children laughing and shouting hadn't filtered up to our open windows.

"My babies!" I squealed as a car braked. We jumped off the bed. Kimo and I paused to grab and touch one another one more time.

"Thank you for Agapito. I adore him." My husband grinned.

"Thank you for my lace briefs and this lei. Kimo, I love you so much."

He swept me up into his arms. "I know you do, darling. Take off that lei. I want you to wear it when I fuck you in this beautiful bed tonight." I gave it to him and he

repackaged it, then we ran around looking for clothes to throw on. The kids were hammering at the front door as we grabbed board shorts out of the suitcase Kimo had brought here earlier. We ran down the stairs, and I turned back to him.

"The champagne...it was wonderful, darling."

"Glad you think so, there's another bottle in the fridge. For tonight." We grinned at one another, our thoughts on pleasuring one another all over again, and then Kimo's hand was on the door.

CHAPTER 3

"Daddy!" Our toddler son, Baby Kimo, hurled himself at us, our five-year-old nephews, Keli'i and Kamaha, right behind him. We immersed ourselves in baby love as my sister, Maluhia, pregnant with the twins Kimo and I so badly longed for, clambered over us, a box of Ding Dongs in her hands.

"There is a TV right? Three days I've had no TV. Oh look at it...it's beautiful." She ran her hands lovingly over the gigantic flat screen TV. Boy, she needed a man. Our house in the mountains had no TV and my sister's not-so-silent suffering was the initial reason we decided to splurge on the villa at the beach. She grabbed the remote and parked her body across the sofa, firing up her obsession, the Lifetime movie channel. This was her way of officially handing off the kids to us.

We made a big fuss of the boys, and our Baby Kimo offered up his face for kisses.

"Mmmm...I taste pancakes..." I kissed him again. "And I think maple syrup. What do you think, darling?" I handed the giggling baby over to my husband, who kissed him.

"Yep. And I taste pineapples." Kimo tickled the baby, who chortled. "Mmm...and maybe I taste strawberries. Do I taste strawberries?" He cocked a brow at Baby Kimo who laughed.

"Strawberries!" he shouted.

"Taste me! What about me!" Kamaha threw himself into my arms for his turn at getting kisses.

I caught my sister's grin. As I had been playing rent boy to my hot husband, she had taken the boys to breakfast in the main hotel behind us. I tried not to think about the fact her chocolate obsession continued unabated. Kimo was certain our twins would be fine, despite her penchant for junk food.

When all three boys had been kissed and cuddled, they ran around the house, all excited. Kimo took such pleasure out of playing with our little guys, he joined their multi-room romp.

"This is cool!" they kept saying. Apart from Kimo's tryst with Agapito, this was to be our July Fourth hideaway as we took a couple of days with our little family before returning to our home in Honolulu.

"Wait until you see the bathroom," Kimo told the boys. They ran ahead of us, ecstatic when they saw each of their names spelled out in different colored sponges. Kimo kissed me as the children delighted in this thoughtful little touch from the hotel staff. They knew we had three boys, and each one had a basket of bath time offerings. Bubble bath chalk, bath paint, rubber duckies, toy submarines and toy dinosaurs and spiders that expanded in water. They were agog, running the tub immediately to watch the glow-in-the-dark bugs grow big before their eyes.

Kimo glanced at me. We loved our lives, and we loved these children. Now, we had two more coming and, thankfully, my sister was a willing accomplice to our little fantasy games. Kimo and I were aware that she longed for love of her own. Her two boys, the beautiful product of an otherwise bad marriage, were very important to us, as important as our son Kimo. Now that Maluhia was being a surrogate for me and Kimo with our expected twins, her own were excited, but nervous about their place in our lives.

We worked hard to give them a strong sense of family, so that when Kamaha turned to Kimo and said, "Daddy,

they're not growing."

He didn't correct him. Until he got his own dad, Kimo was his daddy, and he loved the responsibility of having so many of us to nurture.

"Well, darling..." He crouched beside the boys. "Give them time and they'll grow. Let's go out now and when we come back, they'll be bigger, I promise you."

"Okay, but first I wanna pick my room."

"Yeah!" Baby Kimo and Keli'i shrieked, following him up the stairs.

Kimo turned off the taps to the bathtub, looking across at me.

"They know their way around already! Sweetheart, don't look sad. Our playtime got interrupted before Agapito got to give me another set of fireworks, but I'm looking forward to a rematch tonight." Kimo pulled me into his arms. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Yeah, I know you do...that's why I'm thinking that to put a smile back on your face, I'm taking you and the boys up to Haleakala today to visit our favorite volcano goddess."

"I would love that, but we promised the boys we'd take them out in the boat today."

He shrugged. "So, we'll take them out tonight and watch the fireworks in Lahaina from the middle of the ocean."

"Oh...I love that idea."

The boys came bursting into the room, Keli'i brandishing my lace briefs.

"Daddy." He gave Kimo a fierce look. "Did you have a...woman here?"

Kimo laughed. "Of course not."

"I know these aren't Mommy's. She wears fat lady pants."

"Hey, I heard that," my sister shouted from the living

room, and we all laughed. "Well, if you must know, I was fooling around with Lopaka," Kimo told the kids.

"Lopaka wears girl's panties?" Kamaha asked.

"They're men's panties," Kimo told him, but the boys thought this was hysterical. Even the baby was laughing at me. When I gave the pint-sized replica of my husband a bleak look, he grabbed my hand, climbing up my body like I was his personal Stairmaster. He wound his arms around my neck. God, I loved this child.

Baby Kimo, whom my husband had fathered for my friend Nicky, was spending more and more time with us as Nicky sorted out her complicated lesbian marriage to Kaiona. The more time he spent with our family, however, the less he wanted to go home to the warring mothers he had back in Honolulu.

My little boy put his hands on my face and kissed me. "I love you, Mama."

"I love you, too, Kimo." Of course, I had to kiss all three boys.

Then Kimo spoke. "So, kids, I was thinking we could go up to Haleakala today."

"Hully Ucky!" the baby screamed, making us all laugh again.

"And then tonight we can take the boat out."

The boys loved that.

My sister hit a commercial break and came in to tell us she wanted to visit with Madame at Hully Ucky, too.

"But I booked you a pregnancy massage, a facial and manicure and pedicure. All natural ingredients." I pouted, but she was looking ecstatic.

"You did? Oh in that case, how about I book a picnic basket from the hotel for tonight?"

"Yeah!" the kids yelled, and my new lace briefs fell into the tub, now a merciless red from the dinosaurs the kids had plunged into the water.

I was now in possession of purple lace briefs.

"Hot," my husband whispered as I retrieved them. We told the kids to pick two toys each for the drive up to the volcano, and we unearthed sturdy shoes, long pants, and sweaters for the boys from their suitcases. Since Hully Ucky is like being in snow country at the top, we were going to need them. I grabbed some snacks and water bottles out of the bag of goodies I'd thrown together back at our house.

There was a knock at the door, and my sister's team of beauty therapists—some hot-looking Filipino guys, who all gave Kimo appreciative looks—crowded into the living room.

My husband, who opened the door, didn't even realize they were openly lusting after him. As I finished putting a bag together for our outing, Kimo took me by the hand.

"We need to get changed. We'll be back in a minute, kids."

The boys were rummaging through their belongings, fighting over who was bringing what on the volcano trip, and my husband and I returned to our room. He shut the door.

"Why would I want to look at another man, Lopaka? You are the only one for me, the only man I want. I don't need to dip into another pot of poi, sweetheart. I get it all with you." He smiled at me and dropped to his knees.

My hands went to his hair. "What are you doing, Kimo?"

He opened a small box of chocolate-covered cherries. "I have a little trick I want to try. It's the Fourth of July, it's a festive occasion, and I have in front of me the hottest rent boy in Maui."

He pushed me back on the bed, whipped my cock out of my shorts and started sucking it. I could feel a couple of chocolate- covered cherries rolling around his mouth and the sensation was...something else. I had to remind myself we had a house full of people and I couldn't scream.

Downstairs, our boys were chasing each other around, probably driving my sister crazy as my husband did delicious things to me with his relentless mouth. He sucked my cock with a look of utter concentration and then bit down on his cherries. The juice cascaded down my shaft. I came instantly and he sucked and licked at me with great satisfaction.

"Better than Cherries Jubilee," he said with a grin.

"I love you so much, Kimo." I pulled him up by his arms, and he kissed me until the kids were pounding at the bedroom door.

Downstairs, my sister was getting ready to climb onto a massage table and we waved her goodbye, buckling the kids into the SUV we'd rented on our arrival in the island.

As we drove off in search of rainbows and a certain queen of fire, my husband's hand reached across the seat in search of my hand.

"Jetear," I said.

He grinned at me. "Tell me that's more Andalusian slang."

"It is. It means, kiss me."

He leaned over and gave me lots of tongue and hot lips.

"There they go again." Keli'i sighed. "You sure kiss a lot."

"Yeah," Kamaha echoed.

"Yeah!" the baby yelled, and Kimo and I laughed. My husband's gaze went back to the road as we moved out of the huge Wailea hotel grounds and onto the highway.

"But tell me, Agapito, did I achieve my goal?" Kimo asked as he waited to merge with the flow of traffic.

"What goal was that?" I asked, my cock still tingling in my shorts. I could still feel his mouth on me and the thought

hardened me all over again.

"Agapito means beloved. I told you I wanted to make you feel beloved. Did I do it?"

I laughed. "Very much so, Kimo. Very much so." He squeezed my hand as we took advantage of the break in traffic.

Little Keli'i yelled, "Daddy, Daddy!"

"What is it, sweetheart?" Kimo asked him.

"Daddy, Daddy, the sun's following us."

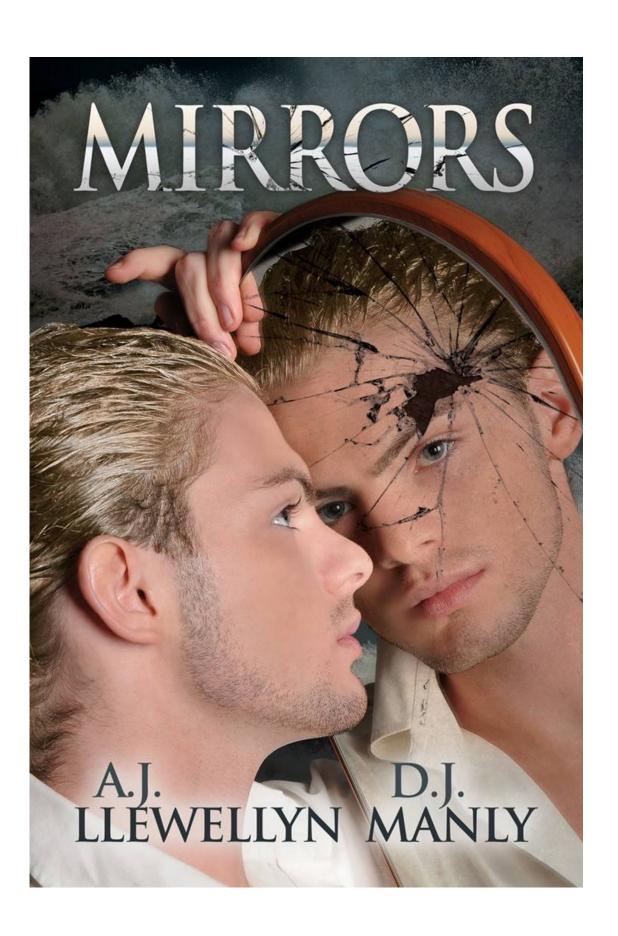
"Yeah," said Kamaha.

"Yeah!" echoed the baby, his face smeared with chocolate.

"I know a great story about the sun," Kimo told them. "And all about how Maui, the demi god, lassoed the sun. You want me to tell it?"

"Yeah!" the kids shrieked again and, as the sun did follow us, leading us to a place of rainbows, mists and fire, my beautiful, handsome man, a masterful storyteller, wove tales for our children. Tales of truth and mystery, myth and magic. He gave me so much...and as I listened to him, I was always grateful to be a part of *his* story.

He is my life and, every now and then, when the naughty love gods strike, I am and forever will be, his willing, wanting, wicked Rent Boy.



MIRRORS

By A.J. Lllewellyn and D.J. Manly

Mirrors: Book One

Troy and Aaron Mayer, identical twins separated at the age of two, lived wildly different lives. Aaron struggled to take care of their alcoholic, gambling-addicted mother, while Troy, raised by their father, experienced a life of luxury. After years of silence, Troy asks to see Aaron. When Aaron arrives at his brother's boat, he finds his twin dead by suicide. In his farewell note, Troy offers Aaron his car, his money, and his life of riches.

On the run from loan sharks, Aaron slips easily into this mirrored life. But everywhere he turns he discovers somebody Troy devastated, including his

On the run from loan sharks, Aaron slips easily into this mirrored life. But everywhere he turns he discovers somebody Troy devastated, including his handsome husband, Dave Alvarez. Pulled into his brother's life of crime, Aaron is set up for a fall, but he's too strong to shatter.

CHAPTER 1

The boat rocked on the water as if it were made of paper. The wind swirled around him in a haze, and whipped his fair hair around his face. Desperately, he tried to see through waves rising and falling around him. *Troy? Troy?* A mix of anxious anticipation and dread filled his rapidly beating heart as he scanned the water. The boat took on a life of its own and attempted to wrestle him over the side, propelling him into the unknown depths. *Come. Come with me, Aaron.* A face looked up at him in the swirling water. It was *his*.

Fourteen months earlier

The voice on the other end of the phone couldn't have sounded more estranged from him if it had been a person doing a marketing survey. It took him a few minutes to recognize who it was. And it shouldn't have. It was light with an underlying lyrical baritone, so like his own voice.

"Aaron? Don't you know who this is?"

Yes, I know.

"How are you?" He paused. "I was sorry to hear about Mom."

Aaron perched on the side of the sofa. *Make words, fool.* "Yeah, well, you know."

"So I'm thinking, maybe we should get together? When was the last time?"

Was there a last time?

He didn't wait for an answer. "I really did want to make it to the funeral. Dad and I were both in Europe on a buyer's trip at that time. Wow, the summer of 2010 was really a busy one."

Mother died in the summer of 2009. "How is Dad?"

"Good. He's in Spain with his newest wife, number four. A fashion model, legs up to there. You know Dad."

No, I don't know Dad.

"So, we have a birthday coming up in a week, twenty-seven, can you believe it? How about you come down here to Bel Air and we go out for the day on Dad's yacht? I mean, I don't know if you're working or what. We can do it when you're off work. I pretty much make my own hours. It would good to see each other, right? Aaron?"

"Yeah, I...I guess."

"Okay, so how about Saturday?"

"Ah, Saturday...I'd have to check and..."

"Aaron, you act like you don't want to see me."

"I just wonder why now?" There, it was out. All this time, Troy had never even bothered to pick up the phone, ask how he was doing, how Mother was doing. Troy was sitting pretty down there in Bel Air, living the good life, and he had

been up here in the shit, struggling to survive. All the lost years trying to scrounge up enough cash to get Mom into yet another rehab clinic.

"Why not now?" Troy came back.

They were twins, identical actually. They'd been separated since the age of three. Their parents were ill-suited from the onset. Aaron would never understand what attracted Darren Mayer, who'd come from generations of wealth, to the shy, little working class girl from the Bronx. Sarah Stein was like a fish out of water in high society and her Jewish heritage didn't sit well with Darren's protestant family.

Talk about a parent trap.

After the twins were born, Sarah fell into a deep depression. Her young husband was given the import business to run. She was displaced from her beloved New York City and her family.

Sarah couldn't seem to fit in with high society. Darren began to go out a lot, leaving her alone. She started drinking. Darren hired a nanny to look after the boys and disconnected from her. The long business trips and numerous affairs didn't help and finally Sarah tried to take her own life. Darren waited until she got out of the hospital, then he left her.

Darren's father insisted he take one of the boys when he filed for divorce. Darren was an only child, and his father was concerned about the family line. In exchange for taking one of the boys, Sarah accepted the big house in Beverly Hills, and one lump sum of money. Within five years, she had squandered the money and was forced to sell the house. Eventually they were destitute, relying on food stamps and the kindness of strangers. Sarah's family begged her to come back home to New York, but she was too proud, and Aaron believed she couldn't bear to let her

family see what she'd become.

An assembly line of strangers went in and out of their three-room apartment in the mostly Hispanic neighborhood of Mar Vista. The strangers would bring booze, in exchange for sex. Sometimes they'd give her money, and Aaron would sit out on the fire escape until they left. Then, if he was lucky, he could grab the money before she came to and he'd buy groceries before she could get to the liquor store.

He eventually grew up and left her. He moved as far away as his work as a landscaper would let him. His life in Los Osos, the 'valley of the bears', on California's central coast hadn't been bad until Sarah started fleecing him. She'd forged his signature on loans, secured credit cards she'd diverted to her flop house down in East LA. It was still a nightmare untangling himself from the mess.

It didn't help when he learned that many parents wrecked their kids' credit through identity theft.

When her liver failed, and she was dying, it was almost a relief. Aaron left a message with the secretary of his father's company but he never came to visit. Not even Troy showed up for their mother's funeral.

It still hurt remembering how she'd vanished from yet another expensive, futile trip to a lockdown facility called Promises.

Yeah. Lots of those. Pie-crust promises. Easy to make; so easily broken.

She'd somehow managed to escape over the wall with the help of a ridiculous, drug-hungry celebrity. The actor had gone on a cocaine-fuelled binge chronicled by the media whilst Sarah had quietly checked herself into a cheap motel on Sunset Boulevard, drinking herself to death.

Aaron had found her with the aid of his debit card, which

she had stolen. Not her finest moment, to be sure. She lay in the small bed of her hotel room, her legs ballooned to three times their usual size, her skin a frightening color. Aaron had paid a doctor who didn't know her to come to the hotel. He'd hoped the handsome stranger could convince Sarah to allow herself to be hospitalized.

"Her vital organs are shutting down fast," the doctor had said. "Her own body is turning against her. It's filling with toxins, hence the swelling in her legs."

It took another twenty-four hours to convince Sarah to get medical help. The handsome doctor came back to help facilitate her journey via an ambulance. Aaron couldn't fail to notice the relief on the hotel staff's faces. The maid told him half their clients checked in and never checked out again. They'd recently had a former pop star die after a drunken binge. He'd checked in with a friend's help and according to the staff was quiet and respectful.

He drank until his heart stopped. There was no ID on him except for a piece of paper in his pocket with the shaky words, *I am Johnny Lee*.

To Aaron's dismay, his mother was headed to a hospice, not a hospital. She'd actually lit up at the prospect and happily signed the Do Not Resuscitate form required to admit her to the facility that spelled the end of her road.

Welcome to the Hotel California.

Promises.

"They'll keep me sedated and I will pass from this life," she'd told Aaron. "I can't wait."

She was dead in two days, Aaron her only visitor. The hospice staff called to tell him she'd passed at four o'clock in the morning.

"She didn't suffer," they said.

Yeah, but I did.

He'd made all the arrangements for her funeral. She'd

looked grotesque at the end and it still wounded him that he'd had to handle it all without any help.

"Are you miffed at me for not coming to the funeral, Aaron?"

Aaron was hardly aware that he was still holding the phone. "What did you say? Sorry."

"Did you drop the phone?"

"No. I'm here."

"I asked if you were miffed at me for not coming to the funeral. You know, I never felt very close to her."

"How could you? You didn't even know her."

"Dad told me some stuff about her though."

"I'm sure he did." Aaron closed his eyes.

"So, how are things with you?"

Should I tell him? Should I really tell him about the trouble I'm in? The loan sharks? How this time they'd hurt me good? Maybe he can help me. Troy has money. He could lend me some. Should I ask? "I... Do you want the truth or do you want bullshit?"

"The truth."

"Well, ah... I'm in a little bit of trouble."

"What kind of trouble? Trouble with the police?"

"Loan sharks. I need money."

"How much money?"

"More than I got, a few grand."

"Okay. I can help you with that."

Aaron was skeptical. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"You're my brother. So, you'll come for sure on Saturday?"

He was stunned. Troy was actually going to help him. "Okay. You know I really appreciate you helping me out. I'll pay you back, every cent."

"You don't have to. I know where you live. There's a marina in Morro Bay. I'll have our boat pick you up."

"Just tell me what pier. I'll be there."

"Pier number ten, and ah... let's say nine in the morning?"

"I'll be there." He hung up and realized that he hadn't even said goodbye.

Troy has a boat and I'm on my last packet of Twinkies...

He walked to the window and pushed aside the motheaten curtain. He scanned the street. It was early yet. They'd be coming. He just had to lay low until he could get the cash. The last time he'd asked for more time, they'd broken two of his fingers. He'd been unable to work and the bills kept coming, not to mention the compound interest on the loans he stupidly took to try and handle his outrageous debt... He dreaded to think what they'd break this time.

Aaron was nervous about seeing his twin Saturday morning. He'd spent a scary couple of days avoiding the loan sharks. He'd actually slept in Elfin Forest in his sleeping bag. All the time he'd been in Los Osos and he'd never visited the forest. He would have been charmed by the air parade of monarch butterflies had he not been petrified of homicide.

It had been too dangerous to drive his car to the forest and he'd told nobody of his plans. Better to leave his car at home. The goon squad would know it if they saw it out and about. He took the tourist van that cost a quarter, then hiked a mile into the woods. For two nights he'd listened for marauding bears... the human kind and the animal kind. He'd spent the days wandering deeper into the forest, thrilled when he'd found a crumpled five-dollar note in the camp ground showers.

Early Saturday, he took the bus down to the main road

and passed his street.

His car sat in his driveway, torched.

Holy crap...

He had persuaded Jake, one of his last friends left in the sleepy beach town, to drive him to Morro Bay. His stomach was in such knots he wondered if he'd swallowed some of those forest butterflies.

"Thanks," he told Jake, who'd lent him a clean shirt and slipped him a few bucks. He tried to decline, but Jake insisted.

"Here, I think you'll need it."

Aaron climbed onto the boat that was docked in the pier as his buddy took off.

The boat was called *The Promise*.

How apt.

There was no one on deck. "Troy?"

He ducked his head in the door and climbed down the steps to the cabin below. The floor was covered in royal blue carpeting. There was a large screen television on one wall, a small galley kitchen to the side. He walked to the stainless steel counter where an ice bucket sat cradling a bottle of expensive champagne. The ice had melted. There was an envelope propped up against the champagne bucket. On the front was written: *To Aaron. Welcome to your new life*.

Aaron narrowed his eyes and looked around. He walked toward the door which stood open on the other side of the room and peeked in. There was a double bed with a white duvet and a small oak bureau. The bed showed no sign of having been slept in.

Maybe Troy hadn't arrived yet. Maybe he should just wait but he was still holding the envelope. Perplexed, he opened it and took out the note. Hello brother,

By the time you read this, I'll be gone. It's not important where. In fact, if I knew that, I'd have to answer an age old question. Everything you need to start your new life is in the top drawer of the bureau in the bedroom. Don't feel guilty. I inherited this life by chance. It was the flip of the coin. It might have been yours. Now it is. I know it will be strange at first but it will solve all your problems, and it's your turn. Good luck, brother.

Love, Troy

How long does it take to step into the life of someone else? When you look identical to the other, it's instantaneous, but not as simple as one might imagine.

Aaron didn't know anything specific about Troy's life except that he worked with their father in the import business and was filthy rich. How in the hell was he supposed to be him, not to mention... where was Troy? Had he committed suicide? It certainly sounded that way in his letter.

When Aaron opened the top drawer of Troy's bureau, he found a driver's license, credit cards, bank books, keys, and a recent photo. Aaron stared at it. Yes, they were identical, same sandy blond hair, same blue eyes, both five eleven, about one seventy. Aaron wore his hair longer though, he didn't have the fancy haircut. If this was going to work, he'd have to remedy that.

He also found an agenda which listed what Troy had to do each day. Meetings, medical appointments, picking up laundry, paying the staff, meeting someone called 'Matt' for lunch the next day. It seemed that Troy was a very organized man; something that Aaron wasn't.

Aaron reread the note. By the time you read this, I'll be

gone. Why would he kill himself? He had it all. Should he call the police?

A sudden realization fell over him. Aaron raced up the steps onto the dock and frantically searched the calm blue waters. He half feared finding his brother floating, then hoped he would... and do what? Closure. I would have closure. I would know he's dead. But do I want him to be dead or alive?

I... don't know.

He roamed the boat, checking the water as far as he could see. He had no idea how to operate a boat. What was he supposed to do now? Troy wouldn't have thrown himself into the water here while the boat was docked, would he? Was his brother really dead? Why would he choose this time to kill himself?

It was all so... strange. His whole life he'd veered between hating his twin and hoping for a reconciliation that involved the two of them being rich and happy. Instead, Aaron had struggled regardless of his efforts to get himself above water.

Don't feel guilty. I inherited this life by chance. It was the flip of the coin. It might have been mine. Now it is.

It was true. He wasn't stealing a life. He was stepping into a life that he had just as much of a right to have. Perhaps it was this fact alone that allowed him to go ahead with it, that and the loan sharks who waited for him back home.

Aaron returned to Troy's bedroom. He sat there on the bed most of the day, and contemplated what he was about to do. If he did this, Aaron Mayer would just disappear, and along with him his troubles, his mistakes, and his past. It was his chance to start over. Troy had handed him a new life for whatever reason. He had to take it.

Aaron grabbed all the papers he would need. He picked

up Troy's car keys with the car starter attached and left the boat. The sun had gone down and it was cooler than normal. He headed for the parking lot and pointed the car starter in the direction of the parked vehicles. A sparkling blue Corvette roared to life while its headlights slowly unveiled. "Nice."

Aaron inhaled the smell of new leather when he slipped behind the wheel as if it were a drug. He adjusted the rearview mirror and rolled forward, slowly.

He drove down the coast, his hands shaking. He had never driven anything so lovely. Was it a dream? It all felt so... illicit. He was almost in a trance all the way to Santa Barbara. Maybe it was real, that luck could change and good things could sometimes happen after a lifetime of living under a dark cloud.

It was a shock to see the old-fashioned freeway signs announcing that he'd reached Santa Barbara. He glanced at the dashboard clock. He'd made the eighty-nine mile drive in a little over an hour. The cops hadn't busted him. Maybe his luck was already changing. He shoved the picture of his twin into his pocket and stopped at the first hair salon he could find on State Street.

Standing at the reception desk, he waited only a moment for a hip-looking stylist to come forward to ask if he had an appointment, Aaron said, "No. I just need a cut." He took out the picture. "It's a cut I had before. Can you do that?"

"Of course," the young man smiled. "Very becoming. Unfortunately, I have no place for you now. We are just about to close. If you come back..."

"No," Aaron said. "I can't. I have to get it cut now. Ah..." he added when the stylist gave him a curious look, "it's driving me nuts and... I have a meeting tonight. Please, look." He took out his brother's credit card. "Whatever you charge here for a haircut, I'll pay double."

"Seventy is the usual price. So let's say one-forty, plus the tip of course."

Aaron was aware of the man staring at his bandaged fingers that for some reason had started to throb. He kept them on his lap and drew a deep breath. Let the fun begin.

"Of course," Aaron replied. "How about an even two hundred?"

"Let's get started."

CHAPTER 2

It wasn't difficult to find the location of the sevenbedroom house his brother lived in. The onboard navigation had been pre-programmed with the Bel Air address. It was eerie to get back into the vehicle with his new haircut and the mechanical navigation voice telling him how to get back on the freeway to Bel Air.

Aaron drove, unable to stop thinking about the fact that his now-destroyed Ford Taurus had forever been on its last legs. The windows and the driver side door didn't open, and the transmission slipped constantly. What a dream to be cruising along the ritzy part of Sunset to his brother's estate, through the gated Bel Air community.

He experienced a small moment of panic at the guard gate. Leaning on the window button, he marveled at how smoothly it operated. The Taurus's window had been stuck since the day he bought it at auction. Aaron recognized the ornate wrought-iron gates from television. His brother had been interviewed in his house last year for a show about luxury homes, because it was filled with fancy antiques. Troy had told the interviewer that the house had originally been built for his father's second wife but that Troy decided to keep it when they divorced.

"Good evening, Mr. Mayer," the guard said, opening the gate. "The meeting has already started, I'll let Mr. Watanabe know you're home."

Who in the hell was Mr. Watanabe and what meeting was he talking about?

Aaron smiled and nodded as he angled the car inside the gates. From the rearview mirror, he could see the guard picking up a phone inside his little cubicle. The gate swung sedately closed behind him. Aaron moved forward, aware of his fingers sweating against the steering wheel leather.

Where in hell was the house? Panic prickled at him. He'd look like an idiot if he began circling the giant, curving road. He blinked for a moment, staring ahead. It looked like something out of *Desperate Housewives...* what was it called? Wisteria Lane. He'd expected mansions and yes they were there... but what the fuck? Which way did he go? Left or right?

He glanced back in the rearview mirror and saw that the gate guard was staring at him. *Oh, spiffing*.

Just as he'd decided to turn right, the onboard navigation system startled him.

"Turn right then one hundred yards ahead, turn right on St. Cloud Road."

"Thank you," he said, then rolled his eyes at himself... thanking a damned computer now!

The house stood on a plateau above a steep incline, surrounded by trees. It was a sprawling Spanish style, with black grated windows and doors. Rose bushes lined the path leading to the front door and there was a small fountain with a pond. A Greek-like statue of an angel peed water into the reservoir.

Did Troy park in his garage? He noticed an old truck parked in the driveway and turned the car around in front of the house. When Aaron got out, a middle-aged Hispanic man with a hat scrunched on his head waved at him.

"Good evening, Señor Mayer. I was just about to finish here. I'm sorry I parked in the driveway, but I needed my tools. It was a bigger job trimming the bushes than I thought. I'll work until dark if you want."

He seemed nervous. Aaron was nervous too. Could he carry this off? "Ah, it's okay, go on home. No need to hurry. Finish it tomorrow." The gardener looked surprised. "You say that but, señor, you told me... I don't want to lose my job."

"It's okay," Aaron replied, "go on home. You won't lose your job."

"Gracias, señor." The gardener bobbed his head and hurried over to the old truck, dragging a rake and a full garbage bag behind him.

Aaron stood there for a moment as the man drove off. He fingered the keys in his pocket and walked toward the front door. He didn't get very far. A man came running out of the house next door, waving at him.

"Mayer! I thought you were going to stand us up again. I'm so glad you made it!"

Aaron stopped and stared at him.

The man was gesturing at him, with harried, wide sweeps of his hand. Aaron tried not to focus on the gardener's handiwork. He'd done a wonderful job. The garden was immaculate. He walked back down the path and over to the neighbor's property. He moved up the garden path, admiring the man's Asian-style Zen garden and the koi pond tucked under an ornamental cherry tree. Even in the encroaching evening light, he could see it had been well tended to avoid leaves and blossoms falling into the pond.

"You usually stomp my garden," the man said, hands on hips. "I... wow... Well, thanks. I appreciate you walking around."

Aaron tried not to react. Troy stomped his Zen garden?

He shook the man's proffered hand. He'd just figured who the guy was. Nikko Watanabe, a big-time, hot new TV star. He was so sexy with his long hair and form-fitting jeans. Aaron couldn't remember what the name of the show was that the guy was in, but it was an Asian Mafia

type thing. Yakuza. Yeah, that was it, something about LA Yakuza. He stared at Nikko's hand and realized the fearsome tattoos that graced the actor's body on the show were not his own.

Glancing at the lined up shoes on a long cedar shelf out the front of the house, Aaron couldn't fail to glimpse the meaningful glance from his host. He kicked off his shoes and left them, facing outward, along with the others.

Nikko Watanabe smiled. "Thank you for that. I appreciate you respecting my religion."

Aaron couldn't speak. The man seemed genuinely grateful... almost... relieved. He entered the house, stunned by its expensive simplicity. A gigantic Buddha statue lined one wall along with a massive Butsadan. It must have cost a fortune.

Two other men milled around what he assumed was the living room, drinking tea out of an earthen teapot on the coffee table. Aaron hadn't stopped for anything to eat or drink all day and the realization suddenly hit him. He was starving.

"Would you like some tea?" Nikko asked him.

"That would be great, thank you."

"Please, sit." Nikko gave him a little bow and gestured toward a pristine piece of white sectional sofa. Across the coffee table the other two men had stopped talking. They looked faintly goofy balancing tiny tea cups in their big hands. Again he was aware of the scrutiny of his broken fingers. He hadn't had the money to get them fixed by a doctor. He'd fashioned his own splints and they were healing well, but his bandaging did leave a lot to be desired. Now he had ready cash he could see a doctor first thing in the morning.

He was about to introduce himself and forced himself to stop. Troy obviously knew these people. He'd have to bluff his way through this meeting.

"It's kukicha tea," Nikko said, handing him a steaming cup. "If you don't like it, please just say so. I'd rather you didn't hurl it across the room like you did last time."

Oh my God... is my brother really such a colossal rich prick?

Aaron was aware of his hand shaking a little. "I love kukicha," he said. "It has so many medicinal qualities."

Nikko stared as Aaron sipped. Perfect. He liked the nutty, creamy taste and let the mouthful linger on his tongue. He closed his eyes and swallowed. When he opened them again, he found them all staring at him. The large guy opposite him seemed especially surprised.

"Sorry," Aaron said. He took another sip, worried that Nikko would take the cup from him and send him packing.

"More?" Nikko asked. He glanced over at the other two men as he picked up the teapot. What in the hell was going on? Nikko poured him a little more tea, setting the pot down again then sat to Aaron's left on a decorativelooking, rather than functional, chair.

"Well," the large man said, clearing his throat. "First of all, I'd like to thank you for coming here and secondly... well, of course we'd like to talk about the tree. I know you've stated your feelings about it, quite... *stridently*, but before we go so far as enacting the Tree Act, we'd like to remind you that the walnut tree is ninety-four years old and we'd like to preserve it—"

"Of course," Aaron said, wondering if it would be rude to ask for more tea. He caught Nikko's swiveled glance and looked back at him. Nikko's gaze flicked back to Aaron's now-empty cup and he picked up the pot again.

The large man was blinking. Aaron had clearly disarmed him by his response. That much was obvious.

"You... agree?" The large man licked his lips. This

was clearly an emotional issue for him. "Wow. As you know, it does lean over and drop leaves and—"

"I'm sorry," Aaron said. "Please tell me what you'd like me to do."

The room fell silent. Nikko kept staring at him, the teapot tipping a little in his hands.

Across from Aaron, the large man visibly relaxed. "That's a shocker. I took a petition around the street and everyone signed it to stop you from continuing to poison it."

Poison it? The fresh cup of tea almost scalded Aaron's lips.

"I would never do that."

"Well..." the man cleared his throat, "Your neighbors across the road videotaped you pouring something onto the leaves, throwing it from your window."

Aaron almost choked on his tea. "There's a misunderstanding here. I have no intention of destroying or removing the tree." Boy... my brother tried to kill a tree?

"Really?" the man beside the large man with the apparently dry lips spoke for the first time. "I was hoping this was the case. We had the tree analyzed and it's hard to tell if the damage to it came from the caustic substance you threw on it, or if it's walnut blight."

He shoved a set of photos across the table at Aaron who set his cup down reluctantly and picked up the photos. He studied the black splotches on the leaves. The lack of the warm cup against his fingers seemed to leave him shivering. His fingers throbbed. He did his best to ignore the pain.

"That's walnut blight," he said.

Again, surprised looks ran between the other three men.

"That's what the tree expert said." The large man shrugged. "The other walnut trees in the neighborhood have it, too."

"I can fix that," Aaron said. "In a couple of weeks they'll be looking like new."

The three men looked dumBfounded.

"Can we have that in writing?" the third man asked.

"Sure." Aaron nodded. "Whatever you like."

"I'm surprised you know about all this. You've been so... negative about the tree. Incidentally, how *do* you fix walnut blight?" Nikko asked.

"Oh, lots of ways, but I prefer a natural approach. I'd need to study it more, but it looks like the soil's pH balance is off. I'd use a Bordeaux mix, burn off the affected areas and—" he whipped through the pictures in his good hand, "I'd want to prune them a little to ensure proper aeration. Blight thrives in moisture."

"My God... that's almost exactly what the tree doctor said." The large man sat staring at some pages in his hand. "Why didn't you say something before I spent two-thousand dollars on his expert opinion?"

Without thinking, Aaron leaned across the table and held out his hand.

"Let me pay for the quote."

The man handed over the pages. Aaron glanced at the name at the top of the first page. William Gelt. The name seemed familiar. Why?

"This went better than I expected," Nikko said, jumping to his feet as the other men stood. Aaron understood the meeting was over and held his hand out to all three men to shake.

"I'm sorry for the misunderstanding," he said. "I am sorry about the tree. I'll take care of it first thing tomorrow."

He shuffled out the door aware of total silence behind him. Nikko came outside just as Aaron finished slipping his shoes on again out front. "Has something happened to you?" Nikko asked.

Aaron froze. "No. Why?"

"Your fingers. They're bleeding."

"Oh, my God. Did I get blood in your house?"

Nikko shook his head. "No, no. I'm worried about your hand. Did you hurt yourself?"

"I slammed them in the car door."

"Doctor Gelt thinks you should go to the hospital and get them seen to."

"But—"

"Do it. Please. Here's his card. I'm so pleased all this worked out." Nikko smiled in the semi-darkness. "I told them all your super-jerk routine was all an act. By the way, per your request, I'm letting you know I will be conducting an early morning prayer service here."

Nikko looked nervous again. The words were weighted, but why? Obviously Troy had cared what the actor did in the privacy of his home but... why does Nikko think I need to know? He began to wonder if the man was gay or straight. Had he and Troy once had something that had gone horribly awry?

"Okay," he said aloud. "Have... fun." *Have fun? Jesus, Aaron, could you be a bit more lame?* He gave Nikki what he thought was a friendly smile. Nikko looked shocked, but said nothing as Aaron hurried down the path.

Next door, he tried several keys until he found the right one, looking around to make sure no one was observing him. Nikko had vanished. It would look so damned foolish for Aaron not to know his own damned door key.

When he opened the door, he could smell lemon furniture polish and—was it sandalwood?— as a young

Hispanic woman rushed forward.

"Señor Mayer? I'm sorry. I just heard you come in. So sorry." She looked frantic.

"Couldn't find my key. I... had too much in my pocket."

"But you never unlock it yourself. I'm so sorry." She stared helplessly at him. "I wasn't sure if you'd be home for supper. I just put it in the oven to keep it warm." Her hand shook as she slipped on a sweater. He reached over, helping her with her sleeve.

She seemed surprised, but covered the awkward moment with staccato words. "You have several messages. One from Señor Alvarez. He tried to reach you on your cell phone but you weren't picking up, so you should call your message service."

"Oh, okay. Thanks." Who is Señor Alvarez?

"Goodnight, señor." She smiled.

