



# LEFT OF CENTRE

When a catfisher gets catfished,  
crazy never felt so good!

# ZATHYN PRIEST

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**Edited in Australian English**

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## CHAPTER ONE

Hidden from view, in the midnight abyss of a darkened bedroom, clothes lay taunting their fleeing owner. A treacherous journey toward the door was fraught with hidden dangers. Unknown territory. Furniture seemed to leap out in ambush. Floorboards creaked in protest, as though set to booby-trap an absconder. A precision line of aftershave bottles clattered onto a dressing table surface.

“Ffffff...” Brandon buckled in agony, slapping his hands over his crotch after a chair introduced itself to his penis. “...uck!” He finished the cuss in a pained whisper.

At least capture had been averted and Brandon soldiered on. The steady rattle of a snore comforted him. Thankfully, the one who remained in bed hadn’t woken and foiled getaway plans. Somewhere, strewn across those noisy floorboards, Brandon’s clothes beckoned. Without them, there would be no escape.

Something snatched around his left ankle and right toe. Like an elasticised foot noose, it tightened into a restraint. He stumbled forward, flailing his arms in reach of anything to break a fall. His feet shuffled in tiny steps, pawing at the floor, until he realised they touched nothing but air. Bare knees cracked hard onto lacquered floorboards. This was no time to give in to pain. If Brandon was caught now, he’d have to explain being on hands and knees, in the centre of the room, with a pair of boxer briefs shackled around his feet. He held his breath, listened for snoring, heard it, and breathed a sigh of relief. Buying that second bottle of wine at dinner—even though he’d complained at the time—now seemed like a smart investment.

Despite the awkwardness of the boxer shorts location procedure, Brandon at least now had underwear. He squirmed into them and, while on the floor, felt around for any clothing items that may have been nearby. It was a good thing Jason was a heavy sleeper.

Jason? Brandon rolled onto all fours and frowned. Jason or Justin? His hand fell upon a shoe. Or Jasper? He located another shoe slightly to his left. *No, it’s not Jasper*, he thought. *Jasper was the dog I castrated yesterday.*

If Brandon’s navigational calculations were correct, and if he hadn’t veered too much off course during the unfortunate chair and underwear encounter, the bedroom door should be found in front of him. Rather than attempt to stand, he stayed on hands and knees. Brandon’s forehead found the door with a sharp crack.

Sometimes he had to make sacrifices, and this proved to be such an occasion. The jeans and shirt were expensive, but Brandon was willing to forego them. He’d left his jacket in the living room, and his car keys were in the pocket. He reached up, found the doorknob, and turned it. Once out in the hall, he shut the door behind him, and used the wall to guide his journey into the living room. He had to move fast now. If Jason, or Justin, caught him in the bedroom, then Brandon could’ve tried the old *‘needed the bathroom and didn’t want to wake you’* excuse. That defence never went down as well when caught halfway out of the house.

Soft light from streetlamps lit up the living room enough to outline a jacket thrown over a chair. He snatched it, grabbed his keys, and made for the front door. From there it was an easy jog toward a green convertible. When Jason, or Justin, woke up, Brandon would be long gone and never seen again.

As he drove home, Brandon’s smug attitude dissipated when he saw police officers flagging down drivers for random breath testing. His panic had nothing to do with being over the alcohol limit. It had to do with sitting behind the wheel of his car in white cotton boxer briefs and a jacket. He hadn’t even bothered to put shoes on.

Luck bypassed him, and a police officer flagged down Brandon's car. He took a deep breath, pulled to the side of the road, and reached for his licence.

A bald cop approached the driver's side window. "Evening, sir," he said, placing a clean tube into the breath analyser. "Have you had a drink tonight?"

"Yes," Brandon replied, trying to keep his voice sounding as natural as possible for a man sitting at the wheel in underwear. "Two glasses of wine about five hours ago."

"Blow until I say stop."

"Said that myself earlier!"

The joke didn't go over well. Brandon obeyed the officer's request and blew into the machine.

"Stop." The policeman looked at the reading, and then leaned closer to the window. "Here's the part when I ask why you're driving in bare feet and boxers."

"Had a feeling you'd ask me that."

The officer lifted his eyebrows. "Intuitive of you."

"I can explain."

"I hope you can." He snapped his fingers. "Licence please, sir."

"The truth is," Brandon handed over the licence, "I was at someone's house. And... umm... I didn't want to be there in the morning."

"She was that bad? You couldn't even wait to put all your clothes back on, Dr Faulkner?"

Quibbling about the gender of his one-night stand wasn't necessary. Brandon returned the officer's grin. "I only have another five-minute drive to get home. You can't cut me some slack, can you?"

"Yeah, go on." The cop laughed and gave back the licence. "Maybe next time keep a change of clothes under the seat."

\* \* \* \*

Late the following morning, no worse for his midnight flit, Brandon chugged back one coffee after the other, and sat staring at a computer monitor.

"Butt-hugging black PVC pants, knee-high boots... Damn!" Spinning around in his chair, he feigned an aroused shiver and smirked at his unimpressed roommate. "Gets me hard just thinking about it."

"There's something wrong with you if *that* makes you horny." Squinting and screwing his face up with distaste, Tarin jabbed a finger at the screen. "*Seriously* wrong with you."

"Okay, so he's not that hot, but he's one hell of a cyber lay." Brandon pushed a large pile of printed pages across the desk. "Check those out. Emails from different guys. All members of my fan club."

Ever since Brandon stumbled on Crystalline Court, a website with members ranging from the Gothic sublime to the full on ridiculous, it became his lustful addiction. It pandered to his fixation with Goth style, though he hadn't pushed his own fashion sense further than off the rack wear.

"You jerk off at the computer?" Tarin's complexion paled.

"I'm an expert at it. Rarely make a mess."

“You say that with such pride, it’s frightening.” Tarin lowered an eyebrow. “There are a whole lot of emails here from a guy called Indigo.” Taking one from the pile, Tarin held it up. “Seems to be under the impression you’re dating him exclusively.”

“Yeah, I’ve told a few of them that.”

Tarin flicked long, blond hair over his shoulder and strode away. “You’re a good friend, Brandon, but you’re a wanker.”

Laughing, Brandon pushed the chair away from a neat desk. Living with Tarin put him on easy street. It was like being married without the ball and chain of monogamy, although they’d never been more than friends. They also worked together at a veterinary practice close to home. Their living arrangements suited them in a lopsided match of weird equality only they understood. Whereas Brandon exuded self-confidence, Tarin struggled with gender issues, and it affected his confidence to the point he’d become a loner. At home Tarin presented as the female he longed to be, comfortable in the knowledge he was in a judgement free environment. No amount of persuasion from Brandon could convince him to step out in public as a woman. Tarin was petite, beautiful, had perfected a feminine speaking voice and, as far as Brandon was concerned, could grace a magazine cover without anyone realising he was a biological male. Yet, even at home, Tarin didn’t have the confidence to allow his best friend to refer to him as she. Brandon worked around it by using pet names instead, with the occasional female pronoun thrown in. Something he knew Tarin quietly appreciated.

At twenty-seven years of age, standing six feet tall, modesty in his appearance wasn’t something Brandon was known for. A self-confessed player, he liked to keep options wide open. After all, why settle for one fish in a sea when there were entire schools to reel in? It was a mantra he lived by. Leaving the study, he cast an appreciative glance at himself as he walked by a hall mirror. He’d always loved the aqua colour of his eyes. They never failed to gain compliments, and contrasted well with his light-brown hair. Then, of course, there was a buffed physique to admire as well.

He stepped away from his reflection. “Draven was hot.”

Tarin watched Brandon slump into an armchair. “I can’t believe you jerk off at the PC.”

“You still going on about that? Change of subject, princess, I’m talking about Draven. I showed you his photo weeks ago. The one with vampire contact lenses.”

“Oh yes, red eyes, how delightful.”

“He sent me an updated photo a few days ago. Put on about ten kilos, so I dumped him. Shame, he was hot before he got fat.” A sly smirk lifted the corner of Brandon’s mouth. “Then there’s Chaos and Enigma.”

Showing disinterest in the conversation, Tarin tapped buttons on the TV remote at random. “How many freaks are you jerking off with?”

“Three.” Brandon screwed his nose up. “Two if you wanna get technical about it. Enigma isn’t into cybersex yet. I’ve got seven others waiting in the wings for emergency purposes.”

Clearly, nothing on the television satisfied Tarin’s interest. He threw the remote aside. “Ever thought of dating a real man? You could have sex with another person rather than with the computer.”

Brandon’s roguish grin broadened. “I got laid last night. Gonna get laid this weekend, too. Scored a date with Enigma tomorrow night, a date with Rapture on Saturday afternoon, and date with Chaos after that. I need your help.”

Silence engulfed the room for several seconds.

“Crystalline Court has a strict Goth member policy. That means you can’t be a member unless you’re a Goth.”

“I figured that out without you clarifying it. Guess you failed to mention you’re a liar when you filled out your profile?”

Brandon dropped his chin and laughed. “Come on, Tarin, be a good girl and help out your best buddy.”

“Help you do what?”

“My hair and makeup. I need you turn me into a Goth.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Chaos has a sex in public places fetish. Man! The images he’s put into my head could keep me up for hours.”

Thoughts of wild romps in the outdoors flashed through Brandon’s mind. Having sex in public places wasn’t something he had done before, though he found the concept exhilarating.

“Not sure how smart Chaos is.” Brandon continued speaking, unaware of Tarin’s indifference. “There’s no point trying to hold a conversation with him unless it has to do with pounding his arse.” When Tarin stood and wandered into the kitchen, Brandon followed. “I have no idea what he looks like.”

Tarin reached for two mugs. “If he hasn’t shown you his photo, it means he’s ugly.”

“Not necessarily. I haven’t added a profile photo and I’m hot. I don’t know what Enigma looks like, either. He’s intelligent enough, but not into hook ups.” Brandon folded his arms over his chest and shrugged. “The only reason he agreed to go out with me is because I told him I’ve been to Prague. He’s obsessed with Prague.”

“You haven’t been to Prague.” Tarin took a carton of milk from the fridge. “You don’t know a thing about Prague. Can you even tell me where it is?”

“Czech Republic. I Googled it. I’ll print out photos and say I took them when I was there.”

Even though Brandon hadn’t agreed to coffee, Tarin shoved a mug into his hands. “Why are you going out with him if you’re not going to get laid?”

“He’ll put out eventually. They always do. I don’t know what it is about Enigma, he’s...” Brandon shrugged. “Don’t know. I can’t put my finger on it.”

“If he’s as smart as you say he is, he won’t let you put your finger anywhere.”

“Rapture will. And, before you say anything, I know he’s...”

“Hideous?” Tarin offered with a mocking simper. “Looks like Satan’s butt crack?”