"Goodnight." Aaron didn't know her name, but as he watched her hurry across the shiny black and white tiles to the front door, he could tell she couldn't wait to disappear. He stood in the middle of the massive foyer and looked around.

"Wow!" The ceilings were high and a large chandelier hung in the middle of the entrance hall. Directly ahead was a large spiral staircase, with gold railings, each step carpeted with a deep burgundy material.

The plush rug covered a huge sprawling living room on the right hand side. Two white leather sofas and a love seat were the only furnishings in the room. Beautiful oil paintings of various landscapes covered the walls. A fully stocked bar and a built-in stereo completed the space. The room was larger than his entire apartment.

To the right was the spiral staircase and straight ahead were several large windows which spanned from

wall to ceiling, profiling a beautiful garden, tennis court and heart shaped pool.

Aaron wandered over to stare outside then glanced to his left. He walked down a long hallway where he found a bathroom. A closet hung open, displaying clean maid uniforms. This was obviously the servant's bathroom. Next door was a large laundry room, and at the back, there was a huge, fully equipped kitchen. Everything gleamed with stainless steel.

Aaron smelled food. Hunger gnawed at him again. He opened the oven and found some sort of casserole. He opened several drawers until he located the cutlery and grabbed a fork. He winced when he banged his injured hand but sucked it up, leaning against the counter. He ate ravenously right out of the baking dish.

It was good. Spicy and delicious. He placed the leftovers in the heavily stocked refrigerator and slowly walked up the stairs. Who was the man who'd left him the message? Where was Troy's cell phone?

His fingers throbbed with increasing heat. He glanced down at the oozing bandages. What in hell had he done to himself? He took a deep breath, holding on to his injured hand. He was torn between helping himself and drinking in his new surroundings. The hallway was lined with the same luxurious burgundy carpet. He savored the feel of it as he investigated each tastefully decorated room. Some had their own bathrooms. At the end of the hall was the master bedroom.

When he opened the door his mouth formed into an unconscious *o*. A round king sized bed sat in the middle of the room. A walk-in closet stood open, filled with clothes. Off to the side, overlooking the garden, was an exercise room and a luxurious bathroom complete with hot tub and sauna.

"Brother, you know how to live." As he said it, he felt a certain amount of sadness. Troy said he'd be gone, and although he didn't know him very well, Aaron felt a certain emptiness, and confusion.

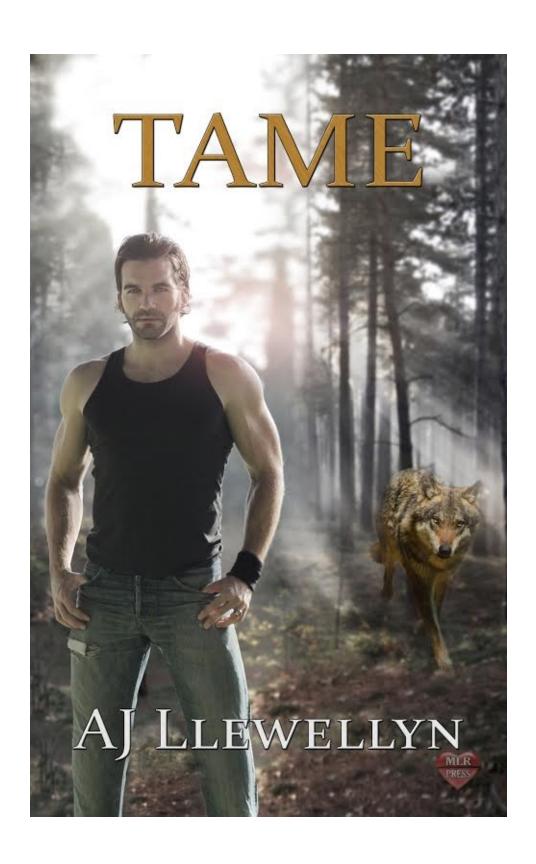
"This is what you lived, brother, and you wanted out?"

This made no sense. Still a smile came to his lips. He couldn't believe that all this now was his. He jumped on the bed and stretched out. This seemed like a fairy tale. Yesterday, he wasn't anybody, someone who lived in poverty, and was in danger of losing life and limb. Now here he was, walking in the shoes of his brother, who had had everything. Why had Troy done this? Why had he let him step into his shoes? Did his brother feel guilty? Did he really think that it was Aaron's turn?

In the master bathroom he undid his bandages and almost fainted. When the loan sharks had come after him they'd let him choose which hand they'd damage. He'd chosen the left. It had hurt like hell when they took the hammer to his fingers, but he'd gone to the public library and learned about setting them. He'd taped the left middle and index fingers together, supporting them with a homemade splint. How in the world had he hurt them again? He'd thought they were getting better.

He saw beneath the hand wraps a deep gash across the knuckle of the middle finger, which was now swollen. He could see down to the bone. He felt suddenly dizzy.

He had no choice. And he had the money. He picked up his wallet and keys, walked out of his house and went to the hospital.



TAME

Ludo might be the most magnificent man Cavan's ever met...but why does he say he's...tame?

It's Halloween and LAPD cop Cavan Carmichael is expecting spooky things... this is LA, after all. But who could have predicted a late night animal abuse call would reveal a beaten, chained-up man in a garden shed?

Cavan rescues the bruised and bloodied man who rasps the mysterious words, "Don't worry I'm tame."

But is he? Nothing about him adds up. For every medical test the doctors perform, come only more questions. When Ludo is admitted to the hospital he has grievous injuries inflicted by a despicable assailant via antique instruments of torture.

Unbelievably, these injuries heal fast and Cavan, who visits the recuperating man finds he is attracted and intrigued. But can he overlook such oddities as bristles under the man's tongue or strange wolf hairs in his wounds? Is the most beautiful man Cavan has ever seen, really...tame?

CHAPTER 1

Officer Cavan Carmichael had had a weird day. Having just transferred from Oregon to California to help take care of his ailing mother, his first full day working for the West Los Angeles Community Police division had been a mixture of blessings.

His division, which covered the tony areas of Bel Air, Benedict Canyon, Beverlywood, Pacific Palisades, Rancho Park and Rustic Canyon among others, had achieved a record of only three crimes in six days. One was a burglary in Pacific Palisades, the other two were traffic accidents on the Pacific Coast Highway.

Though the division's superior officers were thrilled, they were reluctant to promote this news for fear of street-cruising gangs making their way out west where people had money and the criminal competition was nonexistent.

East LA's crime statistics were staggering. Anybody could crime-map Los Angeles online and see the latest reports, but why encourage intruders?

No. The West Los Angeles Community Police division chiefs liked things the way they were. Nice and quiet.

It was a little after eight on a surprisingly warm October night. Cavan had been warned LA could be warm right up until Thanksgiving. He gazed out of the window at the passing parade of celebrity houses on Sunset Boulevard. Halloween was a few days away and he was stunned at the amount of money some of these rich homeowners had spent on their lawn decor. Each house seemingly tried to outdo the other with flying witches, hanging skeletons that had glowing, beating hearts... He'd never known a balmy Halloween week, but then he'd spent the last few years in Klamath Falls, the dying heart of Oregon's timber industry and he knew the weather everywhere was changing. Maybe this was typical California weather now. It was usually cool and wet there and crimes were infrequent and of the "heated argument over borrowed sanding tools" variety.

Cavan and his partner, Ben Ortega, had finished their twelve-hour shift and were on their way back to the precinct on Butler Avenue. All afternoon, they'd fantasized about the meal they'd grab together. All-night diners still existed in Los Angeles and Ben promised Cavan he'd take him to the best.

After completing two weeks of Los Angeles code, weapons and violations training, Cavan had been paired up with Ben and they'd hit it off straight away. They both had moms who'd raised them alone. Cavan was thirty, Ben twenty-eight. They both liked burgers, beers...but deviated over "broads," as Ben called them. Not that Cavan was likely to tell his new partner that he was gay, but newly

separated Ben seemed to want a buddy to hang out with as he hit the ground running from one bar to the next. He was a good-looking guy of mixed heritage. His dark looks and even temperament made him a pleasure to be around. Cavan had inherited his mom's brown eyes, athletic build, and, unfortunately, premature grayness.

"We could chase chicks. Hey, it would be great if we met twins," Ben said.

Ugh. That sounded...disgusting. "Not tonight. I'm pretty wiped out. A burger would be great, though."

"That's cool, Cavan." Ben had finally pronounced it right. After wanting to call him Cave-un, he'd finally gotten that it was pronounced like Kevin. Cavan was the Irish version of the name.

They were on their way to eat when they received a lastsecond report of animal abuse.

"Damn." Ben slapped the dash. "And I was so looking forward to getting that burger. I could almost taste the fries."

Cavan laughed. Ben was driving, which was a good thing. It had given Cavan a chance to absorb his surroundings. Ben pulled over, keying in the details on the computer monitor wedged between them on the dashboard. The dispatcher's voice sounded distorted and Ben had to ask her to repeat herself. Cavan meanwhile, glanced outside at a lawn display featuring pumpkins and goblins, a gigantic vampire whose wings electronically flapped every few seconds and a sign that popped of a fake grave saying, *Boo!*

"Okay, got it." Ben told dispatch they were on their way and turned the car around. Cavan squinted at the screen.

"Pacific Palisades. Huh. Is it the same address where the break-in happened on Saturday?"

Ben flicked him a glance. "Yeah. Weird, huh?"

Cavan didn't think so. "It's an animal abuse case? Do we get a lot of those?"

"No, but this guy's called three times and said he witnessed his neighbor abusing his dog about an hour ago and the dog yelped and cried. He thinks this time he's killed it."

Jesus.

They were both silent as they used the lights to cut across a very slow set of lights on the corner of Sunset and Mandeville Canyon. Cavan had already learned sirens were not used in West LA except for extreme emergencies.

"I don't care how bad your day gets," Ben said, "your animals should be a comfort, not a fucking tool for revenge."

"Right with you on that one." Cavan loved animals. As they turned left on Marinette Road, he was astonished when veered toward the mountains off Sunset Boulevard and plunged into a decadent, lush, tree-lined street. He saw a sign indicating they were near the entrance of Will Rogers State Park. That explained the exotic arbors lining the entire road. As the Los Angeles county-issue Ford Crown Victoria police car drove farther up the hill, Cavan marveled at the scenery. He felt as if he'd stepped into an incongruous wilderness bang-slap in the middle of the city. He had to peer through the clusters of trees to even see a single house.

"Wow, this is something else. I suppose this is how the other half lives." The neighborhood dripped the kind of silence and serenity only money could buy in a city like Los Angeles. Cavan checked the computer monitor's GPS tracking system. They were close. It was hard to find a street number on any of the houses hidden from view, but the vehicle's side mirror searchlights finally picked out the

digits painted on the curb.

"Do you want to check in with the neighbor first?" he asked.

"We could. I'd like him to show us where he saw the abuse take place, tell us what he knows. Since he's called so many times but if it's as bad as he says it is, maybe we shouldn't wait."

Cavan waited for Ben to decide. "I'll call the neighbor." Ben pulled out his cell, made the call, but got no response. When they waded through a couple of feet of eucalyptus trees and approached the house of alleged abuse, they could see lights on inside and hear a dog barking.

Motion sensor lights flicked on, flooding the area around them with light so bright it seemed like daytime.

"That kills that idea of going next door," Ben said. "Guy knows we're here already."

The house had a rustic ranch-style to it, but with expensive-looking light fixtures and a BMW in the driveway. Ben knocked on the door, his knuckles still on the wood panel when it opened.

A middle-aged man, looking as if he'd been woken from a nap, peered out at them from a two-inch wedge. Cavan saw the glow of a TV illuminating the man's halo of disheveled hair.

"Sir, may we come in? I'm Officer Ortega. This is Officer Carmichael. We've had a report of animal abuse."

The man looked stunned. "Animal abuse? Who from?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, sir. May we come in?"

"Probably that asshole next door. He really needs to get a life." The man jerked his thumb to the reporting neighbor's house.

"Sir, may we come in, please?" Ben asked a third time.

The man held the door open about an inch. Cavan heard a dog growling.

"Buster, quit it," the man yelled. The dog started barking.

"You can tell he's real obedient." The man gave an apologetic half smile as he opened the door wider. "But as you can see, he's healthy as an ox."

Buster was an overweight basset hound who rushed Cavan and Ben with licks and frantic pawing.

"What is your name, sir?" Ben pulled out his report book. His tone was frosty. He was bad cop, Cavan was good cop. He bent to pat the dog's head.

"Luke Masterson. Are you writing that down? Why?"

"I have to file a report. How many animals do you have here, sir?"

Cavan straightened and took in the man's T-shirt. The breast pocket read, *Parr Lumber: Go where the Builders Go!*

Luke Masterson showed them around. He wore jeans that were either really old or expensive new ones made to look that way. His flyaway gray hair was thinning on top and scraped together in back into a scraggly ponytail. He shoved his feet into loafers and he introduced them to another, smaller dog that sat on the sofa and thumped his tail happily. He seemed fine, too.

The house was overfilled with movie memorabilia, DVDs, videos. The rooms were simply stuffed. Cavan noticed every type of horror movie stacked floor to ceiling on one wall. He shuddered when he saw the title *I Spit on Your Grave*. Cavan had never been able to watch horror movies after his older brother made him sit through *The Exorcist* when he was nine. He'd never gotten over the experience.

He and Ben went through every room, one of which was entirely devoted to werewolf movies and memorabilia.

"You ever been to Comic-Con?" Luke Masterson asked. "I met the makeup artist Rick Baker. He did all the special effects makeup on *An American Werewolf in London*. He

transformed movie makeup with this film. He said the whole process took sixteen hours a day and that the actor David Naughton had to have all his meals blended so he could drink them through straws. He could hardly move his mouth with his wolf fangs." Masterson's nose seemed to twitch in excitement. "Rick admitted that the scenes where David transformed into the werewolf were sometimes painful. He said he tried his best to make the werewolf's limbs comfortable..."

He moved right in front of Cavan for a moment, so close, Cavan detected a familiar and very pleasant smell sawdust.

"I bought all these signed behind-the-scenes from him." Masterson pointed to a series of framed photos on the wall. "I think his werewolves are great. I love his gorillas, too. Oh, and my pride and joy is my Dracula room."

Masterson kept up a nonstop patter about loving "creature features" and his animals. His bedroom bore a huge painting of *Frankenstein* over the bed. It was creepy. Really creepy. Cavan must have telegraphed his revulsion, in spite of saying nothing and trying to process the house like a professional.

"What can I say?" Masterson asked, cuddling one of his dogs. "I simply adore monsters."

There were four dogs in all and they all seemed in good shape.

"Rescued all of them. This one here is called Roo. He's a Jack Russell terrier, but I always say he's part kangaroo." The little dog sprang five feet into the air to lick the police officers' chins. He kept bouncing. The guy wasn't kidding. He picked up the dog on the sixth bounce.

"Do you have any outside pets?" Ben asked.

"Absolutely not. We get coyotes in this part of town and nighttime. Why that'd be like ringing a dinner bell. I like blood, officers, but only in the movies."

"Mind if we look?" Ben asked. "Then we'll be on our way." Masterson looked as if he did mind them going outside, but he undid the many locks on the door and opened it. Buster bounded out, but returned on command.

Ben walked down the few short steps to the grass, walked outside and looked around. There was a jungle-like feel to the trees towering across the property's borderline and the plethora of plants everywhere. Cavan and Ben walked around. It wasn't easy with so little light.

They took their flashlights off their tool belts. Cavan took in the gigantic plants along the right side, some of which were in plastic pots.

"Are there outside lights?" Ben asked.

Masterson put all the dogs inside and flipped on a light over the door. The bulb didn't illuminate much. The yard appeared small, but it was hard to see in the dark. Masterson came back out and closed the door behind him. He stood on the top step as Cavan joined Ben, who could see the neighbor's house to his left. The kitchen had a clear view of the backyard in spite of the high fence and a lot of foliage from a long trail of bougainvillea topping it.

Ben asked Masterson to open his garage.

"There's nothing in there," he grumbled, but he went inside and got his keys.

"He's been building," Cavan said, keeping his voice low. "I smelled sawdust. He's got traces of it in his hair and on his shoulder. And that T-shirt. I know that lumber company. It's from Klamath Falls, in Oregon."

Ben nodded.

Masterson came outside and unlocked the garage. He yanked a long cord above him and fluorescent lights flickered to life. The garage was filled with even more videos in bookshelves lining the walls. Some building

materials stood in boxes. Ben looked at Cavan, who had detected a whiff of something else.

Blood.

Under the canopy of a dark, starless night, Cavan stepped into the backyard. He could hardly see, but he kept up a sweeping arc of the flashlight.

He could hear Ben talking to the man now. Cavan concentrated. He had figured out the plants looked jumbled together but the farther he walked, the more they created a small, narrow path to the back of the property. Something made him swing his flashlight to the left. He almost missed it, except the smell of new wood was so strong.

A shed.

He turned and caught Ben's eye. Ben came right to him, tripping over a stone.

"What is it?"

"A shed."

Ben arced his flashlight in the same direction. It was very well hidden.

"There's nothing in there. I don't keep my dogs in there." The man kept babbling. "You can't go in there. That's private."

They inched toward it, the big silver bolt on it glinting under the flashlights' beams. Cavan saw a dark stain on the door. He was sure it was blood.

"Unlock this please," Ben insisted.

"No. There's no dogs in there. Come back with a search warrant."

They reached the shack, Cavan touching the lock. The padlock had not been pushed all the way down.

Inside the house, the dogs started barking like crazy, as if sensing something was very wrong. Cavan pulled out his iPhone with his free hand and surreptitiously began recording.

"The lock," Ben said again.

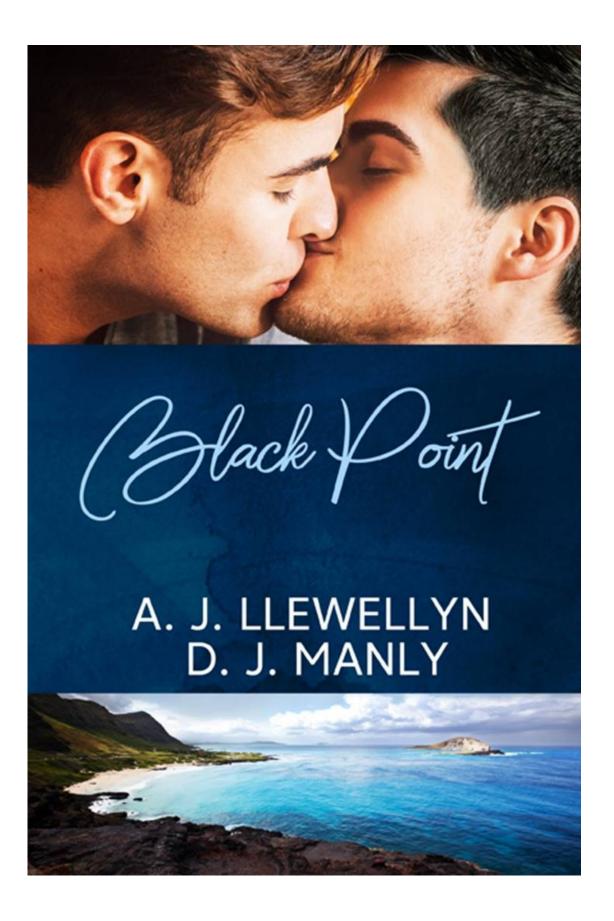
Unbelievably, Luke Masterson took off running.

Cavan heard Ben shouting something to him, but he didn't respond. He wondered what horrors awaited him as he lifted the lock off the hinge, slid back the bolt and prepared to enter the shack. He heard Ben running and realized he'd gone after their suspect. Cavan braced himself as he got the door open and, flashlight in one hand, camera phone activated, began searching the small room. There in the corner sat a huddled creature chained to the wall, shackles on...his feet. It wasn't a dog. It was a beaten, shivering, shaking, bloodied man. Cavan would never forget how the man tried to make himself smaller. Defenseless, Petrified.

Suddenly, his head came up. His swollen eyes looked right at Cavan.

Holy shit.

"Don't worry," the man said. "I'm tame."



BLACK POINT

By A.J. Llewellyn and D.J. Manly

Matt greatly admires Rose, the top male/male erotic writer in America. Just as Matt and rose start to develop genuine feelings for each other via frequent emails and online chats, Rose sells her latest book to a big Hollywood movie studio. Matt is as ecstatic as she is, but also increasingly shocked and bewildered by his developing feelings for this woman he has never met, because he is gay.

Rose too, has sexual fantasies about the hot new writer who writes for the same publishing company. Only problem is, Matt is gay, but then again, so is Rose whose real name is Thomas!

Sternly warned by her publisher not to reveal her true identity to the man she is falling hard and fast for, Rose and Matt both ponder what seems like an improbable romance...or is it true love?

Will their dreams be fulfilled or shattered when they finally meet at a romance writers' conference in Honolulu at the exotic, mysterious and utterly romantic BLACK POINT...

CHAPTER 1

"Can I come out now?"

"I thought you were out." Sandra Evans chuckled.

"Very funny," Thomas growled. "You know what I mean."

"You're a bestselling author, Tom. Why would you want to screw it all up?"

"Because I'm feeding a prejudice, helping to support the myth that men have no emotions."

"Don't be ridiculous. No one said men don't have any emotions. They said men can't write romance."

"Yes, apparently all men are capable of writing is porn." His publisher laughed.

"It's not funny."

"Look, Thomas. Some people think that way, that's all."

"That's why writers like me should reveal themselves."

"You into exhibitionism now? Hey, how about something like that in your next book? A male stripper who—"

"Sandra, focus. I'm dead serious about this. Why can't I just come out and say my name is Thomas Carter?"

"Because your fans think you're Rose Carter."

"What in the hell difference does it make? My writing isn't going to change."

He could hear Sandra sigh on the other end of the phone. "Thomas, why this sudden interest in coming out as a man? Could it have something to do with Matt Malone?"

Matt Malone. Had it been that noticeable? "Well, he's out, he's a man and he's a writer in the same genre as I am. He even declared that he was gay the other night on my Yahoo group."

"My God, you've got a thing for Matt Malone!" She was howling with laughter.

"I do not."

"You're always flirting with him online. I've noticed that lately and he's flirting back."

"I do not flirt with Matt Malone. And Malone flirts with all the ladies. You're losing focus again, Sandra. My point is, he's a guy and he's accepted in this genre."

"Yes, but he only has two books out and you have over fifty. You started a few years back when all the writers were female, or at least, appeared to be. You're a top selling author, Thomas. A veteran. He's a virgin."

"I bet he's not a virgin," Thomas murmured.

"You know what I mean. We can't do anything to jeopardize your sales. I was talking to Matt the other day. He admires you."

"Yeah? What did he say about me?"

"He said, 'It's too bad Rose is female, she'd be perfect for me."

"That was low. He didn't say that."

Sandra was laughing again. "No, he didn't say that. It's a joke. He didn't say anything about you being a woman."

"Ahem, Sandra, I'm not a woman."

"I know that. He said you were his mentor. One of the reasons he had the courage to write was because of you. Not to mention that he jerks off to your books."

"I'm hanging up now."

She laughed again.

"Maybe we can just tell Matt I'm a guy?"

"We don't tell anyone. Matt could let it slip by accident. Now, get off this trip and get to work. I need those edits from you pronto."

"Yeah, yeah, you'll have the edits."

"And I expect you to be at the promo thing tonight. Your fans miss you."

"I'll be there. Haven't I shown up to most of them?"

"Except when you have some boyfriend problem."

"No worries. I'm temporarily boyfriendless, and you better hope I find a new one soon. My inspiration for those hot male-male sex scenes is quickly drying up."

"Try the personals. Hire a male hooker."

"You paying?"

"I will, if it means you'll give me three more books before the holidays."

"Classy."

"Hang up, Rose."

Thomas sighed.

"Oh, I have another idea—pick up one of Matt's books. You might find some inspiration there."

"I've read both of them."

"Pretty good, eh? You better go out to a gay bar, pick up some inspiration and then get your sweet ass back to the computer. And I've seen it. It's very, very nice." "My computer?"

"No, your ass."

Thomas shook his head. "Good thing I love you."

"I love you, too, Rosie girl. Now write."

Thomas put down the phone.

Matt Malone was a brand new writer on the net. Sandra had accepted his first book two months ago. Since then, he had come out with a sequel, both complete with intriguing plots, gorgeous men and hotter than hot sex. Thomas had been intrigued by him almost immediately.

He was sociable, seemed anxious to get his name out there, and full of compliments for Thomas' writing. Experiencing a dry spell both in and out of bed, Thomas took the time to read Matt's work. He was impressed. His words jumped right out at him and held him captive, touching his very soul. It was as if Matt was speaking directly to him. Thomas took the time to drop him an email telling him how much he'd enjoyed the books. Matt wrote back almost immediately.

Rose,

My God, I'm speechless. Thanks so much. Coming from you, it means everything. I will keep this email for the rest of my life.

Matt

Thomas had no idea what Matt looked like, but he'd had some fantasies about that. He knew very little about him at all except that he lived at what seemed like the other end of the universe and he was gay. Somewhere he'd mentioned being in his early thirties, which was just perfect. He also mentioned that he didn't have a boyfriend,

but that didn't make a hell of a lot of difference anyway since Matt thought he was some woman named Rose.

Thomas sat down at the computer and tried to write, but was distracted. He checked the clock. It was almost eight o'clock and their chat was at nine. He didn't have time to go out. Maybe later he'd hit the bars. It was Saturday night, after all.

Thomas got up and went to his closet. He took out a pair of black leather pants and a white silk shirt. He glanced at himself in the mirror. For a guy who had just turned thirty, he looked pretty damn good. Six foot two, slim and muscular, he put a lot of effort into staying in shape, especially since he spent so much time sitting in front of his computer.

His dark hair was layered back a bit and he'd finally got that shadow thing going on his jaw. Light blue eyes contrasted nicely with the thick chestnut colored hair. Men told him he was hot. He smiled at his reflection for a moment.

"Well, Matt, wonder what you would think if you could see Rosie now." He laughed at his little joke and shook his head. What in hell was this obsession he'd developed with Matt Malone anyway?

It made no sense. They weren't going to meet. And there wasn't even a possibility that Matt would ever imagine something happening between them because of his stupid masquerade. Oh well. He dumped the clothes on the bed and went back to his computer. He brought up Matt's latest book, *Falcon's Fire*. He scrolled down to the scene where one of the characters, a former next door neighbor who'd been enamored with the other guy for what seemed like eternity, finally get it on. And boy, do they get it on! Thomas smiled. He wondered if Matt worked from real life experiences like he did. If so, wow! Matt Malone would be

one hot lover in bed.

Thomas snaked his hand down inside of his jeans and leaned back, reading the words out loud as he lightly stroked his cock.

Bertrand's hand moved up over the naked flesh of Samuel's sculptured abs.

Samuel lifted his head and met his gaze. He went to say something, but no words were audible. They were completely alone out here now. Both Danny and Keith had gone to the ABC Store on Kalakaua Avenue to pick up more beer.

It was just the two of them alone with the late summer surf as witness. Bertrand reached up with his hand and touched Samuel's hair. "I have to kiss you," he said.

"It isn't right. You're here with Keith and I'm with Danny now."

"I didn't say it was right, goddamnit," Bertrand growled, curling his fingers around Samuel's hair, "I said I have to." He pulled Samuel forward and captured his mouth with his. At the same time, he fiddled with the zipper on Samuel's jean shorts, managing to take his cock out.

Samuel moaned into Bertrand's mouth as the kiss deepened. Bertrand had Samuel's cock in his hand and was gently caressing it. It was sending shivers up Samuel's spine.

"Lay back," Bertrand coaxed, putting his hand on his chest.

"Bert," he protested weakly, his lips touring his, "we shouldn't. We..."

"You want to, don't you?" Bertrand asked him softly, pressing him down against the wooden deck.

Want to? Of course he wanted to.

Bertrand hovered over him, still fondling his cock.

Samuel met those blue eyes and any fight he might have mustered left him. "Bertrand," he whispered, "all those years, I dreamt of holding you and now—"

"Shush." His mouth came down on his, hard, demanding, the passion threatening to drown them both as Samuel came in Bertrand's hand.

"Oh no," Samuel groaned. "I'm sorry, I..."

Bert smiled at him, straddling his hips now. "Come with me inside." He dipped his dark head down and lapped one nipple, then the other.

"We can't. They'll be back and—"

"They just left." Bertrand jumped to his feet and reached out his hand. "Come. I know a secret place."

Samuel still resisted. "A secret place." He tried to act casual, but the fire ignited in the pit of his belly, reflected in his eyes.

"I've been saving it for you. I've never taken anybody there. Black Point... the most beautiful place in the world for the most beautiful man I know... come, baby...

Thomas was coming all right. Damn that was nice. And what followed that scene was one of the hottest sex scenes he'd ever read. Forbidden, juicy, and—

The phone rang. Thomas groaned as he picked up the receiver. It was Brian, one of his casuals. He'd stopped seeing him awhile back. He got too clingy.

"Going out tonight, Tommy?"

He hated it when people called him Tommy. "Naw," he lied. "I don't think so."

"I'll be at the Stud Bar tonight. Come over later, baby. Drop by."

"Yeah, maybe." Make a mental note. Be anywhere later but at the Stud Bar. He checked the time on the computer. "Look, I got to go. I have this author thing I have to be at." "Okay, sexy. I miss you. I miss your cock."

Thomas rolled his eyes. "Yeah, okay, bye, Brian." He hung up. He'd slept with that guy once, and it had been a real snooze fest. Brian needed to get a life, he thought, typing the name of the chat room into the browser. Get a life? Damn, I need to get a life, instead of sitting in front of the computer masturbating to Matt Malone's sex scenes. Sheesh!

When he arrived in the chat room, he greeted many of the regular authors that he'd come to know over the last few years, expecting Matt to pipe up and greet him, but he didn't see his name on the list of those present. The host started talking about some of the authors' latest reviews and Thomas went out of his way to be supportive.

It was kind of his hobby, promoting new authors, helping them get their name out there, if he could.

Suddenly, Sandra showed up. Thomas sat back, reading the board.

The big boss is here, the host announced.

Hey people, Sandra wrote. Just wanted to tell you that Matt Malone was supposed to be here to talk about his book tonight, but he's having internet problems.

"Shit," Thomas said, disappointed. The rest of the chat went well, but he'd been looking forward to shooting the breeze with Matt. Everything felt a little flat without him there.

You're really quiet tonight, Rosie, one of the authors pointed out on the chat group. You sick?

I'm fine. Just reading everyone's stuff, Thomas wrote back.

When the chat ended, he left the room and checked his email. He read some fan mail, updated his website, then went to change his clothes. He needed some new scenery, some goddamn inspiration. Before he left, he checked his

email again. His heart sped up a bit when he saw that he had one message. The sender was Matt Malone. Thomas sank down in his chair and clicked open the message.

Hey, Rose,

I wanted to tell you that I was really looking forward to chatting with you tonight at the talk, but my damn internet gave out on me. I'm definitely changing companies because this is the third time this month. I heard it went well. I was wondering if you'd be the special guest at my chat next Saturday? I wanted to spotlight a few authors I admire and of course you're at the top of the list. Please, tell me yes???

Bye, yours, Matt

Thomas sighed. "Yours, Matt?" He shook his head. It was a nice thought. But it wasn't going to happen. Matt Malone would never be his. Thomas pressed reply and began to write back.

I missed you, too. I hope you work out your internet problem. I'm very flattered that you want me to be your special guest. It would be my pleasure.

Yours, Thomas

Thomas read it over and gasped. No, no...not Thomas. He went back and deleted that and wrote, *Your friend, Rose*. He sent it. Waited. He refreshed the page three times, waited. Then suddenly, another message. Matt had replied.

Rose,

What are you doing now? Do you want to meet in that chat room and talk, just the two of us? I know we're not supposed to probably, but what the hell! No one will be in there now. Feel like being naughty?

Matt

Oh yeah baby, he felt like being naughty. He laughed, clicked reply. He wrote three words then pressed send. *I'll race you*. Thomas was waiting in the chat room when Matt popped up.

Hey.

Hey there, sexy.

If you could see me now, you wouldn't say that.

Why not?

I've got on these old jogging pants. What are you wearing?

Thomas laughed out loud. He wasn't about to say he was dressed in leather pants. *Oh, ah, not much.*

Naked, eh?

LOL. No. Now, Matt. You are gay, aren't you?

Yes, Madame. I'm teasing.

You do that a lot.

I'm a natural it seems. I'm not dragging you away from anything, am I?

I wasn't doing anything special.

How's the writing?

Don't ask.

Come on, you're the great Rose, the writer I most admire.

Yeah. Someone tell that to the blank page on my computer.

It's a dry spell. Everyone gets them.

I need inspiration.

What's your sexual fantasy?

Oh my God. Thomas swallowed. *You. You're my goddamned sexual fantasy*. Finally, he typed, *Ah. I don't know*.

You must have one.

What's yours?

You don't want to hear it.

Come on, Matt, I write this stuff for a living. I won't be

scandalized. You know I don't have a homophobic bone in my body.

I know that.

I want to steal your fantasies for my next book. LOL

Okay. Well I have this fantasy where I see this guy across the room and I just fall in love at first sight.

That's sweet. And after??

Well we talk and I discover that I've known him forever you know, or it seems like it. It's so stupid.

No, it's not. Go on.

He's dark haired, blue eyed, gorgeous body and he has a voice like an angel. He understands me, anticipates my every need. And he makes love like...well...and that's all I'm going to say because the rest is X-rated.

Thomas sighed. Dark hair, blue eyes, he had. His body could be considered...well, he was buff enough, spending at least four hours a week at the gym. As for anticipating his every need, oh baby. He'd sure as hell like to try.

Rose? You're shocked right?

No. Thanks for telling me that.

Use it if you want. LOL. If it helps to break your dry spell.

I'd need more than that.

There was no response for a moment.

Matt?

Rose, I'm still here.

What's the kinkiest thing you've ever done? Don't tell me if you don't want.

LOL. Tell a straight woman my deepest romantic fantasies.

Ha, ha. No really?

Well, once some guy gave me a blow job behind the bar at someone's wedding. That was hot.

OMG.

LOL. It was also pretty scary. Rose, I can't talk to you about this stuff.

What if I were a guy?

If you were a gay man, I'd...forget it.

No, you'd what?

Nothing. We flirt enough with each other as it is.

Is that what we do? It's just teasing.

Rose. It feels like more than teasing. And I don't

usually...you know, you're a girl.

But you do that with everyone anyway.

Yes, but it feels different with you.

Does it?

Yes. And you know it. There's no way to explain and I don't really want to anyway.

Why not? Why don't you want to explain it? Maybe he knew. Maybe Matt knew he was a guy. And Sandra be damned. If Matt asked him right now, he was going to tell him the truth.

Because you're a woman with a beautiful soul, Rose. If I'd ever had a sister, I would have wanted her to be like you.

Sister! Ye gods!

I feel like I can tell you everything.

Thomas groaned as he wrote, *What a nice thing to say*. He banged his head a few times down on his desk.

I know you're going to be my closest friend on the net. And I'm in awe because you're such a great writer. I never thought I'd be friends with Rose Carter.

Thanks, Matt. So, what happened with your last boyfriend? You never told me. Were you together a long time?

About a year. I hate being single again. Those gay bars are such meat racks.

Yeah. I know what you mean. These guys don't even ask your name. It's come on, let's go, let's fuck.

Rose? I hate to have to tell you this, but I doubt the patrons of a gay bar would proposition you, unless it's a lesbian bar.

Of course not. I know that. I'm just imagining what you're saying, that's all. Whoops! A great looking guy like you must be propositioned all the time.

You don't know what I look like. Hey, send me a picture of you, okay? And I'll send one back.

Thomas froze. A picture. Shit. He could send a picture of his cousin, Carol. No. He'd just say he didn't have any, but damn, he would really like to see what Matt looked like. Better not. When I get a good one done, okay?

Sure. Let me know and I'll send you mine. I chopped my hair off. It used to be longer.

Are you blond?

Kind of. You have dark hair, I bet.

Yes.

I don't know why I'm so attracted to dark haired guys. I guess it's the contrast.

Probably. Anyway about the bars, do you score? I mean, do you bring guys home and stuff?

Sometimes. But usually I just look around and leave. LOL. Pathetic, eh?

No. I do that too...in straight bars. I just don't want to wake up next to some stranger.

Me neither. But sometimes you know, guys have needs.

Girls, too!!! LOL.

Of course. It's just with two guys, it's more evident. LOL

Oh, yeah. I get you.

Well I got to go, hon. I'm starving and I haven't eaten anything. Are you going anywhere tonight?

I don't know. You?

Maybe. I'll fill you in if I meet Mr. Right.

Thomas sighed. It's been nice. What time is your talk?

I'll send you an email.

Okay, sweetie. Bye.

Bye, Rose. Love ya.

I love you, too.

Thomas shut down the computer. Matt had said *love ya*. He knew it was just a way of saying goodbye. It didn't mean he really loved him.

Later that night he caught up with a few of his friends. They went bar hopping, danced a bit and drank a lot. He ended up coming back to his place with Steve, an old friend from high school, who inspired absolutely nothing in him in terms of desire. But at least he was fun to talk to. He found himself telling Steve about Matt.

"He thinks you're his sister?"

"No. He thinks of me like a sister. He thinks my name is Rose."

"Your nom de plume?"

"Yes."

"Is he hot?"

"I've never seen him, but I can feel him. He feels hot." Steve thought that was hilarious. "Just tell him you're a guy."

"I can't"

"Why not?"

"My publisher won't let me."

"Tell him not to tell."

"I promised not to say anything."

"If he saw you, he'd come in his pants." Steve grinned.

"Why, Steven," Thomas sniggered, "I didn't know you thought that."

"You were a doll back in high school and now you're a hunk. You're just an elusive hunk."

Thomas narrowed his eyes. "Am I?"

"Tommy." Steven leaned forward, looking like he was ready to pass out any moment, "you give the patrons a

hard on, then you snub them and go home alone."

"I'm looking for something different."

"You used to just be looking to get laid and if I recall, you did, and often. I was damned jealous. Never once did you give me a taste."

"Steve, you're like my brother." After he'd said it, he leaned back and laughed.

"What a horrible thing to say," Steve murmured, lying back on the sofa. "I'm going to pass out."

Thomas laughed, closing his eyes. "You do that. I'll join ya."

You're not a girl, Rose.

No, and I'm not your bloody sister either.

He could see a blond head, a beautiful face. They were walking hand and hand toward a little cabin. "What if someone catches us?"

The other man with him smiled. Damn. He wished he could see his face clearly. "Does it matter? I won't tell anyone."

"Promise?" He took his face between his hands and kissed him deeply. He heard himself moan slightly.

"Only if you fuck me."

"Oh yeah," he breathed. "Yeah. Matt? Matt?"

"What, baby?"

"You can tell me anything, you know."