“That’s rather harsh.” Putting the mug onto the counter, Brandon reached out his arms for a hug. “Come on, turn me into a Goth. Please?”

When he sidled in, Tarin caved. “I can’t say no to seeing you make a total dick of yourself.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Brandon listened to Tarin rifle through an assortment of clothes while he sat immersed in Crystalline Court. Within hours, he'd meet Enigma at a club called Iniquity, one of the most popular LGBT Gothic meeting places in Adelaide. Iniquity had a Victorian-era feel, with a dark interior matching the nineteenth-century building. It wasn't a foreboding atmosphere. At least, it didn't look foreboding on its website. Two levels were set aside for different purposes. A café and restaurant on the upper level appeared as respectable as any high-quality establishment. The first floor had a bar and large nightclub.

"You need black eye shadow," Tarin shouted from his bedroom.

"I'll use yours," Brandon yelled back.

A brief moment of nothing followed until Tarin poked his head around the door of the study. "Do you honestly think I'd have black eyeshadow in my cosmetic bag?"

Shifting in the chair, Brandon peered over his shoulder. "Why wouldn't you?"

"I look best in warm colours," Tarin snapped, as though his cosmetically challenged roommate should have already worked this out. "I would not compromise my skin tone with black eye shadow."

An alert on the computer monitor grabbed Brandon's attention. He looked around to see a message box in the middle of the screen.

Rapture Says: *Got ya pants down?*

Brandon smirked and typed a reply.

Shade Says: *Gimme one sec and they will be.*

Rapture Says: *Don't keep me wating long.*

Before Brandon closed down the chat window, Tarin peered over his shoulder. "Did he graduate from primary school? You should take him a dictionary tomorrow instead of flowers."

Rapture's poor spelling caused no concern in comparison to his cybersex abilities, and Brandon changed the subject to the previous topic. "Can you buy me eye shadow?"

"You expect me to go out and buy your makeup?" Tarin jutted his jaw forward in exasperation. "I have my hands full trying to sort out a passable Goth outfit for you."

With Rapture waiting in the wings, Brandon wanted the house to himself. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a wallet. "Buy yourself something while you're gone."

Tarin snatched fifty dollars from Brandon's hand and flounced from the office. "Don't jerk off at the PC!"

As soon as he heard the front door close, Brandon maximised the chat window, his cock hard in anticipation.

Shade Says: *Back.*

Rapture Says: *Bout fuckin time. U no I dont like being kept wating.*

Rapture didn't have much patience. It didn't bother Brandon. In fact, his bossy nature added to the kink factor of masturbating to what, in reality, was only typed words. He didn't have an emotional attachment to Rapture. He didn't have emotional attachments to any Crystalline Court guy.

Shade Says: *I'm all yours. Had to get rid of my roommate.*

Rapture Says: *Turn ya cam on. I wanna wotch ya cum.*

'Wotch'. The guy couldn't spell to save himself, but the mention of displaying his genitals on a cam switched Brandon's mind away from poor English. Jerking off in private was one thing, doing it while Rapture 'wotched' was another.

Shade Says: *I don't have a cam.*

Rapture Says: *Lyer.*

Brandon raised an eyebrow.

Shade Says: *You want to argue or get me off?*

In preparation, Brandon unzipped his jeans and slipped his right hand into parted denim.

Rapture Says: *Turn ya cam on or nuthin from me.*

"Shit." The word emerged as a growl. He glowered at the monitor, trying to determine whether a few minutes rubbing off was worth putting an image of his penis on Rapture's screen. A video cam-sex session could be saved and uploaded onto an Internet site.

Rapture says: *If ya let me wotch ya cum I'll suck ya off 4 reel tommorow.*

Even if the video was saved and uploaded onto the Internet, who would know to whom the penis in question belonged? A blowjob in exchange for turning the cam on seemed a good enough exchange to prompt rapid reconsideration of prudish virtue.

Shade Says: *Deal.*

The cam had to be positioned to avoid any chance it might film Brandon's face. Now the idea had a minute to settle in, he appreciated another dose of kink factor. It wasn't as though he had anything to be ashamed of.

Shade Says: *Ready.*

An invitation to begin the video chat blinked on the screen. Brandon hesitated, finger poised on the mouse, and then clicked accept. Several quiet, tense seconds elapsed before Rapture responded.

Rapture Says: *Dam that makes me hungary.*

Brandon sniggered. There was a first for everything he supposed, but the sight of his prick hadn't ever before succeeded in turning a human into a country.



Rapture Says: *Start strocking.*

Why had Tarin pointed out poor spelling? Brandon hadn't noticed it any other time and now it became irritating.

"Focus." He shook the thought out of his head.

Obedying Rapture's order, Brandon wrapped his hand around his shaft, impressed he remained hard in spite of suffering a degree of performance anxiety. In a preview screen to the left of the chat window, he watched what Rapture saw. His prick looked long, thick, and standing upright. He gave a nod of self-appreciation.

Rapture Says: *imagin puting ya cock slowly into my mowth. Pushin hard betwene my closed lips until u feel the head on the tip of my tonge.*

To recreate the fantasy, Brandon ran his hand up his shaft and then tightened his thumb and forefinger around the head. As he pushed into his fist he felt the warm lubrication of pre-come slide against his palm.

Rapture Says: *u can feel my tonge ring teese the head and ya slit. Flikking fast until u thrust into my mowth. My tonge wet pressing under ya shaft. The back of my throwt hot and my lips hard around u. I wanna see u pump hard and sqeez ya balls at the same time.*

Typing a response was now out of the question, not that Brandon had any desire to anyway. He shifted forward in the chair, cupping his left hand around his swollen sack and massaging per Rapture's instructions. Heavy breathing intermingled with the occasional groan.

Rapture Says: *Think of fucking my mowth as hard as ya fucking ya hand.*

It was all Brandon *could* think of. Normally, Rapture didn't get him off quite this fast. He doubted his ability to stave off coming for much longer. Watching himself on the cam preview heightened the experience.

\* \* \* \*

Two hours until the date with Enigma. Brandon sat on Tarin's bed, unable to see the dresser mirror. He wondered what Enigma looked like. The profile stated his age was twenty-three; there wasn't much else to go on. The nickname he'd chosen suited him.

"Stop blinking." A liquid eyeliner brush hovered close to Brandon's lash line. "This is a precision instrument. If I screw it up, I'm going to have to start all over again, and you don't have time for that."

"How do I look?"

Stepping back, Tarin admired his handiwork with a satisfied nod. "I'm a genius with cosmetics." He tapped Brandon on the brow with the liner bottle. "You need a toner to close up those pores. A good cleansing routine is important. Quit it with the tanning, too. Otherwise, by the time you're forty, you'll look like a dehydrated apple. That's if melanomas don't get you first."

“Can I look in the mirror?”

“In a minute. How will you recognise Enigma if you don’t know what he looks like?”

“He said to look for the guy reading.”

Closing his eyes while Tarin worked, Brandon thought about an email he’d received from Chaos laden with guarantees of a sexual romp in the outdoors. He guessed he should’ve been thinking about Enigma rather than tomorrow night’s date.

“You can look now,” Tarin announced.

Brandon looked across the room into the mirror, eager to see a Goth masterpiece, and glowered at his reflection. “Tarin! I look like Marcel Marceau!”

“Goths are supposed to be pale.” Instead of remaining at the dressing table arguing, Tarin turned to clothes laid out in ready. “Quit whining and get dressed.”

Brandon sighed, stepping away from the bed toward where Tarin held out shiny PVC pants. They appeared painfully small. A black jacket looked far more promising size-wise.

“Where did you get those?” Brandon pointed to a pair of boots. “Are they cowboy boots?”

“They *were*. Cost me five bucks at a thrift shop. A bit of black spray paint, stuck those old buckles on the front, and voila. Goth boots.”

\* \* \* \*

Brandon had never felt as intimidated as he did when he walked to the entrance of Iniquity. He hadn’t felt quite as uncomfortable as he did now, either, squeezed into PVC pants that practically pushed his testicles into his lower abdomen. The drive to the nightclub had been a physical nightmare, and he reasoned it was lucky he didn’t want children, since he’d more than likely be sterile by midnight.

As it was early evening, Iniquity hadn’t reached its full Friday night capacity. Brandon arranged to meet Enigma in the cafeteria, and he prayed he wouldn’t have to walk around between tables before he located his date. Although, when he thought about it, sitting for an extended period of time in the pants wasn’t a pleasant idea either. There didn’t need to be a bustling crowd for Brandon to feel all eyes turn on him. The men sized him up through narrowed eyes. The women were just as ruthless. He’d never seen so many corsets, vinyl, leather, and dagger-like glares in one concentrated area. The concept of Crystalline Court appeared far more agreeable than the reality of Iniquity. He scanned the room, avoiding eye contact with anyone as he searched for Enigma. When Brandon thought he’d been stood up, his gaze landed on small figure sitting at a table and immersed in a novel. He took a deep breath and walked over.

“Hi. Enigma?”

“That’s me.”

Amethyst eyes, surrounded by dark gothic makeup and framed with raven lashes, stared unblinking. Short jet-black hair had purple bangs that tapered to a central point, and framed a beautiful face. A soft, boyish quality to Enigma’s features made Brandon question whether twenty-three was his true age. It didn’t matter. He didn’t look under eighteen, and that was all Brandon cared about.

“Shade?”

Brandon snapped his mouth closed before he drooled onto painted cowboy boots. “Uh-huh.”

“The guy who’s been to Prague.”

Brandon lifted his brows. If that was all Enigma remembered him for, then his chances of ending up in the guy's bed weren't good. His ego deflated like a week old balloon.

"Sit down." With a nod, Enigma gestured to the chair across from him. "If you can."

*Was that sarcasm?* Brandon wondered.

"I didn't realise you were so tall," Enigma added. "These booths are very close to the table."

*Perhaps it wasn't sarcasm.* Brandon comforted himself with the thought he might be feeling sensitive in a café filled with leering eyes. He squeezed between the table and dark red seats, grimacing as his pants cut a cruel line from his crotch to his butt.

"If I'd known you were this hot, I'd have arranged to meet you weeks ago." There didn't seem to be a reason not to hit Enigma with smooth talk straight away. "What's your real name?"

"I haven't decided whether or not I want to share that information with you."

"Okay." It wouldn't have been the first time Brandon bedded someone without knowing their name. "I'm Brandon."

"I knew a Brandon once. Couldn't stand him. Hated that name ever since."

Brandon's smile slipped away like butter off a hot frying pan. There was something odd about the static smiling, mysterious Enigma, and it became unnerving. The bottomless violet eyes hardly blinked. He was gorgeous, but creepy.

"Did you bring photos of Prague?"

Brandon reached into his jacket. PVC pants squeaked against the leather seat, twisting his testicles into a position God never intended testicles to go. Once he'd retrieved the printed photographs from his jacket, he placed them onto the table.

The ensuing awkward silence drove Brandon into trying to think of anything to break it. "Was the best trip of my life."

"Better than a bad trip."

*Was that a drug reference, or a comment about dreadful vacations?* Either way, Brandon thought maybe it was time to try a little humour. Whether Enigma was a loon or not, he was worth one good roll in the hay. "You can say that again! If only I..."

"Why would I say it again?" Enigma arched an eyebrow. "It'd waste breath I might need on my death bed."

There was no denying it. Enigma was sexy as hell, with a face like a Gothic angel, and definitely wacky. It seemed the unnatural grin Enigma wore was a deliberate effort to unsettle his date. And, it worked. Brandon made a mental note not to hang around long after he'd shagged this guy.

"Forget it." Brandon dismissed the conversation with a wave of his hand. "Do you come to this place a lot?"

"Yes." Enigma slipped the photos up his sleeve, ignoring a look of disbelief shot in his direction. "Most Fridays."

"Bet you get hit on all the time." An additional attempt to flatter, while still coming to terms with the fact Enigma had stolen what may have been, under truthful circumstances, precious holiday snaps.

"Do you do your own makeup?"

"Yeah," Brandon lied. "Always been a Goth. Always done my own makeup."

"It's horrendous."

Brandon's self-esteem took a battering. He was used to guys fawning over him. It made him want Enigma more.

“Your makeup is excellent. Maybe you can show me some tips.” Brandon added a wink for extra effect.

“Maybe not.” Enigma picked up the book, slid across the chair, and stood.

“Where are you going?”

“Home,” Enigma replied, as if it should have been obvious.

This meeting became more bizarre with each passing second, and Brandon would’ve welcomed his date leaving if Enigma wasn’t so shag-worthy. “I just got here!”

Enigma shrugged. “I never said I would hang around.”

Now Enigma stood in front of him, Brandon had the opportunity to check out his tight little butt in leather pants. He had a damn fine arse, was short in stature with a narrow waist, and appeared toned in all the right places.

“I can drop you home.” Somehow Brandon had to get the odd, though divine, Enigma into his bed.

“There are perfectly roadworthy cabs outside.”

“I take it that’s a no, then?”

Together they weaved out through the growing crowd onto the sidewalk. Light rain fell. Brandon cursed not just the weather, but also the embarrassing squeak his pants made with each step. He imagined arriving home and finding his groin purple and swollen.

“So…” Brandon attempted to once more rescue the defunct conversation. “Will I talk to you again online?”

“That would depend on how desperate I am for conversation.” With a jerk of his head, Enigma gestured to Brandon’s feet. “By the way, your cowboy boots are turning tan.”

Sure enough, when Brandon checked, black spray paint pooled onto the pavement. By the time he looked up, Enigma had already jogged across the road toward a taxi.

\* \* \* \*

Less than ninety minutes after leaving the house, Brandon returned home. A bewildered expression plastered onto his face.

Tarin peered up from the television screen. “That was quick. What happened?”

“I have no fucking idea!” Brandon unzipped the PVC pants, desperate to relieve a searing pain in his crotch. “The guy could…” Trying to remove the pants was like trying to peel an apple with his fingers. “…drain the self-confidence out of a… a… bottle of self-confidence.”

“What a clever analogy.” Tarin watched Brandon fight to get the pants to his knees. “What did you expect? You meet a freak on the Internet and you think he’ll be normal?”

“Help me get these off.”

Sighing, Tarin left the armchair. “Guess the spray paint wasn’t waterproof.”

“Yeah, no kidding. I feel like my balls have been pulverised.”

Tarin sniggered. “By the pants or Enigma?”

“Both!” Brandon gripped the sofa arm while Tarin pulled at the torturous pants. “He hardly blinks. Stares until you feel like you have to look away, but you can’t because he’s so God damned gorgeous. He’s about five foot five, slim, tight arse, beautiful, with violet eyes like Elizabeth Taylor.”

“They were probably contacts.”

“Nope, they weren’t. And, he has this sexy little overjet.”

Tarin lifted his brows. “He has buck teeth and you think he’s sexy? You really will shag anything, won’t you?”

“Not buck teeth, princess, it’s an overjet. Like this.” Brandon moved his lower jaw backward a little to demonstrate. “Makes his lips look pouty. His teeth are a bit crooked. Not much, but a little. Just enough to make them as hot as his overjet.” He tilted his head, picturing Enigma inside his mind. “Pretty hands, too. Pretty nose. He smelled great. Oh...and...” Brandon snapped his fingers. “Grumpy eyebrows.”

“Grumpy eyebrows?”

“Yeah. They tilt down in the middle and give him this sexy, serious, grumpy expression. They’re great eyebrows.”

“I can’t believe you noticed all these things.” Tarin cocked his head. “Anyway, don’t be too disappointed. You’re still left with Rapture and Chaos.”

“Enigma’s creepy. Odd. Weird. A freak. Hot as hell!” The pants came loose and Brandon fell back into the sofa, covering his face with his hand. “I *have* to fuck him.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Every second Saturday Brandon worked at a veterinary practice from eight in the morning until noon. Though he'd gotten little sleep during the night, wondering what happened between him and Enigma, he took solace in the fact his balls hadn't suffered permanent damage. Considering Friday night had been a disaster, he wanted to make sure Rapture made good on the blowjob promise.

Standing at an examination table, Brandon watched the clock, willing the minutes to elapse faster. He heard Tarin approach the door, looking up when he spoke.

"Someone's walked in with an emergency case."

"Fuck it," Brandon mumbled. "Show them in."

Tarin left and came back moments later with the new client. Brandon froze.

"Dr Faulkner, this is Lewis." Tarin couldn't hide a smirk. "He informed me you know him by the name Enigma."

Brandon dropped his stunned stare from Lewis' unreadable expression, to a plastic bag filled with water and one disoriented looking goldfish.

"Fluffles is sick," Lewis announced. "He has fish vertigo."

"Does it?" Brandon's ignored Tarin's sniggers. "How can you tell it has vertigo?"

Lewis stepped forward and placed the bag onto the exam table. "He's doing the backstroke."

Sure enough, the goldfish swam upside down, its boggle-eyes wide and staring, fins flapping madly at its sides. Brandon felt like the fish looked, anxious over how Lewis knew he was a vet, and also the practice he worked at.

"I don't think it has vertigo, Lewis." A professional approach was all he could think of. "Has it ever done this before?"

"He. He's not an 'it', and his name is Fluffles. I'd appreciate it if you referred to Fluffles by name, rather than a generic term demeaning him into nothing more than an object devoid of gender." Lewis tilted his head, staring unblinking. "Fluffles is a beloved pet. I *demand* you show him respect."

"Oookaaaay." Brandon pressed his lips together, releasing them a second later with a loud pop. "Has *Fluffles* ever done this before?"

"Don't know." Lewis peered into the bag. "I've only had him forty-five minutes."

Tarin laughed out loud, apologised, and coughed in an attempt to cover his amusement.

"Are you going to have to put Fluffles to sleep?"

Before Brandon could answer Lewis' question, Tarin stepped forward. "Euthanasia might be the kindest option in this case, Dr Faulkner. All things considered."

"Thank you, Nurse Bentley, I don't think that's necessary." He shot a dark look at his friend, and then forced a smile at Lewis. "Fish have a swim bladder. It's what regulates flotation in the water. Sometimes, when goldfish take a trip from the pet store, the movement of a car disrupts the swim bladder for a while. Fluffles should be fine tomorrow, Lewis, once he's settled into his tank."

"I don't have a car. I don't have a tank, either."

"Why did you buy a fish if you don't have anywhere to put it?"

"Who else would buy an upside-down goldfish?"

“A very good question.” Tarin giggled, no longer trying to hide his laughter. “Who else indeed?”

Lewis gave Tarin a quick once over. “I shall give my beloved pet to you.” He handed over the bag and miserable goldfish. “Be kind to Fluffles, and he’ll repay you with years of faithful companionship.” Lewis strode out of the consultation room without another word.

They did have an aquarium at the house. At least the deserted goldfish wasn’t homeless. Brandon gripped the sides of the examination table, hunched his shoulders, and shook his head.

“Damn,” said Tarin, still giggling. “You know how to pick ’em.”

Leaning over, Brandon bumped his brow onto the metal surface. “What I wouldn’t give to bend him over this table and fuck his brains out.”

\* \* \* \*

At four o’clock, dressed in comfortable clothes, Brandon walked into Iniquity. This time he kept his face lowered, avoiding harsh stares from regular patrons. He found a stool at the café bar, far enough away from others, and sat down. A buxom woman in a corset took his order. She came back moments later with black coffee.

“Hello.”

Brandon knew that voice without a need to glance up. He squeezed his eyes closed, cursed under his breath, and looked around to see Lewis perched on a barstool beside him. God, he was gorgeous. With perfect Goth makeup, perfect little body in tight leather, perfect overjet, perfect pouty lips, perfect face, perfect hands... Just perfect. *Except*, thought Brandon, *for his undeniable sanity imbalance*.

“Hi.” Brandon’s voice sounded higher than normal. “I thought you came here on Fridays.”

“I also come here Saturdays.” Leaning his elbow on the bar, Lewis turned and rested his chin in his palm. “You have creepy eyes.”

*This from someone who rarely blinked?* Brandon’s ego took another tumble. Everyone complimented his aqua eyes. They didn’t impress Lewis. He ignored the statement. “I’m meeting a friend here.”

“How lovely for you.”

Seducing Lewis toward a sexual encounter was the plan, but for Brandon this wasn’t the time. “His name’s Chaos.”

“Chaos? Really? Interesting. Very interesting.”

“What’s interesting about it?”

“Nothing at all.” The buxom waitress approached as Lewis removed a black wallet from his jacket pocket. “Hello, Melissa. Cappuccino on the rocks, please.”

“Sure thing, honey,” she replied with a smile.

“You want a cappuccino with ice?” Brandon inquired, regarding Lewis with a frown.

“Yes, I do, which explains why I placed the order.”

Curiosity got the better of Brandon. “Why do you want ice in it?”

“Turns it into iced coffee.”

He pointed to a chalkboard menu. “They do sell iced coffee here.”

“Why order iced coffee when I can have a cappuccino on the rocks?”

“No idea. Forget I asked.”

“Don’t mind if I do. A ridiculous question anyway.” Obviously, Lewis had no intention of taking the hint to leave. “It warms my heart to know you’re meeting a friend, even if it is someone called Chaos. Nice to know some people, those *very* much like myself, are prepared to spend time with other people, like yourself, who have problems with social interaction.”