"I know. I've felt that since I first met you. It was chemical I guess. I felt your heat through the computer. I knew you'd be hot. I knew you'd look this good...feel...take off your clothes, Thomas."

Thomas stood there in the middle of this huge room. There was a bed a few feet away. He took off his clothes, his gaze moving to the billowing curtains. He saw his silhouette on the wall, a young man, with beautiful muscles flexing, an obvious erection, waiting for his mouth, his lips.

"Thomas?"

"Um." He moved his fingers over taunt flesh, nipples glistening with his saliva, cock straining, slick head brushing his lower lip. He licked the stickiness, dipped the tip of his tongue in the slit to taste him deeper.

Fuck me, take me. Thomas. I need you. Please.

Yes. Ummm....ahhhh....yes.

"Thomas. Thomas?"

His eyes snapped open. "Oh God." He looked up into Steve's bloodshot eyes.

"I got to go. I got the early shift at the coffee shop today," he headed for the door. "I must have fallen asleep here last night. Boy, were we drunk."

He said goodbye and was gone.

Thomas moaned. He reached his fingers out across the sofa. There was no one to touch. "Matt."

It had seemed so real. Tears came to his eyes. It was too damn real. He cleared his throat, sat up and put his face in his hands. He had to get a grip.

He got up, made some coffee and then sat down and tried to write. He gave up after an hour and went onto his Yahoo group. Matt had been on there promoting his upcoming book. Thomas took some time to comment on the excerpt saying it sounded like an interesting read. Right after, Matt replied, thanking him. A few readers started talking back and forth about different books they had read and enjoyed in male-male romance, but Matt stayed silent. Maybe he'd gone. A few minutes later, Matt sent him an instant message.

Hey, Rosie. How's it going?

Tried to write. No luck. You?

I drank too much last night.

LOL. Me, too. Hangover?

No. I don't get those.

Did you get lucky?

Actually, yes.

Thomas stared at the words. Matt had slept with someone last night. Shit. A new boyfriend maybe. He should be happy for him. After all, he had no right to be jealous. *Was he cute?*

He was hung like a horse. LOL. If I get too graphic, haul me in.

No worries. You know what I write.

LOL. Yeah. Well, he was equipped and ready. I needed to let off some steam.

You were careful.

Of course.

You going to see him again?

He just moved in upstairs so I can't help it. But I don't know if I'm going to make it with him again. We connected

in bed, but not out.

Oh. You mean like you do with me?

Yes. Now if you were a guy. I could imagine we'd have some great sex.

Do you?

Do I what?

Imagine us having sex?

Of course not. You're a girl. LOL. If you forgot already, I like cock, remember?

I know. I know. I'm only kidding. So, does this guy want to see you again?

I don't know. Maybe. He said I was a good lay. Wink

You're incorrigible.

You bring it out in me, Rosie. So tell me about your night?

Nothing to report. Came back here with a friend and we fell asleep.

Male friend?

Yeah.

Was he cute?

He's okay. He's like a brother.

Oh, those friends. We love them, but to a point.

Yep.

So, next weekend the talk starts at two.

I'll be there.

Got to go, honey.

Okay. Bye, Matt.

Thomas brought up the file for Matt's book and began to read it again. If he couldn't have him, at least he could listen to his voice. And it was Matt's voice speaking to him in those lines, his thoughts, his experiences and when Bertrand pumped his lust into Samuel, Thomas pumped his own into his hand.

"I love you so much, Bertrand," Samuel held him close, his heart beating next to his. "But we can never be together. We are worlds apart. And we're involved with other men."

Bertrand kissed his hair and looked deeply into his eyes. "If we love hard enough, Samuel, anything is possible. I won't give up on you. And I can't stop loving you. I'll always love you."

"I'll always love you, Matt," Thomas whispered. "Always."

When the phone rang at eleven o'clock that evening, it woke Thomas out of a dead sleep. He picked it up clumsily. "Yeah?"

"Thomas, it's Sandra."

"Oh, shit, the edits. I'm sorry, Sandra, I've been on the moon lately."

"Honey, never mind that. I just got a call from a major movie network. They want to make a movie out of *Last Chance*."

Thomas gripped the phone. "What?"

"You heard me. Honey, you've made it. I want you to come out here and be in on the negotiations. They are waiting for word from you and then everything is a go. Then, you're coming with me to the Exotic Romance Convention. I'll pay everything."

"Sure, you can afford to now. Man, this is not registering."

"It will. And, sweetie, you can come out as a man. I'm going to make a big production out of it, meet the real Rosie Carter. And everyone will see you're a guy and—"

"Ah wait, Sandra, I—"

"I won't take no for an answer. Mum is the word until the conference, okay? As for the movie, you can shout that from the rooftops. I've already posted it to the groups. Call me and tell me when you're coming. I'll meet you at the airport. Hurry. Bye."

Thomas sank down in his chair. *Movie*? He went to the computer. Everyone was congratulating him all over the place. His head was spinning. He checked his email. There was a letter from some legal office on behalf of the people offering him a movie contract. He sat staring at it for a long time. When his private messages started going crazy, he turned it off. He called his parents and told them the news. They were excited. Then he called his friends. Finally, at three in the morning he went back to the

computer. There was a single message from Matt. He opened it.

Rosie,

I'm so very happy for you.

Congratulations. You deserve it. Can't wait to talk. I'll understand if you can't make my chat. Oh, and I think it might work out with the neighbor. We had a great talk today. I'll tell you more later.

Matt

Thomas' heart sank. He was going to write back that he had a surprise for him, maybe one he'd like and that he... he what? Loved him? No, that was insane. Instead, he wrote—

Matt,

Thank you. I will be at your chat as planned.

See you, Rosie

"Why don't you tell him now?" Sandra asked as Thomas opened up his laptop, prepared to make his appearance at Matt's chat.

"Yes. It doesn't make any sense. I've never even seen the guy. How can you fall for someone over the internet?"

[&]quot;I can't."

[&]quot;Why not?" Sandra handed him a cold glass of ice tea.

[&]quot;He's got a new boyfriend."

[&]quot;You really like him for real, don't you?"

"You connected."

"Yeah. And he thinks of me as his sister, of all things." Thomas wrote. *Hi, Matt, and everyone. I'm Rosie Carter.* Matt went about introducing him and Sandra settled down beside him.

I'm sitting beside Sandra Wells, publisher of Romance Esquire. She says hello.

Matt wrote that Thomas had a movie offer from his latest book and asked Thomas to talk about that. Thomas wrote a few of the most important things. People asked questions and he answered.

"Sandra, is Matt going to be at the convention?" Thomas asked, waiting for more questions to come up.

"I don't know. He hasn't said. He works in an office doing administrative work and he told me last time I spoke to him that he wasn't sure he could get the time off. Sorry."

Thomas shrugged. "Does he know I'm...Rosie is going?" "I don't know. Has he asked you?"

"He mentioned it a few times a long time ago, but just in passing. At the time, I said no because you didn't want me to blow my cover."

She nodded.

Finally, the talk began to wind down. Matt came up on his instant messaging.

Thanks, sweetie.

My pleasure, handsome. So, are you going to the conference?

I doubt it. The way it looks now, no. But if things change, maybe. It will be a last minute thing. Hey, I got a lot of new people on my group.

Good.

Are you going?

Yes.

Damn. I'd love to see you, Rosie, give you a big hug.

That's not all I'd like to give you. Yeah, same here.

Say hi to Sandra.

Will do.

"Tell him his latest book is doing well," Sandra said.

Sandra says your book is doing well.

Yahoo. That's good news.

How's the boyfriend?

Will you walk me down the aisle?

Thomas winced. Moving a little fast, aren't we? You've only fucked him what...once...twice? He must be damn good!

Rose? I'm joking. You sound miffed.

Not. No worries. Got to go.

Thomas closed down his private message system. "Thomas, are you all right?" Sandra asked.

Thomas slammed down the laptop cover hard enough to break it. "I'm fine. Damn it." He shook his head.

"What?"

"I didn't stand a chance. I'm here and that fucking neighbor is right upstairs and not someone he thinks is his goddamned sister. I'm going for a walk."

"Maybe you'll see him at the conference and—"

"It's too late. And besides, he's not coming," Thomas said, heading for the door. "I need to get my head examined. It makes no sense to be jealous over Matt Malone. He's a fantasy. That's all. Just a fantasy."

Later that night, Thomas lay in Sandra's recreation room in the basement with his e-reader. He'd read Matt's book three times now, but somehow it brought him peace to read it again. He vowed that this was the last time. He needed to read the part where Bertrand was leaving with his boyfriend. Samuel was hurting bad, watching him with another guy, knowing he could never have him, never hold him again.

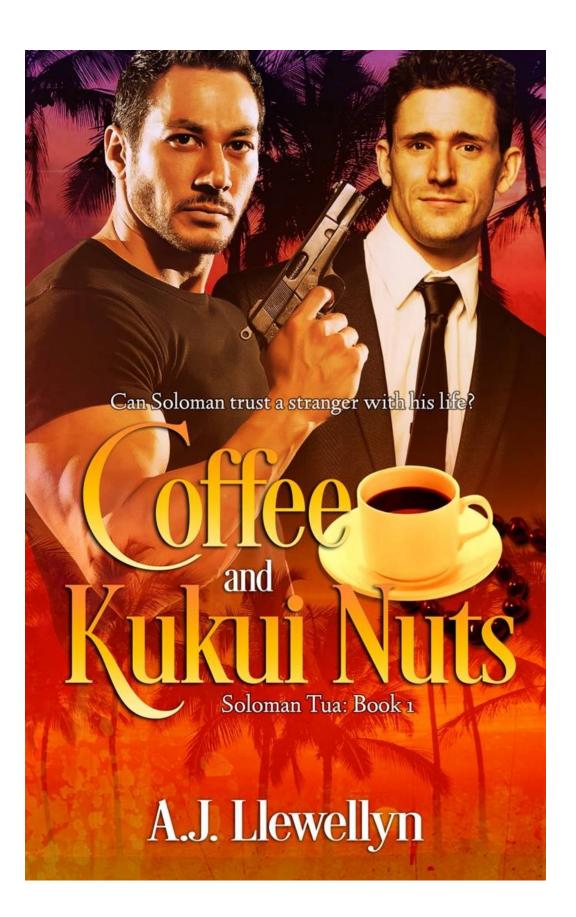
He wished they'd never touched, never connected like that. He could still feel his hands on his flesh, taste his kiss in his mouth. Now someone else would hold him in his arms.

Tears ran down Thomas' face. It was better if he didn't go out of his way to connect with Matt anymore. He wiped at his cheeks, put down the e-reader. He should be walking on air right about now, but he wasn't. He closed his eyes and imagined that Matt was here with him, sharing this. He turned on the pillow and looked into his eyes.

"I need you," Thomas said aloud, "a lover, a friend for the

rest of my life. I feel so close to you."

No one answered. Matt was far away, probably lying next to some other guy.



COFFEE AND KUKUI NUTS

(Solomon Tua Series, Book #1)

Maui-based police arson investigator, Solomon Tua, known mostly as just Tua, looks forward to a day trip on the island of Oahu. He's helping his sister Meleny taste-test wedding cakes. Tua loves cake almost as much as malasadas, but something deadly interrupts their plans for butter cream and spongy goodness. A bomb.

Tua unwittingly uncovers a near-fatal plot in a marriage gone awry and soon becomes the target of not one but two hit men. He now requires round-the-clock protection from a U.S. Marshal. But not only is Tony McCracken skinny and shorter than the big Samoan detective, but Tua doesn't need protection.

Well, that's until McCracken saves his life in a spectacular way, when one of the bad guys finds him. What started as a fun, family day becomes a nightmare, and Tua must trust a stranger with his life. Can he? Or is he in big, bad, Hawaiian trouble? Will he live long enough to walk his sister down the flower-strewn, tapa-carpeted aisle, or is there worse to come?

CHAPTER 1

"Will you look at that chick? Look at those legs!" Meleny said as Tua tried to squeeze his spanky-new but cramped rental VW Beetle into the only remaining parking spot in the narrow alleyway that fronted the businesses. He'd mistakenly clicked the "compact" option when he'd booked the vehicle back on Maui, but who'd have thought he'd be unable to upgrade once he landed on Oahu?

Tua couldn't help noticing the elegant woman Meleny mentioned in her classy business suit. He needed her to close her car door so he could park, but she was immersed in a tense cell phone conversation. Tua was local. He wouldn't honk. She seemed out of place in the dingy stretch of blacktop that serviced a restaurant, wedding cake shop, and a beat-up looking printing business.

When he'd initially swung off the freeway exit on King Street, Tua had detected the unmistakable smell of baking bread, and his mouth had watered. The stress of taking a day off work in Maui to island-hop for Meleny's sake, soon melted away until Tua realized the aroma was not from the cake store but Love's Bakery. That place was much more his speed, and like him, was big and took up a lot of space, the entire first corner of the street, in fact.

"Are you sure this it, Mel?" He squinted at the dark windows of Tiers of Bliss at the entrance of the store. His eyes adjusted to the sudden glare of the huge, fake diamond ring dangling from the store's shingle in the bright morning sun. The weather had changed four times since he'd picked up his sister twenty minutes ago. It had been sunny when he landed at the airport, raining like mad up in the Manoa Valley where she lived, then overcast. Now the sun shone again, but maybe not for long. A fat raindrop landed on his windshield.

Meleny hopped up and down in the passenger seat beside him as he waited for the blonde. He followed his sister's gaze. Her stare was fixed on the blonde, who still chatted on her phone as she closed the door to the gleaming black BMW beside them.

Tua took in the woman's long, gorgeous, coltish legs and confident gait. "Yeah, she's beautiful," he said, jutting forward and angling the VW beside her. He switched off the ignition and blew out a breath.

Meleny rolled her eyes. "No, I didn't mean her. Look at the shoes. They're Jimmy Choo." Her voice cracked. "I love them, Tua."

He was about to tell her she needed to calm down and focus on more important matters, but probably to her, shoes were crucial. Her wedding preparations were in full swing, and they'd turned into a nightmare.

He got out of the VW, dropped his favorite Maui Jim sunglasses into the breast pocket of his aloha shirt, and checked the time. Eleven-forty-eight. They were almost twenty minutes late for her taste-testing expedition. Funny how they were here for cakes, but on this warm summer day, all he could smell now was spicy sausage from the Filipino *chicharon* next door.

The blonde shrieked into her phone, "What do you mean he's gone?" She pushed open the shop door, and without holding it for them, stepped inside. Tua grabbed it before it could smack Meleny in the face.

Tua let the pleasant scent of butter cream fill his senses. He licked his lips, following Meleny into the tiny shop. Meleny was so obsessed with the blonde's fancy shoes that she tripped, almost colliding with the woman who wore them.

"Sorry," Tua said, his glance connecting with hers as he grabbed Meleny and stopped her from falling on her ass. The woman turned, giving them a quick, cold smile, then breezed past them toward a group of women to his left, who were already clustered around a round table.

A store clerk came over to Tua and Meleny. "May I help you?"

Tua was a little put off by her tone and sweeping headto-toe glance. What, did they look like they didn't belong here?

"Sorry I'm late," the blonde said to her friends. "Traffic was bad, and I had a lot of trouble finding the place." A beat. "I see you've started without me." She tossed her

hair back, trying to hide her annoyance as the other three women flushed guiltily at her.

"Amy, I'm sorry, but it looked so good we had to try it," one of them said, holding a plate toward her with a hunk of white cake on it.

"I'm Meleny Tua." She smiled at the sales clerk, threading her arm through Tua's, her attention off the shoes and back on the real reason they were here.

"Ah! The Tua/Guerrero wedding." The clerk smiled then. "We've been expecting you. And is this the lucky groom?"

Meleny gave a tinkly laugh. Tua recognized it as her nervous-with-strangers laugh. His sister was a beautiful, accomplished young woman who came off so strong and secure, but she was a cream puff.

Why did I have to go and think of cream puffs? Now I wanna eat everything in sight. Say, are those women gonna finish those cakes?

Another piece came out covered in chocolate and nuts. It smelled so good. He allowed his gaze to follow its path to the chattering women. So near, and yet so far. *Is there such a thing as a malasada-flavored wedding cake? I must ask.* Meleny trembled slightly as she leaned into him. He released himself from her grip and put a steadying arm around her. Tua knew how stressful the past week had been for her.

"No. This is my big brother, Tua." Meleny glanced up at him, a gleam of pride in her eyes. "He just flew all the way here from Maui to help me taste-test my wedding cakes."

"What a wonderful brother," the saleswoman said.

"Nah. I just love cake." Tua rubbed his stomach with his free hand, making the clerk and a few of the other women in the store laugh.

The clerk's happy smile faltered. "Does that mean your fiancé can't make it here today, Meleny?"

"No. I'm sorry." Meleny sighed. "But he trusts our taste." She beamed at the clerk. "Mine and Tua's." She'd rescheduled the cake tasting three times. Oswaldo was a busy guy. He worked up at the Kaneohe Marine base and had been unable to get away. Again. With the wedding two months away, Meleny wanted to order the cakes today so that she could focus on other tasks.

The clerk consulted a clipboard. "Okay, then I just wanted to double check. I was certain it was a mistake, but Jenny insists that you want thirty individual three-tiered cakes. Is that correct? Or did you mean three?"

Tua became aware of the shocked silence from the table with the blonde and her friends. They'd all stopped eating and talking.

"No, thirty is right," Meleny said. She swallowed, her throat perhaps a little dry.

Tua took over. "We're Samoans. It's a big wedding. We're expecting eight-hundred people. Maybe more." He'd only learned of the head count that morning and suspected this was why Oswaldo was hiding behind his pots and pans in Kaneohe. He was the head chef there, but wedding cakes terrified him. Poor Meleny had freaked, and Tua had stepped in. With all that a huge, traditional Samoan wedding entailed, she needed to focus on the trickier aspects of her planning, namely the *oloa*. He groaned inwardly. *Man, the oloa*.

The clerk looked wide-eyed. "Goodness! Well, let's get started then."

She ushered Tua and Meleny to a table to the right, opposite the women, and near the double glass doors. Abruptly, the blonde with the great legs and fantastic shoes, sprang from her seat and nearly knocked Meleny over as she called over her shoulder to her friends.

"I'm going to take this outside." She had a stressed look

on her face as she held her cell phone to her ear and left the store.

Tua held Meleny's chair out for her and was about to take the seat opposite when the gossiping started at the other table.

"She gives new meaning to frequent flyer," one of the ladies whispered.

Wow. What a treacherous friend.

Her voice echoed in Tua's soul. He wasn't supposed to hear those words, so he tried to ignore them. He was here with one mission, to help Meleny pick out tasty cakes. Easy peasy. That was a job Tua could handle. He adored wedding cake. Almost as much as malasadas. But even as the clerk left them and returned with a trio of mini three-tiered cake styles for Tua and Meleny to sample, he couldn't help tuning into the conversation at the other table.

"I told you she wouldn't sit still for five minutes," the woman continued.

Another one said, "I know. It's all about her, but I had to invite her after you posted it all over Facebook!"

Tua glanced at the woman stuffing her face with ruby red cake and matching icing. She caught Tua's gaze and narrowed her eyes. He looked away again and tried to act excited for Meleny, who clapped her hands together as the clerk explained the sample cakes.

"The white cake with the pale green leaves is the coconut cake with lime mousse icing. That was the one your fiancé wanted to try." She pointed to the next cake, but Tua became distracted when a huge delivery truck trundled through the alleyway.

What the... The driver almost collided with the back of both his rental car and the blonde's. She was pacing out front as she talked into her cell phone and paused to glare in the truck driver's direction.

Tua was about to go outside when the driver seemed to stall.

"Sit down and taste them, Tua." Meleny moved the tray to a sunnier spot on the round, wrought-iron table in front of her. She snapped a couple of shots he knew would wind up on Instagram, and he tried not to feel uncomfortable.

It had caused a few ripples back on Maui that Meleny didn't want the services of Fantasia Taumamua, his cousin (and police station buddy) Loto's wife. Fantasia was a lovely, competent karate instructor—for law enforcement—and kick-ass, weekend caterer whose specialty was baby luaus and afternoon dress up teas for little girls. It had caused a lot of hurt feelings because Fantasia had planned Tua's former partner, and good friend, Mimi Porter's wedding.

"Wasn't my wedding gorgeous?" Mimi had asked Tua, which was about as deeply involved as Mimi would get in girly matters.

"Yes, Mrs. Manuia," he'd said. Tua always called her that, and Mimi had laughed. She and her husband were both Maui detectives, and he always envied their ability to blend passion and police work. "But this is a Samoan wedding and it comes with strict rules. The bride and her family are supposed to do everything. You and Kimo, and Fantasia and Loto, and everybody else is supposed to just come and eat cake. And all the other stuff we're gonna have, too."

"Poor Meleny." Mimi got it, but her partner, Loto, had taken Meleny's decision even harder than Fantasia. Tua had explained to them that Meleny wanted an authentic Samoan wedding. These were time-consuming, thankless events.

"You don't know what she's had to go through," Tua had

said in her defense.

"And what? A regular wedding isn't?" Loto had fumed. "Don't you know they're all days from hell?"

The preparations would have fallen to their mom, but she and their dad had been in New Zealand for three months to care for their mom's ailing sister. They wanted the wedding plans to move forward. She kept promising they'd all be here for the big day. Dad wanted to be left alone on his sister-in-law's La-Z-Boy to binge-watch old episodes of *Star Trek* and its numerous spinoffs. The customary planning fell to Meleny, and now to Tua, who was more comfortable hunting for incendiary or explosive devices at crime scenes than selecting flowers, napkins, and appropriate wedding favors.

Oh, and the oloa. Don't forget the oloa. That little custom of gathering a dowry for his sister would ruin him financially. He longed to take a seat and bite into the awesome-looking cake. Except the beautiful blonde was still being discussed in hushed tones as she continued to pace outside, looking agitated in her uptight, uptown, pencil-slim black skirt and matching jacket.

He knew very few women who dressed like that in the islands. She was either a *malihini*, a newcomer, or she was some big mucky-muck. The closest Tua got to formal wear was jeans with no holes in them and a good, classic aloha shirt, like the one he wore now. Only one button was loose, and that was because he'd kept pulling at it on the flight over here.

The blonde threw a distressed glance toward the store, and he sensed she didn't want to be in there, or outside. She closed her eyes and seemed to sigh as somebody kept nattering in her ear.

Meleny giddily sliced into one of the cakes and took a selfie as she sampled it. In her awkwardness, the fork went to her nose leaving a dot of butter cream on the tip. She laughed, and Tua snapped off a photo with his camera phone.

"Oh, no you don't. Let me look at that," she said, her eyes sparkling.

Tua let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding. He flashed back to the first time he'd taken her swimming in the small brook at the back of their parents' Manoa Valley home. She had been two, Tua, seven. Meleny had been the surprise child of his parents. He still remembered the gigantic double rainbow that had shot up out of the sky that day, and the way she'd reached her arms up to touch it. The arcing colors still touched his soul, and then there was the moment the majestic, mysterious *pueo, a* Hawaiian owl, appeared on the branches of the lush kukui nut tree beside them.

He'd known in that moment that Meleny was a special girl. Owls and rainbows were the treasured companions of Kahala-o-Puna, the valley's ancient, ruling goddess. Tua was awed by his sister's otherworldly goodness and spiritual protection. He also knew even at his own tender age that he would protect her rainbow and he'd do anything for her.

Even beg favors to try out wedding cakes. He tried not to think of the upcoming trips they would have to take and the bizarre collections of gifts he'd have to amass, and somehow pay for. Spears, clubs, nets. Maybe I should raid our precinct's lost and found...

Cake. Just think about cake. Delicious cake. Tiers of Bliss was doing brisk business for a place that had been difficult to find. It had been a few blocks down on the left from Love's, and he'd found it after circling back three times, almost at the end of a decrepit-looking alley of the street's industrial section.

Tua took the plate his sister handed him. She'd carved a huge chunk of cake and the unmistakable tang of banana wafted under his nose.

"This is the Bananas Foster," she said. "Dad's favorite. The butter cream frosting is a blend of banana and caramel."

Tua took a seat on one of the wrought iron chairs but an ominous creak lifted him to his feet, and that's when he saw it.

The blonde came back inside, gripping her cell phone, her face a mask of anguish. Tua felt a pang of sympathy for her. I wonder what the heck is going on?

Meleny whispered, "Tua, look."

I'm looking, I'm looking. The woman might have been upset, but she was still stunning. Tua couldn't tear his gaze from the long, luscious legs in their three-inch black satin pumps. Her skin was lightly tanned, her legs toned and gorgeous. There was a sheen to them, too. He hadn't noticed it earlier.

Meleny mooned over the shoes once more as the blonde trotted past them. "Those heels have real Swarovski crystals on them." Her voice quavered with emotion. "Look at the little ornament on the back of the ankle. Have you ever seen anything so darling? I'd love to have shoes like that for my wedding."

"How much do they cost?" Tua wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

"Sixteen-hundred bucks a pair."

Tua almost choked, ignoring her pleading glance. She still lived in the family house up in Manoa and could barely cover her expenses as it was. As far as he was concerned, Oswaldo could dress her up in anything he wanted on his dime, once the wedding was over. Fork in hand, his gaze fell on a tall, dark-haired man wearing a gray suit, standing

outside in the alleyway. He hovered against the far wall, holding a cell phone to his ear. He seemed nervous. Something wasn't right. The blonde had rejoined the table with her gossipy friends and let out a loud sigh.

"James is making my life hell," she complained.

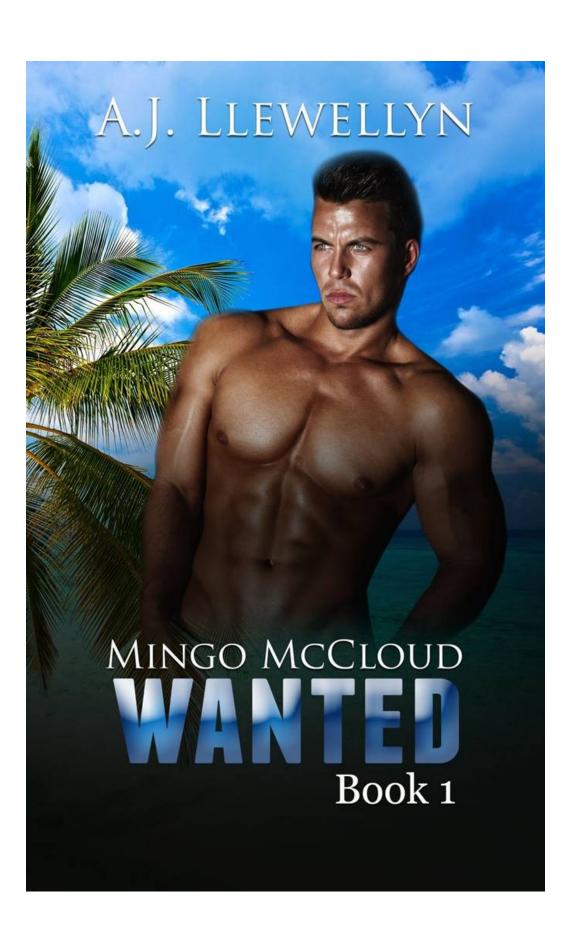
Tua caught snatches of conversation. Therapy was mentioned. So was, "You need to call your attorney."

The blonde retorted, "Who do you think I was talking to?"

Tua forked the cake and tried it, but for some reason, there was no taste. He noticed the man outside pacing behind Tua's rental, then the blonde's car. Tua gaped when he realized the man wore skin-tone latex gloves. He moved so fast, he was lucky to have caught it. Reaching into his jacket, the man drew out a red-tipped slim Jim, slid it into the window frame, popped the lock, then dropped a square-looking black object into the back of the vehicle. He closed the door and with a quick glance back at the cake store, strode away from the BMW.

Tua almost thought he'd imagined it, but he knew he hadn't. The guy was a pro. Fifteen seconds, tops. The cake stuck to the roof of Tua's mouth. What on earth...? What had he put inside the car? Tua's senses flared, his mouth grew hot. He tried to swallow. No. It couldn't be.

Bomb.



WANTED

(Mingo McCloud Series, #1)

Honolulu forensic accountant Mingo McCloud's lover has cheated on him again. To escape his heartbreak, a severely depressed Mingo moves to the North Shore of Oahu. Eager to start a new life and to forget, Mingo soon learns that Turtle Bay might be the home of big surf, but it also has even bigger secrets. He catches the eye of a mysterious stranger, Jason, a sexy lone wolf with a troubled, sketchy past. The two become embroiled in a tempestuous love affair that turns dangerous when Mingo discovers Jason is spying on him.

Involved in his first big murder case, Mingo needs all his emotional resources to help find a missing young housewife...yet his private life just turned deadly. He has no idea why Jason would be tracking his every move—or even who hired him. Determined to find the truth, he hires big black, bad French former mercenary, Francois, to help him...and discovers shocking truths...Mingo McCloud has gone from wanting to wanted.

CHAPTER 1

He was mine for the taking. Standing in line on that sultry morning at Ted's Bakery in Sunset Beach, I knew I could have him. He was hot. There was something in his gaze, a secret, furtive pain. A restlessness...

Our eyes met. He was standing two feet away from me and I knew, just knew I could follow him home and get naked in less than a minute with him. I took it all in, the pale blue T-shirt, the tight jeans, very closely cropped, almost shaved hair, the wiry, muscular body. He was around five ten, white, with a dash of some kind of ethnic race, and I put him at his mid-thirties. I glanced away again, and by the time I looked back, he'd gone. I breathed

a sigh of relief. Yeah, I was lonely...so lonely and beyond horny. Six weeks since Kaolin and I had broken up. My stomach clenched at the thought of him. After everything, everything we'd been through, and Kaolin had used and abused me. *Again*.

It had been a shocking adjustment, getting over all the time we'd spent together. I thought it had been perfect, sublime. We'd made love constantly; we'd made each other laugh... I still wanted to shout out funny things I'd read to him, still found myself hoping for, then dreading a call. I still reached out for him in my sleep. No, another complication with a probably heartless bastard was not what I needed.

I ordered two cups of coffee, half a dozen *malasadas* and, eyeing the macadamia nut cream pies in the frosty, cold fridge, I bought one of those, too.

"Eh, Mingo." Soosie, the old lady who baked the pies, inclined her head and I sidled to the far counter. "Give me that." She took the pie from my hands and pressed another one into them, whispering, "Very fresh."

"Thank you, Soosie."

"Anything for my favorite guy, Mingo."

I had no idea how I got to be her favorite guy in just six weeks, but I kinda liked it. My mother had met some military guy from the base up in *Kaneohe* and he'd convinced her to move to San Diego, California, with him when he was transferred out. Without telling me, she sold the family house, got rid of almost everything and, in daily emails to me, was lamenting her rash decision.

There wasn't much for me in *Waikiki* without her...or Kaolin. I went to my office on McCully as little as possible. All my mail went to the condo I was now renting and all my business could be handled by phone, fax, and email.

So it felt nice to be somebody's favorite guy, even if it

was an elderly woman.

When I walked outside into the bright sunlight, the guy I'd spotted in the bakery was gone. I dropped my parcel into the passenger seat of my island Moke. Six weeks I'd been living on the North Shore of Oahu and I'd changed everything, even my damned car.

"Hey."

Turning around, I saw it was him. He gave me a slow, sexy smile, walking with a swagger toward me. All he had was a large cup of coffee. He wasn't local, I knew that from the crisp, new-looking jeans and heavy-duty walking boots.

"Wanna ride?" I dropped my two cups of coffee into the holders in front, transferring the paper sack with the pie and donuts into the narrow space behind the front seat.

"Sure." He eased in beside me, his wary sexuality a major turn on, but also a complete head trip now that he was sitting right next to me. His air of danger was thinly veiled. He was chewing gum. I wanted to take it out of his mouth with my tongue. I mentally shook my head. *Quit it, Mingo. You're just too damned horny.*

"Where do you live?"

He was about to point in one direction, then pointed back the other way. He wasn't only not local, he was a total newbie.

We drove about a mile toward Turtle Bay and he pointed to the right. "Over here." I immediately veered off the road, startling some red hens that had hopped over the slats in a fence and were pecking at the gravel on the shoulder of Kamehameha Highway. He smiled. I could almost read his thoughts. *You're anxious*.

He walked through a high wooden gate and I saw a jumble of houses in varying stages of habitability, but all of them bordering on decrepit. Typical North Shore, I thought. Crappy houses with a drop dead, friggin' *gorgeous* view of

the untamed shoreline. I followed his fine, muscular ass down a path overgrown with wild thyme. The scent was invigorating. He opened a white door on the side of a house to our left and I entered behind him.

I smelled lemon furniture polish and...some sort of tropical smell. I glanced around. He'd slathered on underarm deodorant before he walked out for his morning coffee. Moving behind me to close the door, I caught his appraising glance and I knew several things about him. He was not organically gay. He, too, was horny and had figured out it was easier to get laid by a gay guy. Ah geez, why did I always attract the straight guys?

He caught my gaze and quickly looked away. I knew so much in that moment and when I saw the unbearable neatness of his small room with no view of the ocean, I felt his despair and knew I should leave. I'd just been hit by Kaolin, the human Mack truck. I still had tire marks running down my heart. What the hell was I doing here?

There was a perfectly made bed tucked in the corner. A single bed for a single man. Either he had been in the military, or prison. I couldn't decide which. He had a TV on a dining chair, small kitchenette, a dining table with the remaining chair and a big wing chair off to the side.

We stared at each other for a moment. I had to make the first move. I stepped toward him and felt his hesitation until my mouth went to his. He accepted my tongue, though he was resistant at first to the kiss. He let me kiss him and soon, was responding with eagerness. We were both surprised. I knew how hot this was, how good this felt and how good we both tasted.

He held my face in his hands. They were strong hands, fingertips rough, and I ached to feel them on my cock and balls. I took my mouth away from his and his tongue was still protruding when I moved away from his face. He was

glassy eyed as I lifted the T-shirt to find what I knew would be there. Perfectly chiseled abs, a sprinkling of hair on the upper torso, and my hands moved over him as he took the T-shirt himself and whipped it over his head. His nipples stared at me invitingly and I gave them passing attention with my tongue. I was too eager for the main course.

"Take your boots off," I instructed and he tried kicking them off as I unbuttoned the top of his jeans. I saw the Calvin Klein waistband of his underpants and then I lost total control. I slid down the zipper and cupped his perfect, tight ass in my hands as I held him to me. I found his mouth waiting for me. I wanted to spoil him, make him want more. I wanted him to crave men, to crave me, and I shucked down his jeans and underpants, savoring that raging erection just before I released that surprisingly thick, long cock. He was uncut.

I fell in love on the spot. Kneeling before him, I took his cock straight into my mouth and sucked as I frantically undid the ten million laces on those boots. He sighed with abandon as he kicked off the boots and pulled off his pants. His mouth fell into a happy O, and I glanced up to see that he was watching me enjoy my unexpected morning feast. I sucked him the way Kaolin loved me to suck him. I swallowed him, pulled back and all the way off him, plunging back down again. His cock bounced eagerly to be back in my mouth each time I came off him. He was making little sounds...he did *not* want to beg me for it. He was too proud for that. He just made little primal noises, an instinct in all men for that safe, sexual burial in a hot, warm mouth.

Sucking his cock was as much a pleasure for me as it was for him. I took my mouth off him and told him to get on the table.

"What?" The animal wariness was back now.

"Get up there," I barked and he obeyed me. He got up on the table, his cock still hard and I grabbed his feet, still encased in his socks.

"Lie back."

His ass was gorgeous. I knew one day I would fuck him, but for now, I wanted to give him the most outrageous pleasure I could muster. I stroked down on his rigid cock as he lay there looking at me and he waited to see what I would do. He wanted head again and, as I parted his thighs just a little bit wider, I leaned down and kissed him and he gave his mouth back to me. Just a little bit of tongue and I was back to his cock again. I sucked, pulled off, stroked down with my hand and he started to moan. I plunged back down over his cock, my tongue swirling over the head as I moved all the way down to the bass of his shaft. He gasped. I grabbed his balls and squeezed, stroking his perineum with my thumb.

"Oh, my God!" he screamed and came with a violent thrust into my mouth, his cock head almost choking me. But I adored this part, the feeling of a throbbing, coming cock inside me...any part of me. He stopped shuddering and twitching and lay on the table, imprisoned in my mouth, my thumb still stroking him. Perfect. He'd just had the perfect blow job.

I eased my mouth off him, his cock head purple and angry looking. Mmmm...I hadn't even begun to scratch the surface of keeping this colossal beast satisfied. I placed a kiss on the tip, pulling the foreskin back over the top because I knew from past experience this felt good to an uncut man who'd just come, and he twitched underneath me.

"Shit. That was fantastic." I knew he wanted me to suck him again, but I also knew leaving him wanting more was sublime torture. I stroked down on his cock again and it leapt at my touch. I ran a finger along his asshole, cupping his balls and his gaze stayed on me.

"Welcome to Hawaii." I grinned and he laughed. I reached up to kiss him again and he closed his eyes this time.

"Have an awesome day." I bent down, gave those now erect nipples a little bit more attention and was about to leave when he held me to him.

"I need to see you again."

"You will." I eased him back on the table and kissed him. He wound his legs around me and I knew that fucking him would be a privilege and a joy. His cock lay hard between us. *Christ, Mingo, what the hell are you doing?*

I dropped down and started suckling on him again and he thrashed underneath me, hissing, "Yes!" I held his cock in my hand and this time, licked his asshole, sucked his balls in one at a time and he went crazy when I sucked him off a second time. My right hand stayed at his ass, the thumb stroking insistently at his hole. When I slid it into him, his ass sucked it up and he came with the same violent force as he had the first time. God, I wanted to fuck him but I had to go slow.

"Oh...oh..." he kept moaning. I loved looking at the glistening head of that cock as it came out of my mouth. I tried not to think about it being in my ass. He lay there looking at me and I finally extracted my thumb from his ass.

"How long have you been out?" I asked him.

"Out?"

"Out of prison."

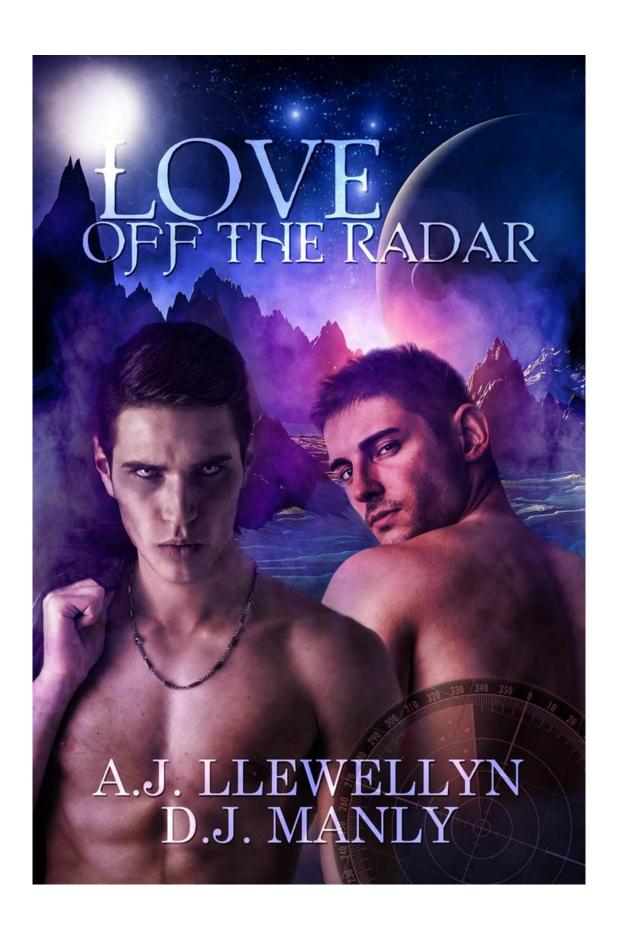
I thought he would run except he was pinned underneath me.