It was all the confirmation Brandon needed to rate the guy in desperate need of psychological intervention. “*I have obvious problems with social interaction?*”

“Yes, I know you do. Repeating what others say is a classic symptom.”

When the buxom waitress placed a large mug onto the counter, Brandon watched Lewis stir his cappuccino first before opening five packets of sugar and adding them.

Ice cubes clinked against each other when Lewis took a sip from the mug. “Eww!” He called out to the waitress. “Melissa? Why isn’t this sugar sweet?”

“Did you stir it after you added the sugar, honey?” she replied.

“Oh.” Lewis seemed flustered, and cleared his throat before changing the topic. “Dancing House and the Astronomical Clock. Have you seen them, Brandon?”

Brandon peered at his watch, once again trying to press home his earlier hint. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I thought you’d remember those places, since you apparently took photos of them.”

They must have been tourist attractions in Prague. Brandon knew Lewis outsmarted him. The information he’d crammed the day before hadn’t included researching the images. Brandon’s ego had not only taken a tumble, now he also felt his IQ fall as far.

“Funny thing about the Internet, Brandon.” Each time Lewis smiled, it appeared carved in wax. “If you look for pictures on search engines, chances are the same ones keep reappearing.” He winked. “You might want to be more careful who you’re trying to con.”

Brandon grinned, assuming the wink was flirtatious. “What can I say? I wanted to meet you, I knew you loved Prague, and I thought it was my best bet.”

“It’s okay.” Lewis petted Brandon’s arm. “I know how difficult it must be for people like you to get dates. No offence or anything.” He took his hand away to pick up the mug, shrugging in sympathy. “I know you can’t help how you look, and I never judge people based on physical appearance. It must be tough on you, though.”

*I know you can’t help how you look?* Brandon’s mind raced in horror at the implications of that statement. It made no sense how anyone could fail to notice his obvious gorgeousness. He was the prettiest baby in the family photo album, the best-looking boy in high school, and an adult who turned heads wherever he went. No one ever implied he was unattractive.

There wasn’t time to reply before, over the top of Lewis’ head, Brandon saw a familiar face attached to a huge body looming toward the bar, like a massive satanic shadow. He cringed.

“Well, well!” A deep baritone voice rumbled Iniquity on its foundations. “You must be Shade. I saw those aqua eyes you bragged about from the other side of the room.”

Rapture stood around seven foot tall. Taller than seven foot if one included platform boots into the equation. Dressed in a black monk outfit, complete with hood, and a wooden crucifix hung around his neck.

“Ain’t you a purdy little thang?” he drawled, leaning in closer as Brandon recoiled. “You’re as purdy as your cock is. Thanks for showing it to me on cam. Can’t wait to taste it.”

The man was terrifying, built like a skyscraper, looking every bit the devil’s henchman. Rapture’s picture hadn’t been a turn on, but it was a damn sight better than reality. Brandon imagined being the man’s bitch minus a cellblock.



“I’m not who you think I am!” A Mickey Mouse quality threw Brandon’s voice into soprano range. “I was about to leave.”

“You ain’t going nowhere, Shade. You wanted a blowjob? Ya gonna get one!”

Brandon had never felt so short at six feet tall.

“He saw *what* on your cam?” As if Rapture’s revelation hadn’t been mortifying enough, Lewis’ loud question had everyone turning around to stare.

“His cock,” replied the waitress. “And, I don’t think we’re talking poultry, unless he was choking his chicken.”

“Do you mind?” Humiliated by the sniggering around him, terrified of Rapture’s dominating presence, Brandon glared through narrowed eyes. “Don’t you have orders to take?”

“Not from you, sunshine.” She leaned over the bar, an ample bosom almost falling onto the countertop. “Whip it out again so we can all take a look.”

Lewis leapt from the barstool. “I don’t want to see it!”

“I do,” rumbled Rapture.

“Me, too,” quipped the waitress. “All those who want to see this guy’s cock,” she yelled into the café, “raise your hands and say aye!”

A sea of hands lifted into the air and a chorus of “ayes” rang out.

“He’s all yours.” Lewis snatched his cappuccino on the rocks, backing away.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Hiding in a cubicle inside the men's bathroom proved almost as uncomfortable as the PVC pants had been the night before. Brandon's legs were bent in an awkward position, his feet planted on the toilet seat. At least the door could be locked, although he doubted it would stop the gigantic Rapture should he go hunting for his dungeon bitch. He seemed determined to follow through on the blowjob promise, and Brandon didn't think he'd left Iniquity on his own accord.

"See what happens when you meet people on the Internet?" Tarin's voice shrilled through the phone. "What are you going to do?"

To stop from slipping off the toilet, Brandon braced against the wall. "I don't fucking know!" he hissed, listening for movement outside the cubicle. "Come down here and distract him so I can escape."

Someone walked into the bathroom. Brandon held his breath, hoping whoever it was would leave, and praying it wasn't Rapture.

"You think I'm going to walk in there and be beaten up by Goths? Get a security guard to walk you out."

"Please!" His frantic whisper lowered even more. "If I leave this cubicle, he'll be waiting."

The stranger knocked on the toilet door. "You okay in there?"

Thank God it wasn't the baritone voice of Satan's henchman, though it was terrifyingly familiar nonetheless. "For God's sake, leave me alone!" Brandon snapped.

"If someone's making trouble for you, I can get help."

"I'll call you back, Tarin." Brandon dared to put his feet on the ground.

"Is someone harassing you?"

Brandon opened the cubicle door. "*You're* harassing me."

"Geez, relax dude, I was just offering some help."

Brandon frowned, noticing Lewis now wore no makeup, different clothes, the purple streak from his bangs was gone, and his hair was slicked back. "Listen, Lewis, this is stalking. If you think I'm such a loser, why are you following me?"

"Ah, you've met my brother?" He stepped back to allow Brandon out and smiled. "I'm Casey. Unfortunately for me, Lewis' twin."

"Stop fucking with me. I've had enough." Stumbling to the basin, Brandon turned the faucet and splashed cold water onto his face. "Is that giant still out there?"

"You mean Wayne? No, he left with Lewis. They were walking out as I walked in."

"You need professional help. I'm meeting Chaos. I want you to leave me alone."

"Oh my God, you're Shade? *I'm* Chaos."

"That does it, I'm leaving."

"No, wait!" He snatched Brandon's sleeve. "Ask anyone here, they'll tell you I'm Casey, and I have a fucked up twin brother called Lewis. Actually, they'll tell you I'm Chaos, because that's what everyone calls me." As though realising the implications, he narrowed his eyes, and let go of the sleeve. "How do you know my brother?"

Now Brandon took time to analyse the situation, he did notice differences between this guy and Lewis. They looked identical, but spoke differently. Lewis had a clipped, sarcastic tone to everything he said, whereas Chaos spoke in a soft, calm manner. Lewis carried himself upright with shoulders held back. Chaos slouched against the basins. He didn't stare right through

Brandon like Lewis had. There was a nasty scar in the centre of Chaos' brow, something Brandon hadn't noticed on Lewis due to his bangs. Twins weren't such a rare occurrence that circumstances like this were unheard of. And, Lewis had made a point of stating 'very interesting' at the mention of meeting Chaos. *Perhaps*, Brandon thought, *my luck has changed*. He may have the opportunity to bed a Lewis look-alike without fearing for his life in the process.

"Can you prove you're his twin?"

"I don't carry birth certificates with me." Chaos laughed. "You still haven't answered my question, Shade. How do you know Lewis? Did you pick him up online, too?"

The more he spoke, the more Brandon believed him. "I've emailed him a few times. We met here yesterday. Briefly."

Shrugging, Chaos grabbed a handful of Brandon's jacket. "No problem. We're both only here for sex. I know it, you know it, so let's find a spot in the park where you can fuck me."

\* \* \* \*

A full moon shone bright in a cloudless sky, lighting up the night a little more than Brandon would have liked. Chaos chatted, more than likely sensing his date's reserve, and trying to ease his nerves. However, the farther they walked from the perimeter of the park into its heart, the more Brandon's anxiety increased.

"Hey, listen." Chaos slipped an arm around Brandon's waist. "This place is a known hangout for sex. The cops rarely bust anyone. They pretty much turn a blind eye."

*Rarely bust anyone*. After the last twenty-four hours of disaster, it was obvious to Brandon that Murphy's Law had it in for him. Even if the cops hadn't raided the park for a year, he figured tonight would be the night they changed their minds.

"You're not messing with me, are you?" Another rush of doubt added to his nerves. "You're not Lewis pretending to be Casey pretending to have a twin brother called Lewis? 'Cause that'd be something Lewis would do."

Chaos led him to a bench nestled under a tiny, dense glut of trees. Sheltered enough from people sticking to the pathways on an early evening stroll, there was still the chance of being caught should anyone stray off those paths.

"Shade, there's one nutcase in every family. In ours, it's Lewis." Warm hands slid under Brandon's jacket, and Chaos stepped in closer. "Can we stop talking about him?" He slipped the jacket over Brandon's shoulders, letting it fall to the ground. "I'm getting an inferiority complex."

Chaos removed his own jacket, and a shot of adrenaline pulsed through Brandon's veins. He didn't want to turn back now. He wanted to add another notch to his long list of sexual encounters. Not so much a notch with Chaos. He'd lost count of how many guys he'd had sex with over the years. This was a notch of where not who. If Brandon had his preference, no matter how much Lewis disturbed him, he'd rather have been with the crazy twin.

Chaos didn't seem to leave the ground as he pushed Brandon onto the bench seat, straddling his lap, gripping a handful of brown hair. For someone of his height, the guy had an amazing amount of strength. His body pushed in hard, pinning Brandon with force.

"You're already hard for me." Warm breath brushed over Brandon's lips. "Like it rough, do you?"

In spite of the pain Chaos inflicted by knotting Brandon's hair inside his fingers, despite the dominant position he held, Brandon indeed was turned on. A swipe of Chaos' tongue across

his bottom lip sent a shiver of desire down Brandon's spine. He opened his mouth a little, closing his eyes, their tongues teasing and flicking against one another.

"Got a condom?"

"In my pocket," Brandon rasped. "Back jeans pocket."

"Lube?"

"There's a packet in..."

His reply was stifled into silence by lips smothering the sentence, and Chaos' tongue diving into the depths of Brandon's mouth. It felt like being kissed by an inferno, blistering hot and out of control. Chaos tasted sweet with a hint of spearmint. Teeth clashed now and then, and it seemed he wouldn't be satisfied until his tongue burned the back of Brandon's throat.

A tearing sound ripped through the silence of the park. Chaos tore Brandon's shirt open. Buttons flew off in all directions, and the next heady sensation Brandon felt were those fiery lips travelling across his chest. He shifted his position to allow Chaos easier access to his belt. Hands fumbled with a zipper instead, getting nowhere fast. Impatient with waiting, Brandon pushed Chaos' hands out the way and took on the job of undoing the belt buckle himself.

Dismounting, Chaos yanked the jeans down to Brandon's ankles. One shoe came off, then the second, and he hurled them into the trees, followed by the pants. Boxers came off next, then Brandon's shirt, and they joined the shoes.

"What the hell are you doing? Stop throwing my... *ohhhh, Christ!*" Brandon jerked his hips up in reaction to a heated mouth taking in the entire length of his prick. His hand clamped to the back of Chaos' head. "Fuck!"

There was a fine line between pleasure and pain. Chaos pushed the limits by sucking hard and scraping his teeth over soft skin. The more Brandon bucked his hips, the more the wooden bench nipped at his arse. Even if he spent the entire week pulling out splinters, he decided it was worth it. Chaos gave one hell of a blowjob, using his tongue to apply pressure in all the right places, pressing it firmly against the shaft as he bobbed his head up and down. It didn't seem like the guy had any trace of a gag reflex.

Brandon gritted his teeth together, not wanting to vocalise his intense pleasure for the entire park to hear. "Stop! I'm gonna come. For fuck sake... Stop!"

"Shame, I could've used the carbohydrates. Sperm cappuccino on the rocks."

Dropping his head into his hands, Brandon knew he'd been duped again. "You're seriously twisted, Lewis." He tried to calm the tremble in his arms and legs, though he still felt more turned on than he'd ever been before. "Fucked in the head."

"*I'm* fucked in the head? You're the dipstick who fell for 'I'm his twin'." Lewis guided Brandon's hands to a studded belt. "You still want me?"

"Hell yes!"

By the time Brandon removed Lewis' pants, rolled the condom onto himself, and stood, Lewis was already braced with his hands on the back of the bench, head down between his arms, legs spread apart, and waiting. Brandon walked behind him, running his right hand down Lewis' spine.

Lewis reached for the packet of lube and held it out. "Slick up and fuck me."

Brandon faltered at the blunt, monotone way Lewis said it. He tore the packet open with his teeth, squeezed lube on his palm, and slicked up as he'd been ordered. The hot kiss still burned on Brandon's lips. He wanted to spin Lewis around, press their naked bodies together, run his hands over smooth, hairless skin, and kiss him until they were breathless.

"What are you waiting for?" Lewis growled. "Fuck me."

Brandon guided his prick between rounded butt cheeks. He spread them apart, rubbing the head of his cock over a tight hole. Lewis left him aching from the blowjob, but now Brandon had what he'd really wanted. He pushed in and Lewis jammed his butt backward. Tight heat closed around him, nearly taking his breath away. He thrust in and out, setting up a quick rhythm that left his head spinning.

"Fuck, that's hot," he panted, thrusting hard and fast.

Rapid breathing and smothered moans switched to hoarse grunts. He gripped Lewis' hips tighter, and slammed into the guy several times until he came. Brandon's body shuddered. He fell forward over Lewis' back. He stayed there for several moments, trying to catch his breath, and allowing the relaxation of fulfillment to envelope him.

"Holy shit." Brandon found his voice. "That was damn hot. *You're* damn hot, no matter how fucked up you are."

"Pull out."

Another blunt order. Brandon didn't care. He kind of liked it, and did what Lewis demanded.

Lewis straightened, and walked over to retrieve his pants. "You think that was hot, do you?"

"Hell yeah!" Brandon remembered his clothes were somewhere hidden within the glut of trees. He turned his head to see if he could locate them. One shoe hung from a branch. Where the other items had disappeared to was anyone's guess. "I know why you get off on sex in public places."

"Only when I cum, too." Lewis pulled on black jeans. "I've proved my point. You're a selfish jerk." He reached for his shirt. "Maybe I am weird, but at least I was legitimately interested in you, until I found out you were hooking up with as many guys as you could."

Shamefaced and stark naked, Brandon watched Lewis try to dress, feeling a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. Perhaps it was due to anger, but Lewis fumbled with his clothes.

"You *told* me to fuck you." Brandon retaliated, wishing Lewis would keep his voice down. "It's not like you gave the impression you wanted anything else from me."

"Like it would've made any difference if I had." Lewis stalked toward the bench, face contorted in fury, placing his foot onto the seat. "Enigma, Chaos, Rapture... They're *all* me. Three months you talked to me! Telling lies, telling me you had feelings for me, sending romantic emails, convincing me you were a nice guy, and I believed you. I thought you really did like me. Thought maybe... for once... I'd met a decent guy. Until I found out you were playing me." Lewis tugged at his shoelaces, teeth gritted as he let out a loud, frustrated scream. He gave up on the laces, turning to jab his index finger at Brandon. "Do you even remember me, Brandon? Indigo. Does that name ring a bell?"

It was true. Brandon sweet-talked Lewis, while trying the same treatment on many other Crystalline Court guys. Except Lewis, or Indigo as he'd been known then, had always been different. A pleasure to chat with, intelligent and funny, someone Brandon enjoyed getting to know. Always obscure, but never dull. He'd been the only one in an impolite chat room to speak and welcome a new member. From the start, Brandon's intentions had been to work Indigo over, seduce him online, and bed him. As soon as he managed to build up a list of guys more willing to partake in cybersex, Brandon dumped Indigo like yesterday's newspaper.

Brandon stared into violet eyes. "I'm sorry."

"You're not sorry at all!" Lewis balled his fists at his sides. "I fell for you, and you made me look like a fool. Even worse than that is, I thought you were my friend. When I went to bed at night, I looked forward to the next day, because I knew you'd be there for me to talk to."

This outpouring of emotion wasn't an act. Brandon felt sick to his stomach. Lewis' bottom lip trembled, his eyes glistened, his voice cracked, and his expression was one of pained confusion.

"Three months! Three fucking months, and then nothing. You couldn't even type a reply when I tried to say hello to you." Brandon didn't see the knee coming until it slammed into his crotch. "That didn't hurt anywhere near as much as you hurt me."

## CHAPTER FIVE

A tabby cat lay splayed out on a steel table with its back legs spread open. Normally a veterinary practice with a lively environment, today the operating theatre was bathed in silence. The melancholy atmosphere had been the same around the house.

“If you don’t snap out of this mood, Brandon, I’ll lay you out on this table and cut your balls off.”

“Might be a good idea,” Brandon replied, setting aside a scalpel. “Being neutered might keep me out of trouble.”

“What trouble? You’ve hardly left the house for two weeks.”

Latex gloves came off with a snap. “I’m done here.”

From the operating room, Brandon walked into a kitchen at the rear of the practice, dragging his feet. He took a coffee pot off its warmer, and poured black liquid into a mug. Lewis hadn’t replied to his emails. They bounced back without reaching their intended target.

Once the cat had been placed back in its cage, Tarin joined Brandon at the table. “Vent. Get it off your chest. Then maybe I can live in peace again.”

Narrowing his eyes, Brandon glared over the rim of the coffee mug. “Drop it.”

“I’m the one who has to live with you, and you’re about as pleasant to endure as a bikini wax.” Enough was enough, and Tarin wasn’t prepared to let Brandon sulk any longer. “What’s wrong with you lately?”

“Lewis won’t answer my emails.”

“You’ve got to be kidding! You’re moping around because of that freak?”

Brandon bristled. “He’s not a freak.”

“I stand corrected. He’s not a freak, he’s a psycho.”

“I feel like Lewis is looking for something and he hasn’t been able to find it yet.”

Tarin huffed, rolling his eyes. “His medication?”

One thing Brandon couldn’t extol upon himself was the title of world’s most considerate lover. Sex had been about his enjoyment. He believed the only gratification his partners were worthy of was the honour of being the one he chose for the night.

“You didn’t see the hurt look in his eyes.” Brandon ignored Tarin’s sarcasm, focusing instead on what took place a fortnight ago. “He was furious, and he had every right to be. Yeah, he scared the shit out of me, but I deserved it.”

“Yes, you did, Brandon. Ever heard of Catfishing?”

When someone pretends to be different people online, plays people online, and cons them. Brandon pursed his lips and nodded.

“There you go, darling boy.” Tarin raised an eyebrow and tilted his head. “The catfish was out-catfished by a more deviant catfisher. Time to get over it. Lewis is an Internet con-artist, nothing more.”

“You’re wrong. It was more. It *is* more. I led him on. Made him think I was falling in love with him. The only reason he conned me was because he found out I conned him. I’m a selfish bastard, and I’m paying for it.”

“My God, you don’t have feelings for him, do you?”

“I don’t know.” Brandon shrugged, gaze lowered. “I think... Yeah... I think I do have feelings for him.”

“I saw him with my own eyes. He is beautiful, I can’t deny it.” Mockery vanished from Tarin’s voice. “Are you sure these feelings you have are for Lewis himself, or are they for his looks?”

“I reread all the emails we sent each other. I didn’t realise there were so many. I told him a lot of things, Tarin. When I had a shitty day, I told him about it. He cared. He gave me advice, he lent me an ear, and he cared.”

“Or he was pretending to care, just like you were. He’d be nothing but trouble. For Lewis to behave like he did, even for payback, means he’s not all there upstairs.”

“Sure, he *is* loopy. But, I don’t believe he’s dangerous, and it’s because he’s crazy that I can’t stop thinking about him.”

\* \* \* \*

For the next week Brandon moped around the house, praying one of his emails would result in a reply, and disappointed when they continued to bounce back. For every guy he’d bedded in the past, and then left with no concern, Brandon experienced the punishment of Karma. He’d never once come close to finding someone who held his interest for more than a few hours. Brandon knew it was Lewis’ unpredictability, the element of risk, of never knowing what he might do next, and a pile of selfless emails that captured his imagination.

Early Friday evening, after finishing work, Brandon made a decision to brave the Iniquity leers. If Lewis was there, and if he dismissed any attempt to reconcile, then Brandon would back off and leave him be. He couldn’t walk away before giving it one last shot.

The buxom waitress served bar. She eyed Brandon as he approached.

He tucked a magazine under his arm. “Has Lewis been here today?”

“Looky here.” Melissa curled her lips into a smug smirk. “If it isn’t penis man.”

Embarrassed, Brandon flushed. “Has he been here?”

She lifted her eyebrows. “Do you ever say please or thank you?”

“Please?”

“That wasn’t difficult, was it?” She leaned over the counter, giving Brandon an unwanted view of her voluptuous breasts. “He told me to pass on a message in case you came in looking for him.”

“What message?”

“That his right hand makes a better lover than you do, and your cock looks bigger on cam than it is in real life.”

“Right.” Clearly Melissa enjoyed taunting him. Brandon donned a simpering smile. “Has he been in tonight or not?”

“Not.”