"Two weeks," he mumbled. He looked suddenly miserable. "How did you know?"

I shrugged. "It's cool, *brah*." I felt him relax then and I kissed him one more time. I prodded around his mouth for the gum he'd been chewing and found it wedged between two teeth and I extracted it with my tongue.

"Hey." He laughed. His thumb stroked my chin. "And they call *me* a thief."

I should have run for the hills, but I stayed for the hard kiss he put on my mouth and then I walked away. My balls were still heavy but I knew the next time I saw him, I would follow him back to the property of half dead houses and lay claim to the hot, emotionally half-dead man renting the small, lonely room at the side of that house overlooking Turtle Bay.



MOJO RISING

(Short story from Love Off The Radar, Otherworldly Tales)

On a South Seas island, a village chief finds unexpected love and a cure for a curse...in the arms of another man...

They said it was a ghost town. The two men in the double-hull canoe approached the sleepy emerald cove in the gray dawn and Tavae who paddled from the rear, waited, his paddles inches from the ocean water as the Great Chief Laki, sitting in front of him, held up his hand.

They heard nothing.

The canoe drifted to the edge of the white sandy beach and Tavae, who would never have admitted it, was glad they were finally on dry land.

Laki, a massive man who somehow always managed to run and hunt with swiftness and grace, stepped out onto the island, beckoning him.

Tavae, nearly twenty-four and deeply in love with his tribal chief, still couldn't believe his luck when he'd been chosen for the voyage.

Chief Laki was a magnificent specimen. Almost seven feet tall, he weighed three hundred pounds, but he was muscular, not fat. Married, with three tribal wives, betrothed to yet another, he had chosen Tavae, the promising young warrior from his village to find the only son he had sired. The son, Natalianou, had come to this island in the South Seas with his young bride.

"Do you hear anything?" Laki asked. For the first time, he showed a trace of fear.

Tavae shook his head.

Natalianou had come here six months ago. Neither he nor his bride been seen since. A Japanese whaler had offered to come here, in exchange for traditional tribal tattoos he had, in the end, been able to receive, thanks to the unbelievable pain associated with being inked by a pig's tooth. The whaler claimed he upheld his end of the bargain and had come to the island in search of the lost tribal prince.

"I hear nothing." Laki sighed. He had tried everything, hired a pilot, then another ship's captain. All repeated the same thing. It was a ghost town. The pain in his eyes, the grief etched in his face tore at Tavae who secured the canoe with a large white rock to the shore. He followed his chief up the side of the mountain.

A huge black and gold bird swooped high above them, its screech sounding like a steam train shooting across the sky.

"There is life." Laki's gaze followed the bird. "And yet, I feel desolation here."

In spite of his words, the fear left this sharp features and, with determination, Laki led the way.

"The good news is our noisy friend, the Hornbill tells us there is both fruit and water on the island."

Tavae marveled once again how focused and single-minded Chief Laki could be. They saw the faint outline of a building high up on a mountain slope, but not much more.

"This place feels like death," Laki suddenly said. He shook his head as if to loosen such ugly thoughts. "Come, Tavae, let's look."

Tavae followed his chief all the way to the top of the mountain.

After five days rocked at sea in winter storm-swollen waters, the long, long hike upcountry in a place neither

knew was not exactly restful.

They approached the house finally after a four-hour climb. They had run out of food three days before due to a particularly violent storm and had only sipped their remaining fresh water until they'd run out the day before. Tavae felt lightheaded as they approached the gaping front door to the house. He saw now that it was built of bamboo.

"I taught my son nothing." Laki said this to himself it seemed, since his words were so soft. He touched the exterior walls, his hands coming away white. The bamboo was already disintegrating. Tavae knew from all the elders taught him that bamboo also encouraged insects into the home. Frankly, he was surprised Natalianou had built something as sturdy as this shelter, then he felt guilty for thinking such negative things.

The Chief walked into the house, which had grass mats on the floor. There were two chairs made of stone and bamboo. In one corner was a long, low pallet, obviously used for sleeping, but only a threadbare piece of white material lay on it. In the corner on the floor lay a single canoe paddle. Laki picked it up and both knew by it's ornate, carved handle that it belonged to Natalianou. They investigated outside and found a small fireplace built of rocks. Laki nodded his approval over a series of flat rocks covering what was quite a large underground oven. They walked a little further and Tavae moaned when he saw pigweed.

Laki followed his gaze, stretched out a hand and tore off two clumps of the healthy looking bush. He handed one well-stocked branch to Tavae and both men sucked at the stems and leaves of the plant, gulping at the little sips of pure water they were able to eke out. They each tore off more branches and Tavae spied a coconut tree. He didn't think he had strength enough left to climb it, but saw the

expectation on Laki's face and remembered his place. He climbed the tree, ignoring the pain in his legs and shoulders.

He picked three young green coconuts, tossing them down to Laki and, when he landed back on the ground, Tavae used a small knife he'd kept hidden in the folds of his black and yellow lava-lava and punched holes between the eyes of each coconut. The men drank deeply and when the coconut water was gone, Laki, who drank the juice of two nuts, split all three, leaving them to dry in the sun for a future meal. He wore a yellow T-shirt over his lava-lava and he rubbed his belly.

Tavae knew the next thing the Chief would want was for his cock to be sucked.

Laki re-entered the house, Tavae following. He had both longed and feared for this time alone. He knew the Great Chief's body well, having serviced him for three years now. He wasn't the first young warrior, wouldn't be the last. The Great Chief sat in one of the stone chairs, which rocked under his weight, and his cock was already hardening against the fabric of his lava-lava.

"Attend me."

These were the two words the Chief always used and Tavae was ready. He didn't care that the Chief had not bathed for days...he loved Laki...no, Tavae's problem was that the longer they remained alone here, the harder it would be to hide his own excitement, the need for his own release. He knelt before the Chief, untying the fabric ends of the lava-lava like he was unwrapping a toy. There, like a freshly cut steak lay the huge, thick cock against the Chief's warm brown thigh. Laki sighed as Tavae took it in his hands, to feed it to his greedy mouth. For three years it had been like this. He had been trained to service the Chief as a means of earning his trust, of bonding with him.

He had fallen in love with the man who treated him kindly, sharing knowledge, giving him extra time in combat training and hunting. Tavae longed to do more than suck the Chief's cock. It had been his dearest wish to become the Chief's lover and he had been devastated to learn instead that Laki was taking yet another bride.

Within days of announcing his intentions, the Chief had set off for this faraway island...his loyal warrior at his side.

Tavae was surprised at the salty-sweet taste of the massive cock in his hands. Now that he thought of it, they'd consumed only vegetables, fruit and water on the voyage. He longed to drink a long, cool, glass of water. This is what he thought about as he brought the Chief fulfillment and the Chief, as always, smiled as his young charge brought him to his happy place quickly. It had been days since he'd been able to receive his gratification.

"You want it again?"

Before the Chief could respond, Tavae dipped his head and began the whole process of sucking and licking the royal cock again. The Chief rarely made a sound during their times together, except for the odd, joyous sigh. This time, he moaned...the sound so unusual yet so erotic to the young warrior on his knees that he actually moved his hand down to the Chief's balls and stroked them. Laki twitched at this unexpected contact, but did not otherwise resist. In fact, he seemed to part his legs a little bit more to give his attendant better access to him.

The Chief moaned. "Such pleasure..." He came hard and reached out one huge hand to hold Tavae's head to him. When at last the Chief stopped coming, Tavae knelt back on his haunches.

"I think you enjoy giving service to your Chief," Laki murmured.

"Very much." Tavae looked him right in the eye. He was

aware of a rush of heat to his own cock and wished he could jerk off quickly, but the Chief had other things on his mind.

"We need to find food and water. Young Tavae..." he reached out two fingers and ran them over the lips that had been so passionately secured to his cock only seconds before. "You invade my dreams. You and your hot mouth."

Tavae did mental and emotional back flips. He wished the Chief would one day fuck him, but knew this would probably never happen. He knew of no other man or woman currently who serviced the Chief as he did and wondered why he needed it with so many wives at his disposal. He only knew as he rose to his feet that he was glad he was the chosen one...

Outside, the sky broke open in shades of blue and pink and Laki once again took charge as they roamed the land surrounding the house. They found mountain apples, papaya, potatoes, limes and breadfruit. They collected the fruit and Tavae spotted the almond tree, gathering several of the oval-shaped adult nuts and bringing them to Laki who lined them up on the ground beside the oven and stove.

"We can cook these later," Laki said. The look in his eyes surprised Tavae who was certain Laki wanted head again. Laki opened his mouth and Tavae fell on his knees. This time, it was the Great Chief who opened the ends of the lava-lava, smiling as Tavae's mouth reached for the big cock slapping against his open lips.

"It is yours," Laki whispered, looking around furtively for a second before allowing himself the lust-filled sight of the young man kneeling before him, working his cock with experience and true desire.

Laki knew he was Tavae's first. It was Tavae's brother who serviced the Chief before the royal gaze fell on Tavae.

Their first time together had been on a hunting expedition in a tropical rainforest. The only thing Tavae caught was come. A lot of come. The Chief had an abundant appetite for sex...at least, for having his cock sucked. After their first time together, Tavae had replaced his brother and became the Chief's obsession.

The hornbill was back, soaring across the sky, startling them both so that the king's cock slipped out of Tavae's mouth. He grabbed onto it, sitting on the ground now and the Chief, watching him, also sat down, letting the young man work his charm. Tavae wanted to do things to the Chief and urged him to lie down. The Chief behaved as though he didn't hear. He merely thrust his hips up harder and, at the moment of his release, held Tavae's head to him. Laki laughed when Tavae's mouth came off him.

"You ever had a man fuck you?"

"No." Tavae swallowed hard. How he wanted the Chief to fuck him. Laki stared at him a moment and then stood, holding his hand down to his warrior.

"Let's explore." Wearing nothing but his T-shirt, the Chief led the way across the mountaintop, but after several hours, it became obvious they were alone. No human footprints...nobody hiding in the few caves they found.

They returned to the house and cooked dinner after the Chief made a fire in the underground oven. The two men ate the cooked nuts and fruits, drank more coconut water and the Chief retired to the house. It was the custom of their own island home that the Chief's warrior would sleep outside, but the Chief was, as Tavae's brother would have put it, in a mood.

He wanted to be serviced again and Tavae didn't mind. In fact, it took a while for the Chief to come since he'd come three times already that day, but he seemed to enjoy the special attention Laki gave his balls openly now. In

fact, the Chief reached down, took one of Laki's hands and placed it on his balls. When the Chief bellowed to an orgasm, the sound filled the night sky. Tavae did not stop. He squeezed Laki's balls, stroking the unexpectedly lovely space between the buttocks and the balls, making the Chief natter, "Oh that's good," over and over until he came again.

The Chief retired to the bedding on the floor, insisting Tavae remain in the house. In the middle of the night, Laki who slept curled up by the door, awoke to find the Chief had crawled over to him and he was untying the lava-lava at Tavae's waist. He was breathing heavily. For the first time, the Great Chief of their village studied the naked warrior who loved him, naked, in all his glory. He ran his hand over the strong, solid thighs, hardly daring to breathe, shocked to feel the Chief's hand on his cock.

Laki stroked the cock in his hand, his face immobile as Tavae bucked and moaned beneath him.

"Oh fuck me, your highness." Tavae moaned and, for the first time in his life, feared the Great Chief's wrath. The expression on Laki's face was unforgettable. Fury and lust mingled in those proud, ancient eyes, but he turned his favorite warrior onto his back and stared down at him... Tavae opened his legs, his cock hard against the Chief's heaving, solid belly.

Please, oh please fuck me.

The Chief too seemed in shock, but also wonderment that the young man writhing underneath him was prepared to give himself to him. He was kneeling between the hungry, open thighs, his body desiring the naked man within reach, but his mind clearly at war with the idea.

"I am yours," Tavae sighed. "Only yours."

The Chief arose and returned to the makeshift bed, wrapping his big arms around himself and closed his eyes.

It was a few hours later when the Chief returned, nudging him with a foot.

"I hear noises...we must look." He was wearing his T-shirt and lava-lava and, frozen with the need to sleep, Tavae rose to his knees.

The Chief looked down at him and with a cry, pushed Tavae to the ground again.

"Open your legs, open your legs!" he screamed and Tavae rolled to his back, both men struggling with the unfortunately well-tied ends of the fabric. Both became frenzied when the knots would not give way.

The Chief looked down at the ass just ready to be his, and gasping, pulled his cock from the folds and poked it at his warrior's ass.

"Oh, God forgive me." The Chief's cock paused at the entrance.

"Fuck me...oh, fuck me." Tavae clutched at his Chief whose cock entered him finally and the Great Chief grunted his relief. He tried to liberate his cock and did not stop pushing his way into Laki who worked desperately to get the cock out of the lava-lava. The Chief pushed and pulled. It took Tavae everything he had not to react to the pain of being fucked for the first time, but the pain was now subsiding and something else took over.

The Chief was lost in his romantic assault and Laki managed to release the Chief's body from the yards of fabric only at the last moment. And at that moment, the Chief stabbed Laki's ass hard and deep with his cock...his mouth falling open in a silent exclamation as he came... deep in Tavae's ass.

The two men breathed heavily, the Chief collapsing on him.

"I had no intention of fucking you," Laki said. "No intention at all. Did I hurt you?"

"A little...at first."

The Chief nodded. "I took your virginity."

"No, I gave it to you."

Laki smiled as he removed his cock from Tavae's ass. "Blood. You weren't lying at all."

Suddenly, blood came from the Chief's nose and fell on Tavae's face. It didn't stop. Tavae and the Chief tried everything. There was blood everywhere. Nothing staunched the tide. Outside, the blood, which oozed from both his nostrils, suddenly stopped. Tavae took all the clothes covered in their shared blood and washed them in the ocean. The Chief joined him, dragging their canoe a little further up the beach. His gaze fell on his favorite warrior now coming out of the water with their clean clothes.

"Leave them," the Chief said and Tavae dropped them. The Chief took him back into the cold water and this time, they frolicked together. The Chief held his favorite warrior in his arms and looked down at his face.

Tavae lifted his legs and wrapped them around the Chief's waist in the water. Laki went berserk, his rigid cock looking for the hole to fill.

Laki laughed as soon as he found it and Tavae fell back, arms outstretched as his Chief fucked him relentlessly. It hurt little out here in the ocean. The Chief grabbed the strong thighs from around his waist and put the legs up his torso, grabbing the manly ass in his hands now, just a little bit closer. He fucked Tavae, coming hard once again.

The two bodies separated and the two men stepped onto the shore.

Laki pulled the younger man to him, reaching around him so that Tavae's back was to his belly. His hand went down to the younger man's thick cock.

"You started something here, Tavae..." He did not stop

stroking Tavae's cock until he came.

All day it was like this between them. They hunted for food and water and then fucked. They retired to the house early and Tavae joined his chief in bed, sucking on his cock, until the Chief pushed him away...his nose was bleeding again. This time, blood seeped from his eyes and ears as well and Laki screamed at him.

"You have cursed me!"

"No, I haven't," he implored, but the Chief pushed him away. Tavae fell across the floor, grass matting coming apart. He stared. The floor.

The two men examined the stone under the matting, certain the stains they saw in the moonlight were old blood. The Great Chief bled harder now, sobbing as the life seemed to leave him.

"That idiot son of mine..." he moaned. "What did he do?" Tavae led him from the house and once again, the bleeding stopped. He cleaned and comforted his Chief and built a fire on the stove, allowing the Chief to fall asleep with his head on Tavae's lap.

At first light, they inspected the foundation of the house and both men knew that Natalianou had built his house on what he thought was an old stone base for an earlier house. In fact, he'd build his bamboo house on a sacred altar. He must have been killed by the gods for his crime. The two men spent the day tearing down the house, burning the bamboo walls, the bedding, everything, brushed salt water from the ocean, across the great slab of rock intended for sacrifice.

That evening, the Chief trembled as he bit into roasted breadfruit, fearful of the bleeding starting once again. But there was no blood. He kept his warrior at bay until first light and when the bleeding did not return, thanked Tavae for his help in appeasing the gods for his family's shame.

"And now I have my own shame," Laki said. "I love another man."

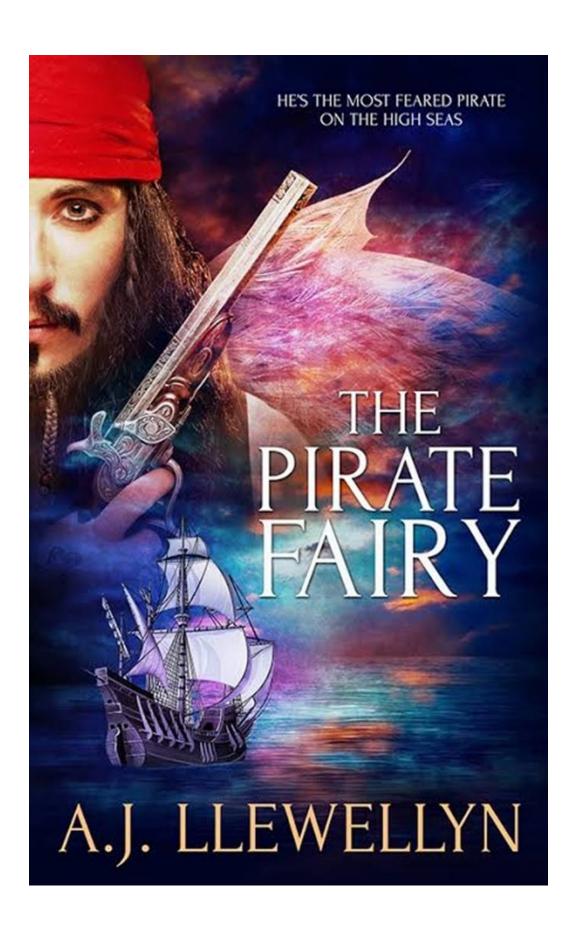
"There's no shame in that." Tavae shrugged.

The Great Chief closed his eyes.

"We will be as we have always been, except now, we both experience release...we give each other pleasure."

The Great Chief Laki turned his head toward the warrior who spoke these brave words. "I am honored you want me."

He held his hand out to Tavae who didn't hesitate to step into the Great Chief's arms. Tavae felt his dreams had come true, the extra prayer he had thrown to the gods had been answered. He had prayed for the Chief to give himself to love, the real mojo, the real power of this world. He prayed and would continue to pray that The Great Chief Laki would love him more and more...that their great love, like mojo rising, would bring them peace and pleasure no matter what the future held.



THE PIRATE FAIRY

Denny Derrick Dalton is the most feared pirate on the high seas, but he's not a bad guy. He's just having a very bad day...

It's 1841 and the high seas are a dangerous place for anybody. Denny Derrick Dalton's the most feared pirate in the choppy waters, but his risky reputation takes a hit when a wicked old witch curses him and gives him a pair of fairy wings. It's hard to boss your crew around when you look ridiculous. Not only that, he has no idea how to fly.

Denny's depressed. The witch, hiding as sweet Princess Fortunata, has left his ship and taken her brother, Prince Merritt, the man Derrick deeply loves, with her. Can his luck get any worse? Oh yes, it can. His crew mutinies and sells him to a slave ship.

But it's not just any slave ship. This one's bewitched, and Denny's soon taken to a magical court where he must explain his rotten behavior and fight for his life.

But can he save himself to rescue Merritt, who's at the mercy of his wicked sister's magic?

CHAPTER 1

1841. Somewhere on the high seas...

"Don't hurt me," the naked young man whimpered.

Denny kissed his captive's smooth cheek, inhaling his masculine fragrance. Denny detected a hint of soap beneath some kind of woodsy oil on his skin. The young man's fear spiced up the sheen on his muscles. He groaned as Denny squeezed his biceps.

"I'm not gay," the young man insisted.

Denny chuckled. "That's what they all say."

The young man bit his lip, but writhed toward Denny's probing fingers, not away from them, igniting Denny's passions anew. He ran his hand down the young man's face. A knocking sound came from somewhere, distracting

him.

Ignore it. They'll go away. He slid his hand across the young man's throat, letting his fingers pause to feel the quickened pulse. Denny kept moving down the smooth, taut torso. He couldn't resist handling the juicy, buoyant cock begging for his touch. He cuffed the young man's shaft with his fingers, trying to hold the blue-eyed gaze before him, but the knocking continued.

What's the use? It's just a dream anyway. I'll never get him back.

Prince Merritt.

Only in his dreams did Denny allow himself to utter his name. He still couldn't believe he'd lost his beloved prisoner. He rarely dreamed about Merritt anymore.

Even if I saw him again, he wouldn't want me the way I look now.

The knocking intensified.

Burrowing his head deeper under the covers, Denny fought to return to his twilight world, enjoying the temptations awaiting him there. And there they were. How wonderful. It hardly ever happened that he returned to the exact moment he'd been interrupted in a dream, but Merritt's smile drew him in once more. His blond-haired lover smiled, beckoning him. The bashing on his cabin door grew so loud the bed shook, wrestling Denny Derrick Dalton with a jolt from his sleep. So annoying, too, right in the middle of the good part about his captive prince chained up in stowage, and Denny about to shove his cock up Merritt's ass.

This had become his favorite dream, but one often denied him. One so real he could feel the excited prince's breath on his face, his feverish, whispered words, 'Please don't hurt me,' the very things that made Denny want to do wicked, wanton things to the tethered male beauty.

But the insistent rapping continued, and Denny had to come back to reality. And for the furious pirate captain of the La-Di-Da, reality wasn't so hot these days.

"Cap'n. Sir. There's a boat up ahead," came the timid voice from the other side of the door.

Denny stirred in his bed. Once again he'd made a mess of the bedding, and for a moment he hated what had happened to him so much that he wanted to find that—

"Sir? Are you in there? There's a boat." The voice rose to a squeaky pitch.

"I heard ya. Keep your breeches on."

"But they are on, sir."

He knew now it was Sorenson, the stranded Swedish idiot he'd picked up in Port Victoria, in the Seychelles. Sorenson, the alleged cook who'd bought rancid flour from a tradesman with a fake mustache and an indecipherable accent. Sorenson had thought the bits of black stuff in it was caraway seeds and not weevils and rat droppings.

"So? What's the big deal? Attack it. Do I have to do everything around here?" Irritated, Denny punched his pillow, rolled over on his stomach and stared balefully out of the porthole. He'd expected it to be early morning but was surprised to see the sun high and probably hot. He hadn't left his quarters much in the last three months, and his sheets were getting a bit stinky.

It suddenly occurred to him. Why's the cook coming up here? Why isn't he making my porridge? Where is everybody else?

A second voice piped up, "But, sir. Cap'n. Sir. There are thirteen of 'em, sir. Fishing boats. All like sittin' ducks in the port, like."

Denny rolled his eyes. Parlayne Foster was his first mate and originally from New England, where they'd been headed for two weeks after bad storms steered them from Honduras, their original planned destination. Foster, however, had taken to his new life so well he and Sorenson had started talking like all the other Cockney gits Denny employed. And this from a Bostonian missionary's son.

Thirteen vessels? Denny's cock got hard. Only two things aroused him these days. A hot young man's ass wanting a royal fucking, and multiple vessels awaiting his attack. Fishing boats meant fish, and probably gold.

"Hoist the flag," he yelled and got up out of bed. He visited the head then contemplated his wardrobe. He had to look the part. Tight black pants, thigh-high boots, crisp white shirt with a few ruffles. Aye. That was the ticket. It was easy getting his pants on, but negotiating socks was difficult. He had no balance. He got so frustrated he stuffed his boots on, and with the scrunched-up socks inside, he fell down. Unbelievable. He'd been so sure the curse would have worn off by now, but it hadn't. He slipped on the shirt and wanted to cry. He'd had to put two slits in the back to accommodate his new deformity. It just wasn't fair. On top of this he threw on a long coat. That kept his little problem well hidden.

Outside the cabin, he inhaled fresh ocean air for the first time in weeks and almost keeled over in shock. He caught the gazes of a couple of deck hands. Both seemed surly. He'd spent years on the high seas with both of them, fucking them alternately and occasionally together. Denny had rejected both since the dreadful curse had hit him. He'd shunned all human contact. The only good thing about their grumpy expressions was that it seemed that Foster hadn't told the entire crew of his misfortune.

Denny took a deep breath and climbed the companionway up to the deck. He'd forgotten how gorgeous the ocean was first thing in the morning. It

glistened like glass and he could have allowed himself to become mesmerized, but he had work to do. He surveyed the deck of the La-Di-Da, a former British Navy privateer. Spotless. It had once been named for Queen Victoria, but Denny, a former midshipman who had staged a mutiny two years ago, before the ship had reached India, had renamed it. He'd always had a notion he should have been born in high places, and not in the shameful East London dump where he'd rubbed with others grouped as The Great Wen.

He tried to picture himself walking down the streets of his old neighborhood with his new affliction and couldn't. For one thing he was unable to control his, er, condition. For another, he'd always prided himself on his good looks. Dark-haired, dashing, handsome.

Cursed.

Damn.

Denny felt the weight of the crew's watchful gazes on his back. Maybe they did know. His whammy made him looked hunchbacked. And who'd ever heard of a hunchbacked pirate?

He nodded at the few crewmen scattered around him. Denny had never liked taking orders, but he *adored* giving them. Denny had plotted against his ship's captain, Lester Piggins, from day one. Denny had left England eight years ago at the ripe old age of seventeen, under dubious circumstances. His good looks, impressive stature and fearless protection of the crew had ensured that all one hundred and fifty of them had chosen to stay with him when he'd accomplished his mission two years later. One hundred and fifty one, if you counted Theodore, the formerly starving kitten that had stowed away on the ship during a brief call into the port of Diego-Suarez in Madagascar.

Renaming the ship the La-Di-Da, Denny thought, was a good laugh at his former delusions of grandeur. He was no upper-class twit. In his heart of hearts he wished he were. And in some ways, he adopted their mannerisms. Not to mention their clothes and money. He robbed the rich and gave constantly to the poor, as in himself and his crew. They had set off to seek their fortune and to terrorize other ships in the Indian Ocean. They had done both with a beautiful success rate for five years now, thanks to the two tanks and sixty guns on board plus those they stole in their frequent attacks. They'd also been helped by the increased speed of the La-Di-Da, following a complete restructuring of the vessel on the small island of Ruatan off the coast of Honduras.

A year ago, Denny Derrick Dalton had come up with the brilliant idea, which increasingly seemed less so, to switch his activities to the North Atlantic Ocean. He'd managed to hide gold in various caves throughout the Caribbean and had even bought a house on a hill above the seaside in Cornwall, England. He'd looked forward to an early retirement, until he'd been cursed. Things had gone from bad to worse since rescuing Prince Merritt and his sister. Sisters were bad news. Denny knew that from experience. But Merritt's sister was the worst.

Damn that woman. I can't retire until I find her and make her take her whammy off me. Aware now of all the crew members' scrutiny, Denny frowned at Sorenson. "Where's my porridge?" he fumed.

"But, sir." Sorenson pointed a shaky finger at the boats in the far distance.

"We have time," Denny snapped. He did not add, *Unless* you'd prefer to walk the plank, because the last time he'd threatened, somebody had elected to walk it. The intended victim had somehow managed to survive the initial plunge.

Denny had decided not to order the crew to have cannonballs tied to the man's feet. He hadn't been bound or blindfolded either. Denny had done it to teach him a lesson but the man had refused to come back on board. He'd swum away laughing at Denny. It had upset everybody. Nobody knew if the man had survived after the initial drop but several of the crewmembers were upset by the incident. And today, there was no time for hard feelings. There was, however, always time for porridge.

Sorenson scuttled away. Satisfied, Denny studied the map his second mate, Rigby, spread out before him.

Foster handed him a telescope and Denny put it to his eye and peered across the bay. He couldn't see a darned thing. Everything was fuzzy and weird. He scrunched his eye hard but it only made things worse. I'm falling apart! That curse has done me in! Now I can't bloody see out of my eyes!

"You're looking through the wrong end," Rigby whispered to him. Rigby was the token Australian aboard and the only man Denny trusted. Rigby was a solid type who told it as he saw it. He liked his ale a little too well, but who didn't?

"Ah," Denny said and flipped the telescope around. He was certain he heard a few crewmembers snickering. Before his affliction, they'd never had reason to mock him. He'd made certain to hide himself as much as possible since disaster had befallen him. Only two of them had seen his...shame.

He took a deep breath and looked again. And there they were. Thirteen boats sheltering at anchor in Port Rosewater. He lowered the telescope, checked the map, looked up at the boats again then back at the map. *Port Rosewater?* Where the hell was that? He tried to decipher the numerous hand jottings on the map. He didn't recognize anything. Not a single name. Even the longitude

and latitude coordinates resembled no place he'd ever sailed, and Denny had covered a lot of ocean water in his time.

He gulped. Could he ask Rigby where they were? Nah. He'll think I've really lost the plot. Denny sensed tension around him. I'm being paranoid. Of course they're tense. We're about to take on thirteen boats.

"Where the hell's my porridge?" he roared.

Sorenson scuttled back to him, a battered metal bowl in one hand, and a spoon in the other. Why were the lad's hands shaking?

Denny peered into the milky-looking sludge. "I hope those black things doing the back stroke in my porridge are raisins," Denny said.

Sorenson winced and shrugged. "Sorry, sir. No. A rat infestation."

"It's rat poop?" Danny thought he'd throw up on the spot. "Where the devil is that cat? Why isn't he earning his keep?"

"He disappeared, sir."

"Disappeared?" Denny gaped at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

They all looked at him then, cutting glances to and fro between them, then back at Denny.

"What?" he asked Rigby. If anyone could be trusted to spit out the truth it would be him. "What is it?"

"Nothing." Rigby's gaze shifted from side to side, and he added, "Sir," as though it were an afterthought.

"Take it away," Denny roared, pushing the bowl of porridge back toward Sorenson.

"Are we ready to prepare for attack, sir?" Rigby seemed annoyed.

"Yes, but I'd love a cup of coffee."

"Later," Rigby snapped.

"Okay." The boats were getting a bit closer but Denny did love his cup of morning coffee. As long as it didn't have rat poo in it.

"Awaiting your instructions, sir." Rigby's facial expression was neutral.

Denny didn't know what to make of it, because he sensed Rigby's seething fury beneath his flat vocal tone. "Where are we?" he whispered to his second mate.

Rigby gave him an odd look and said something that was obscured by a frigate bird's wild cry. There must have been fish on the boats in the distance. They were always attracted to boats carrying fish. Rigby said something like, "Date with destiny." What did that mean? Was it the name of one of the boats? Denny's head throbbed. Was he still sleeping? Nothing made sense. Maybe Rosewater Bay was part of some bigger port with a name like Bay of Destiny. Maybe that's what he'd heard. Some of these ports had very strange names, but he was afraid to ask Rigby in case his second mate thought Denny was losing his hearing, his eyesight, and his damned marbles.

He took a gamble. "Excellent," Denny said, feeling for the familiar knife in his pocket. "All hands!" he yelled. "All hands on deck! Hoist the flag!"

His crew yelled back acknowledgments and ran around doing his bidding.

"Fire the cannons!" he roared. He loved saying that, even though the actual firing made his ears ring for days. They currently had no prisoners. Denny was wary of taking on anymore after the last bloody catastrophe. The black pirate flag rose high as the first cannon boomed.

Denny felt better than he had in ages. Except he was hot. Damned hot. He wished he could shed the coat but knew he couldn't. Nobody could see the horrors that lay beneath it. His beautiful ship surged forward toward the

doomed vessels and he smiled widely until he glimpsed one of his crew running past him. As soon as the man became aware of Denny's scrutiny he gave a strange whimpering sound, clapped a hand over his badly swollen right ear and tiptoed backward away from Denny.

"What's he doing? And what happened to his ear?" Denny demanded of Rigby who sighed.

"You don't remember?"

"No. What am I supposed to remember?"

"You tried to have sex with his ear last night."

"I- What?"

"You heard. You broke into his bunk and tried sticking your cock in his ear. I had to thunk you over the head to get you to stop."

Denny frowned at him. "Is that why I feel like utter shit this morning?"

"No. That'd be all the *la féeverte* you've been drinking." A hint of malice Denny had never seen before danced in Rigby's eyes.

Denny's mouth opened and closed. He had nothing intelligent to say but since a comment seemed to be required, he mumbled a feeble, "Oh." He was certain Rigby had used these words deliberately, *la féeverte*, or the green fairy, which was the folk name given to absinthe. The green-tinged one-hundred-and-forty-eight proof alcohol had been the only thing that could lift Denny's, er, spirits in his dark days of late. The only trouble being that, tasty as it was, it had been accused of being a powerful hallucinogenic.

I might have to stop drinking that stuff. Why would I try to have sex with somebody's ear? I know I'm a horny git, but this is ridiculous! And the guy isn't even handsome! I wish my bloody affliction was a figment of my imagination but it isn't. Why me? Why the bloody hell did it happen to me?

He ignored the answer that came to his mind. He knew why. He just couldn't get over the reason. And, he never would. He decided to play along with his crew, though the word *mutiny* flittered into his mind. *Nah. They would never do that.* Thanks to him, they were richer men than they'd ever dreamed possible. They angled closer to the fishing boats, and Denny stared. They weren't fishing boats.

Holy guacamole. They were blackbirding boats!

As in slave traders!

"We can't rescue all them slaves," Denny said to Rigby, reverting to the ill-bred language of his youth. They couldn't do it, even though he wanted to. Denny Derrick Dalton abhorred slavery, but he could see dozens of dark faces and they worried him. He couldn't fit them all on the La-Di-Da, and some of them looked very ill.

Rigby gave him a harsh laugh. "We're not here to save the slaves."

"We're not?" Denny stared at him.

"No. We've come to sell *you* to the traders. Your wings are the talk of the high seas. Good luck, Captain. You great big bloody fairy, you!"

Denny opened his mouth, but Rigby snatched the telescope out of his hand and swung it hard and close, knocking Denny so viciously, his head snapped to the left. Denny grabbed hold of the instrument to stop Rigby from hitting him again. This time, Rigby hauled back and shot Denny with a right hook to his left temple. It was the last thing he remembered. Denny sank into an instant, befuddled nightmare where the beautiful young girl who'd tried to bed him turned into an old crone when he'd confessed he preferred men.

"You're beautiful," he'd said with a moan. "But I just don't fancy you."

She'd gone bonkers. Maybe he shouldn't have told her

he was in love with her brother, but Denny had always prided himself on his passion for honesty. She'd run around his cabin screaming and hurling things, some of them aimed at his head and groin. She'd turned old, her hands going first. They'd looked like crooked, veined talons by the time she'd turned a long, gray finger toward him.

"I banish you to a lifetime of shadow and light, where you will learn to use your wings. Or not." She'd unleashed a dirty cackle. "I'm turning the fairy into a fairy." She'd cackled again, then howled with joy.

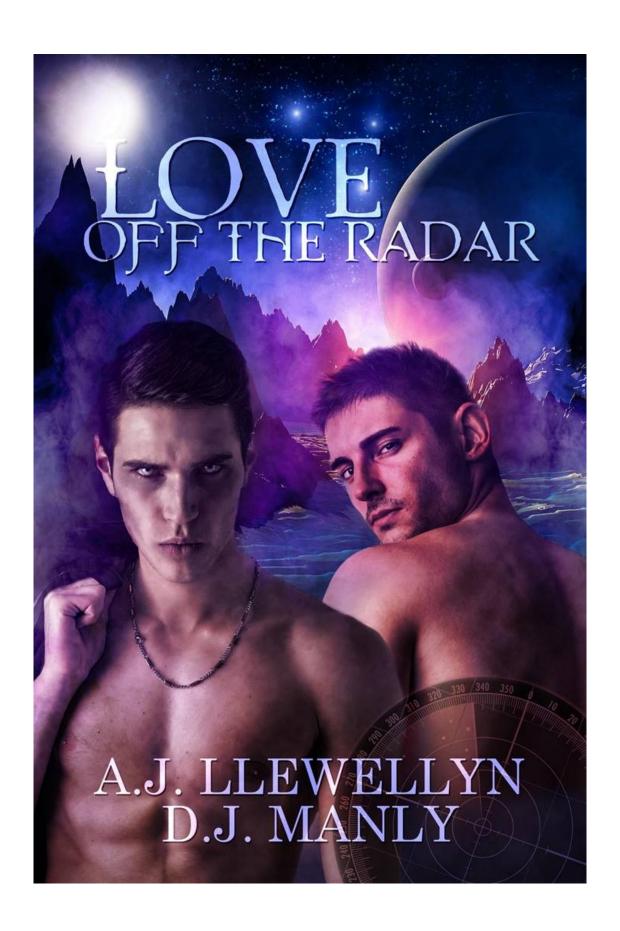
Denny had tried to think of it as a dream. A very, very bad one. And she'd lied. There'd been no light in his new world. Just shadows and the fearsome things he sometimes saw out of the corner of his eye. Strange specters, the ghosts of men and women. Theodore, the cat, had hissed at him and run out of the cabin.

The witch-woman had turned back into a young beauty, but her hands had taken longer to change into their former youthful smoothness. She'd put on her cloak and hidden them under the folds, leaving him locked in his cabin. She had plunged him into perpetual night. And he couldn't fly. His wings hurt whenever he stretched them. He always felt them, whether awake or asleep. They seemed to sense things before he did, if he allowed them to transmit messages to him.

He didn't have to try hard to interpret the soft, whispery words they sent him now as he came to, carried by his own men from the La-Di-Da across the wooden plank he'd built himself. They dumped him onto the deck of a blackbirder. Denny spotted the side of his beloved ship and saw that her name had once again been changed. Written in green paint were the words, *The Pirate Fairy*.

Denny Derrick Dalton knew he was in trouble. Deep,

dark, trouble.



BANISHED

(Short Story from Love off the Radar, Otherworldly Tales)

Hawaiian kahuna, Mahini (The villain in The forbidden Island, Phantom Lover, #3) is banished for violating huna law. Can he find a new life, even love on a remote volcanic island or only death?

The young man in the bed stirred as I walked into the room. He was facing away from me as I'd requested. Young, around twenty-five, his body strong looking and slim, he was perfect. Absolutely what I'd hoped. I slipped into the sheets beside him and I felt...what was it that I felt? His fear? Nervousness? *Anticipation*.

We had never met before, but he was what I wanted.

"Johnny," I whispered and his body curved into mine. He looked and felt just like Johnny and just as I'd demanded, he responded to my calling him Johnny as wrapped my arms around him from behind. I felt him leaning closer into me as I reached down and kissed his neck and shoulder. His arm curled up, moving around my head and I caught his sly glance.

His eyes glittered with relief and surprise. I could tell he liked what he saw. Maybe he had been expecting someone old and ugly. But I wasn't either of those things. His eyes took in the tattoos all over my face and muscular body. I worked hard to keep myself in shape. He pressed his ass to my crotch and I paused, allowing the sensations

that tight little ass was sending my starving cock.

"Get your clothes off," he hissed. "I need you inside me now. Please don't make me wait anymore, Mahini." He helped me remove my jeans, shirt, running shoes and socks, nibbling at my chest and neck, kissing me and our tongues met at last in a genuine exchange of heat. Oh, I was going to give him what he wanted, all right. He was pressing against my bare cock now, his ass pulling at me, willing me to go there, to take him.

"God, you're so big and hard," he moaned. At heart though, he was still a rent boy and he had to be dreaming if he thought I was going to let him get away with pretending to take my cock all the way up his ass.

I knew all the whores' tricks. I knew how they could manipulate you into putting on a rubber and then, once you took them doggy style, they could convince you that you were inside them. Except that you were not.

"Is this how it's gonna be with us?" I asked him.

Johnny gasped as I turned him over on his back and he watched my hands roam his toned chest, down his flat belly to his cock, which was so like Johnny's. Now it was smearing pre-come on the soft palm of my hand. I rubbed it in slow, lazy circles, enjoying the buildup of erotic fire in the hustler I'd found on the Internet. Yeah, this little whore liked me as much as I liked him. I licked at my hand, making full eye contact now as I knelt between his legs. He was as lovely as his picture on the website indicated. His almond shaped eyes were dewy, a sleepy, fuck-me quality to them. And

I planned to fuck him all right.

His fingers grappled with the mammoth cock between my own thighs, but I pushed him back.

"First things first." I gave him what I hoped was a warm smile and not a lust-crazed leer. I was so anxious to be

inside him, to win him over, to make Johnny love me...I bent and gave him a kiss and he accepted my tongue into his mouth, my hungry lips grazing his. I'd spent months combing the sex sites for the perfect man, the one who could be Johnny. Now we were here in a luxury hotel and I wanted to savor every second of being with this beautiful creature.

But Johnny had a mind of his own, reaching for my nipples with his hands, sucking them one at a time. Oh, he had been paying attention to our late night phone conversations, that's for sure. His skin, when I allowed myself the indulgence of inhaling the scent of his throat and chest, smelled just like Johnny. He'd followed my instructions, bathing in the pikake and ginger lei gel I'd left in the bathroom for him.

His eyes widened now as I let my tongue do all the talking, sucking up his smooth, succulent cock. I worked him with a warm, relentless pressure, looking through half-closed eyes at the way he watched me bring him to his fulfillment. He was used to things going the other way. Well, maybe he hadn't heard about me yet. I had never let a rent boy leave my bed without stumbling out on shaky legs, his heart racing, his body slick with sweat and sex. And already I predicted this one was going to be the best ever. He was bucking against my mouth now, anxious for release. I stroked his ass with a hot wet finger, feeling the rage of his blistering, quick orgasm.

"The next time you come, I'll be inside you, Johnny." I smiled as he fought to recover from the unexpected ferocity of my mouth. "Just like we dreamed. Just like we planned." I bent my head again, tasting his balls. "Very sweet, very juicy," I murmured, looking up to see his eyes turn glassy. I pushed his legs apart until his fine ass opened to me. I had a good feel around with my tongue

and lips and got to work pleasuring him. He started pushing at me as if he wanted my whole face inside him.

He was ready for me.

"I talked to the other guys. They say there's something special about you. That your cock makes them come very hard." He sounded breathless as I gently bit the inside of his thigh. It made him jump and quiver as my hands slid under his ass, holding him to my face.

"Johnny...I don't fuck anybody else," I scolded him. "Everything you see here, everything I have belongs to you."

He immediately grasped my cock. His fingers and tongue pushed back the foreskin of my uncut cock and his mouth stopped, his eyes swiveling up to me.

"What...what the hell are they?"

"Black obsidian, the seer's stone." I enjoyed seeing the mixture of fear and excitement in his eyes. I'd had the four stones surgically implanted around the head of my cock under the foreskin. Inside a man, any man, the sensation of those stones on his prostate rendered him senseless, giving him orgasms that took a long time to get over and many lifetimes to forget.

"Suck it, baby. Suck it, Johnny, then we'll come so hard together."

His tongue was tentative at first and then eager to pander to me. For he already knew I intended to provide him ultimate pleasure.

Pushing him back on the bed, I moaned, "I love you, Johnny," and plunged into him before he had time to catch his breath. I saw the shock of pain skitter across his face, but then I was moving inside him, in and out, allowing the shiny black obsidian to work their magic on him.

He screamed at me to fuck him, to pull out and push myself back in again. He gripped me to him with ravenous fingers, his words insensible as he felt the stones touch him in a way nothing and nobody ever had before. His body shook and a powerful orgasm ripped right through him. It washed over my cock, up through my crotch like a warm, wet wave. I watched over my shoulders as his feet flexed, his toes flattening out, his thighs beating against my chest to get me in him, deeper, harder...longer. And then he started to sob when it was all over.

Oh, he was the best Johnny yet. I let him recover with my cock still buried deep inside him.

"Mahini." The tears kept spilling down his face. I wanted to spend the rest of my life making him feel this way. "I never knew passion like this. I never...I never came like that."

"Johnny, I'll make you come like that over and over again." I held his face in my hands and spoke against his trembling lips as he wrapped his long legs around my waist. The obsidian implant surgery had almost killed me—the pain was so great for weeks after the procedure. With each fresh conquest, the feeling of power, of supreme joy given and received was a source of gratification for me.

Oh, I enjoyed the feeling of being the greatest fuck my Johnny ever had as the small clock on the nightstand showed me we had twenty minutes left.

"You didn't come." My petulant lover's hands stroked my thighs, melded to his on the crisp, new sheets.

"Not yet, my love." I smiled and saw the lust flare in his eyes as I started working on his tight little hole again, his sweet, smooth cock stiffening in my hand.

There was a knock at the door and I frowned. Who would be interrupting me when I'd paid a thousand bucks to enjoy my rent boy?

Removing myself from him was difficult. I saw his watchful eyes take in my whole body as I got out of bed

and looked through the peephole.

Oh God, no.

I would have to let them in, I had no choice. With a sigh, I glanced at my new lover. "Johnny, get dressed, darling." "But—"

"The party's over, my love. I'll be in touch."

"But I want to stay with you. Off the clock. I—" He could hear the sound of chanting outside the door, saw the sweat on my brow.

"I have to go," I croaked, despair washing over me. "I'll go out there...just get dressed and go." My hands and feet shook as I dressed and hurriedly opened the door. The three tribal elders waiting for me stood in an impassive line. They looked over my shoulder at the young man throwing on his clothes in a haphazard fashion.

"Go!" I pushed him far away from us. One of the elders tried to stop him, but the rent boy had nothing to do with any of this. They only wanted me. I saw Johnny's feet moving, his long, reedy body trying to keep up with them as he hurtled down the corridor.

Yes, the elders wanted me. They'd come to arrest and try me and I knew already by the looks on their faces that the outcome wasn't going to be good.

"Come." The first one took my hand and we disappeared from the hotel room. We were in a forest now and I was alone in the middle of a circle of old men, sitting, talking. A few had drum gourds.

"Sit." Another voice, a disembodied one demanded, and I sat, fearing I would be dead before I could even hear the charges read against me.

"For crimes against Johnny Kaimana, we have judged you guilty." A very old kahuna stood, staring at me. It galled me that my private love matters had become so public. "You sent him a death bundle. You cursed him."

"I loved him! I was stupid! I have paid dearly for what I did!"

A tremendous heat filled the circle and I could have cried. He was here, the only one who could save me. I saw him appear as if by flames. His power was very great now. I smiled as the great kahuna, the great high priest, Kimo Wilder, nodded to me, taking his place in the circle surrounding me.

He was a handsome man. Massive, around six four or six five, a proud member of the Hawaiian race. A descendant of the last King of Maui, he was a majestic man I respected and admired, even when we didn't agree with each other.

But he'd gotten my message that I was in trouble and he was here.

"I am here in defense of Mahini." Kimo's authoritative tone soothed me, but I knew from the murmur of dissent he was the only one who wanted me spared.

"Why?" the first kahuna shouted. "His own sister tried to murder your husband!"

Kimo Wilder stared at him. "I am certain Mahini had nothing to do with that and his sister paid for her crimes against me with her *life*."

There was a pause and then the whispering started again.

"You're too late." A smug voice I recognized as one of the real old farts, one of the men who had vehemently opposed Kimo Wilder remaining an elder himself.

"Why, Nanalo, he hasn't been pronounced dead yet."
Kimo's silky voice sounded like a big cat's purr. "And I just know I haven't missed anything. I am The Keeper of Secrets. after all."

That drew a few smiles that fell as he stalked toward us now, his movements leonine. Oh, he was good, his magic stronger than ever since declaring his love for another man and wanting to live openly and honestly with him in the sacred bonds of marriage. The kahuna had tried to disown him as one of their own. They thought up every test imaginable and he'd passed them all. I knew this because I was there.

"When I needed a friend, Mahini was there for me." Kimo stated what they all knew to be true. In the distance, I saw his husband, Lopaka, hovering on the edge of the circle. He had a small child with him. *Smart move,* I thought. This was the couple's son, also named Kimo, and people said that at the age of two, this child's powers were already tremendous.

People said he was able to bring dead animals back to life. They said he would one day be the strongest and most powerful kahuna the Hawaiian Islands had ever seen.

The kahuna wanted this boy. And he was here in my defense.

"As his chosen protector, the protector Mahini prayed for and, as The Keeper of Secrets, I believe I have the option of offering him life over death." Kimo stared at me.

"No! He performed ancient magic. He brought grief... terror...a terrible curse on a man whose life was almost destroyed," said one of the *kahuna*.

Kimo held up his hand. "What he did was bad. He did wrong, but what he did was out of a foolish belief that he needed to exercise control in order to win the love that he desired."

His magic had to be extraordinary to keep him here this long. I knew it was causing the real Kimo undue stress and great human pain to keep his Spirit here in the circle. I also knew with a flick of any physical wrist present, I could be stone cold dead.

"Mahini." Kimo's voice was wavering. "I don't have any

more time left. Tell me now. I can give you life. A second chance. Some place else, far away. You will never see any of us again. You may never come back to Hawaii. But tell me now and it is written. And I will never tell a soul where you are banished because I am The Keeper of Secrets."

I looked at his face, the other, vengeful faces, saw a couple of hands move.

"Do it," I screamed and then the world went flat. Just like that, I was gone. Banished.

He had a sense of humor, Kimo. I found myself waking up in the middle of a dense field of green, but I knew I was far away from home. For a moment, I adjusted to the dizzy sensation, looking out over an ocean of impossible blue. I knew I was on an island.

But I knew I wasn't in Hawaii anymore. Though wan sunshine polished the lush green foliage, everything sagged under the weight of what had obviously been a very heavy downfall. My running shoes, which had been fine for a hotel tryst, were already feeling soggy in what I realized was mountain terrain. I could see no houses, no streets. No traffic lights. No people. I felt immense bitterness at the knowledge that the lovely warm islands I'd come to take for granted were no longer mine. In the distance, I could see land, far, far away and an immense black cloud coming toward me.

More inclement weather. I felt depressed to be in this cold place, the familiar scent of tropical flowers gone. I should have taken a really good, long sniff before I left.

Ah well, at least I got laid. I sat up, feeling like I'd been hit by a bus and looked around me. Yeah, it was green all right. But it was the scent I missed...Mark Twain said it

best, and of my Hawaii, it is still true.

In my nostrils still lives the breath of flowers that perished twenty years ago.

For another moment, I thought about the island on which I'd been born and which was still my home...well up until this moment it had been my home. Ni'ihau, known as The Forbidden Island since nobody but the two hundred and fifty pure blood Hawaiian residents were allowed to set foot on it. Over the years, I'd enjoyed brief forays away from there to the island of Kauai, where I had my little sexual trysts, and loaded up on toiletries and groceries that were impossible to find on *my* island. These sojourns had sustained me through long, difficult years of isolation. I wasn't sure whether to be happy or sad that I would never see Ni'ihau again.

What I would miss were family members. My Uncle Chooey, who on rare outings to Honolulu on the island of Oahu, took me and my sister, Mim, to those oh, so scary *obake-neko*, Japanese horror movies at the Roosevelt Theatre. My heart pained at the memory of sauntering down to that old theater on Maunakea Street between Pauahi and Beretania. Mim and I had loved Uncle Chooey. I remember how we enjoyed the movie and always, as we were walking home, we'd stop at one of the saimin stands by the theater and inhale twenty-five cent bowls of saimin noodles and ten-cent barbecue chicken sticks.

I bit my lip. My sister was dead, the theater and the saimin stands were long gone and Uncle Chooey...Uncle Chooey got eaten by a shark as he walked through the surf not far from his house in Oahu a few years ago. Just remembering him brought pleasure and pain. I think we were really happy then.

Was that really the last time I knew such joy? I wondered what he would think of my circumstances now and I got up,

brushed off my pants and decided I'd better check out my new home. As I looked around me, I saw I was on a large island, much more lush that Ni'ihau, and for that I was thankful. Breathing deeply, I detected pines. That was not a familiar smell to me except high up in some parts of the Big Island of Hawaii. I stopped. Another smell. Good God, sulfur. I could hear the hiss of gasses, my head turning in the direction of wisps of smoke. Climbing up hill faster now, I encountered a fumerole, a heat vent and beyond it, the unmistakable sight of yellow sulfur powder. An active volcano.

"Hello."

I jumped, wondering if I was in possession of any of my kahuna powers anymore. A *banished* high priest was usually stripped of his magical talents, which meant I could not use any extra sensory benefits to repel the woman standing behind me if I needed to protect myself.

"Are you the new ranger?"

I turned to look at her. She had a heavy European accent. I scanned her outfit. Thick winter clothing, waterproof boots, sealskin hat and coat. As she kept talking, I realized she was Russian.

"My husband is taking photos, but I wanted to introduce myself. My name is Katarina. My husband, Wladimir, is enchanted with the boiling lake." She laughed. "I've had a great time, but I'm happy to be leaving tonight. This monsoon weather is too crazy for my blood. Hurricanes yesterday, that heavy mist all morning...I can get bad weather back home in Kiev." She shook open a piece of paper. "Now, what do you know of this hotel?" She thrust the page under my nose.

I read it quickly, dumfounded to see the dubious heading of Santa Resorts, a confirmation for the Hotel Sakhalin Sapporo and below this an itinerary for *Kunashir Island*.

Where the hell was Kunashir?

"I know nothing about it." I shrugged. "Sorry."

She looked disappointed. "It's changed hands many times between Russia and Japan, but since my magazine is footing the bill, I picked the place with the best reviews. They say the hotel is very popular with the Russian tourists...oh, there's Wladimir now. Wladi! Come and meet the new ranger."

"But I'm not the ranger," I jumped in quickly. "I'm a tourist here myself."

"Oh..." Katarina looked surprised. "But I thought with the new hurricanes coming tonight, they weren't letting anyone else on the island."

"I'm collecting specimens." I had no idea where the lie came from, but she looked pleased when I informed her of this.

"Oh, you're the one! I heard there was a guy collecting spiders here. Amazing how many we've found, huh, Wladimir?"

He nodded. "Entire plants up the caldera swarming with spider eggs, you'll be happy to know. We were going to pick some peaches, but they were infested. Where's your kit?"

I waved my hand in a vague way toward some spot over my left ear.

"Oh, the rangers' cabin?" the woman asked me. "Those damned bears punched out all the windows last night. I thought at first it was the hurricanes coming back, but they were looking for food. You should be okay up there." Her dubious expression belied her words.

Wladimir glanced at me. "So you will you be staying tonight?"

"Probably." Every night for the rest of my life.

"You sure? I mean, weather looks bad...you should

come back to Hokkaido with us...the boat leaves in an hour."

I almost screamed, *Japan? Are you kidding me?* I just stared at them. What was a Russian couple doing on an uninhabited Japanese island? And then a man in a uniform was coming toward us and he, too, looked Russian.

"Boat's here." He looked at me. "Who are you?" "Mahini—"

I did not get a chance to complete my sentence. He was checking his watch.

"Folks, you'd better get back down to shore. The boat's coming. We need everyone off the island."

We allowed ourselves to be escorted down the slippery slope and when Wladimir turned to ask me about my kit, I almost punched him.

"I'll be back. I'm sure nobody needs it."

But as we neared the ancient patrol boat puttering down a river toward us, a strange thing happened.

Something...an unseen force knocked me right in the gut, sending me spinning backward and I blew into the air. Up and over like a runaway balloon I soared. My breath caught in my throat...far below me I could see the ranger and the Russian couple searching around for me, arms gesticulating wildly as my mouth opened in a silent scream and I plunged back to the earth with a hard thud.

I woke up some time later, thanks to a violent squall. Rain fell on me in unremitting sheets and I got up, aware of darkness, the relentless rainfall and started to laugh. Ni'ihau was an island dying for one good solid rainfall. I mean, literally dying. As lush as its nearest neighbor Kauai is, Ni'ihau is like living in a desert. I'd gone from one extreme to the other.

Trust me, a voice said inside my soul. Kimo. It was as if he'd infused me with new life, new energy. I

turned and ran, sloshing and falling upcountry, determined to find the ranger's hut. For a long time I ran, so blinded by fast-falling darkness and the unceasing deluge that I ran with my hands outstretched, tears and rain scalding my eyes.

I had fallen in love with Johnny. I had tried to control him with a binding spell called a bundle in ancient times. Yes, I'd been wrong, but I'd become a hostage to my emotions, controlled by fear, guided by lust. A dangerous combination in any man's hands. A potential stick of dynamite in a kahuna's grip. The magic had backfired, not three fold, but a hundred thousand times. My hands smacked into trees, plants and then...something else. I felt around with rubbery fingertips. Smooth wood. Sides. It had to be the rangers' cabin.

Almost screaming with fury when I was unable to enter the little structure, I put my shoulder to the door and found it gave way. It was simply warped due to the weather. I shut the door again. I didn't care what creatures lurked inside. I needed a respite from the rain and cold. I forced myself to calm down, but all my natural resources failed me. I found a blanket in the dark and dried my face and hands. The little house was freezing. Still unable to see in the now pitch darkness, I shuffled forward and banged right into a bed. My hands connected with the mattress and I lay on it, breathing raggedly. I took my time getting composed, my fingers feeling around me.

Oh, God. A warm spot. Somebody had just been in here. Swallowing hard, I was aware of breathing from somewhere far away. Whoever ...whatever it was, reacted to my presence, sensing I'd detected theirs. The sound of footsteps. I knew it was a person now and they ran for the door.

"Wait!" I shouted.

Heavy breathing...very heavy breathing.

"Please don't go."

A low, growly voice. "Who are you?"

"My name is Mahini and I...I just arrived today. What's your name?"

"We'll talk in the morning." The door opened and softly closed and I was alone. I lay back on the bed and, despite all my fear and the cold, I fell asleep. On and off I dozed through miserable bouts of lightning and thunder, a strange smell on the sheets. I was grateful for the first milky rose shafts of sunlight because by this time I was starving and I was anxious to get a closer look at the shack. I was shocked to see great tufts of cream-colored fur and blood on the sheets all around me. The fur clung to my wet clothing and I got up from the bed, feeling grimy and disoriented. I found the shack to be pretty much a wreck, but hikers had obviously been here and left whatever they no longer needed. A half-open bottle of water, a can of pinto beans and matches. Matches! I would need those, I was sure. I almost wept with joy when I found a can opener in a red plastic basket on the floor. I ripped into the can, spooning beans into my mouth with my fingers.

"Here, try some of this."

I almost fell on the floor with fright. It was a young man. A handsome young Asian man. I'd never seen anyone quite so lovely, despite his unkempt appearance. How had he managed come into the cabin without my knowing? I stood there with bean juice dripping down my chin and he gave me a sad, sympathetic smile, handing me a stone plate with raw salmon sliced on it.

"Take it." He leaned against the wall, watching me eat. "I'm sorry I didn't stay when you came in here last night."

I stared at him. His voice was different. Strange. I said nothing and finished the fish very fast.

"I saw your..." He held up his hand indicating my airborne display the previous day. "That was something." "Yeah...something."

"Have some water...it's fresh." He indicated the half-full bottle. He smiled when I uncapped it and drank. "You like grapes?" On my nod, he laughed. "Come, I'll show you my secrets."

His name was Zoshi and he came from Hokkaido, he told me. He showed me the island, his island, sharing with me his favorite spots to find grapes, plums and cherries.

"The river is just choked with salmon. It's one of the last pristine salmon spawning grounds in the world." He grinned. "Just don't get in the bears' way when they are hungry."

We were able to catch the salmon with our bare hands, Zoshi gutting them easily with a penknife.

I had so many questions. "Where am I?" I asked him.

"Don't you know?" When I shook my head, he fell silent for a while and seemed ready to run off. "You're on Kunashir. It means Black Island in the native tongue of my people."

"The Japanese people?"

He shook his head. "The Ainu. They are an indigenous people to northern Japan and to Hokkaido in particular." He paused. "These islands, the Kuril Islands, were used by the Russians as a base camp during World War Two and they have been a matter of dispute between the two countries ever since." He squinted at me and I felt he was having trouble seeing me. "You're not Russian."

"No, Hawaiian."

He shrugged. "For years, the Russians have used this island as a place of...banishment for outlaws and criminals." The words remained an ugly accusation between us.

"Japan, too?" I asked.

He nodded and I saw the pain of his infinite shame.

"Oh yes...Japan, too."

Zoshi led me back to the cabin to a portable toilet in the rear. It smelled terrible, but I didn't care. I needed relief and soon, we were off walking again, exploring the boiling lake of the still active volcano, low lying lakes and unusual birds, which he told me were rare and endangered.

"This island is a refuge to them as well. Look, it's a Blakistan Fish Owl," he whispered as a huge, majestic bird soared over us. I couldn't get over the size of it. It was the size of a small pony. "They're the largest predatory birds in the world."

Zoshi watched it with a mixture of fear and respect.

When another huge downpour came, we took refuge under a huge coltsfoot leaf that felt like the most beautiful umbrella in the world. We were so close together and his breath on my skin so tantalizing, I wanted to touch him. I felt his breath stop. He could feel the rising fire between us, but he shook his head.

"We can't."

I didn't say anything.

For two days it was like this, hours and hours spent together, bathing in pools, stealing looks at one another's bodies, catching fish, eating whatever we could find and, at night, he would leave me, insisting I sleep in the cabin. A terrible sound woke me on the third night and I ran outside, my eyes well used to the darkness now and I was shocked to see one of those big owls tangling with a large, furry cat.

The hissing, spitting cat however, looked suspiciously like... *Zoshi*.

I fought off the owl and a weeping, bleeding Zoshi allowed me to carry him into the cabin. I cleaned him up as best I could, finding chunks of fur coming away in my

fingers. I remembered the fur from my first night here. I calmed him and lay beside him as he told me of the curse placed on him by his people because he was gay and that in his culture, this was simply taboo.

"They said nobody would ever love me...tell me, who cursed you?" he asked me and, in the darkness, I bled out verbally, telling him everything. At dawn, he was back in his human body and he hid his face from me.

"Don't. You saved my life on this island," I told him and I moved my body over his. He was strong and slim, his muscular body hard under the ragged clothing he wore. He struggled with me for a few minutes, but his need was great, as great as his desire.

He allowed me to kiss him and we explored one another's mouths and faces as outside, a crack of thunder could be heard. Voices...somebody was coming to the cabin. A streak of vicious lightning flew right through the window and Zoshi and I hurled ourselves onto the floor as the bed went up in flames.

We ran from the room as two rangers stood, shocked and we flew right past them.

"Jesus," one of them muttered. "Fire!"

Zoshi and I found shelter under our coltsfoot again and he was bashful about resuming where we'd left off, but I wasn't. I undressed him with the urgency of possible detection as the fire raged behind us. My mouth sought out the prize in his pants and Zoshi's breath turned ragged as I sucked on his long and surprisingly thick cock. I brought him off with my mouth, his juices sweet from the high fruit diet. I let my tongue meander down to his balls and his ass and he almost screamed when he saw my cock.

"Oh, fuck me with that huge Hawaiian thing," he crooned. His giddy grin turned into something else when I planted myself in him. He kept calling out God's name as I kept a relentless pace in his ass. I did not stop until he had come in my hand and I had come in that hot little ass. For two days straight, we fucked, slept and ate. It was on the third night, in my arms, my cock buried inside his hungry ass that he made a discovery. He no longer became a cat man after dark.

"I can leave this island...I need know no more shame." He was so happy I could only wish him good luck. He wanted to leave in the morning and return to his people.

"I've been here for so long, please understand."

"How long?" I asked him.

"Six years."

"I understand." He broke my heart, wanting to leave me, but I felt true joy for him that his curse was lifted and, in the morning, he gave me his penknife and I watched him board the decrepit patrol boat. One of the rangers was loading two barrels of salmon onto it and I crouched in a thicket of bamboo, alone on my island, pondering my next move. I spent the afternoon inspecting the cabin. The fire damage was minimal, but the smoke damage was awful. I wandered the island, not really hungry, not really *not* hungry.

I slept under the coltsfoot umbrella, dreaming about my beautiful Zoshi, grateful that I'd come to know him.

In the morning, the sun burst through gray-white clouds and, as I waded through the river that met the Sea of Japan, I wondered how he was faring in Hokkaido.

"You scare the fish away like that."

Man! He always managed to make me jump. I whirled around. "Zoshi, what are you doing here?"

"I came back for you." He looked amazing. Hair trimmed, clean clothing. "Mahini, I can't leave you. I can't stay here either. You gave me love freely and so my curse is lifted. You let me leave freely. Your curse must be lifted, too."

"You really think so?"

He nodded emphatically. "If not…I'll make do. I don't care where we live. I only want to be with you." He reached out his hand and I saw the small boat behind him. I took his hand and felt the sun at its fullest in the sky as Zoshi led me by the hand to his boat and we stepped inside.

"You're going to have to learn Japanese," he warned me. "For you, anything."

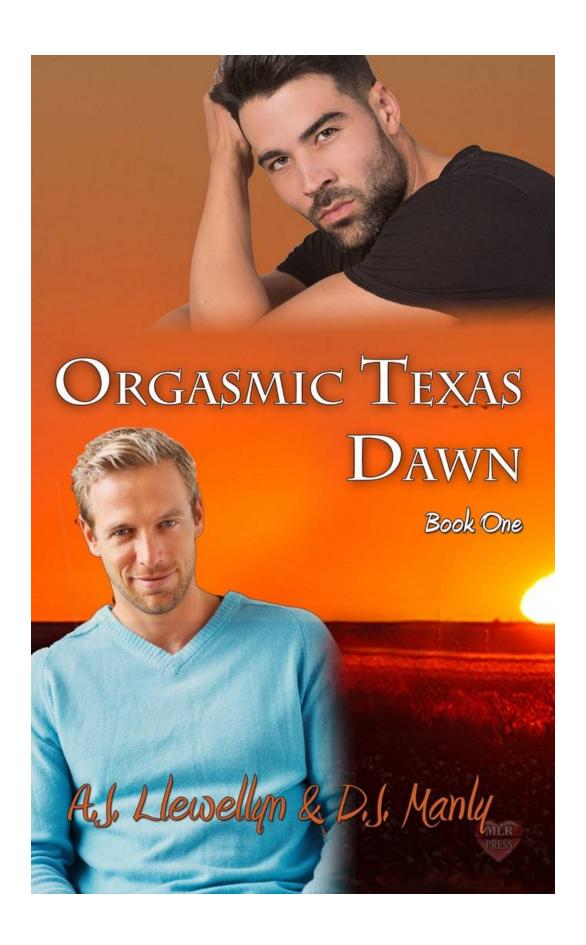
He grinned and started the small outboard motor. I could not believe this was happening. And then Zoshi looked at me.

"When you say things like that, you should kiss me."
I moved beside him, taking his dear, sweet face in my hands and kissing him.

"God, you got me hard," he groaned. "How can I get us home if I'm so hard?"

"With me between your legs, you can do anything."

My fingers moved toward his zipper. Zoshi laughed and it was the sound I'd waited for my whole life. It was music and sunshine and echoes of islands...islands in the time of my life.



ORGASMIC TEXAS DAWN

(Book #1 by A. J. Llewellyn and D. J Manly)

Canadian cop Kieran Fox has fallen from grace after a disastrous romance with the wrong guy—the head of a drug cartel. When Sheriff Dillon DePriest moseys on up north begging Kieran to come to his town of Lone Trail, Texas, to help him deal with a gang of murderous drug dealers, Kieran agrees, if only to get away from the scene of his own crime.

Soon thereafter, Kieran learns that the tough little Texas town is knees-deep in an escalating mystery. There's a cross-dressing Cher impersonator, a killer missing some gold teeth and his...er...dangly bits. And worse, there's Kieran's growing attraction for Lone Trail's sexy U.S. Marshal, Jubilee Mason, that he neither wants nor needs.

CHAPTER 1

"Personally..." The big man leaned forward and lowered his voice as if someone might hear him. "I think you got some pretty important reasons for getting outta Dodge, son. I read about them there Chinese fellas. Your ex-honey was mixed up with some pretty tough characters." He straightened up, stretched his neck. "I don't need ta tell ya, I wouldn't want to be out in the middle of the corral without my pistol if they were gunning for me."

What language is this guy speaking? Since I'd made the error of opening the door of my condo to this heavyset cowboy twenty minutes ago, the man hadn't stopped talking. Worse yet, I wasn't quite sure what in hell he was talking about.

"You're a quiet one there, young fellow. I s'pose you should tell me what's on your mind." He folded his arms across his massive chest and waited.

I ran my gaze over the man who stood in front of me. He was in his forties with a dollop of rusty brown hair crowning his head. He was almost the same height as me, around six-two, but he was carrying quite a bit of weight around the middle, straining the material of his beige uniform in some strategic places.

He was the first person I'd opened the door to in days. After being hounded by the press, and on guard for assassins lurking around every corner, I'd decided it was time. If Dishi's men were coming for me, I was prepared to take 'em on. I couldn't live the rest of my life, if you could call it one, in fear.

When I heard the door, I dragged myself off the sofa. I'd been lying there for three days. I wrapped my old tattered robe around me and picked my pistol up off the coffee table. I was a crack shot, could have been a sniper if I'd wanted. If something moved, I'd hit it.

"Who is it?" I demanded, keeping left of the door, ducking my head when I passed the window.

The voice on the other side of the door spoke with a deep drawl. "My name is Dillon DePriest, Detective Fox. I'm the police from Lone Trail, Texas."

There wasn't much doubt the guy wasn't from around here the way he said the word *POLE…lease*.

"Your lieutenant gave me your address."

Actually, I didn't have a lieutenant. I didn't have much of anything anymore. I lowered the gun. "What do you want?"

"I gotta a little fat to chew with you, boy."

Fat to chew?

"Come on, Fox, open up. You're not being very hospitable considerin' I came all the way out here to your neck of the woods just to see ya."

I glanced at myself in the mirror and, for a second, I hardly recognized the man looking back. I had a few days

growth of beard and my dark brown hair was hanging around my shoulders, unwashed and uncombed. My green eyes looked bloodshot. I wasn't sure about the last time I'd managed to sleep more than a few hours.

"You there, Detective?"

I cautiously unlocked the door, still holding the gun, and stared at the tall, heavyset man in a police uniform, Stetson in hand. Hell, he even had the cowboy boots. I was a little disappointed to see they didn't wear spurs. This guy would have been right at home in Calgary during the stampede.

"Detective Fox?"

"Just Fox. Who in hell are you?" I poked out my head and cautiously glanced around outside the door of my condo.

"Dillon DePriest. There's no one out there. I checked."

"What can I do for you?" I eyed him.

He looked at the gun. "Well, you can put the gun away for starters and invite a fellow in." He met my gaze.

"See a badge?"

The man slowly drew out his badge and flashed it.

I peered at it. "Texas?"

"You got it."

So, I opened the door wider. I figured even the Asian mob didn't have that much imagination. I waited for the man to enter, then closed the door, sliding the bolt into place. The suspense was too much. I wanted to know what in hell some cop from Texas was doing on my doorstep.

Dillon DePriest studied me for a moment. "You don't look much like you did on the news."

"Go figure." I wandered back into the living room area. He followed.

"Drink?" I picked up the half-empty bottle of tequila and showed it to the man.

"Wouldn't be fair considering, would it? Looks like you've gotten quite a little head start on me there."

"Um, you mind?" I sank onto the sofa and poured another glass.

"I don't mind. But you're gonna mind plenty in the mornin'. Sobering up hurts worse than chugging it down."

I didn't need a lecture. "What is it you want, Officer DePriest?"

"Well..." He grinned, leaning on the doorjamb. "I want to offer you a position with the Lone Trail police department."

I paused in mid swallow, almost choking on the tequila, then let the rest of it slide down my throat. "Where in the hell is the Lone Trail police department and why would I want to work there?" The stuff burned all the way down.

I fell quiet and that's when DePriest started going on about getting out of Dodge and all that stuff. In spite of his strange talk, I understood one thing very clearly; this Texas police officer knew all the sordid details of what had happened to me over the last few months.

"Dang it boy, you haven't said a word. Tell me what's going on in that mixed-up head of yours, besides feeling sorry for yourself?"

His patronizing tone got to me. "I think you better leave before you piss me off, cowboy!"

He shrugged. "Besides the fact you got a loaded pistol, given your present state I'm not feeling too worried about gettin' the shit beat outta me right now."

He had a point there. "I don't know you or your little town." I looked up at him. "I'm not interested in police work anymore."

"Is that so?" He walked over to the easy chair and perched on the edge of it. "Well, that's quite a big declaration there, Kieran. And I hate to rain on your parade, but it's been my experience this kind of job gets

under your skin, something like a mosquito does, down by the creek after a rainstorm."

I shook my head. "What does that mean?"

He laughed. "You see, I may look like some kind of a redneck from the backwoods to you, son, but I'm not in the habit of using up all my frequent flyer miles just to come after some boy who is about to give up on life. The missus is going to skin me when she finds out I used those miles."

"Look, they may like to be preached to out where you come from, but I don't."

"Don't know much about preaching except from listening to the good reverend on Sunday morning at the Lone Trail Baptist church. But I do know me one thing for sure; you're a damn good cop. In fact, you're probably among the best when it comes to narcotics."

"How in the hell would you know that?"

"Because I've just about followed every case you've worked on."

That surprised me. "What?"

"You heard me."

"Why?"

"Because we got a drug war going on back in my neck of the woods, one that's getting the dealers and their runners dead, and has 'em shooting anything that gets in their way. Ten-year-old boy got shot in the head a few weeks back. He was just playing in the wrong field."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that but..." I trailed off. I truly was but it had nothing to do with me. "I'm not your man."

"I beg to differ, Kieran. I'm pretty dang sure you are my man. I wouldn't be here otherwise. Besides, you got some Texas in ya. Your daddy came from Texas."

I sucked in some air. Hearing about my father had a way of cutting off my ability to breathe. "What do you know about my father?"

"I know I won't have no trouble with immigration if I hire you on, not that they couldn't be talked into something anyway," he smiled.

It was true I had dual citizenship, but that didn't mean I was going to run off to Texas to work in some backwater town.

"Well, your daddy would be mighty proud if he knew how you turned out."

"I doubt that. He ran off when I was a baby, never came back."

"Life has a way of kicking some people in the ass, don't it?"

"I guess," I scoffed.

"Just to let you know, you'll have to forget to mention the gay thing when you're in Lone Trail. You see, back where I come from, it's Adam and Eve. They haven't really gotten around to the Adam and Steve thing yet. As for me, couldn't care a damn what you do in the bedroom. I say, live and let live. But in Lone Trail, everyone gets into everyone else's beeswax. To be accepted, you gotta be real queer, you know, girlie boyish. They seem to be accepted...the girlie ones. We got one...really swishy like, named Earl. Townsfolk have adopted him, kind of like a pet."

That left a real bad taste in my mouth. "Always wanted to be someone's monkey. They got a cage for him?"

He laughed. "Oh, the townsfolk don't mean no harm in that. Earl's been kicked around quite a bit and he's not too bright. It's just people don't like the ones who hide. If you bat for a different team, they want to know. A guy like you, all macho and stuff...well...you'd get the shit beaten outta you if they found out that you were hidin' your preference."

"Not a preference really but...that's beside the point. If you're trying to sell me on this job of yours back in your

homophobic little paradise, you're not doing so hot."

"Just being honest. Want you to know what you're gettin' into."

"Don't worry. I won't be getting into anything because I won't be working there."

"Look, Kieran, sign on for a year. It will get you off the path of the Asian mob, and give these reporter folk a chance to forget about all this mess you've gotten yourself into."

I glanced down at my hands. I was horrified to feel the tears threaten. WTF. I pushed them back. "Why would you want me anyway? I fucked up big time."

"The way I see it, only mistake you made was in judgment. If that fellow hadda been a woman, don't think it would have been such a story after all."

I looked up in surprise.

"Took a lot of guts to do what you did. As soon as you knew he was a big drug dealer, you brought him in, in spite of your feelings. Sometimes the job and the personal get mixed. That's all it was."

I swallowed hard, still staring at my hands.

"And I figure," he shrugged, standing, "their loss is my gain."

I glanced at him.

"I'm a man who believes in taking advantage of opportunities as they come along. I saw one and I traded in my frequent flyer miles and jumped on a plane. I figure I got a chance to get me a big city, top notch narc."

"Lone Trail, eh?" I swallowed.

"Yep. You know, I like the way you fellows talk up here, with your ehs. You pronounce every damn vowel like the world would just cave in if you didn't."

I actually laughed faintly at that. He wouldn't want to hear what I had to say about the way he spoke.

"I'm staying at that fancy place downtown with all the sails on it. Room twenty-four. Damn pricey. One night is all I can afford to put on the expense account." He slapped an airline ticket on the coffee table. "If you don't use it, you best mail it back to me, care of Lone Trail police station... or I'm gonna come for ya. Once you deduct the air miles, the rest is tax payers' money." He turned on his heel and headed for the door.

"Have a nice trip," I murmured, lying back and taking another gulp of the liquor.