He stepped away from the bar, prepared to wait on the chance Lewis made an appearance. “*Thank you.*”

“You’re welcome, dipshit.” As Brandon turned to walk away, Melissa snatched his sleeve. “I’ll give you a warning, mate. Lewis has enough problems without you adding to them. There are plenty of people here who would love to make sure you don’t become another problem for him. Are you getting my drift?”

Pulling his arm away, Brandon headed toward a nearby table, sat down, and opened the veterinary magazine. Judging by the amount of disdainful glowers speared in his direction from nearly everyone in the café, it seemed Lewis was a popular member of their clique community.



Melissa's threat wasn't idle. Lewis obviously knew giant, ominous Rapture well enough to weave him into a game of revenge. In a way, it soothed Brandon's lingering reserves, and proved his theory that Lewis was harmlessly wacky. If he were dangerous, the patrons of Iniquity wouldn't be so willing to engage his acquaintance, or jump to his defence.

Over the next forty minutes, Brandon sat reading. At times glancing up to search for the face he wanted to see. A strong coffee or, better still, large shot of scotch would have aided in settling his anxiety. Both of which he could've ordered, if not intimidated by the big-breasted, loud-mouthed waitress.

Another five minutes elapsed. Brandon peered up from his magazine. There, sitting at the bar, looking striking in red leather pants, a body hugging black military jacket, and patent leather, knee-high buckled boots, Lewis sipped from a mug and read a novel. Seeing him sent Brandon's pulse racing.

Taking a long, slow, deep breath in, Brandon approached the café bar. "Lewis?"

"I'm reading."

Wuthering Heights, the ultimate Gothic romance novel, but a title Brandon wouldn't have expected to find Lewis reading. Despite being fobbed off, he smiled. Lewis turned a page from back to front, reading the book from end to start. It reminded Brandon of why he found him intriguing.

"Please?"

Lewis sighed, peering sideways through eyes decorated in black and red makeup. "And God said, *'Let there be light'; and there was light.*" He stood up, tapping hard on Brandon's forehead with his finger. "Except for in there, where even God can't lift the ignorant darkness of an eternal moron."

Humiliation, shame, guilt, and helplessness. They were emotions Brandon hadn't dealt with prior to meeting Lewis. Now they'd become familiar adversaries.

Brandon nodded, knowing his face flamed scarlet. His heart hit the pit of his stomach. "I'm sorry for everything. I wish I could change it." He tucked the magazine under his arm in preparation to leave. "I won't bother you again."

"Oh, yes you will!" Snatching the novel off the barstool, Lewis smacked Brandon hard in the arm. "Midnight tonight, you'll meet me at Henley Beach, by the jetty."

Blinking in surprise, Brandon broke into a wide smile. "Sure!"

"You'll bring with you a six-and-a-half-page essay, explaining why you're an eternal moron, and why I should trust you again. Twelve point, Times Two Numeral Font, with single line spacing." He smacked Brandon on the other arm. "Get out of my sight before I change my mind."

\* \* \* \*

Brandon worked on the assignment until eleven in the evening. The longer he slaved over the right words, the more he realised the project had a far deeper meaning. Lewis wasn't a fool. Not by a long shot. To write out his behaviour in an essay forced Brandon to delve into aspects of his personality that had long been forgotten. At first it seemed little more than a way to sooth Lewis' anger. By the time Brandon finished, he despised the man he'd written about.

"Let there be light," Brandon whispered as he reread printed pages. "And there was light."

He folded the pages, slipped them into an envelope, and grabbed his car keys off the desk.

## CHAPTER SIX

Henley Beach boasted a lively square with trendy restaurants, cafés, bars, and a lawn area where visitors could laze around eating fish and chips. Even at midnight, in winter, people milled on the jetty, or walked hand in hand along white sand on the water's edge. Certain areas of the beach were bathed in soft light from the square. The moon lit other sections.

Brandon half expected to be stood up. As he walked along the pavement toward the jetty, he spied Lewis waiting. This was going to be a one-off second chance.

"Hello."

"Hi." Brandon resisted the urge to bend down and greet Lewis with a kiss. "You look gorgeous. No makeup tonight?"

"Your powers of observation are astounding." Lewis ignored the compliment. "Did you bring the essay?"

Though nervous over possible reactions to what he'd written, Brandon laughed. No one he'd met before dished out sarcasm as often as Lewis.

"I did." He removed an envelope from his jacket pocket. "Spell checked and everything."

"Hmm." A small, half smile tilted up the corner of Lewis' lips. "You did it? I'm impressed."

Brandon returned the smile. "I did something right?"

"Statistically it's difficult for someone to fuck up *all* the time." As Lewis opened the envelope, he walked toward the sand. "We're going under the jetty."

Thrilled he managed to impress, Brandon followed. Cool weather kept most people off the beach and away from a brisk ocean breeze. Lewis continued to the water's edge. He took a diminutive flashlight from his pocket and started reading. Brandon stood biting his thumbnail, feeling exposed by words he'd written.

After reading all six and a half pages, and not uttering a sound in reaction, Lewis slipped the papers into his jeans pocket. Cracks in the wooden jetty were wide enough for those walking above to peer down at anyone below. It didn't faze Lewis as he peeled his clothes off, dropping his jacket and t-shirt in a pile.

"What the hell are you doing?" Brandon rushed forward, sweeping up clothes and trying to thrust them into Lewis' arms. "We can't have sex here!"

"Shh." Shoes, socks, and jeans came off next, until Lewis stood in nothing but a pair of black boxer briefs. "Take your clothes off, Brandon," he whispered.

"People might see."

"That's why you have to be quiet." Lewis waded into the water. "They'll think you're in a bathing suit." He gasped as icy water hit waist high. "Ooh, it's cold."

"It's *winter*!"

"This is fun, trust me."

Trust me. Two words which, when used in conjunction with the name Lewis, seemed like an oxymoron. He appeared to suffer from a severe lack of inhibition. Fascinating, unpredictable, volatile, impulsive, intelligent, and charismatic. Even if Lewis was a bit derailed, even if he behaved irrationally, he'd gotten under Brandon's skin.

"Braaaaandon." Beckoning with his right hand, walking backward into the water, Lewis seduced in a quiet, husky coo. "Come on."

*Shit. How can I resist you?* Brandon whipped off his clothes, exhilarated by the prospect of whatever Lewis had in mind. "Coming!"

He splashed into the water, braving frigid temperatures and moving to place himself behind Lewis, circling his arms around his waist. “Christ, I’m gonna freeze my knackers off.”

“How’s Fluffles?”

“Swimming upright.” Nuzzling into Lewis neck, an ecstatic rush made Brandon’s pulse quicken when the move wasn’t rejected.

“I saw him at the pet store and felt sorry for him.” Lewis craned his neck and peered over his shoulder, meeting Brandon’s eyes, smiling. “I hate fishermen. They show no empathy for fish.” It was an honest, warm, cheerful smile that wasn’t carved in wax. “Which is why this is so much fun,” he said. “Watch.”

Several nylon lines hung from above and disappeared into clear water. Lewis pinched one of the lines, paused, and then yanked hard. A man shouted from the jetty, “I got one!”

A childish prank, but it folded Brandon into laughter. A shuffle of heavy footsteps from above made it even funnier. Grown men hollering over a catch that, when they reeled in the line, would leave them deflated.

Lewis twisted in Brandon’s arms, placing his hand over Brandon’s mouth. “Shh, we don’t want to give the game away this early.”

Light from between the jetty cracks reflected inside violet eyes and Brandon watched, mesmerised. “You’re mad,” he whispered through Lewis’ fingers.

“Your turn next.”

Brandon lifted Lewis’ hand off his mouth. “Have you noticed the crabs?”

“Geez, you could’ve mentioned that *before* you fucked me.”

They giggled like delinquent schoolboys. No matter how immature their behaviour, Brandon hadn’t ever had this much fun on a date. There weren’t any false attempts at tedious conversation, and no need to feign laughter when it came naturally.

“The crabs over there in the net.” Brandon pointed. “Wanna set them free?”

“How do we get them out? They have...” With his hands, Lewis mimicked pincers.

“Looks like a simple two ring net. All I have to do is tip it upside down, and hope they’re smart enough to escape.”

“What if they get you with their nippers?”

“Then you’ll have to reward my self-sacrifice with a kiss.”

Hugging himself and shivering, Lewis lifted an eyebrow. “You’re going to deliberately get nipped now, aren’t you?”

“I’m not that brave.” With his hands on Lewis’ waist, Brandon edged him out of the way, and prepared to wade out to the net. “Move aside, honey, time to emancipate my crabs.”

Using a term of endearment gave Brandon the strangest sensation of warmth. As did the giggles of appreciation, and whispered cheers egging him on toward several annoyed Blue Swimmer Crabs. A clear midnight ocean deceived the water depth. Brandon soon had water up around his shoulders.

Slender pincers sure looked menacing. Beady black eyes peered up through the net. Shaped like a basket, with a rope leading up to the jetty, it seemed like an easy procedure to free the crabs. All Brandon had to do was lift the net, without alerting those on the jetty to it being interfered with. He plunged his hand into the water, grabbing the rope as close to the basket as possible, and eased it upward. Six furious crabs thrashed against one another. Three crabs tumbled out, using their back paddle-like legs to make a getaway. Two floated to the bottom of the sand where they hustled to bury themselves in sediment. The last one clung to the net and refused to budge.

“This one won’t let go. I might have to leave his fate to God.”

“They’ll eat him!” Lewis still hung back. “Tap on his shell.”

The basket hung suspended in Brandon’s wary hand. “I’m not tapping on anything.”

“Is it just me, or has the water got a whole lot warmer?”

“I believe that’s called hypothermia.” Brandon shook the basket a little. “Nope, he’s not gonna move.”

“Tap *hard* on his shell.”

Not wanting to look like a sissy, Brandon knocked on the shell. The crab let go, floated through the water, and then snatched a pincer full of boxer fabric.

“Ah, Lewis? I have a crab attached to my underwear, dangerously close to my penis.”

Lewis broke into laughter. “Get out of the water.”

“If I move, it could get even more pissed off.” Brandon stood stationary, staring down as two black eyes glared at him. “Stop laughing and help me.”

“It’s too deep. I can’t swim. Move slowly. It’ll be fine.”

“Easy for you to say, Goth Boy, you’re not the one about to be a eunuch.” Brandon edged backward, keeping his gaze pasted on the crab, hoping to psych it out with a staring competition.

When he’d reached knee deep water, Lewis approached with a shirt he’d retrieved off the sand. “We need to get him out of the water.”

It was official, Murphy’s Law hated him, and Brandon saw his entire sexual future dependent on the crab’s next move. “That will piss him off.”

“I’ll wrap him in your shirt so he can’t get you with his other pincer.”

“Don’t you dare! That’s an expensive shirt.”