"You know, Fox"—he stopped and glanced over his shoulder—"I'm just thinking you got a choice; you can lie there on that sofa and drink until the cows come home. Or"—he placed his hat firmly on his head—"you can get up off that sofa and start over again. From where I hail, that's what a man with guts does, and from what I know of you, you got a lot of that going on."

I closed my eyes and sighed.

"Plane leaves right after lunch tomorrow for Dallas, one o'clock!" He slid the bolt and opened the door. "Oh, one more thing." He turned again, grinning. "I been meaning to ask you. Are you half as good a shot as I've heard you are?"

"Better." I told him.

DePriest chuckled and walked outside, closing the door behind him.

After he left, I managed to doze off for a few hours. Tequila was a great sleeping pill. It was almost midnight when I got off the sofa again and went to the computer. I thought about what my life had become and I Googled the town of Lone Trail, Texas. That cowboy was right. I couldn't lie on the sofa for the rest of my life. I'd have to pick myself up and start again sometime. I'd done nothing wrong, broken no laws. I'd just fallen for the wrong guy.

I had to forgive myself for that. That's all it was, forgiveness. I knew I'd never make that mistake again. I would never let my guard down again. I'd learned my lesson.

Lone Trail, Texas, was no Vancouver, British Colombia, for sure. For a town of fewer than ten thousand people, the crime rate was double the national average. Sounded like I wouldn't get bored! The same family names seemed to come up again and again. Everyone related? The word inbred came to mind.

There appeared to be two principal families that ran everything, including the drug trade...the Keens and the Masons. *Move over Hatfields and McCoys!*

However, the crime rate wasn't what terrified me about Lone Trail. It was all the pictures of women in floppy hats and people line dancing in plaid shirts and big boots. They sure had a lot of festivals.

The local town newspaper, the *Lone Trail Reporter*, covered everything from some garden party held by a Mrs. Tucker, where she served tiny cucumber sandwiches and sweet tea, to the arrest of a gang of toothless, white supremacists that shot an African American in the head in his pickup truck over his barking dog. Wonder if they'd been invited to eat the fancy sandwiches at Mrs. Tucker's.

Two police organizations were mentioned often in connection with the drug trade: the local sheriff's office that to my surprise was headed by Dillon DePriest—guy might have told me he was the sheriff—and the U.S. Marshals office. These two policing agencies seemed to get in each other's way a lot. Although there had been several arrests for assault as well as murder in the town recently, neither agency appeared to be able to get to those who were actually running the drugs.

Yep, Lone Trail was a scary place. People prayed with

snakes, and preachers claimed to make the blind see and the lame walk. White supremacists walked around with swastikas tattooed on their necks, shooting people, and women were referred to as belles. And there didn't appear to be a gay bar in sight.

But that last part was a good thing. There was no temptation there, which meant there were probably no beautiful men ready to trick me into bed, then stab me in the heart, at least none that would be brave enough to own up to it in that place. People didn't know me. I could start over. And maybe, just maybe, this was a case I could sink my teeth into and help me forget how much in love I'd allowed myself to get.

The sun was up before I started to pack my bag. I told no one except my neighbor at the condo, Mary Sousa. She promised to collect my mail and check on things while I was gone. I had no cat, no bird, and no life, so I grabbed the ticket DePriest had left on the coffee table, and called a cab to take me to the airport.

When I passed through customs and walked into the boarding room, I spotted Dillon DePriest right away. He was hard to miss, sitting there with his big hat on his lap. As I walked toward him, I noticed a few more men in cowboy hats and boots. This isn't Oz, Dorothy, I thought. We were headed to Texas!

I sat in one of the hard plastic chairs beside DePriest and put my carryon bag between my feet.

Dillon DePriest didn't look at me but he asked casually, "Hit a lot of traffic on the way here, did ya?"

"Normal amount, I guess."

"Um, so, what took you so long then?"

I looked at him. He met my gaze, then grinned as I shook my head and smiled faintly.

Dillon reached over and slapped his hand on my knee.

"Hot damn!" he whooped, causing the other passengers to look over at them. "I got me a real live narc!"

Once we were settled in our seats in the air, Dillon DePriest said, "One thing I didn't mention to you was Jubilee Mason."

"Didn't mention that you were the sheriff either," I commented.

"Oh well, that. Didn't want to brag none."

"So, who's Jubilee Mason? One of the suspects?" I had seen the name Mason come up a few times in the Lone Trail paper.

"Worse! He's a U.S. Marshal, a fed we call 'em down there, a young hot shot, and a hometown boy."

"He related to the Masons who have been arrested lately?"

"Cousins...a lot of cousins."

"Um."

"He came back to town after doing some policing in Dallas for a spell. Honorable enough. He takes his job real serious. He's daddy to little Philip and Andre now, Peggy's kids, that's his sister."

"Okay."

"Her husband got shot down in Afghanistan."

"That's too bad," I murmured.

"Reason he gave up his job and came home. There's a lot of honor in that. But damn it"—Dillon DePriest punched the armrest—"Jubilee takes the shine right out of my sun."

"Translation, please?"

"He's the curdle in my milk, the fly in my soup."

I stared at him. "Can you give me an example? I don't think I speak Texan."

"He don't trust the local police, though I can't say I blame him. Before I come along, there was a lot of corruption, greasing palms, you know what I mean?" "Yes. We have that, too."

"So that boy comes back to town and they put him as the key investigator on this drug case. We know it's connected to another syndicate, the big boys. Jubilee is always second-guessing me...like a hound on a blood trail. Checks every damn thing I do. He's as stubborn as a stupid-assed mule, he is. But"—he grinned—"Jube is just about the nicest fellow you're ever going to meet. Give you the shirt right off his back. Handsome brute, ladies love him. And he's smart for someone so young. Can't be much older than you are."

"How can he be both a stupid-assed mule and the nicest guy you'll ever meet at the same time?" I was really confused now. I had a feeling the more the days went by, the more confused I'd become.

Dillon laughed. "Down in Lone Trail, we know when to separate work and socializing."

"Ouch." That stung.

"No offense." He patted my shoulder. "When that boy is not marshaling, we get along like two peas in a pod. Even go hunting together. I mean I've known him since he was knee-high to a grasshopper. His father was even sheriff at one time. But when we're working, well...it's another story. He has a way of rattling my cage. That's why I can't wait until he gets a gander at you!"

"Wait a minute. Why me? I don't want to get in the middle of any type of feud you got going with this marshal."

"Not a feud"—he chuckled—"Just his eyes are going to pop when he knows I got a big city narcotics cop on my team. Hot damn!" He laughed.

Oh brother. I didn't like the sound of that.

"It's all in fun, mind you."

"Right. Ah...Dillon, are there any houses or apartments to rent in your town?"

"We'll get you all fixed up, no worries. Won't need to sleep in anyone's haystack. You'll be snug as a bug in a rug at my place until we move you someplace permanent. You'll stay with the missus and Jesse-Belle until you get settled."

"I can't put you and your family out."

"We got plenty of room. Told the missus last night you'd be coming."

I narrowed my eyes. "Last night?"

He smiled at me. "Never had any doubt."

I sighed. Right. I was that predictable...or that desperate. "That your daughter, this Jesse-Belle?"

"Nope, my two girls are all grown up and gone, live in Dallas they do." He took out his wallet and passed me a photograph. "This here is the oldest, Christine, married a lawyer. She's a photographer." I found myself looking at the picture of a nice-looking young woman with coppery hair. "The other one"—he passed me the next photograph—"is my little Willow." She was blonde and not exactly little, but rather a plump, smiley girl with big blue eyes. "She works in advertising."

"Nice family," I said politely.

"This is my little darling orange blossom, Elsie." He flashed the next picture at me. "The love of my life. We'll be married twenty-five years this coming June."

I smiled. She was a tall woman with poofy hair and a generous smile. Looked nice. "Congratulations. So, who is Jesse-Belle then?"

"Oh dang, got so caught up in showing off my family, I forgot the question. Jesse-Belle is my wife's niece."

"Oh. You have a picture of her, too?"

"Good gracious, no." He tucked the pictures away again in his overstuffed wallet. "Every picture she's given us, she's wearing dresses up to her neck and necklines plunging down to her waist. Elsie gets so peeved with her, tells her she looks like a ten-dollar whore."

That must go over well, I thought.

"She's been living with us since the divorce. A little ornery, but don't mind her none. She's got the raging hormones, you know, since she's a single woman again."

"Raging...hormones?"

"A little wild in that girl. Preacher even tried to exorcise her once. Plum ridiculous mumbo jumbo. You can't tame that girl. Anyways, what happened was, she done got his pants down to his knees." He chuckled. "Didn't mean no harm."

My eyes widened even more. "She took the preacher's pants off?"

"Not off, just got them down to his knees."

"Maybe she needs help," I muttered.

"Good heavens, Kieran." He sighed. "She's our harvest queen. We'd have to lock her up to get her that kind of help...can't lock up the harvest queen, can we? She'll settle down eventually."

Although I really didn't have any idea what a harvest queen was, it sounded important.

"Nope"—Dillon sighed heavily—"problem with our Jesse-Belle is she needs a man. See, she up and married one of those Keen boys, a real troublemaker. His family is involved with trafficking up to their necks. He was in and out of jail, always drinking. She divorced him, but she's the type of woman, all out of sorts without a man to be bedding, if you get my drift. Just move the dresser up against the door at night before you go to sleep. You'll be all right."

"Move the...ah...maybe there's a hotel somewhere I can stay?"

"There's Miss Jones's Bed and Breakfast, but I had to

arrest her a while back for running a bawdy house, so she's closed, only temporary, mind you. Folks do have to make a living and she's a widow. Husband died of mouth cancer...chewin'."

"Tobacco?" I made a face.

"You got it. Anyway, it was only a few locals she had in there and she charged for the drinks and such, gave all the money to her daughters who do the putting out. Trouble was, Miss Jones bought the liquor on the black market instead of the legal way."

I just stared at him. "What about the prostitution?"

"Oh that ain't no never mind. Minor stuff, really. But it's a dry county, no liquor stores. A few blind pigs but we don't bother with them. If we don't let those guys function, we get a lot more trouble, what with the illegal trade. Anyway, I'll let her operate again if you like, just for you. It's clean enough, no bugs, although you might find a lizard or two, alligator lizards to be exact. But only if it gets too hot."

"Alligators?"

"They're a cross with the lizards, itty-bitty things, really. Big strapping fellow like you not afraid of lizards and snakes and such, are you?"

I shuddered. I'd never actually seen any lizards, and as for alligators, well...I could do without seeing those, too.

"We got a colony of them down here. We even call them by name."

I closed my eyes. Good Lord. What have I done?

Three hours later, I was riding in the sheriff's pickup that he'd parked at the airport. Once we left the city of Dallas with its various shapes of skyscrapers, I got a bit edgy. The smooth city roads got rough. Soon we were travelling over bumpy terrain and down unpaved back roads.

"Ah, Dillon," I spoke up, "where is this town exactly?"

"Coming up, another thirty miles, or so. You are now

officially in East County."

"We are?" I looked around, trying to see through the dust that was kicking up around us. All there seemed to be were fields and trees.

"It said so back there on that sign pinned to the outhouse. Said Welcome to East County."

"Oh, I must have missed the outhouse."

He chuckled. "The sign was blown down during the last cyclone, no one bothered to put it up again. They just tacked it to the outhouse."

"Cyclones eh?"

"We get those once in a while. Last one I recall was in ninety-eight."

Great. Alligators, cyclones, and a horny niece.

"We'll reach the exit in a little bit. To the left is Lone Trail, to the right, New Trail."

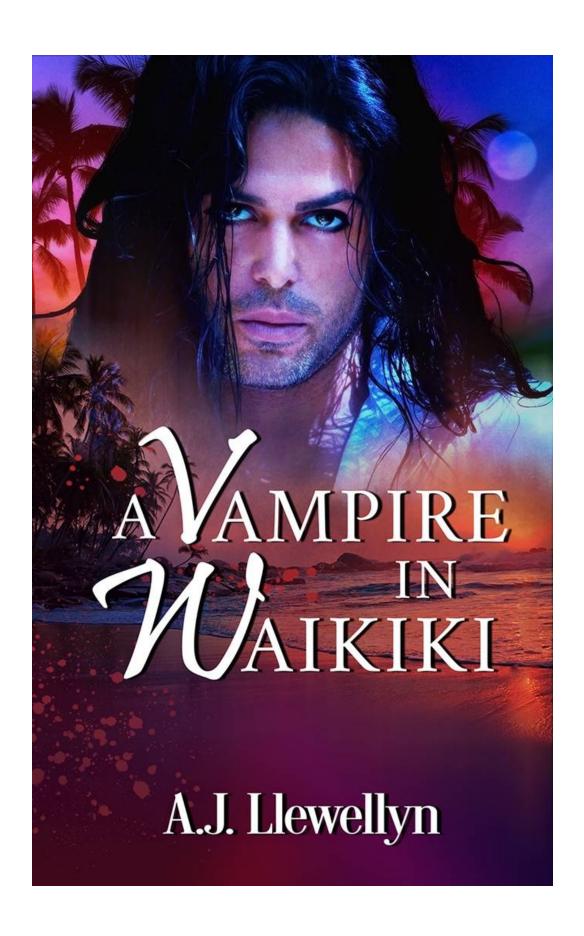
"Original names."

He laughed. "You got what'cha call a dry wit. I like that. Makes me smile. Some people around here didn't go very far in school though. They're not going to catch on. Might think you're uppity."

"That's okay. I can handle that."

"I got a feeling you can handle just about anything this county's got to throw at ya, son."

"One hopes." Although I wasn't so sure about Jesse-Belle.



A VAMPIRE IN WAIKIKI

Gay-for-pay porn star Jimmy Thunder doesn't just have a double life, he's got three. Just when he thinks he has all his big secrets under control, he discovers mind-blowing sex and the emerging feelings of true love with his gay co-star, Angelis. And it's no fluke. These guys just can't keep their hands off each other, doing unscripted, hot sex scenes that thrill their director, but for Jimmy, it's actually one more problem he doesn't need.

His most recent ex-girlfriend claims she's pregnant, his current girl is fighting deportation, and just what is that deadly entity lurking in Angelis' second bedroom? Jimmy knows an otherworldly monster when he feels one. And he ought to know, because Jimmy's a vampire. Sleeping by day, hiding at night, Jimmy's many secrets are about to collide in the sinister, dark side of tropical Waikiki few visitors ever see.

CHAPTER 1

Sweating palms, dry tongue feeling like a sock wedged in my mouth, I hoped my terror didn't show. I had to remind myself this was supposed to be fun, but I was starting to think I couldn't go through with it.

The drop-dead handsome man who was exchanging lusty kisses with me, moved off the sofa and got between my knees. He was the most striking man I had ever seen, but being a guy, I didn't analyze the sexual potential of other men very often. Angelis was different. He would have passed for an ancient Hawaiian king in different times with his jet black hair, caramel-colored skin, big black eyes and perfect, lean and muscular body topped by a toothy white smile.

Besides, I was about to fuck him, so how he looked was kind of an issue. He was giving me his best shit-eating grin right now and something shifted between us. Good God, was I actually feeling lust for the man? I watched him

unbuckle the leather belt at my waist, unzip my pants, and heard his gasp of appreciation as my huge cock sprang out and greeted him like a long lost friend.

"Delicious." His tongue swirled expertly over the head. I felt faint for a moment, then that incomparable surge of warmth started from the base of my spine, shot straight to my balls and to my grateful cock—which had never, ever been given this kind of oral attention by any of the countless women I'd fucked.

"That's it," I managed to say. "Suck it." I watched Angelis's eyes glaze over, as if he was drunk with my cock, letting it slip inch by inch into his hot, hungry mouth. It was like being in my own porn movie when the second guy nudged him aside and took over.

Wait. This was my own porn movie. My first. As in, my first ever love scene, on or off the camera, with another man.

My name is Thunder, Jimmy Thunder. I adore women, but I fuck men. They call it gay-for-pay. I call it the best damned way to make a living that I know of—tons of sweat, not much work.

It was Angelis, on the floor now sucking my cock as if it was the last one on earth, who recruited me, who suggested I give it a try. He knew of my lady killer reputation, and when he caught a glimpse of my cock in the Kalakaua Avenue gym shower one day he said, "Man, you'd make a fortune in porn."

My sexual appetite being as voracious as it was, and my lifestyle so secretive, I figured I'd do a few movies, screw some hot chicks...and bail. But it was gay porn Angelis was talking about and I found myself intrigued.

I watched him suck one of my balls now as the second guy, Alan, sucked the other one. Angelis kept up a languid, but insistent pace on the length of my rod with one hand, coming back to graze on my cock head every now and then. He was driving me crazy. I wanted his mouth on me again and then I got it, his swiveling tongue sending waves of joy straight to my toes.

"Thunder, I'm gonna want a come shot here, baby," the director Billy Flamingo whispered and my gaze went to Angelis's face as he started sucking on my meat in earnest. Next thing I knew, he was pulling back and I was jerking like an old-fashioned soda fountain, exploding all over the place.

"I want that dick in my ass," Angelis hissed, coaxing the last shot of cream from me as the cameraman, a guy who went by Bull, kept the handheld camera an inch away from the action. It took me a moment to calm down and then Alan and Angelis were licking the cream from my belly and from each other's mouths.

I was watching Angelis thinking, *God, I want to fuck you* at the same moment another thought rushed in right behind it. *What are you thinking? He's a guy!*

Angelis leaned up to me and I wanted him naked. I was ready to fuck and I was hotter and more switched on than I had ever been in my life. Oh, there was a woman once...a long, long time ago—before I stopped letting women mess with my head—who'd made me feel this way. He started kissing me and I felt that momentary panic again. He tasted good. That wasn't the problem. It was in my contract as a top that I had to lick the bottom's ass, suck his cock and fuck him.

"But I'm straight," I told Billy Flamingo when I met him for the first time two days before we shot the scene.

Billy laughed. "Yeah. They all say that in the beginning." He'd sent me off for blood tests to make sure I was clean and non-contagious and asked if I wanted to shoot my first scene with Angelis.

Angelis was the hottest thing in gay porn right now, particularly in the bareback or breeding category as some people call it, where no condoms were used and the guys were strictly screened. I didn't need help from the set fluffer. Neither did Angelis. He was openly gay and apparently liked what I was doing to him.

The man looked like a demigod. I sure did want to shoot my first scene with him and now he was squirming around on my lap on the red velvet sofa of the closed nightclub. I felt the growing heat between us, or was that the camera lights? I suckled one of his nipples and he gasped, "How did you know?" into my left ear.

He was driving me crazy and it gave me a thrill to rub the crotch of his elegant dress pants, to feel the bulge forming at my touch. I felt my own cock lengthen and harden.

"That's it, feel that boner, baby." Billy Flamingo's whispered instructions would be dubbed out later, our own voices dubbed over, and now that old nightclub standby "Relax" by Frankie Goes to Hollywood pounded through the sound system. It brought back old, pleasant memories and triggered a horny spike in me that had me putting Angelis on his back, ripping off his trousers, eyeing the massive piece of sweet Hawaiian sausage between his legs and not even thinking twice about giving him head.

I eased him back, working my way between his legs, the pulsing beat of the song putting me in an almost hypnotic space. I am not a bad looking guy, quite the opposite. I am not saying this out of...false pride, but because being a handsome guy in Honolulu has been both a blessing and a curse. Like Angelis, much of my blood is Hawaiian and we're tall guys with lean, muscular bodies.

Relax don't do it, when you want to come Relax don't do it, when you want to come The lyrics thrummed in my brain and now all that mattered was that I did want to come. I forgot about the lights, the people, and concentrated on the huge cock I was handling with inexpert, but willing fingers.

"God, that's hot." I heard Billy gloating as Bull, the cameraman, zeroed in an inch from my nose while I inhaled the incredibly sweet, clean scent of Angelis' skin. I stopped sucking the tip of his cock for a second, to nuzzle and sip at the lovely flesh at his thighs. He smelled of oatmeal and honey soap, and he moaned, running his fingers into my hair, holding me there, allowing me to inhale and absorb his smell, his intoxicating presence. I felt my canine teeth elongating, and it took everything in me not to sink them into the nearest vein and feed on him. My teeth slipped back, blood hunger stirring the steaming cauldron in my belly, then my mouth went back to his cock.

"I will teach you, I will help you," Angelis had said before we shot the scene. A couple of belts of fire whiskey and I'd been game to try this. Now, I wanted to make him feel as good as he'd made me feel, and the crazed expression on my face, which had more to do with the fierce effort to not unleash the real beast within me, seemed to set him off.

He was humping my face, watching me suck him. Hey, ma. Look at me! I'm sucking another guy's joint. And loving it! The music got louder and I took my mouth off that cock. I wanted to get to his ass. I didn't intend to lavish it with quite as much tongue as I did, but damn. This tastes better than pussy. How can this be?

Angelis spread his legs wider and I went easy on him, preparing him for my cock, which was massive by anybody's standards. I really needed to fuck him now. I licked and laved at that hole like I was licking the tastiest frosting at the bottom of the mixing bowl. Man, this was

good.

"Fuck me." He said it a few times, until it sounded like a mantra, louder and louder, a sob, a beggar's prayer for my cock, for...me.

I couldn't see straight, I wanted to be inside him so badly. I felt him take me, put my cock right at his asshole, and I started to move into him. Bull stayed on me, Billy's voice reassuring as the tightest cave I'd ever found myself in wrapped me in a velvet haze of carnal heat.

When you want to come When you want to come

The lyrics were like hot bursts of magma firing straight up my spine as Angelis gripped me to him, harder, closer... closer. I fucked him like I'd been kept away from him for months. It was better than fucking a woman, looking down and seeing his full cock nestled between our flat, hard bellies. I leaned down and kissed him and knew I was going to come. I pulled out, let Bull get his come shot, and that greedy boy I'd been banging told me to stick my spurting cock back into him.

I was supposed to say, "I just put my babies in you, man." That was the line, but when our eyes connected, I couldn't say the same corny line all the bare-backing guys say in porn. Instead, I put my hand on his belly and snarled, "I just put future Hawaiian kings inside you."

It seemed to be driving him wild and he was pulling on his own cock, beating me to the punch, and I felt bad he'd had to jerk himself to his own satisfaction. But I was too busy flying into another panic attack. I was still coming and now had to pull out and let Bull and Billy dictate exactly how they wanted me to take my cock out, stick it back in, and then I finally stopped coming and felt exhilarated that

the scene had gone great and everybody was happy.

"Beautiful," Billy kept saying. "Thunder...you are gonna be a star, baby."

Angelis and I grinned at each other. I bent down and dropped a kiss on his chest, right over his skittering heart.

"Oh...nice touch...keep shooting," I heard Billy say, even though this was a private moment. Angelis pulled my head to his mouth and kissed me. It was completely spontaneous and I surrendered to the moment, unhappy when he pulled back. His lips went to my ear. "That was incredible. You were incredible."

"So were you." I was suddenly jealous of whomever he was fucking, whoever got to command that juicy piece of ass pie off camera. And, oh...I was just realizing, plenty of other people got to give it their best shot on camera, too.

I was still lying on top of him. He put his mouth back to my ear so I could hear him over the waning music.

"You ever wanna play in private, you give me a call." He kissed my cheek like a shy teenage girl and gave me a gentle push. He swung his legs to the floor and I sat there in a daze, watching him walk that cute ass of his to the restroom.

Bull leaned over to me, his breath smelling of Dentyne gum. "He must like you." I detected a strong German accent. "I never see him stay hard for a top unless he likes him and I never, ever heard him say anything like that to another guy before."

He was too focused on his camera as he prepared the next scene to see my stupid grin. The one I hadn't worn on my face since I was about sixteen years old. Bull and Billy were all business now and I was thinking about how I'd lost all control, fell into the honey trap of passion. It would be seen by people, millions of people all over the world. It worried me and I felt the glorious moment of pure pleasure

run dry.

"Don't get wiggy on yourself, dude." Bull's voice was firm. "It's just sex."

Wiggy? He had that right, but not for the reasons he was thinking. My eyes followed my sexy co-star, who was now slipping on his street clothes. He held up a hand to me, my stomach in knots when he gave me another lovely smile. "See you tomorrow, Thunder. You're a natural, baby."

As I went into the bathroom to clean up, my cell phone began vibrating. I was trying to sort out the feelings I had about everything that just happened. I wasn't living a double life, I was now living three. Skirt chasing beach boy by day, gay porn star by night. I didn't know which was harder. Now I was having fantasies about another man. I didn't know which curse was worse. Having all these lives, or being a vampire in Waikiki.

CHAPTER 2

"You're late, Jimmy." My on again, off again, always irksome girlfriend Nonita was standing outside the ABC shop on the corner of Kalakaua Avenue and Prince Kuhio Walk. She worked there three afternoons a week, helping out her dad, who was no fan of mine. As she got into my car he was standing, hands on hips, watching me drive away with his demented offspring.

It wasn't that Nonita wasn't a handful before I met her. *Au contraire*. But her dad was exasperated with pulling her out of strip clubs and brothels and wanted somebody else to take over the invisible, impossible reins of keeping Nonita in check. Since we'd met, she'd curtailed these activities until we had a fight, or, as I was beginning to realize, she created a fight, then she would head right back over to the nearest opium den in search of Japanese businessmen with a yen to part with their...yen, and the desire for some half Hawaiian, half Japanese female fighting fish.

"Are you hungry?" My voice was sharper than I'd intended. It was still dark and I was excited, despite the gnawing hunger of no blood in a couple of days. I knew I'd have to feed soon. I was feeling light-headed. I always got grumpy when I didn't get blood.

My small, pert, part-time girlfriend gave me a wicked grin, knowing I liked to eat at the best places, and afterward, have some hot sex. That was Nonita's gift. Her insatiable urge to fuck was the reward for the non-stop headaches she gave a man. Any man.

"Where were you anyway?" She was pouting, but the effect of those juicy, tart, Asian plum lips wasn't giving me

the same instant erection it usually did. I could still feel Angelis's cock in my mouth, the way he pulled and sucked and owned my cock. I could still feel the rhythm we'd shared, like I'd spent a day in the ocean, at one with the sea. *Stop it.* It was just sex. It was just exciting because it was new.

"I love seeing how hard I make you." Nonita's tiny, French-manicured hand was working on my crotch. No need for her to know it was thinking about Angelis that had me all hot and bothered.

"Uh-huh." I let her fingers do the walking to my fly, but I wasn't really looking forward to the sex. Or was I? I pointed the car toward Waikiki, the good end with the expensive hotels, even more expensive boutiques and the worst, most overpriced restaurants in town.

Nonita liked the good names, the hot, new places to eat. She moved her hand away from me to pat down her sleek, chin-length bob and I felt grateful for the reprieve, wanting to be alone with my thoughts.

"Why can't you buy a decent car?" She made a big production of having to manually wind down the window. "This one feels so creepy. Like there are things living in it."

"Yes, like you and me."

"And it smells really bad."

I laughed. "Thanks a lot."

"No, silly. I was thinking something more like a rat. I feel like there are claws rubbing at my ankles."

Oops.

She started to look down at her feet, but I distracted her by pointing to some imaginary thing of interest out the window. There was a rat right where she was sitting, but he was a dead one. Leaning down, I picked him up by the tail. He was as big as I remembered, that alley rat, big as a freakin' house cat. I tossed him out the window as Nonita

turned to look back at me.

I saw the horrified look on the couple's faces in the car beside me. Tourists! They had to be, in His and Hers *Aloha* shirts. Nobody who lived on the islands actually dressed that way. The rat landed with a thud on their windshield. I cringed inwardly as the car swerved, narrowly missing a palm tree.

Nonita was looking at me now. "Why don't you love me?" Not this conversation again. She swiftly switched gears. This streetwise girl recognized a stalled vehicle when she saw one. "I know! Tomorrow, let's go buy you a new car." She looked giddy at the prospect and I would have indulged her an hour of aimless car hunting, except that there were many things that Nonita, close as we were, didn't know about me.

The biggest thing being that I am a vampire, the second thing being that my car often doubled as my crib when I couldn't get home before daylight. The massive trunk served as my bed and I'd rigged it so I could lock myself inside the velvet-lined recesses when needed. The beauty of my old '76 Lincoln Continental was that nobody wanted it and there wasn't a thing on it anyone would want to steal. I'd even removed the original white wall tires in an effort to really make it look like a shambles.

Obviously, I'd succeeded.

"Where are we going?" She watched me angle into the narrow parking entrance at the Waikiki Parc Hotel. It was like I'd just added water and she'd turned into someone nice. Making Nonita happy had been a challenge and a privilege. It's true that guys fall for hot bitches, but now Little Miss Firepants was squirming onto my lap and it wasn't working on me. "Self park, Jimmy. I want you to fuck me before dinner."

"Don't be ridiculous, sweetie." I pushed her off me and

she frowned as two harried valet guys simultaneously opened our doors.

Nonita stepped out of the car. She might have been tiny, but she was first in line when God was handing out perfect, perky breasts and long legs. That little stick of feminine dynamite walked with a confident sway toward the lobby. I stared at her, trying not to think about how good it felt fucking Angelis with his rock-hard cock lying between our bellies.

Nobu was packed, the throbbing music hitting us in the face the instant the door opened. Being a vampire, I have acute hearing, smell and my vision is pretty darn good at night, but Nonita has acute man acumen. She hypnotized the Maitre D' into giving us a good table against the wall and we hunkered down, looking at our menus.

Being Hawaiian, there was nothing especially original about Nobu's menu to us. I mean, we on the islands have been eating this type of food since we were *hanabutta*, or small kid time. Asian grannies on the islands have been cooking this way forever and you'll find the same food cheaper and quicker at local-style *izakayas*, but the quality of the food is like comparing a Mazzerati with my bashed and trashed Lincoln.

We ordered quickly, *Inaniwa* udon noodle salad with lobster and Tasmanian trout with crispy spinach for both of us.

"Can you bring lots and lots of *yuzu* soy sauce?" Nonita asked the waiter. It always bothered me when she didn't say please and thank you. One glance from me and she added, "Please." Her almond eyes and winning smile, when she decided to turn it on, always got her what she wanted.

I was more than a little shocked that it had suddenly stopped working on me.

"What do you want to drink?" I asked her.

"Pisco sour." We'd both fallen in love with the Peruvian cocktail we'd discovered here. A couple of those and I'd be ready to fuck anybody if I had to. She leaned over the table and put her hands in mine when the waiter was gone. She had a disarming way of decrying public displays of affection one second, then wanting to get fucked in alleyways the next.

"All right, who is she?"

"Who is who?" I looked around, thinking some girl was looking at me, but Nonita grabbed my chin with forceful fingers and her gaze seared into mine.

"The woman that's got you all shook up. It's not that stupid Australian girl, is it?"

I stared at her. "No. She's just a friend." It was sort of true. Clancy was an original, a bright spark plug of a girl, but I wasn't in love with her any more than I was in love with Nonita.

"Somebody's got you worked up. You're in a frenzy of sexual heat. I can smell the pheromones. You're intoxicated by somebody, Jimmy Thunder."

Pheromones. She was the only woman I'd ever met who naturally understood them. I've been accused, in fact, all vampires are accused, of swamping their victims with pheromones. People never stopped to think about what they swamp us with, everything from bad breath to body odor. I smell it all.

"I don't want to fight. Not with the prices I'm paying."

"We're not fighting. This is foreplay." She was pouting, both from the lip and from the bosom.

I kept trying not to think about how I couldn't wait to get my hands on Angelis's cock again. I wanted to make him come this time. I didn't want him jerking himself off the next time we shot a scene together. "Where were you today?" Nonita leaned closer and I could smell the cheap version of *Pua-keni-keni* perfume her daddy sold in his stores to tourists who bought it by the bucket load.

"I told you, I had a meeting. It was business."

"Funny business." She had her head tilted to the side and was swinging chopsticks between her fingers.

She was always angry with me. Angry and demanding. Good thing I liked her. Not that I made a habit of eating my friends, but I didn't want this, the constant arguments. Hunting her down, dragging her out of peep shows and whorehouses. I didn't want Nonita selling herself for a living. She could have had a good life, she just chose to make it hard.

My thoughts drowned out most of her predictable barrage. I let her rant and rave for several minutes about her desire to settle down, and tried not to laugh when she broached the subject of children. As a vampire, I could have them at certain cycles of the moon, but only with a female vampire. And I certainly didn't plan on turning Nonita into my mate.

I interrupted her with a raised hand. "Sweetie, I already told you I can't have kids." That was my standard line with every woman and she knew this long before she cast her net and lured me to her.

"We should see a doctor. We could adopt...or try insemination. You're such a manly man, how can you not want children?"

What I didn't want was to bring my family's curse on any child. The truth was I adored children, but both my sister and I had vowed we would be the last of our bloodline. I was saved from getting into another pointless argument by our drinks arriving. I clinked glasses with Nonita.

"You know I will find out who she is." Nonita had a smile

like a tomahawk. "I will find her and kill her."

"There is no her. If you want to waste your time, go ahead. In the meantime, let's enjoy our dinner, okay?" I didn't want to fight. I would not fight. Normally I would fight because it guaranteed a damned good fucking afterward, but now I didn't care. I was itching to get back to the set the following day, back to fucking that man.

I needed to know if it had been a fluke or if in fact loving other men might be the very thing I'd been holding out for, the missing link in the chain of my very long, lonely existence.

The scene was a hotel elevator. We were shooting on the seventh floor of a new Japanese hotel still under construction. One of the crew guys on our movie had arranged, via his roommate, for us to shoot here—but we had to be done by four A.M. when the security shift changed. The only fee was that the roommate, the security guard on duty, wanted to watch. No problem.

Angelis, dressed in a pinstriped business suit, stood beside me looking unbelievably sexy, yet credible as a company CEO. The scene called for me to kneel in front of him, unzip his pants and go berserk sucking his cock. Our fingers touched on the brass rail behind us. Our eyes met. I was so excited, yet nervous. The elevator door was jammed open. Billy, the director, Bull, the DP and one lighting guy all crowded behind us.

"Don't worry about us, just concentrate on him," Billy had said as we'd started shooting the scene. I wasn't worried about them at all. I got the zipper down, the cock and balls wedged in the opening of that Brooks Brothers suit not giving me as much access to Angelis as I wanted, but somehow it added to my enjoyment of the moment.

I paused to inhale his clean fragrance. He smelled so good. He had a fresh, earthy scent. Not like Nonita. I tried not to think about the screaming argument we'd had when I'd dropped her home without fucking her.

My tongue touched the tip of that cock, which was glistening with pre-come. I tasted it. *Oh God*. He tasted like coconuts. I could go down on a woman and tell you exactly what she'd been eating. Looked like it was gonna be this way with guys, too. For a moment, I rubbed that beautiful prick all over my face, surprising everyone including myself.

"Wow. That feels really good, baby." Angelis stroked my hair away from my face. I knew he wanted me to suck him and I turned my face slightly to take him into my mouth. Oh man, I'd been looking forward to this moment all day.

Angelis was so well endowed, he could easily top in movies, but he preferred to bottom. That was, according to everything I read and heard, what made him so hot in movies right now. Most bottoms didn't have such huge cocks.

And I was feeling it all right. Did I say I'd been looking forward to shooting this scene? Hell, I'd barely slept, ignoring Nonita's barbed texts and lengthy voicemail messages. Now Bull's handheld camera stayed on me as I extended my tongue out as far as I could. Angelis gave a little jump as I took his ass into my hands. I knew I'd pricked him even through the woolen suit fabric with my fingernails. When I haven't fed on blood for a while that's one of the side effects, my nails start growing into razor-sharp talons, my body's reminder I need more than sex to keep refueled.

I wanted him close as I sucked on his juicy fruit and I found I was good at it. My teeth stayed recessed in my mouth and when I closed my eyes in ecstasy, it was real. I

was not acting. When Angelis started to buck and moan, that wasn't acting either and the hardest thing I have ever had to do was take my mouth from him as he started to come. We had to get that money shot, you know.

He came all over my mouth and chin and I slurped everything up. I held onto his ass, feeling his body tremble, feeling enormous power that I'd brought him such sexual release. Angelis looked down at me as I licked the side and base of his cock. Bull was keeping the camera on my roving tongue and I looked up to watch my on-screen lover smiling.

"Damn. You're good with that tongue." He pulled me up to him and we exchanged sloppy, heart-felt kisses. We looked at each other and had Billy not started shrieking about moving onto the next scene, I knew, just knew Angelis and I would keep going.

Angelis and I didn't exchange a word. We just kept staring at each other and I wanted, more than anything, to be alone in a room fucking the hell out of him with no interruptions, nothing but the sheer pleasure of being with him.

"We're done here." Bull and the lighting guy moved out of the now very warm elevator. Angelis came out of his trance and zipped up his pants, packing away his meaty piston, conferring with Billy. He was in a scene with two other guys now and I felt myself grow hot with fury.

Angelis glanced over at me. "You wanna do this scene with us?"

I looked right into his eyes. "Yes, I do."

A slight smile from him and my heart swelled.

"Great! That's great! Thanks, Thunder. One of the guys didn't show up." Billy was looking at his watch, but I knew Angelis hadn't asked me because somebody hadn't shown up. He wanted me to fuck him and he knew I wanted it,

too.

"We've set up in a room down here." Billy pointed to the other end of the hall and the three of us walked toward the sound of noise and laughter. "We're shooting a period movie next."

Billy's chain smoking made his breathing labored and his voice come out in gasps, yet the guy was just scraping thirty. "Angelis and I think you'll be perfect as the king. Same sort of set-up...you seem very...comfortable with the sex. Are you interested?"

"Very." I gave Angelis a long look I hoped conveyed my sincere desire to fuck him often and repeatedly, and he gave me a merry laugh.

"Cool!"

Cool. It was better than arguing any day.

The crew was wrestling with setting up the hotel bedroom, so Angelis and I took the elevator down to the street and I treated us to iced green teas and steamed *edamame* beans at a small noodle shop on the corner. I glimpsed the street sign. No wonder my skin was crawling. We were on Helumoa Road.

In old *Waikiki*, this had been the site of human sacrifices. Chickens would come out at night, pecking away at the maggots feasting on rotting bodies. Helumoa takes its name from that. The word means chicken scratch.

"Are you serious?"

I looked at Angelis. I had no idea I'd said that aloud. "Yes." I felt oddly protective of him, putting my hand on the small of his back and steering him toward the hotel. I wondered how well it would do on such troubled ground.

"You're an unusual guy." Angelis smiled at me and my stomach gave a little lurch watching him suck on the straw in his drink.

"I am?" I laughed.

"Oh, yes. I find you very intriguing, Jimmy Thunder. By the way, I am kinda embarrassed admitting this but I've never sucked a guy with foreskin before and it's a major turn-on."

I stared at him, the moment thick with innuendo. I never thought twice about having an uncut cock. A few women had told me the same thing Angelis did, but I'd never before been so thrilled by the compliment.