“Okay, but don’t blame me if he nips you.” The whole time Lewis cackled, not worried anymore about being heard. “I’m going to breathe on him.”

“Oh, Christ, I’m not even going to ask.”

Lewis bowed his head and huffed hot breaths in the crab’s face.

“I’ve changed my mind. Why are you heavy breathing on the crab?”

Lewis stopped huffing and peered up. “I had hermit crabs when I was a kid.” After several more huffed breaths, Lewis continued. “When they get you with their pincers, you breathe on them. It confuses them.”

“It’s confusing *me*, Lewis, I’m getting a hard on.”

“Stop making me laugh! I need to keep breathing on it.”

“Breathe away.” Brandon placed his hand behind Lewis’ head and pushed it down. “I like you in that position.” A sharp slap stung Brandon’s thigh. “Ow!”

To Brandon’s astonishment, the crab let go and paddled off.

“Bon voyage, crustacean,” Lewis straightened up, waving at the water. “Stay away from nets in future.”

“You owe me a kiss.”

Lewis retreated toward a pylon. “The crab didn’t pinch you. Only your boxers.”

“Don’t split hairs. I still risked my manhood.” Wet underwear clung to Lewis’ body, and Brandon took an indulgent look at a semi-erection. “You know you want to kiss me.”

“You’re so cocky.”

“Don’t say anything with the word cock in it, ’cause that gets me more worked up.” Pinning Lewis under an expectant gaze, Brandon ambled over, placing his hands either side of the pylon with Lewis between his arms. “Are you gonna make good on your promise?”

“Kiss me.”

The invitation was all the incentive Brandon needed. His lips brushed over Lewis’ mouth, lingering long enough to treat his senses before instinct took over. This time kissing Lewis was different. It still felt like fire, though now it smouldered rather than scorched in mimic of an out of control inferno. A light scrape of Lewis’ fingernails on the nape of his neck made Brandon shudder. How could kissing feel this good when in the past it had been nothing but a formality to get to the main prize? Something inside Brandon’s soul switched on for the first time. It took him by surprise with its force, and he backed away from the kiss.

“What’s wrong?” Lewis whispered, brows knitting together.

Brandon’s voice faltered for a second. He searched Lewis’ eyes, trying to find an answer within them. “Nothing,” he whispered in reply, bowing his head to nibble Lewis’ neck. “Nothing’s wrong.”

Brandon took a chance on slipping his hand between Lewis’ legs, massaging and receiving an appreciative moan. A moan he reciprocated when Lewis returned the favour. The smooth body felt like satin to Brandon’s fingertips. Whether anyone on the jetty watched from above no longer mattered, and waist high water helped hide what went on below. Brandon slipped his fingers down the back of Lewis’ boxers, gauging his reaction when he shimmied the underwear farther down. Lewis showed no resistance, following Brandon’s lead to pull down his boxers as well. Languishing in bottomless kisses, they stroked each other and rocked hips in unison.

\* \* \* \*

Inside a warm cafeteria, seated beside a roaring fireplace, Lewis scanned a menu. “I hope you brought your wallet, ’cause I’m starving, and you’re paying.”

“You have beautiful eyes. I’d never seen violet eyes in real life before.”

“That’s because they’re rare.” Lewis put the menu down and folded his hands on the table surface. “Contrary to popular belief, they’re not related to blue eyes, they’re related to grey eyes. It’s a lack of melanin, which allows a reflection of blood off the retina to show through, making them look purple.” He smiled. “You’re attempt at diverting my attention off the topic of who’s paying by complimenting my eyes was admirable but, alas, fruitless. You’re paying, Dr Faulkner.”

The contented smile refused to leave Brandon’s face. “I was going to pay anyway. What’s your surname?”

“I haven’t decided if I want to tell you that yet.”

“How did you know my surname? And, how did you know where I worked?”

“You’re not the brightest sparkler in the box, are you?” Lewis smiled a lopsided grin. “You told me you were a vet when we first met in the chat room. Check your email settings, Einstein. Every time I got an email alert from you, it said Brandon Faulkner.”

Brandon laughed at his own stupidity. “How did I ever get into university?”

“Who knows?” Lewis shrugged. “What’s the deal with Tarin? Is he an ex, is he your boyfriend, is he a friend with benefits?”

“He’s my best friend. There’s never been anything more between us.”

Each time Brandon tried to get personal information it resulted in a diversion, or flat-out refusal. He'd tried asking where Lewis lived, asked what he did for a job, asked for his phone number, and now had been fobbed off again when inquiring over his surname.

They placed an order with a waiter, chatting over the following ten minutes. Arriving at the conclusion Lewis would not reveal information when asked, Brandon decided to quit with the questions and allow him to reveal what he wanted when he wanted.

The waiter returned with hot chocolate for Lewis and coffee for Brandon. Lewis took five packets of sugar from a small bowl.

"I expected you to ask for ice in it." Brandon grinned. "How can you have so much sugar?"

"I like sugar."

"No kidding. No wonder you're hyper all the time."

With the sugar packets clutched inside his hand, Lewis picked up a spoon and stirred the hot chocolate. Brandon opened his mouth to say something, and then changed his mind. Next, Lewis upended a sugar packet before ripping the top off it. Brandon's amused smirk faded. He frowned, watching on, and noticing how Lewis grew agitated at his error. He opened three sugar packets, poured the contents into the mug, and then repeated the mistake he'd made with the first packet.

Brandon's brows knitted closer together when Lewis sipped the hot chocolate and screwed his nose up. "Sugar first, then stir."

"Oh, right, yeah." That same look of humiliation covered Lewis' expression as it had when he made the mistake at Iniquity. "Hey!" The entire café jumped at the sound of a sudden shouted request for the waiter's attention. "I ordered marshmallows, and I do not see them in my hot chocolate!"

Brandon shrank into his seat, covering his face. "You're not the subtlest guy in the world, are you?"

The waiter approached, face set firm. "Keep your voice down, sir."

"Do your fucking job, moron, and get my marshmallows!"

Brandon nudged Lewis under the table. "Settle down. It was probably an oversight."

Lewis subdued, his cheeks flushed red. "Sorry. This isn't going to work between us, Brandon. I'm sorry."

Lewis shoved the chair away and rushed from the café. By the time Brandon called out after him, and ran for the door, he was already gone. He seemed to have vanished into darkness. No matter which way Brandon looked, Lewis was nowhere to be seen.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Late the next morning, after enduring another restless night, Brandon staggered into the kitchen in need of a strong hit of caffeine. Tarin stood at the counter, looking every bit as exhausted as Brandon felt.

“Busy night?”

Yawning, Tarin nodded. “We were called to Blake Riding Academy. One of the horses had a twisted bowel.” He took another mug from the cupboard. “How did your date go?”

“Don’t ask.”

Feeling like sand had been emptied into his eyes, Brandon rubbed at his face while he walked toward the living room.

Tarin placed a large mug on the coffee table. “You look terrible. What happened?”

“We were having fun. Everything was going fine. Then we went to a café, talked for a while, and the next second he’s screaming abuse at a waiter.” Brandon’s mind raced in an attempt to understand. “I told him it was out of line. He got upset, said it wasn’t going to work out between us, and ran out on me.”

“You know nothing about him.”

“I never will now. He made that clear.”

Sighing, Tarin ran his hand over the top of Brandon’s head. “You need to move on and forget about Lewis.”

“I don’t want to forget about him.” His voice cracked. Brandon pushed off the sofa. “Drop it.”

“My God... Sweetie... Are you crying?”

The bedroom door slammed closed, though Tarin ignored the request for solitude. Brandon sat on the mattress, gaze averted, struggling to keep emotions in check. Tarin sat beside him, watching on in silence, waiting for his friend to speak first.

“I’m nearly twenty-eight, and I’ve never, *never* considered having a boyfriend.” With a scoff and a shrug of one shoulder, Brandon lifted his face. “I want to give it a shot with Lewis. There’s something there, Tarin. I can’t explain what it is. All I know is...” He frowned, scared of Tarin’s reaction. “I swear, if you laugh at me when I say this, I’ll never tell you anything again.”

“I’m not going to laugh at you.”

“I have no idea how many guys I’ve slept with. I lost count a long time ago.” For the first time Brandon felt no pride in his sexual history. “All that romantic stuff about butterflies in your stomach, and your heart racing when you kiss someone... I thought it was bullshit.” He blinked hard to push back threatening tears. “It’s not bullshit. When I kiss Lewis, it all happens. Butterflies, heart racing, fireworks, you name it and I feel it.”

“Why couldn’t you have fallen head over heels for someone else?” Tarin’s lips turned down at the corners. “Lewis isn’t all there upstairs. He’s not firing on all cylinders.”

“You hate him, you’re biased, and this conversation is a waste of time.” Annoyed, Brandon tried to dismiss Tarin from the room. “Leave me alone.”

“We spent hours with that horse last night. In the end we couldn’t save him. The Blakes’ were upset. Naturally. Anyway, they asked us inside for coffee.”

“I don’t want to talk about work. It’s the last thing I care about right now.”

“There were photographs everywhere.” Tarin continued, holding fast to his friend’s hand. “Pictures of their son in riding competitions. He had a promising future. The Olympic selectors had their eye on him. He was a brilliant rider.”

Brandon rolled his eyes.

“He was in a dressage competition, when someone in the crowd let off a flare gun. His horse spooked, and he fell. His foot tangled in the stirrup and reins. The horse took off, dragging him across the ménage. Broken leg, arm, ribs and, because he was wearing a top hat not a helmet, massive head injuries. He was eighteen.”

“That’s terrible.” No matter whether he felt like talking or not, Brandon shook his head in empathy. “Far too young to die.”

“He didn’t die. He was in a coma for eight months.” Tarin firmed his grip on Brandon’s hand. “Permanent brain damage to the frontal lobe. It changed his personality, and Mr and Mrs Blake felt like they’d lost their son anyway. He’d sneak out of the house, have sex with strangers, and do bizarre things he never used to do. They said he used to be a very quiet, introverted boy. In some ways, he’s made progress, in other ways he hasn’t.”

Every inch of Brandon’s skin heated. He peered up to meet Tarin’s gaze.

“He can’t hold down a job, he can’t focus enough to live independently, he has trouble with a lot of different things. A year ago they put him into Mydeena Lodge. It’s a group home. I’m sorry, sweetie. I saw the photos. His name is Casey Lewis Blake.”

The pain knifing through Brandon’s chest couldn’t have hurt more if he’d been speared with a sword. He pictured Lewis’ beautiful face, and the nasty scar on his brow. The odd quirks, crazy ideas, wacky conversations, lack of inhibition, those were the things Brandon found magnetic. A young man’s entire life, his dreams and aspirations, cut short due to a horrific accident.