Just as I was about to ask him out for a drink, a real drink, the security guard interrupted us.

"They switched floors. The lights kept going out. Take the elevator to the fourteenth."

"Thank you." I wanted to make out like a bandit with Angelis in that elevator. Though there was genuine chemistry between us, we talked shop until we reached our floor.

"A guy not showing up for a scene isn't that unusual," he told me. "Models, as they call us guys in porn, often flake. They audition whenever a casting call goes out and some guys go on to do well in the business. Some do one or two movies, then disappear. Some guys just never show up again."

"You think they prefer fantasy and anonymity?" I asked as we got out of the elevator.

"Sure. But the flake rate is very high in gay porn, more so than straight. Guys might want to get their freak on, but they don't want the world to see them doing it."

I suddenly felt uncomfortable about some random guy getting his freak on with Angelis.

"It's especially difficult in our movies, you know, bareback, where we don't use condoms, even though we are constantly tested for HIV, even hepatitis. I've done test scenes with guys where the sex has been through the roof, but they never showed up for the shoot."

He had through the roof sex with other guys?

"You...do a lot of test scenes with guys?" I asked.

"Not anymore." He smiled. "I pretty much know if I'm gonna be turned on by a guy, and if not I've gotten good at faking it."

He fakes it? Not with me, I hope. We got to the room and the scene was still being staged, beds and lamps were being moved around. Angelis might have been the hungriest, sluttiest bottom in porn, but he was HIV negative and planned to stay that way. A scrupulously clean guy, he was always ready for the camera, and his assistant was ready to help him douche after every scene where he took semen up the...er...ying-yang. He went off to the bathroom to prepare himself and I got ready by waiting for him, pondering my thoughts.

When I went for my blood work in order to do the movie, my blood type came in as rare—Jk b—and excited the doctors who wanted to run all kinds of tests on me. I had deliberately withheld sucking anybody's blood, knowing I was going to be tested for HIV, which vampires cannot contract, but would create havoc in a blood panel with antibodies, making me look like a walking garbage dump. I would need to abstain again in twenty-seven days, when another test would be due, if I planned to keep shooting gay porn.

And, so far, there was no downside. I needed to shoot nights, Angelis only liked to work nights, too. Perfect. Now, the movie was one guy down for a planned threesome and Angelis seemed perfectly happy with me as a sub. We lay around sipping our iced teas in the half-finished hotel room on the king sized bed, draped by Billy's boyfriend, Luke, in very nice Calvin Kline bamboo-patterned sheets. A big clue that I was wearing my heart on my sleeve for Angelis was that I let him eat the last *edamame*.

"This is freaky." He was looking at the sheets now.

"Why?" I asked him. Our bodies were close on the bed. I could think of nothing else. What the hell was wrong with me?

"I went to this gay porn convention in New York—hey, remember that Billy?"

Billy smirked. "Wait until you hear this story."

"...so Billy and I went shopping at Bloomingdales and we picked up these same sheets. This hand reaches for them at the same time and it's this totally hot, packin' guy and he...well, he'd seen my movies. One thing led to another and well, I figured 'Hey, I'm in New York, I'll have me a nooner..."

Nooner!

"...and I went home with him and I'm really grooving on this guy, then he opens his door and it's full of Nazi memorabilia. And he's so freaking proud of his collection, you know. He points out the lampshades made of human skin and it was all a bit too Jeffrey Dahmer for me. I bolted. I ran like a girl all the way back to our hotel."

"Where does he live? I'm going to kill him," was my response. Everybody laughed except Angelis. He smiled at me in that gentle way of his.

The third guy in our scene was a big hunk of beef who went by Tank. He walked in with that awkward, can't-put-my-arms-down-to-my-sides gait that so many body builders had. He showed up just as we were ready to roll and I recognized him as a chauffeur slash bodyguard who, like us, also trained at the Kalakaua Avenue gym.

Suddenly, I wasn't feeling so special. Angelis had been recruiting other guys.

This disgruntling fact almost sent me into despair, especially when I clapped a load of the heavy artillery dangling between Tank's thighs.

Angelis, Tank and I were engaged in quite a fun little scene, stripping, sipping and sucking at each other until Tank failed to get an erection, despite Angelis's best efforts. Tank sat beside us, thumbing through Penthouse, as in, looking at naked women to get hard.

He needed two rounds of serious sucking from the female fluffer kneeling on the floor out of camera range to get hard and it made the shooting of the scene difficult since we had to keep starting and stopping.

Angelis and I, lying on the bed naked, could barely keep our hands off each other.

So anxious to be inside him again, I was dismayed by the fact that it was Tank who was supposed to fuck him. I did get to suck his cock when Tank, suffering a serious case of limp dick for a third time, had to stop and get his dick sucked by the fluffer again.

Lying beside Angelis, I let him poke gentle fun at me as Tank hoovered through a fresh copy of *Hustler*. My rigid cock was cozied up close to Angelis's miraculously chiseled body, and he kept glancing at it.

"You sure you're not gay?" he teased.

I wasn't sure of anything except there was that astonishing, naked body again and I wanted to be on top of him, giving him all I had, feeling his beautiful cock twitching between us. Angelis looked at me in a pleading way, I was sure he wanted me to suck his cock, but we were supposed to be waiting. I couldn't help myself. I needed that dick. I wanted that dick. I bent my head and started sucking him, and suddenly his mouth was reaching for me.

"Shit! Roll that camera!" Billy jumped when he saw that we were getting into a ferocious, unscripted sixty-nine that had the director in paroxysms of joy, and me in paroxysms of angst when that juicy cock was taken from me, but I

knew now that I liked my new job. I liked it a lot.

I had to watch that bastard Tank fuck Angelis, but I kept my hand between Angelis's legs, my mouth moving down his belly when he hissed, "Suck my cock," through gritted teeth, I went straight down to my own private paradise, feeling his hot, burning kisses on my thigh, his tongue on my ass.

No. Oh no. Nobody had ever come close to kissing me there. Nobody. Angelis twisted around to get his tongue on my asshole, and when I felt those sizzling wet licks on that sensitive place I almost wept with joy, then frustration when the director told me to turn over so they could shoot me coming.

Angelis was getting fucked so aggressively by Tank now that he lost physical contact with me, focusing on his own moment, on bracing himself for each plundering of his ass. We did come together—but nowhere near each other.

"That's about the hottest scene I ever shot!" Billy was chortling now and Angelis collapsed facedown on the bed, laughing.

I was exhilarated, but famished for blood now. I had trained myself to satisfy the Hunger two to three times a week. I wouldn't exactly call myself squeamish, but if forced I would admit to being a reluctant vampire. The rest of the time I'd drink.

And I never mix my drinks. Well, almost never. The urge to feed, to kill...some men called it blood lust, I called it wonderlust, because I always wondered when I'd get my next fill.

Angelis got up and went to the bathroom to shower, the director following him, talking nonstop in his ear. I had to dress and leave immediately. My canine teeth kept elongating. I was starting to wonder if I would get through the night without blood. Sometimes, after really great sex,

my ability to control my body was impossible.

I'd planned on downing a couple of Mai Tais, certain I'd be okay. I hadn't planned on being so turned on that I'd be forced to be on the hunt. It was an unhappy prospect in my exhausted, still switched-on state. I was afraid of putting the bite on someone nice, not the usual street vermin I prefer to target.

Outside the hotel, as I was pulling my car out of the driveway, my cell phone vibrated and I recognized the ABC store number followed by nine, one, one. Nonita's daddy.

"Jimmy? That you, Jimmy?" He shrieked like I was deaf.

"It's me, Luisito. What's the problem?" It was now three A.M. Only one reason he could be calling. No, make that two. Bad news or very bad news.

"Nonita...she been gone all day. She no show up for work. I sent Tito out foah find her."

"Where is she?"

"She over at Blossom House." The old man went silent and I knew he was anxious, both for her well-being and my violent reaction. The Blossom House? Christ. What was I gonna do with that girl?

"I'll go get her. Don't you worry. Okay, Luisito?"

The old man calmed down because I hadn't gone barking mad. In fact, he'd done me a favor. I could find some blood, bring back his daughter, and look like a good guy. I pointed the Lincoln toward Waikiki, the shabby end, full of titty bars and flop houses.

Merchant Street, when I first moved here from my family home on the island of Kauai over a hundred years ago, was still in the heart of Chinatown. But man, was it a different place then. On River Street, farmers sold their produce by day. The whores and gamblers ran their games by night. I still involuntarily held my breath as I crossed what used to be Blood Town and Mosquito Flats. The

stench of human sewerage in those poorest of poor neighborhoods was disgusting back then.

The memories still haunted me. I grew to love Chinatown after it was rebuilt following the big 1920s fire, after the plague and the fires and everything settled down. A new cop came into town, Detective Jardine. He was the star of the Honolulu PD. On any given night, you could see him on the corner of Market and River, scouring the 'hood for signs of trouble. And there was plenty of it, even in the thirties. He was a neat, small man who wore a Fedora at an angle. We both rid the streets of vermin, human vermin. We just had different methods. Mine were more... permanent, if you will.

Forget what you read in the travel brochures. Pests and insects do exist in Hawaii. I know, because I live on them. And when I can't find two legged pests to pick off from the backs of decent-living people, I am reduced to feeding on other creatures of the night.

Jardine always acknowledged me. He respected me, never questioned me, but could always be relied upon to be polite. And witty. Sometimes, I still see his ghost on the corner. I like knowing he watches over his old beat, but I miss the warmth and camaraderie of the man. The ghost of an old Chinese man, from a very long time ago, judging by the queue of hair down his back, flittered right in front of me. This was the part of being a vampire that I adored. Seeing it all. I tended to see the ghosts of victims, a reminder perhaps of my own particular plight. I liked to think of it as a warning sign of potential danger and frequently I was right.

I parked illegally on the corner of Merchant and River and stood, looking up at the Japanese brothel disguised to look like a dress making salon. Making my way past the first entrance, I got to the second and third doors and the girl who answered the last, a red-lacquered door with green hinges, went to fetch Blossom.

The imperious middle-aged woman bustled out in her tight red, beaded floor-length gown. She extended her hand. "Ah, Jimmy-San. Such a long time we don't see you."

Smiling, I kissed her pale milky hand. "Blossom, you're as beautiful as ever."

She beamed. We were off to a good start. And in truth she was beautiful, but not to my taste. Like many Asian women of a certain age, she'd had her eyes surgically altered to remove her Asiatic appearance. A pity. The irony is that Japanese girls born in Hawaii are much more protective of their identities, fiercely proud of their heritage.

As Blossom turned and indicated for me to follow her, my eyes remained glued to the other thing that marred her natural beauty. Calluses behind both ears. Her opium addiction had obviously become worse. She must have been doing a lot of lying around on both sides of her body with her head on wooden blocks, smoking up that crap to have calluses on both sides. I would not let the same thing happen to Nonita, who went by Natalie here. Blossom led me into the red-velvet-lined opium den and I saw some beautiful, barely dressed women tending men, mostly Asian, a few chubby white guys smoking up the filth that was filling my lungs with toxic fumes.

Natalie was on the floor, cradling the head of a middle-aged Japanese businessman in her lap. He was lying on his left side, his head on her knee. She held up her finger. He was smoking opium and she was playing with his pencil-sized pecker.

A slim firm hand pulled me away. "He's paying her three hundred dollars, Jimmy-San. Five if she..." Blossom put her pinky finger into her mouth to indicate a blow job. "No

sex and no opium. She is fine. I will watch her personally."

"I'll be in the alley. She has fifteen minutes, then I come in and start going nuts."

Blossom put her hand on my arm again and squeezed. Men were known to save up for weeks to get her hands on them, any part of them, back in the day. I knew she still serviced a few happy regulars and I would have said she had a heart of gold, but it's really a cash register lurking under that immaculate bosom. And I kinda respect her nonsense approach to life.

I was waiting for Nonita by the car, admiring the American battle ship that was bobbing along on the waterfront. This downtown area was still the first port of call for cruise and naval ships. When Matson Lines first started its cruises to Honolulu from the mainland—*In Five Days*! The banners always screamed—their arrival dates in the harbor were called Lei Day and you could set your watch by them. People came ashore for fun, love and, sometimes, unexpected trouble. Some things don't change.

Flirting with my memories, I saw two hustlers chasing a young sailor down the street. It happened very fast. I fell in on them.

"Get out of here!" I shouted at the sailor who saw my way of thinking and never even turned to look over his shoulder as I wrestled with the thugs in the alley. One of the hustlers got away, but the second guy was not so lucky. I slammed him between the narrow entrances of two shops, down a dark alley. My teeth were already out. He was a white kid with rasta-type dreadlocks. I hoped he wasn't a druggie.

I pulled back his shirtsleeve, holding him against a wall, and he fought me off. But he was a puny guy with mean eyes, and when I saw no needle tracks I sank my teeth right into his arm, freezing the scream right out of him. It

felt marvelous, dizzyingly pacifying to feel fresh blood in my veins again. It was almost as good as getting laid. He came at the end, they often do. I like 'em to go out on a high. Why not? His body sagged in my arms.

The puncture marks would make him look like a junkie, especially on his arm. I took pains to bite him a couple of more times for that needle track effect and, as I dragged his body deeper into the alley, small plastic bags fell out of one of his shoes.

Ice. The scourge of the islands. It destroyed lives, ruined families, and it infuriated me that we couldn't curb its grip on our people. I crushed the contents of the bags under the heels of my shoes and hid the dope dealer amongst the rubbish. I tried to shake off the feeling that it might have been fun to fuck him as I fed on him. I was obsessed with balling men all of a sudden, that's for sure. There was blood on my shirt, but not too much. I felt better than I had in days. My vision was sharp and crisp and the air smelled of ginseng, sandalwood incense and baked duck. Back at the car, Nonita was waiting for me.

She was in a terrible mood. I, for once, was not.

"Where did you get to?" she fumed. "I thought you'd ditched me." I felt my canine teeth easing back into my gums, but not quick enough. I gave her a closed-mouth smile and slipped my arm around her.

"Sweetie." I kissed the top of her head. "I'd never ditch you. But I have to get you home now. Your dad is frantic."

"Don't you want me?" she asked.

No. "Sweetie, I'm tired. Let's get together tomorrow night."

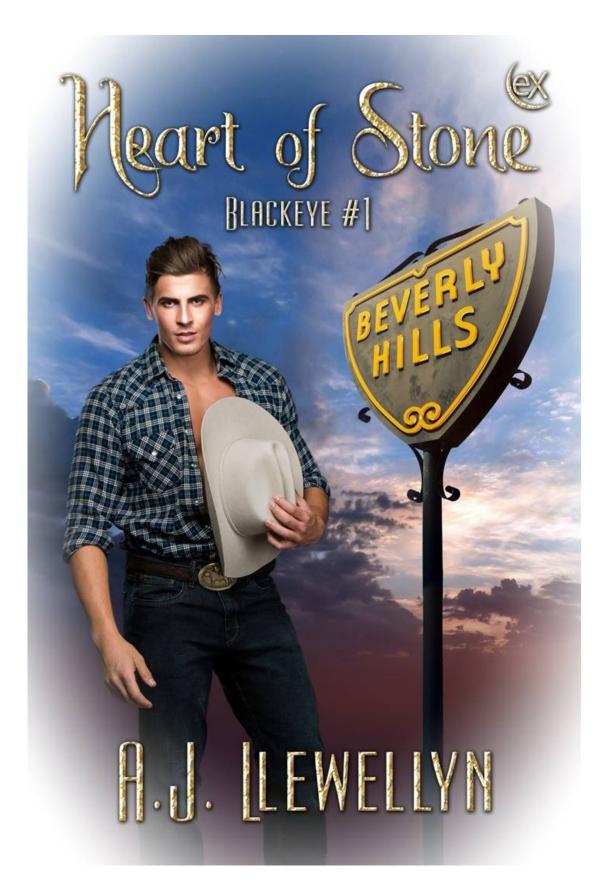
"Fuck you."

"No, Nonita. Fuck you."

She laughed. I took her home and the way she was nodding off told me she'd either been toking on the opium

or she'd gotten some serious second hand intoxication. She came to at one point and freaked when she realized we were at her father's house, not mine. He came running out of the front door and she turned glittering, angry eyes on me.

"Thanks a lot, Jimmy." She spat in my face. I watched her walk up the driveway of her father's house, knowing in that moment that I would never ever see her again, and wondering what I'd ever seen in her in the first place.



HEART OF STONE

(Blackeye Series, #1)

Athen 'Blackeye' Mavromatis moves from New York to Beverly Hills to be lead investigator in their serious crimes division. It isn't long before he gets his first case. A dead woman's body has been found wrapped in a carpet outside somebody's house ready for pickup with their trash. Athen must appease not only the police chief, but the mayor, in a city where murder doesn't happen often. In fact, this is the first homicide in eight years.

Athen must wrap things up quickly because nothing must tarnish the Beverly Hills image of being the home of movie stars and the most expensive store in the world. The cops here pride themselves on a one-minute response time to emergency calls, but this case won't get solved that fast. Secrets and lies, gangs, a mysterious woman...all of it is like a ticking timebomb. Meanwhile, Athen has his lover, Grady, at home, who worries about a strange link in his life with the dead woman. Who could have such a heart of stone to leave her out with the rubbish?

CHAPTER 1

"Coldwater Canyon is closed," the radio announcer's voice blared in Athen's ear. He fumbled for the snooze button. It didn't work. "And if you're thinking of using Benedict canyon, it's closed, too," the announcer repeated. "Closed."

"Okay. I get it." Athen checked the time. Six-seventeen A.M. He needed sleep. He fell back on the bed after hitting the snooze button a second time, his mind racing. Something big must be happening if both canyons were closed. He lay there listening to the rain outside. So, the canyons were closed, and this was the third straight day of rain. Why did people say it never rained in Southern California?

"You need to get up," came a sleepy voice beside him.

"Why?" Athen turned, a smile tugging at his lips.
"You know what they say. No rest for the wicked."
Athen frowned. "Me? Wicked?" His cell phone rang.
Grady had been saved by the bell. Athen took the call.
"Mavromatis."

"Lieutenant?" Athen recognized the mayor's voice. Athen reported directly to Scott Aubrey, even though he worked for the Beverly Hills Police Department. The mayor sounded panicked.

"Sir?" Athen asked. Beverly Hills had its own police force, separate from the rest of the city of Los Angeles. The mayor called the shots and Athen worried that the case he'd been working on for six weeks was about to get scrapped.

"It's me, lieutenant. And we got a bad one. They need you up on Benedict Canyon."

Athen almost said, "It's closed," then realized this must be the reason why. *My God.* Closing down a main road between Beverly Hills and the San Fernando Valley would be a disaster. Closing down two would be worse. Even at this hour.

"It's a homicide, Lieutenant. At least we think it is. Two dumpster divers found a body fifteen minutes ago. A dead woman rolled in a carpet. It's trash day and these guys knew it. They saw what they thought was a clean piece of carpeting left out with the bins. Boy did they get a surprise."

"She's rolled up in a carpet and left out with the trash and we only *think* it's a homicide?"

"I'm just relaying the message." The mayor sounded defensive. "Our response time was perfect. One minute."

Athen knew this was an important fact since Beverly Hills cops prided themselves on a one-minute response time to any emergency. Right before Athen joined the force, they'd

taken three minutes to react to a robbery and potential hostage situation. Heads had rolled.

"The acting chief wants you to handle this," Scott said.
"Please leave now. I'll text you alternate routes that will get you there avoiding the gridlock."

"What about the medical examiner?"

Scott let out an aggrieved sigh. "He's coming from LA County, of course."

"Is that why Coldwater's closed? Because he's coming from Boyle Heights?"

"You got it. It's closer than Benedict Canyon. He'll take Sunset up to Coldwater. I thought about him taking Laurel Canyon which is even closer to him but there's a four-car collision at that intersection."

"Oh, my God. Anyone hurt?" Athen was already out of bed, throwing on clothes.

"No idea. Not my jurisdiction. As soon as Bill's in your vicinity, I'll have to open up Coldwater."

Not on my watch you won't. Before Athen could say so, the mayor continued. "Bill's estimated arrival time is thirty minutes. You'll beat him there. But he trusts you."

"Bill? You mean Bill Campion?" Athen felt the first ray of hope on this miserable, rainy morning.

"Your crystal ball's in fine working order today, sunshine. Yep. And he's thrilled to be working with you. I know you two go way back."

"Yeah."

"There's another problem,"

Athen hunted for socks. Why did his clothing always hide from him? "Lemme guess. It's trash day and the garbage trucks are probably all idling down on Sunset waiting to hit those canyon roads."

"Not yet, but they will be very soon. Your crystal ball's on fire today. And Athen?"

"Yes, sir?" Athen flicked a glance at his lover, Grady, who turned over and covered his head with the bed sheets.

"The acting chief wants you to call her as soon as you have news." A pause. "It should go without saying you should do this *after* you notify me first."

"Roger that."

Scott was breathing heavily on the other end of the line. Athen knew the mayor was petrified. If it was a homicide, Beverly Hills was about to break its record for not having had a murder in eight years. And the last one had been a doozie. Beverly Hills publicist Ronnie Chasen had been gunned down in a botched robbery attempt as she sat in her vehicle at a traffic light.

"Send me everything we know so far and get someone from the crime scene to get on the phone with me," Athen barked. "I don't know my way around those damned canyons yet."

He was aware of Grady stiffening beside him. It was all Grady's fault. Athen had been happy in his New York life. He buckled the belt on his jeans, smoothed out the slightly crumpled checked shirt he'd worn last night, then threw a North Face sweater over it. He then squashed his feet into a pair of tan suede Timberland boots. He suddenly remembered why he couldn't find any of his clothes. They were still in packing boxes in the bedroom. Grady kept promising to organize the house, but it had already been seven weeks since they'd moved here and between them they had done little to finish the job.

The guys would give Athen hell for the shoes, but they were the only dry ones he had. Thunder crackled outside. *Hmm*. They wouldn't stray dry for long.

"Love you," he said to Grady. Silence.

"I'm sorry. It's a possible homicide." Athen knew Grady

was pissed. Athen's first day off in ten days, and he was ruining it. He leaned over and touched the outline of his lover's hip. Grady jerked it away. Athen hesitated, but now wasn't the time for discussion. He ran into the bathroom and pulled up his shirt and sweater. He sprayed his armpits with deodorant only to realize it was his teenaged niece Despina's new cologne. He'd bought it for her himself. *Oh*, *joy*. He brushed his teeth, catching a glimpse of his rumpled hair in the vanity mirror. Nothing he could do about that now. He looked like that kid Alfalfa from *Our Gang*, with two bits of hair sticking up like antenna on top of his head.

An American-born Greek, Athen had the dark eyes and black hair of his ancestors and the somewhat comical name of Mavromatis, which translated to black eye in English. Right now, those two sticking-up hairs were a black eye on his very soul.

He grabbed his trusty leather jacket, strode to the front door and looked outside. Rain. And more rain. Should he take the oil skin coat Grady had given him for his birthday?

Nah. Only so much teasing a man could take. The guys made fun of him for everything. Sometimes he felt like he was in grade school, and not a thirty-four-year old. They always called blond and brown-eyed Grady his toy boy because he was twenty-eight. Athen wanted to rush back inside and kiss him.

Restraint, he told himself, picking up his umbrella from the pile by the doorstep and made a run for his car. Too late, he realized he'd picked up Despina's Hello Kitty umbrella. Oh, great. More jokes.

Despite his request for contact, cell phone reception was patchy. The canyon roads were notorious for dropped calls at the best of times. Athen wanted the conversations kept off the police radio for privacy. Nothing could compromise his investigation, so he and his reporting officers had to rely on text messages.

He received a text message from the acting captain and he verbally texted her back, promising updates. All of his messages showed up on Athen's dashboard screen via Bluetooth. He issued constant commands. *Check security cameras around the crime scene. Make sure the trash bins are kept dry. Have we located the homeowner? Does the city have street cameras up there?*

Answers were slow to come. He checked the address on Green Acres Drive. *Ha*. That was an unfortunate name for a street that would now live in infamy. He could see the gallows-type humor now. *Green Acres ain't the place for me*.

It took him twenty-two minutes to muscle his state-issue Chrysler 300 up to Sunset Boulevard toward the two canyon roads, preparing to use tiny artery roads between Coldwater and Benedict Canyons as suggested by his manic-sounding dashboard navigation. He felt utter frustration that Beverly Hills was its own entity in every way, except it had no hospital, no cemetery and no medical examiner. What it did have was the most expensive store in the world.

Fat lot of good that does me. The chores! The stores! The Greenacres theme song wouldn't leave his head.

What a catastrophe. These tiny mountain roads in Beverly Hills served as alternate morning and afternoon peak hour routes for commuters between the valley and the city of Los Angeles. Benedict ran parallel to Coldwater Canyon but usually moved faster than Coldwater. Once the canyons arced toward Mulholland Drive, their paths diverged. Benedict to the west, Coldwater to the east.

Athen would have to take the heat for stopping anymore traffic coming through here. He didn't care. Until he was satisfied every last shred of evidence had been completely covered, the traffic could remain at a standstill. He pounded the dashboard in frustration. His crime scene was going to wash away in spite of his team's best efforts to preserve it.

Damn.

A creepy thing like a battered woman awaiting trash collection shouldn't happen anywhere, especially in a pretty, cedar tree-lined rustic canyon. But it had happened, and the city of Beverly Hills didn't take kindly to murders. Beverly Hills was famous for glitzy shopping and movie stars. Not real life.

Bill Campion called him twice and both times his calls dropped out before they could talk.

That was another thing. Beverly Hills had no overhead power lines. Everything was underground, which was fine and dandy on a good day but caused havoc in inclement weather. He passed the Beverly Hills Hotel on the corner of Sunset and a traffic cop covered in a hooded raincoat flagged him down. Athen lowered the window.

"Sir? Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Officer Tarrant, isn't it?"

"Sir, yes it is. There are two garbage trucks a third of the way up Benedict. They're acting as guards to keep out passing vehicles. We've already had two accidents. Civilians are blowing past us even when we try and stop them."

"Keep up the good work. I'm gonna call Metro. You guys need help."

"Thank you, sir." Tarrant went back to directing traffic, Athen made it past Sunset sensing the utter hatred of the other drivers stuck at the bottom of the hill. He tried calling Campion, and the two detectives already on scene.

He reached Campion who sounded like he was calling from the bottom of an ocean wave.

"I'm in Hollywood," Campion said. "Making slow progress. I'll be there as fast as I can. I hate this. Our crime scene's gonna wash away."

"I know it. Bill, we have good people up there. They're working hard and fast. I gotta call Metro. See you on the trail." Athen's thoughts raced as he drove. He put a call through to the mayor.

"You got something already?" Scott asked taking the call on the second ring.

You wish. "No. I need you to contact Metro Services and get backup squad cars up the canyon for us."

"We don't work with Metro!"

"Well, we do now. I had a meeting with them last week. They've agreed to help us in an emergency." Athen braked for some idiot whizzing past him on a motorbike. So much for the trash bin guards. "Do it, Mr. Mayor. Please." Athen wished now that he'd called himself. It was always easier to ask for forgiveness after the fact than for permission beforehand.

"Okay." A pause. "Who do I contact?"

"I'll verbal-text you the info." Athen plunged forward, texting as he worked his way around a fallen tree.

Damn. Some media type is gonna remind the world that actor George Reeves was once found shot in the head in his bedroom on Benedict Canyon. Boy, I hope she wasn't shot. They'll try and make some connection to these cases...

It actually cheered him up to think that most media types were too young to remember George Reeves. So, maybe they wouldn't dredge up ancient history.

He followed the dashboard navigator's advice to veer up

Lexington and turn on Hartford Way. These spidery streets were so narrow they allowed only one vehicle to pass in any direction thanks to the stopped vehicles in both directions. He kept his blue flashing light on the hood and honked anyone who tried to cut him off.

He asked Alexa, his sexy app voice, to give him some history about Green Acres.

"Hi, Athen," she said. "The silent movie star Harold Lloyd, owned an estate on the street and his family still owns it—" "What about the owner of 1710 Green Acres Drive?" he asked.

"It's had one owner since 1968. Abe and Beth Golfarb." "That's all?" he asked.

Alexa went silent. A message popped up on his dashboard screen. *Alexa is offline*.

Hmm. Bet she hit the snooze button, too.

He tried again but could find no other related news. He finally got Alexa to pull up the crime scene property owner's details. Athen had a sudden flash that Lorne Brand had been the first detective at the property and was deliberately ignoring Athen's demands for more information. Athen was irritated that nobody had told him if the Goldfarbs knew anything about the body in the carpet.

He reached Green Acres. As he approached the crime scene, he greeted the uniformed officers blocking the street from any passing vehicles. They did a bang-up job of trying to stop him, too. He stared balefully out of the grimy, rain-spattered window at the cluster of makeshift weather guards outside the house on the right side of the hill.

6:54 A.M. and thanks to a text from Detective Paulie Hansen, he now knew now that the dumpster divers were being held inside a police van farther up the canyon for questioning. The home's resident. Mrs. Goldfarb, was an

elderly, newly widowed woman and she hadn't taken the news well according to Hansen. He texted, *She's demanding to speak to the lead investigator*. That was Athen. And he was here.

Cars kept honking like a bunch of demented geese all the way up and down the mountain.

Onward and upward, as his dad would say. Athen opened the door and his mood brightened. Maybe the rain would drown the florid scent of the girlie perfume he was wearing. He stepped out, water already seeping into his allegedly waterproof shoes, and popped open the tiny umbrella. He thought better of it and tossed it back into his vehicle.

Sprinting toward the makeshift canopy stretched across the exterior of the house left him drenched. He regretted not grabbing the Australian oilskin raincoat. He took note of the detectives waiting for him. All of them wore suits. He never wore one if he could help it. People joked that he was a country boy, which he wasn't. He switched his focus to the neighbors who'd come out, most of them standing as close as possible, their ridiculous Ugg Boots and shoes muddy as they juggled umbrellas, cups of coffee, and their cell phones.

The first responding officers had done a great job protecting the macabre discovery with plastic tarpaulins. Athen snapped off a few shots on his cell phone camera. He wanted to study the images of the neighbors and anybody else that might be lurking when he got back to the station.

A few of the officers' heads turned and they sniffed. "What are you wearing, Lieutenant?" Detective Lorne Brand, asked. "You think you're Britney Spears or something?"

The others laughed. Just as Athen had feared, he would

never live this down. He took pride in his appearance. He also took his work seriously, and Lorne's jab rankled. Athen didn't like the fact that the mayor had pulled Athen off an undercover assignment and asked him to take the lead on the case. He suspected Brand, who would normally be assigned a case like this, didn't like the interference either.

"My day off." Athen donned latex gloves. "I was asleep when I got the call." He swallowed, remembering how pissed Grady had been. "I thought I was spraying on Calvin Klein Nek Minnit."

"What *did* you spray on?" Lorne asked, a grin curving his gaunt features, making him look extra spooky this morning.

"Lovely by Sarah Jessica Parker."

Lorne's mouth formed into an O. The other guys laughed. It broke up the tension a little.

"Bummer," said the division's newest detective, Paulie Hansen, the only one in the group that Athen genuinely liked.

Athen shrugged. "The hazards of having a pre-teen living with me."

The guys stopped mocking him. They all knew the terrible circumstances under which Despina had come to Athen's home. They nodded, but a few them looked like they wanted to keep laughing.

"Nice shoes," Brand said. "At least they used to be." Athen ignored him. "Any sign of Mrs. Goldfarb?" Brand looked startled. "You know her name?"

Yes. I know it. You tried hiding it but it didn't work. Athen gestured to her house, the only one in the vicinity where there were no looky-loos out front. "I did an online search of the property on my way up here. Apparently Abe and Beth Goldfarb have owned it for the entire length of their marriage."

"We didn't speak to her very long," Brand said, a defensive tone to his voice. "Lost her husband to a heart attack three weeks ago. They'd been married for fifty years. She's been staying with her daughter. She said somebody called and told her the police were here and she came down the hill in her pajamas. Now she's gone to stay with a neighbor. She's totally freaked out. She's a bit of a mess."

"I would be, too," Athen responded. "Which neighbor has her?"

The guys all looked at each other.

"Are you kidding me?" Athen muttered. "Find her. I want to look at the body."

He walked in silence to the rolled up rug, which remained where it had been left.

"The rug was sort of standing when the dumpster divers found it. They pulled at it, and the hair was there. They thought it was a mannequin. The rug fell. One of them kicked it. Kicked the feet," Lorne said. "That's when they realized it was no mannequin."

"Who are these guys?" Athen couldn't get over the cruel way this poor woman had been abandoned. Three different cords were wrapped around the body bundled in the carpet. Two electrical cords and one heavy twine-type.

"Somebody said they're gardeners and they usually work this street."

"They came up here, even in the rain?" Athen knelt beside the top half of the rug. Black, curly hair spilled out over the edge and a forehead stuck out. Somebody had pulled the carpet back far enough that it was clear the body was that of a woman.

"We've been canvassing the neighbors. Nobody heard or saw anything," another detective said. "Of course." When Athen didn't respond, he added, "We're going to work the other side of the road now."

"Do that. After you find Mrs. Goldfarb."

Lorne Brand chimed in with, "Neighbors say Mrs. Goldfarb has been staying with her daughter, who lives in the neighborhood, but they don't know exactly where."

I'll bet the neighbors are lying. Trying to protect her for some reason. "Somebody put Mrs. Goldfarb's garbage bins outside the house," Athen pointed out. "We need to dust them for prints. Thanks for hauling them under cover, guys." He glanced up at the other bins lining the street. "Damn. They're all wet. Any chance of pulling prints off them is gone."

Lorne's face reddened. "It was raining when we got here." He was always defensive where Athen was concerned.

Athen fumed silently. "How about security cameras? Have we checked for those?"

"We asked the neighbors on either side of the Goldfarb residence but so far nobody has them." Lorne's face turned redder by the second.

"That's strange in Beverly Hills." Athen studied the Goldfarb house. "Looks like she has a couple of cameras." "We didn't get to ask. She got hysterical."

"Okay. We'll talk to her again in a few minutes. Check up and down the street. It's almost impossible that nobody has a camera." It was so much easier on TV shows. Athen bent to study the faded red and brown Persian-style carpet. He knew he'd have to deal with the dark head of curls streaming from it. Time was of the essence. According to Paulie, it had instantly upset all the officers involved seeing the poor woman discarded like an old washing machine out with the trash.

Athen's cell phone rang. It was Bill Campion. "I'm here." "That was fast."

Bill hurried over from his van, which one of his crew parked close to the crime scene. Bill normally handled Beverly Hills deaths, especially celebrity deaths. He'd had a serious workout lately with a number of mysterious homicides of young women on Hollywood Boulevard. Though he worked for the City of Los Angeles' Coroner's Office, he and Athen went way back to New York.

Athen and the others made sure one of the tarpaulins blocked the body in the carpet from the prying eyes of the homeowners gathered nearby. Bill and one of his assistants unraveled the carpet. Three crime scene techs hovered over the female body inside it.

"What time is trash collection?" Athen asked the first uniformed officer he spotted standing near him.

He shrugged. "Any time now." He added "sir," even as his nose twitched. Note to Sarah Jessica Parker. Tell people to use your perfume sparingly.

"Don't let those trucks up here," Athen commanded. "I can hear them now."

"I can, too," Bill muttered,

"Send them back down the mountain. How many vehicles have been up here since the carpet was found?" Athen asked.

"Only ours, sir. We keep turning people away, as you requested, and we've stopped people from the top end from coming down."

Athen tossed him a bone. "Good work. We called Metro and they're sending officers from the traffic division here to help. I know it's tough dealing with irate motorists."

"They're already here, sir," another officer said. "How'd you get the mayor to agree to it?"

"It was his idea," Athen said. He knew his response would get back to Scott. If he had his way, the mayor would get a military parade on Rodeo Drive after this. "Do you want to speak to the Metro officers?" Paulie Hansen asked.

Athen looked at him. It was the last thing he wanted to do.

Paulie nodded. "I'll take care of it, sir."

"Thanks, Paulie." Athen liked the way Paulie was willing to take responsibility. "Come back as soon as you can. I need your help."

Paulie looked pleased. "Yes, sir!"

Athen turned to the officer still standing beside him. "Nobody is to take their trash away from the curb until we've had a chance to go through every last container. That includes homeowners. Please ask all the officers on hand to keep an eye on the bins."

"What are we looking for?" the officer asked.

"I don't know yet. Please have everyone fan out until they get a text from me."

"Yes, sir."

Athen turned to Bill. "What have we got here?" He knelt beside the body, aware of Lorne hovering beside him.

One of the crime scene techs was taking photos of the body.

Bill looked old and tired when he glanced at Athen. "She's between twenty-five and thirty-years-old. Five-foot-three. About a hundred and eighty pounds."

The woman's eyes were half closed, the left side of her face slack. Rigor was setting in.

"She took a hell of a beating." Bill indicated the dark, curly, shoulder-length hair. "Clumps of it have been pulled out from her head. Whoever did this almost scalped her. I also see skin and blood under her nails. We'll scrape them, of course."

"She fought for her life," Athen murmured, taking note of her rainbow-colored nail polish. *Maybe she fought in more* ways than one. To have hope, to believe in things like rainbows, was an achievement past the age of twelve, in Athen's book. He thought of Despina, then shoved the image aside.

"Yes, she did," Bill went on. "Looks like she's been strangled. And shot."

"A bullet in the head." Athen saw that it had entered her right temple. "But somehow she survived."

"Right. It exited at an odd angle." Bill and one of his crew shifted the body over and half the back of her scalp was gone.

"She didn't die so then they strangled her." Athen leaned back on his haunches. "Wow. Somebody really wanted to make sure she was dead."

"They sure did. I'll know more when we do the autopsy."

"Let's keep that detail about the bullet to ourselves," Athen said. "For now."

Bill nodded. "Fair enough. It'll sort out the weirdo confessions."

"Let's talk about the clothes. They don't seem to fit her," Athen said.

"Right again. And they're weird." Bill held the victim's shirt label in his gloved hands. The writing was in Spanish and the sizing was European, not American. She wore blue, faded and torn jeans. A gaping hole in the leg revealed a livid bruise on her knee cap. She also wore a black, sleeveless blouse over a purple tank top, but none of these items seemed to fit her.

"I don't see much blood on her clothes. If she was shot wearing this weird collection, there'd be tons of blood, surely," Athen said.

Bill nodded. "I was thinking the same thing."

"Her clothes seem awfully big on her frame," Brand offered.

"I agree," Athen said. He focused on her hands. "It's odd that with her ill-fitting, tatty clothing, it appears that her nails were done by a professional."

Bill gave him an appreciative glance. "I wondered about that, too."

"We need to circulate photos of them to all the nail salons. It's unique enough that maybe someone recognizes their handiwork," Athen said. He focused on her half-open eyes, which revealed the familiar spray of blood in the whites that usually meant strangulation. The presence of petechiae around her eyes indicated she'd been dead for some hours. The blood-red and purple spots also appeared around her ankles. "Any idea how long she's been dead?"

"About twelve hours."

"When do you think she was stuck out here with the trash? You think early this morning?" Athen asked. "The inside of the carpet seems dry."

"Exactly. Probably not more than a couple of hours ago, I'd say."

Athen sighed. Most of the homes here had heavy foliage out front, designed to block out noise and prying eyes. He glanced up at the house in question. It looked shuttered and cold, and only had a few shrubs out front.

Bill was staring at the victim's feet, which had angry red ligature marks.

"Think she was shackled?" Athen asked.

"Yeah. I think her ankles are broken. She's got no shoes and no jewelry. No identification."

"Any luck with prints?"

"Haven't taken them yet." He gave Athen a sulky glance. "I know you're anxious."

"Sorry." Athen touched his shoulder. "I'll go talk to Mrs. Goldfarb. I'll be right back. "If you have anything new,

you've got my cell."

"Yes, I do. You know, I'm thinking she might have been trying to disguise a pregnancy. I'll get to that in a moment." Bill moved a gloved finger to her half-open lips. "She has something very unusual. Gold dental trim around the two top front teeth. Very distinctive. I've never seen that before on a woman."

"This looks like cheap dentistry," Athen muttered. "Maybe her teeth were so bad the gold was designed to prevent further decay."

Bill nodded. "It's the kind of dental trim poor folk get thinking it makes them look rich. It's an economical but generally effective way of avoiding porcelain veneers. Those are way more expensive. The rest of her teeth are a mess. Just like you suspected. They're real bad. I see a lot of gaps. We'll circulate the photos we take to all the dentists in LA. I'm hoping the trim is unique enough to give us some leads."

Athen studied the body. "Maybe she's somebody's housekeeper or maid. Her hair's very dark. Any idea what nationality?"

Bill blinked. "I think she's Latina. She's not a pampered woman, that's for sure. The clothes look pretty raggedy. Interesting thing is, they're all in foreign sizes. The purple top is a size forty-two, which is a fourteen here."

"Maybe these were hand-me-downs. Or if she was someone's housekeeper, these were given to her."

"Possibly," Bill said. "That makes sense since there are deep strap marks on her feet. I think she was forced to wear shoes that didn't fit her. There are blisters on her heels and on top of several of her toes."

Athen studied them as Bill's team moved in closer to shield the body from the neighbors' prying eyes. Athen was stunned by the bruises that appeared on her collarbone, arms, and what was visible of her belly.

"She took a hell of a beating, like I said." Bill had to shout as a blare of car horns fired up again.

Overhead, a chopper whirled. A news crew. Damn.

Bill went on. "The bruising on her belly and torso is severe." He let that sink in a moment.

"Anything special about the carpet?" Athen asked.

"Other than it's ugly?"

Athen nodded. "Yeah, I noticed that, too."

"I don't think it's a real Persian. It's been cut from a much larger piece. Doesn't look or smell like's it's been cleaned for a while. I'll know more later. There are fine white hairs all over the outside and the edges of the interior. Maybe a cat or rabbit. I don't know yet. There's one huge blood stain on the carpet."

Athen stood. It was time to meet the not so merry widow. He wondered, what the hell had she been doing down at her house, if she was staying with her daughter? "Thanks, Bill. I'll have uniform detail search the trash containers for any sign of her purse and shoes. That looks like unusual rope used to wrap the carpet."

"I'll say. It's mason twine, normally used in construction projects. The electrical extension cord wrapped around the middle of the body has an unusual knot to it. Nautical." He indicated the now-bagged items.

Athen took photos of the evidence and gestured to Lorne, who was watching him with the kind of sulky expression Despina did so well. It wasn't cute on a thirteen-year-old. Or a homicide detective.

"We need to check all the trash bins," Athen told him. "Do you want me to organize it?"

"Knock yourself out."

Athen gritted his teeth. "We also need to talk to the two men who found her."

"I would have done it already, but they said to wait for you." Lorne stared daggers at him.

"We'll do it together." Athen called Paulie and a few of the other officers over and gave them instructions for searching the bins. "I'm emailing you all photos of the carpet." Athen thought he texted fast for a thirty-something cop, though Despina always said his thumbs were...all thumbs. "Show the photos around and ask anyone standing here if they recognize it. Also check if there's any sign of the pink twine used to wrap the carpet."

He sent them all images of the mason twine and paused, holding each officer's gaze in turn. "And please, do not to discuss anything with the neighbors, no matter how pushy they get. As soon as the bins have finished being searched, we'll start looking on the side of the road. Her belongings could have been tossed over the edge and into the scrub below."

Athen paused. *Damn*. The killer or killers had picked a good spot to dump a body. In this weather and with the mountain scrub so dense, they could search for days and not find a thing.

"I guess we'll need more help. We'll need residents' fingerprints, too. I know it's a bit like looking for Cinderella's glass slipper, but we have to do this right. Thank you all."

The men and women around him nodded.

"Yes, sir," a few of them said and began fanning out once more.

Paulie spoke up. "You think somebody here did it?" He moved beside Athen, a large umbrella covering both of them as the rain came down hard again.

"Who spoke to Mrs. Goldfarb this morning?" Athen asked him.

"Brand. He was kinda mean to her. She said she wasn't

in the house last night. She came home early to feed her cat."

"Did she put out her rubbish bins?" "No."

Athen moved over to them, Paulie rushing to keep up with him. Athen studied the green one for plant and tree trimmings, the large blue recycling bin, and the black one for all other refuse. He opened and peered into each one. There were no recyclables. A few discarded takeout bags loitered at the bottom of the black container. The plant receptacle was empty. "Somebody wheeled out empty bins. And, she hasn't been getting lawn service by the looks of the overgrown grass," Athen said. "Interesting."

"Interesting how?" Paulie asked as Lorne Brand bent and talked to the medical examiner.

"She probably hasn't paid her bills," Athen said. "Maybe the husband did it all and now he's gone, and she can't cope. I know the type. We need to find out where the daughter lives."

Paulie opened his mouth as Athen opened the black bin again and took note of a receipt stapled to a Chin Chin bag. He took photos of it then gently lifted out the bag.

"This was ordered four days ago. Sweet and sour chicken, mushu pork, chicken potstickers, a large order of fried rice, and egg rolls. Christ. I just got hungry. It's too early to call the restaurant to ask about this order, but look. There's a clear signature on the receipt." He took a photo with his free hand.

Paulie squinted. "It says Lori Weingarten."

"Yes, it does." Athen deposited the takeout remnants into an evidence bag. "I'm betting that's the daughter's name. Go and ask the neighbors where Lori Weingarten lives."

"Okay, boss. This is so exciting! So you think somebody here is involved?" He seemed fixated on this point.

"Maybe." Yes. It was a good plan. Who'd have thought outsiders would be up here at the crack of dawn looking for treasure?" He paused. "Where are the men who found the body?"

"In one of our vans. They're pretty upset." Paulie went off to tackle the neighbors as Athen moved under cover of the tarps. A lone raindrop dripped down the collar of his sweater, chilling his entire being as it slid down his neck.

Athen became aware of a man watching him. He was tall, dark, and handsome. Just Athen's type.

"She couldn't have put that takeout bag in there," the man blurted.

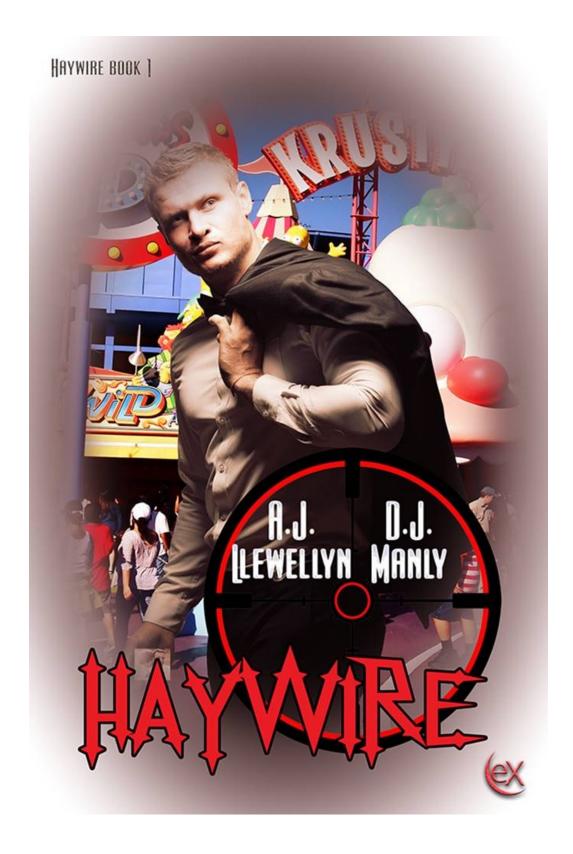
"Who?"

"Lori Weingarten. I heard you mention her name."

"And why couldn't she have put it in there?"

The man looked at Athen as though he were crazy.

"Because she never leaves her house. Hasn't for nearly three years. She's a shut-in."



HAYWIRE

(By A.J. Llewellyn and D.J. Manly, Haywire, Book #1)

What would you do if you took your family for a fun day at Universal Studios, watched your husband and son go on a ride and when they return... they are completely different people? For Jack Connors, it's a nightmare when he tries to convince park security, police, and then hospital staff that the two people claiming to be his loved ones are impostors. Worse... he has no proof. They are far from home, and the only photo in his wallet is that of the man and child from the ride. Something sinister is afoot, but Jack isn't quite sure what... or why his whole world has just gone haywire.

CHAPTER 1

Jack Connors stirred. An insistent hand sneaked around his hip and moved straight down to his cock. He grinned, leaning into his husband's warm body. Dex kissed his shoulder, the back of his neck, and along his arm.

"Good morning, beautiful. How about we go on some rides today?"

His hesitation was enough to make Dex drop his half-hard cock. He leaned away from Jack, who turned onto his back. He had no desire to go to Universal Studios that morning. As he yawned and stretched in the comfy king-size hotel bed on their second day in Los Angeles, Jack looked forward to seeing his family later. Beside him, however, Dex glowered.

"Still fucking freezing," he muttered, a look of fury on his face. It wasn't like Dex to be so tense. With his dark hair and blue eyes, he looked sexy and kissable. But his mood matched the chill in their high-up tower hotel room at the

Universal Hilton. The heat was obviously still on the fritz. Dex had made a big deal about it with the front desk the previous night, but since the room had been comped, and Jack hated the fuss his husband had made.

It was now seven o'clock, and Dex was ready for battle. Again.

"Round two coming up." Dex leaned across him to the bedside table and snatched the receiver from the hotel's landline. Jack tried rubbing Dex's muscular shoulders and back to get him to relax. His ripped body was usually a turn-on, but right now, Dex wasn't going to cave in to carnal pleasure. He was touchy, but not feely. Jack knew that his husband still hadn't gotten over losing his high-profile, online-based mortgage company. He missed being in the e-hot seat. He *loved* acting the big shot whenever they hit LA. It was weird, really, because at home in San Rafael in Northern California, he was one big pussycat.

"Look at the day." Dex peered out the window as a faint rainfall splashed the thick glass. "It's so gray and overcast."

"It's only seven o'clock," Jack reminded him. "The cloud cover will burn off."

"No." Dex hung up the phone. He had picked a new battle. Jack prepared himself. They'd planned to drive down to Laguna Beach to visit Jack's parents. Jack knew what was coming next but couldn't speak quickly enough to head Dex off at the pass.

"I think we should go to Laguna another day. Let's just stay here and go to Universal."

"Oh please. We promised—"

But Dex was out of their bed, throwing on sweats and striding across the ridiculously large living area of their suite to check with their son.

Nicky was nine, and of course going on rides all day

seemed like a great idea to him. It was so unfair. Jack's parents longed to see their only grandson, but Dex always had an excuse to put off the visit. Jack knew that Dex's poor relationship with his own parents had a lot to do with it, but this...this was too much. He had their kid whipped into such a frenzy about going on the studio tour and all the rides they'd pored over online. A two-hour drive to the beach, when it probably wouldn't entail actually going to the beach, paled in comparison.

Jack couldn't even tempt his kid by mentioning all the presents his grandparents would have waiting for him.

Nicky had heard the word rides, and he'd hunted out the studio map.

"I want to go on everything at least twice," he insisted. Nicky was the most handsome boy Jack had ever seen. With his dark brown hair, he could have passed for Dex's son, except that he was a beautiful blend of Greek and Chinese. His lovely, almond-shaped eyes were a gorgeous shade of chocolate brown.

Both the men in Jack's life were stark contrasts with his blond hair and green eyes.

"Daddy...all the rides except Waterworld." Nicky made a face.

Dex laughed. "Come on, slowpoke." He picked up Nicky and swung him around the room, flicking a glance at Jack. "Last one to get ready pays for breakfast."

Dex and Nicky were in the bathroom before Jack could set foot in there. And, of course, that would mean he was buying breakfast, not that it had ever been an issue. He paid for most things these days. He padded over to the huge, scenic windows and looked down at the city of angels. The rain had stopped lashing the soundproof wall of glass. Traffic whizzed along the 101 freeway below, but no sound could be heard from down there. He spotted two

accidents on both sides of the freeway. Maybe it was a good thing they weren't driving down to Laguna after all.

From the bathroom, Nicky squealed with laughter as Dex washed him. Nicky had a water phobia. More to the point, he couldn't bear to have his head submerged in liquid. Baths, pools, big waves, rivers, and creeks all traumatized him. He and Dex had no idea where the problem originated, but they'd adopted Nicky when he was two and he'd abhorred being bathed from the day they'd brought him home. He had an odd quirk, though. He liked to walk along the beach. He liked shells and sticks and had quite a collection.

They'd consulted some top pediatricians, and nobody could explain Nicky's irrational fear. He couldn't bathe alone, and went bonkers when it was time to wash his hair, but Dex had been the one to discover a game Nicky loved. He would dip his head back, have his scalp wetted, then shampooed. He found the scalp massage relaxing, and the various bath toys they now provided were a great distraction. He'd dip his head back once more, and rinse the shampoo clean. Jack had found a good leave-in conditioner, and that solved the problem of rinsing that out, too.

The bathroom door opened, and Nicky ran out to him, swaddled in a huge bath towel.

"Dad...when we go to Universal, can we start with the studio tour?"

Jack wrapped his arms around his son. "Of course we can."

Nicky reached up for a kiss. He smelled of blueberries, his new body shampoo du jour. Something made Jack cling to his son a moment longer.

"I'm okay, Dad," Nicky said, pushing himself away from Jack. He ran to his own room. Nicky rarely made reference to his water phobia.

"What was all that about?" Dex's eyes glittered. Boy, he'd won the battle over the studio; couldn't he back off a little? Jack couldn't explain, even to Dex, why he'd felt the need to hug his son a little harder

Jack shrugged. "I don't know. I just felt like hugging him a little longer."

Dex softened, walking over to him and putting his arm around him. "You worry too much. Call your folks and tell them we'll go there tomorrow. I just feel like letting my hair down today and screaming with our kid. Is that okay?"

"Yeah. That's okay." Jack smiled into the kiss Dex gave him. He felt his cock harden against his husband's groin.

"None of that now," Dex teased, wagging a finger at him. "Let's get dressed and get out of here."

Jack watched his husband's cute swagger as he returned to the bathroom and showered. Jack called his office and checked in with his assistant. He was a marketing manager for Paradigm Studios, which did most of the graphic art for Universal Studios' movie promotions and marketing campaigns with big restaurant chains.

He had the satisfaction of seeing his work show up on everything from key rings to McDonald's takeout cups. He'd spearheaded the campaign for six summer release movies that had all been blockbusters. Hence, Universal Studios' kind offer for a week's vacation. He'd been excited to bring his family out here. They'd had lunch at the commissary the first day with some of the marketing executives, and Nicky had been ecstatic to see singer Christina Aguilera in there with some friends.

One of the hosting judges of the NBC-Universal TV show *The Voice*, she had been a very nice lady who happily posed for a photo with Nicky and had even left a lipstick kiss on his cheek. With Nicky's water phobia, it would have

been easy to leave it on his face for days, but Jack had insisted they wash it.

Nicky was anxious to have breakfast, and ran around the suite with the room service menu. "Do you want bacon and eggs, Daddy?" He burst into the bathroom before Jack could stop him and asked Dex what he wanted.

"Pancakes," came the response. When Dex passed Jack a few moments later with a towel around his waist, he shot Jack a reproachful look. "I coulda been jerking off, for Chrissakes," he griped.

"Shoulda locked the door." Jack couldn't resist. Dex was being an ass. Their son was distracted, chatting up the room service staff.

"I'm going to Universal!" he squealed into the phone.

Jack grinned at his son and took his turn showering.

"Don't be long," Nicky warned. "They said they'd bring my waffles up super quick!"

They took one of the complimentary trams up the hill to the main entrance. Excitement buzzed in the air. Jack and Dex exclaimed over the ridiculous eighty-seven-dollar entry fee per person, and that was at a seasonal discount. As Jack showed his ID and received three free passes, he marveled at the families around them with multiple kids. The children's rate was only a few dollars less than the adult price.

"Can we get a free year?" Nick tugged at Jack's shirttail. "Huh? Can we?"

Jack noticed the sign saying, "Buy a day, get a year free." He had to explain they couldn't get a free year because their tickets for the day were free.

"Oh." Nicky looked crestfallen.

They went through the security rigmarole of having Dex's

backpack inspected, and then moved to the turnstiles with their passes. Nicky had looked so disappointed about not getting a free year—and on top of it, not being able to get his fingerprint for it—but as they entered the amusement park, he was all excited again. He hopped from one foot to the other as they made their way through the lot. Nicky studied his map.

"We have to go downstairs for the studio tour." He went berserk when he noticed the *Shrek 4D* ride to their immediate right. "Can we start with that? Can we? Can we?" He was all over the place with his enthusiasm.

Jack laughed. "Yes, we can start here."

The line was only a five-minute wait, according to a sign underneath the ride's name. They each picked out a pair of 3D glasses from a barrel and waited. Jack had called his parents earlier to let them know they had a change of plans but had reached their voice mail. His cell phone chirped, and he checked the readout. It was them.

Dex gave him an eye roll. Jack ignored him and took the call, letting his mom berate him. She was understandably upset. She began to harangue him.

"This isn't fair," she said a couple of times. "We are so disappointed, Jack."

"Why don't you meet us for dinner?" he suggested. Dex narrowed his eyes, but what could he say? They were Nicky's grandparents. Of course they wanted to see him.

"Can we have dinner at The Counter, Dad? Can we? Can we?" Nicky was hopping around again. The boy was a burger fiend, as was his grandfather.

"The Counter. That's in Studio City," Jack's mother said. "I see it here on Google. It has a pretty good Yelp rating. We'll meet you at six-thirty." She ended the call. Jack could feel the waves of disapproval radiating from his phone. He turned it off, wondering if his parents would cancel before

the day was over. They always liked to be in control of their plans.

Jack sighed. He was the only one working, between him and Dex. He knew Dex was looking for another mortgage job, but the tough economy had played havoc with the real estate market, and men like Dex had suffered. The loans they'd once been allowed to write had been nixed all over the country. Almost nobody could qualify for financing anymore. But underlying Dex and Jack's problems was the fact that Jack did the work and a lot of the housework, but to let Dex still feel...manly, he gave in to his partner's decisions way too often. If Dex spent more time trying to find work instead of squabbling with Jack and his parents, he'd probably be gainfully employed.

Enough. We came here for a vacation. Enjoy it.

Dex quickly kissed his cheek. "It'll be okay."

The line suddenly sprang forward, and they ran indoors. In total darkness, Nicky sought his hand. They loved the pre-show entertainment with Donkey, Lord Farquaad, the Gingerbread Man, and other characters giving them hilarious instructions for the ride. A bunch of doors opened, and the small crowd ran into the theater where they took their seats, Nicky sitting between them. They put on their glasses when instructed, and the show began. The seats bucked and bumped as the simulated ride mimicked a horseback journey. Donkey turned and sneezed at the audience. Water sprayed everyone's faces.

Everyone roared with mingled surprise, amusement... and slight disgust.

Water.

Jack turned to look at his son, making sure he was okay, but Nicky was screaming with laughter. As spiders crawled over their legs and neck, Nicky hooted with the rest of the crowd. Donkey sneezed again, but Nicky was still having

fun. Jack relaxed and gave himself up to laughter as Shrek careened around a haunted forest. He had a blast until the jolly green ogre and Donkey tumbled over a waterfall and once again the audience was splashed.

No. Not splashed. Drenched.

This time even Dex turned his head toward their son, making sure he was okay. Nicky was still having a blast. Thank God. They left the theater, returning their 3D glasses to a barrel, and headed toward the studio tour. Once again, Nicky became distracted, this time by *The Mummy* ride.

"Can we go on this, Daddy? Can we?"

The line wasn't long, but one of the amusement park officers standing nearby overheard their conversation.

"You should take the studio tour *now*," she advised. "You'll be able to go through the old Wisteria Lane set for *Desperate Housewives*. They're using it as the location for a new movie. If you wait, they'll be in production and you'll miss seeing it."

"Cool!" Dex and Jack chimed in unison.

"What's Wisteria Lane?" their son wanted to know. He wasn't happy about the detour until they'd descended the ten thousand, or so it seemed, levels of moving stairs to get to the entrance for the studio tour. Nicky grumbled until he saw the attendant passing out 3D glasses for the ride.

"Oh yeah!" he shouted, excited again.

The line moved quickly, and their tram driver proved to be quite the comedian. On a video screen above them, Jimmy Fallon, the tour's official comedian, was playing guitar and cracking jokes. Nicky wore his 3D glasses even though they'd been instructed to wait. He was riveted by everything he saw.

Jack's heart swelled with love for his child. Twenty-five years ago, at the age of eight, Jack had come to the studio

tour with his parents for the first time. He'd loved every second of it. Back in those days, there had been no rides. The tour was the entire thing. He would never forget Lucille Ball coming out of her dressing room to wave to the occupants of the tour tram. From that moment on, Jack had been in love with Hollywood movies and longed to be a part of it. Now he was and he adored his work. Thanks to the magic of telecommuting, he could live in the place he wanted, yet do the job of his dreams.

As if on cue, they passed a slew of posters for Universal's upcoming fall release, the vampire movie, *Banpaia*.

"There's your campaign, sweetie," Dex said, snapping a pic of one of the posters.

It had been one of the biggest joys for Jack, creating a successful, award-winning promotion for a movie about gay vampires in Little Tokyo. He'd managed to snag a marketing bonanza with a limited edition, prerelease graphic novel and billboards all over town saying, *Banpaia is Coming*.

Jack felt warm and squishy inside, proud of his work. He kept his arm around his son as they ventured into Old Mexico and a simulated flash flood. Nicky, however, took it in stride.

"Way cool!" he shrieked, water splattering his 3D glasses. When the kid finally got to the 3D portion of the tour—the breathtaking and utterly astonishing battle between King Kong and the dinosaurs from *Jurassic Park*, Nicky went into orbit.

"I want to go back on it," he said as soon as the tour concluded. Dex was happy, too. He'd glimpsed Felicity Huffman, his favorite actress in the whole wide world, running past the bus tour, her hair in curlers. She'd waved to the crowd, and they waved right back.

"She's working on a new TV series, which is kinda hushhush," the tour guide had said over the loudspeaker.

Nicky pulled at his fathers' hands. "Come on. We have to go on *The Mummy*. Then we can come back and take the tour again."

The line for *The Mummy* took thirty minutes. Dex left his family to queue, while he went to the locker room and stowed the backpack in one of the units. When he returned, he showed the park map to Jack and pointed out a special feature for the ride.

"Look, they've got this thing called Child Switch. We can take turns going on the ride with Nicky. They have a special holding area where one parent waits while the other one rides."

"Sounds good," Jack said. He'd hoped they could all ride together, but the attendant loading people onto the roller coaster said that they'd have a more comfortable ride with only two people in each set of seats.

Jack went first with Nicky, who loved it. He screamed and waved his arms in the air. He seemed fearless. The ride was over quickly. Jack traded places with Dex and stood in a freezing section to the left of the landing bay and waited for his family to return. He had the weirdest feeling...a pang of separation anxiety he couldn't explain.

I worry too much. I have to relax. I have to stop thinking something will happen to Nicky. Millions of people take this ride, and they don't fall out of the roller coaster. Dex loves Nicky. He'll protect him.

He stood and waited, watching out for his husband and son. A family came to stand beside him, exchanging with him the tight smiles strangers always did. And then a man and a child approached him.

"Daddy, that was sooooo cool!" The little boy stared up at him.

At first, Jack thought the kid was talking to the people beside him. Then he realized the child was talking to him. He stared at the little boy. A lump started forming in his throat. The kid was dressed exactly like Nicky.

The man who stood with his hands resting on the child's shoulders beamed at him. He was dressed exactly like Dex.

Except they weren't Dex and Nicky.

"Who are you?" Jack asked. This was freaky. How could they be dressed exactly like his husband and son?

"It's me," the man said. He looked exasperated. "It's me. Dex. Don't you recognize me?"

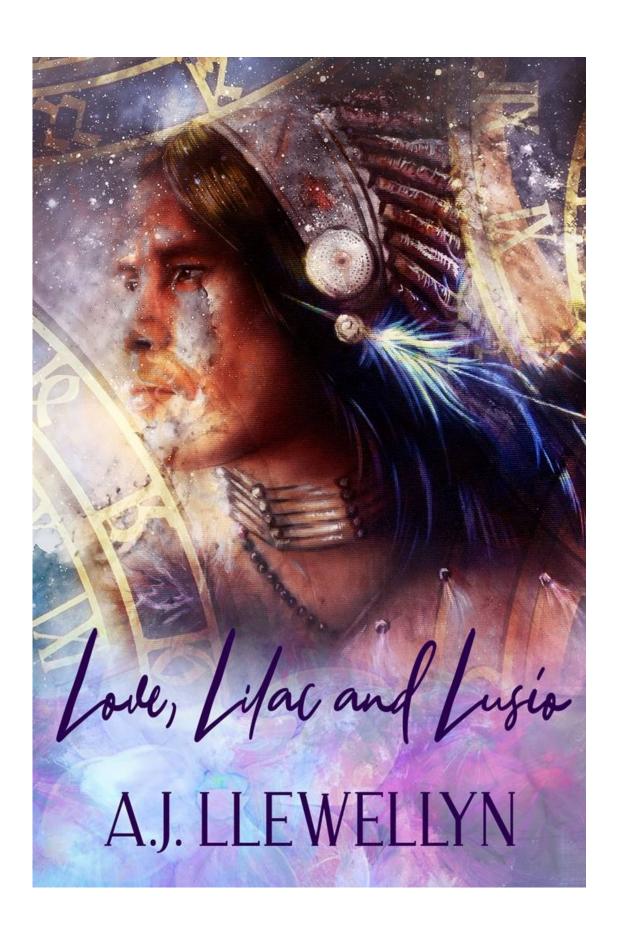
"What's wrong, Daddy?" the little boy asked, his round blue eyes staring up at Jack.

He wasn't Nicky. No. No. No.

Jack began to scream.

The little boy began to cry.

And Jack's world had just gone haywire...



COMING SOON: LOVE, LILAC AND LUSIO

(A Sneak Peek)

Lilac Boguske is a chubby, middle-aged woman who hires a hitman to kill her because it's easier than sticking to a diet. She changes her mind—only her would-be assassin won't stop.

Short of hiring a PR company to boost his image, she employs struggling PI Toby Cameron to help her, putting them both in mortal danger.

Toby's petrified of the hitman. He knows Lusio Lanon's reputation as a fearsome Zuni warrior who had his right ear sliced off in a tribal ritual at the age of thirteen. It left him with priceless gifts of supersonic hearing, unusual agility, and um, yeah, he's also a shapeshifter.

Lilac knew none of this. She hired the guy because he was cute...

CHAPTER 1

"Toby?"

"Yeah?" He looked up wondering who the short, stout woman was and how the hell she'd tracked him down in a McDonalds in Hell's Kitchen. Toby Cameron was a million miles from home. He squinted at her. He'd never seen her before so he knew she couldn't be a disgruntled former client. He glanced back down at his plate, wanting nothing more than to chomp on his Egg McMuffin and guzzle his coffee. Rats had kept him awake all night.

The woman's rotund face was framed by well-styled red hair that could not have been natural but set off her green eyes in a stunning way. She had a mouth that seemed to want to smile, and it did. Her sparkling white teeth disturbed him for some reason. She presented an air of

precision but he detected desperation right below the surface. He felt more demoralized than ever. He was pretty good at reading people. This one he couldn't. Something was wrong. Very wrong. And yet she was smiling.

Toby had wanted to splurge on the breakfast meal but it cost an extra ninety-nine cents, so he'd settled for a sandwich and a small coffee. *Geez, I've come down in the world*.

"Lilac Boguske." She stuck out a hand containing gnarled fingers that bore a perfect, lilac-hued manicure.

He shook her hand. "Pleased to meet you," he said, though he suspected he soon wouldn't be.

She sat opposite him without being asked and shoved his tray away from her, tipping his coffee onto it.

"Sorry. I'll get you another one." She pushed back at a stray lock of hair that had strayed across her forehead. "I have a case for you and it's urgent."

He wished now he'd opted for the meal. The hash browns would have been awesome smothered in ketchup.

"No hash browns?" she asked. Before he could respond she tumbled on. "I have an urgent case that involves murder."

"Whose murder?"

"Mine."

He stared at her. *She doesn't look crazy, but then, neither did Jeffrey Dahmer*. "You think someone's trying to kill you?"

"I know someone's trying to kill me."

"Why—"

"Because I paid him to do it."

Toby sat back in his chair, dumfounded. "Why would you do something like that?"

"Because I tried an overdose of pills and survived. I heard this guy was good. Only now I want to live and he won't quit trying to kill me."

Toby's jaw flapped open. "He's already tried?"

"Twice. And close your mouth." She held up a hand. "He gets four more chances and he won't give up. Says he has a reputation to maintain."

"Ah. An ethical hitman." Toby wasn't feeling as jovial as he tried to project. He had a bad feeling about this one.

"I've hired many men for many jobs in the past, from unplugging my toilet to rebuilding a burned-out kitchen. I've never once had good luck. They never turn up on time or get the job done right. Just my luck to land a hitman who *loves* his work." Lilac's frown only just showed a trace of wrinkles. She must have had a lot of work done. He had no idea how old she was but he guessed she was in her 60s.

"Look, Toby. I need a burger. I'm getting one for you too. You want hash browns?"

"Sure. Thanks." He could give her a few minutes of his time. He had two hours to kill before he drove up to Connecticut to give his current—and only—client some bad news. When Lilac left the table he wondered what kind of hitman demanded six attempts at a person's demise. How much had she paid? Whatever it was, he'd consider taking on Lilac Boguske's case even though he was in a city he didn't know, staying in a crummy dump on his client's dime.

Lilac returned with a laden tray. How had she gotten such fast service?

"Thanks," he said as she unburdened herself of most of the food stashed on it. She handed him a paper-bagged hash brown.

"Dip it in the ice cream. It's so good."

He did as he was told, though he had a sudden, and wild desire to dump ketchup on it as well.

"It's great with ketchup, too." She squeezed some from a

packet onto his slab of fried potato. It was as though she could read his mind. She seemed so kind, so caring, so... fragrant. He could swear he smelled lilacs.

"Why did you want to die?"

She looked at him as she motorboated her way around a sandwich. "Because I'm fat."

Nothing had changed as far as he could tell. "Um. Okay. So what changed your mind?"

"I started a diet last Friday. Do I look a lot thinner?" He laughed. "I don't know what you looked like before."

She heaved a sigh. "That's because I lost half an ounce. I wanted to die even more except my son and his husband are adopting a baby. I'm gonna be a grandma!"

She shouted the last sentence and a few people around them stopped speaking and smiled.

"Tell me who he is and how you found your, er, hitman." "On Craigslist."

"Oh, my God. And how much did you pay him?"

"Ten K. All of it up front on account of the fact I wouldn't be around to pay in full otherwise. Plus I had to turn over all my weapons to him. He was afraid I'd do it myself and he has pride in his work."

He squinted at her. "How many weapons did you have?" "Nine." She chewed another mouthful.

"Nine?" He almost choked. "What kind?" He had a feeling a flick knife might be involved.

"A Sig Sauer, a Glock." She grinned. "The cops' weapon of choice. A Desert Eagle—"

"What the hell?" he shouted then remembered they were in a family restaurant. A woman with three tiny kids was staring at him, appalled. "Why would you need a fifty caliber weapon?" He lowered his voice even more. "That's a gun you use when you really want to kill someone."

"I know." She looked saucer-eyed. "My hitman said the

same thing! I first saw it on *The First 48*. I had to have one. I had originally intended to shoot myself."

The woman with the three kids ushered them out of the place, a frightened look over her shoulder at Lilac.

Toby was scared of her himself.

"But do you know how heavy that thing is?" Lilac asked.

"Where did you buy it?" It wasn't a typical street weapon.

She pointed a crooked finger at him. "My hitman acted just like you. Fascinated. I bought it from my gardener's brother. Had to drive all the way to El Monte to get it."

"El Monte, California?"

"Yeah. I live in Northern California. Anyway, I bet my hitman confiscated my toys because he wanted them for himself." She leaned forward and said, "He seemed really interested in my Lemat Revolver. I inherited it from my granddad along with some weird stuff like his false teeth. The gun was a much better gift." She slurped at her coffee and circled a finger around the trays. "There's more where this came from if you take my case."

Oh, man. She thinks I'm like the guys on the edge of the freeway. Will work for food.

"Who is he?" Toby wondered if a phone call to the killer would eliminate any high drama.

"He won't quit, I'm telling you. My son doesn't know and he'll wonder when I die what the check is for. He inherits everything. I had no idea my killer comes from a long line of trackers and—"

Trackers? Toby's blood ran cold. "Tell me his name." He held his breath.

"Lusio. Lusio Lonan."

You stupid woman! Toby swallowed. Hard. "I've heard of him. Never met him." My God. I've heard stories about this guy. Some kind of Zuni warrior. They say he moves like the wind and there are stories about his antics on the Sierra

plains. "He's famous. Well, infamous. Why would he run an ad on Craigslist?" He couldn't get the idea out of his mind. It was surreal.

"To entrap me." Her eyes brimmed with tears.

Wait. Are they the color of lilacs? "How has he tried to kill you so far?" She had his attention now.

"He set fire to my house after drugging me. I woke up and the fire fighters came when I called 911."

"He drugged you?"

"Yeah. I cooked him dinner. He gave me something to drink and said it was peyote mixed with honey. It was disgusting. I'm surprised that alone didn't kill me."

"And the second time?"

"He tried to shoot me. And missed."

Toby gaped at her. "That doesn't sound like him. He never misses his mark."

"I'm telling you, I don't want to die. I changed my mind almost immediately. My son, James is gonna freak when he finds out I wasted ten K on a contract killer."

Oh, Buddha. "James?" It was all starting to make sense. He hoped she wasn't talking about James Talbot, the man who'd broken Toby's heart.

"Your James," she said.

Aw, crud. It could only happen to me. "He's not my James. He's with somebody else."

"He still loves you."

Let's not go there. The wounds are still fresh. He drank his coffee, staring out the restaurant window. The world moved at a frenetic pace, but the truth was, most people didn't want to invite chaos into their lives. They yearned for peace. Yet here was a woman who not only shopped around for total disaster, she paid for it.

"Lilac, you seem like a nice lady. Take my advice. Go to a remote island somewhere. And don't come back. I can't

help you. This guy is good. He won't miss again."

"That's what my psychic said." She paused. "I wish Lusio would go blind or something."

"Don't wish that on him. He's only got one ear."

"Whaaaat? What the actual what? How do you know that?"

"You didn't see it?"

"No. He has long hair. I guess he covers it up." She gazed into space. "The truth is I'd never heard of him and I saw his ad. His photo was so cute. We met for coffee and he was not that excited about killing me. He suggested I overdose on Xanax. I was thinking about hollow point bullets. I wondered if they'd hurt less."

He shook his head. She'd paid for death and was afraid of it hurting her. "Look, there's some things you should know. His real name is Ki'Somma Bodaway. It means fiery sun. His method of killing is fire. I doubt he's the one who shot you."

She gasped in a dramatic way but he knew he'd just shocked her. "You mean he still gets five more tries?" She raised a shaky hand to her lips.

"Probably."

"So who tried to shoot me?"

"I don't know." Toby's thoughts raced. "His great, great, great granddaddy was the first Native American detective in the Midwest. We're talking the wild, wild, west days. Wagon trains, outlaws. All that stuff. His great, great, great granddaddy got his right ear cut off by a gang of white guys he tried to arrest. All the Bodaway men have their right ears cut off in a ritual when they turn thirteen. By trusting them to chop off his ear, the tribe gave Bodaway a special gift."

"What, like a nice tie or something?"
Toby almost laughed. "No. They gave him the gift of

supernatural hearing and incomparable agility.

Congratulations. You hired the best of the best. I'd try and get into the Witness Protection Program if I were you." He stood and she bolted to her feet.

"But where are you going?"

"I have an appointment."

She huffed out a breath as he loaded the trays with their empty wrappings. "I can pay you," she said, following him to the refuse container.

He walked out the door, checking his cheap watch. It kept good time, but he'd taken fifteen minutes more than he expected. He had to make a run for it.

Lilac plucked at his shirt sleeve. "I can pay you. A lot."

Toby needed the money. "How much?" he asked out of idle curiosity.

"I've got seven thousand dollars cash."

Toby felt his eyes rolling around in his head. "So saving your life is worth less than taking it."

"I've got four, no five, more chances for him to send me to hell." She jumped behind him, clutching his waist. "He could be anywhere," she whined.

"You don't know the half of it," he muttered. He whirled around and faced her, holding her by the shoulders. "It doesn't matter where you go or what you do. He will find you. And I'm no protection. He'll go straight through me to get to you."

She blinked. "No. He's not capable—"

"He's more than capable."

"Why are you afraid of him? He's only human."

"Not really." He took a deep breath. "He's not. He's a shape shifter."

And with that, Toby dropped his hands and ran, blending in with the crowd.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.J. Llewellyn, who was born in Australia and lives in Los Angeles, is the author of over two hundred published gay erotic romantic novels. An early obsession with *Robinson Crusoe* led to a lifelong love affair with islands, particularly Hawaii and Easter Island.

Being marooned once on Wedding Cake Island in Australia cured her of a passion for fishing but led to a plotline for a novel. A.J.'s friends live in fear, because even the smallest details of their lives usually wind up in her stories. A.J. has a desire to paint, draw, juggle, work for the FBI, walk a tightrope with an elephant, be a chess champion, a steeplejack, master chef, and a world-class surfer. She can't do any of these things, so she writes about them instead.

A.J. started life as a journalist and boxing columnist, and still enjoys interrogating, er, interviewing people to find out what makes them tick.

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