“Mydeena Lodge?” The name sounded familiar to Brandon. “Isn’t that near the vet surgery?”

“Yeah. You’re not going to give up on him, are you?”

“I can’t.”

“I’m going to say this because I care, Brandon.” Tarin sighed. “No amount of rehabilitation is ever going to help Lewis live a normal life. Not ever.”

\* \* \* \*

Mydeena Lodge was six short streets away from the veterinary practice, and a fifteen-minute drive from Brandon’s home. He’d driven by it many times, never taken notice, and not given thought to those who lived there. Now, he sat inside the main living area, glancing up when a resident wandered in and out, feeling his tension rise with each passing minute. With sparse hospital-like furnishings, it saddened Brandon to know Lewis called this cold, clinical environment home.

Yvonne—a woman in her late fifties, and Mydeena’s House Mother—sat opposite Brandon in an armchair, looking far calmer than he felt. “He’s probably close by. He likes to walk down to the local pet store and look at the aquariums.” She smiled. “He loves fish. Fish and Prague are two of his favourite things.”

“I know.” Brandon offered her an insubstantial smile in return. “Should he be wandering around by himself?”

“He doesn’t venture far from his safety zone,” she replied. “He’ll walk around this suburb, go to Iniquity, he goes to the local library, that’s about all. This isn’t a jail.”



One of Brandon's eyebrows flicked up, thinking Yvonne didn't know Lewis very well. Surely these types of group homes had a curfew and, if they didn't, perhaps they needed to. Lewis roamed around Henley Beach in the middle of the night. He met up with men he talked to online, putting himself in a situation where anything might happen to him. Just because Lewis wasn't dangerous didn't mean *he* wouldn't be in danger.

"He's a colourful addition to the household." It seemed Yvonne appreciated someone to talk to. "He can be boisterous, though. We tend to hear Lewis before we see him," she said with a chuckle. "He has his quiet moments, too." The doorbell sounded several times in a row, and Yvonne rose from the chair. "That'll be Lewis!

The mere sight of Lewis sent Brandon's heart beating double time, though Lewis hadn't yet seen him. He wore a black tailcoat, black pants, purple shirt with black lace trim, and a black studded choker. He stood in the living area doorway, peering into a plastic bag containing a goldfish.

Yvonne exhaled and exasperated sigh. "We've been through this over and over again, Lewis. No more goldfish. What am I supposed to do with this one, hmm?"

"Look at him." Lewis held the bag up. "He has scoliosis. No one else would've bought a fish with scoliosis, would they? He'd have stayed in the pet store until he died, because people only want perfect ones. If you hadn't thrown my fish tank out, I could've put him in there. I could've made a nice home for the faulty fish no one else wants, and they wouldn't have to grow old and die in a public fish tank."

"And, you bought the fish tank without permission, too, didn't you? No pets. You're well aware of the rules. If you disobey the rules, there are consequences."

Brandon's throat tightened. Yvonne missed the point behind the argument. To Brandon, it was loud and clear. Lewis was talking about himself as much, if not more, than the goldfish in his possession.

"I'll take him," Brandon said.

Lewis spun around. He gasped, slamming his hand to his chest, backing away. It appeared he would take off at a run any second. Brandon hurried over, taking a hold of his arm before he made a getaway.

"Go away!" Lewis squeaked, staring wide-eyed.

Yvonne intervened. "Lewis, do you know this man? He told me you know him."

It didn't matter to Brandon how desperate he sounded. "I've been worried sick about you since last night. Please... can we talk?"

"I guess. I've got nothing to hide now, have I?" Lewis held out the plastic bag. "Do you still want Bendy?"

"Bendy?" It was a name well suited to the unfortunate goldfish, and Brandon sniggered. "Yeah, I still want him."

"I'll leave him on the table. You can take him when you leave." Lewis nodded toward the door. "Let's go outside."

Brandon ignored Yvonne's narrowed gaze and walked Lewis toward the door. They stepped out onto the veranda, veered left into a bedraggled garden, and sat down on a bench. Brandon's insides tied into knots, his legs shook, and he prepared to lay it all on the line. He rested his hand on Lewis' thigh, and revealed what he'd learned from Tarin. When he finished speaking, Lewis appeared small, dejected, and humiliated.

"Before the hiccup in the café, we were having a good time together, weren't we?"

“Yes.” Tears washed across Lewis’ eyes. “I know what I did in the café was wrong. I sometimes get angry quickly.” Digging around in his pocket, he removed a scrunched up tissue, and dabbed around his makeup. “When people tell me it’s inappropriate, I can see that it is. By then it’s too late. I’ve fucked up again.”

“I fuck up all the time, too. Hell, I’m the king of fuck-ups.”

“True. You are.” Lewis nodded. “It doesn’t change anything. I meant what I said last night. This isn’t going to work between us.” He stood. “You need to take Bendy and go. Don’t come back here again. Don’t try and find me at Iniquity.”

The rejection stung. Brandon refused to give up, standing in front of Lewis with upturned hands. “Give me a good reason why I should walk away.”

“I can give you a million reasons. I can’t even make a cup of coffee without fucking it up.”

“Not a good enough reason. I can make the coffee for you.”

Frontal lobe brain injury at times caused problems with activities that required sequencing. It explained Lewis’ errors with stirring a beverage before adding sugar. Brandon figured Lewis had similar problems with tasks like making phone calls or cooking a meal.

“I can’t tie my own shoelaces.”

“I’ll buy you shoes with Velcro straps.” Brandon cupped Lewis’ chin in his hand. “When I look at you, I don’t see a faulty fish. Since that night in the park, I haven’t looked at any other fish in the tank. I’m not interested in them.” His heart pounded against his ribs, and he swallowed to relieve a knot of anxiety. “You made me realise what a jerk I’ve been during my life. That essay made me face myself, and I didn’t like what I saw. I never knew you before the accident. I want the left of centre person you are now. Don’t push me away.” His thumb caressed Lewis’ bottom lip. “Give us a chance.”

The tip of Lewis’ tongue snuck out to lick the pad of Brandon’s thumb. “You really wanna keep dating me?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm.” A cheeky expression lit up Lewis face. “If you’re prepared to date a freak, I’m prepared to date someone who’s ugly.”

Brandon’s ego took another bashing. “You honestly think I’m ugly?”

“It gets you every time, doesn’t it?”

“Well, do you?”

Flinging his arms around Brandon’s neck, Lewis pressed his lips hard to Brandon’s mouth before replying. “No. I think you’re gorgeous. Except, your eyes are creepy looking.”

“Want to come back to my place?” Brandon whispered.

“What on Earth gave you the impression I’m an easy lay?” Lewis whispered back. “Okay, you twisted my arm. Let’s go fuck.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of, let’s go make luuurve.”

“Ooh.” Twirling a strand of Brandon’s hair around his fingers, Lewis pressed his body in close. “I’ve never made luuurve before.”

“Neither have I,” Brandon said with a laugh, grabbing a handful of Lewis’ butt cheek. “It could be a disaster.”

“Can’t be as bad as your performance in the park. The only way is up from there, pardon the pun.” Snatching Brandon’s hand, he took off at a jog toward the door. “Let’s get Bendy and get the hell away from this shithole place.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Three months later

“I can’t do this. I want to go home.”

Elevator doors slid open, and Lewis looped Tarin’s arm through his. “Going home isn’t an option, Miss Bentley.”

Brandon squeezed Lewis’ hand, then gave Tarin an encouraging smile. “You look beautiful.”

Lewis accomplished what Brandon thought impossible. Over the past weeks, he’d taken Tarin under his wing, and forged a close friendship in the process. When Brandon explained Tarin’s gender issues to Lewis, it was accepted without question. From then on, Lewis made it a mission to coax Tarin out of her shell and groom her for a public debut as female. Honey-blond hair had been dyed platinum, an evening gown chosen, and he even convinced Tarin to throw away earthy-coloured makeup for something more daring.

The three of them cut a handsome figure as they walked together toward the restaurant. Lewis had a thing for men in suits, and Brandon obliged by dressing accordingly. Lewis wore pinstripe pants, a black shirt, a sleeveless tailcoat, and a large scarlet cross pendant. A new faux hawk hairstyle finished off his elegant Goth look.

With head lowered, Tarin gripped Lewis’ arm when they entered the restaurant. “Everyone’s staring.”

“Do you blame them?” Lewis replied. “You’re a knockout. Soon tables will levitate. It won’t be magic.”

Tarin frowned. “What? I don’t get it.”

Brandon sniggered. “He means every guy sitting down will crack a boner.”

A waiter showed them to a table nestled in a cosy corner. Iniquity stole Tarin’s attention away from nervousness. She looked around the restaurant with an approving nod.

Leaning in to kiss Lewis’ cheek, Brandon purred in his ear, “Have I told you how sexy you look tonight?”

Lewis perused a menu. “Yes, Brandon, you have. You’re looking pretty good yourself. Expect to get laid tonight.”

“It’s very classy here, isn’t it?” Tarin fiddled with a lock of her hair. “Look at the lovely tableware. This cutlery would cost a fortune.”

“I love lots of cutlery. Watch.” Setting the menu aside, Lewis picked up a bread roll and bit into it. He then picked up a fork and stabbed it into the roll. He stabbed in another knife, another fork, and another knife. “Voila!” he mumbled through a mouthful of bread. “Table hedgehog. The bitten part is supposed to be his face. And, they say modern art takes talent. What a load of shit.”

It wasn’t appropriate behaviour to stab cutlery into bread rolls while at a restaurant. Brandon couldn’t see a reason to pick Lewis up on it, in spite of being told by Yvonne that this type of thing was exactly what Lewis needed to be corrected on. What was the point? Lewis wasn’t harming anyone, and Brandon refused to cause him anxiety over something as minor as a table hedgehog. At times, Lewis’ language left a lot to be desired, as he had little verbal filter. He also had a habit of speaking far louder than was necessary when excited, angry, or stressed. Again, Brandon let it go. Telling Lewis off would only alert him to something he’d already done wrong, but it wouldn’t stop it happening two seconds later.

A waiter approached, and Lewis ordered first. "I'd like one scoop of strawberry ice cream, half a scoop of banana ice cream, half a scoop of spearmint ice cream, and chocolate fudge topping."

The waiter wrote down the order. "What would you like for an entrée?"

Lewis did not look up from the menu. "That is my entrée. For a main course, I'd like one large slice of cheesecake, and one small slice of Black Forest cake."

"For dessert?" The waiter asked, casting Lewis an incredulous glance.

"No, thank you. I never eat dessert. I'm watching my figure."

The waiter took Brandon and Tarin's order next and walked away. There was a decadent ambience about the restaurant, along with sounds of subdued chatter, low lighting, and a small dance floor. Another waiter returned with a bottle of wine, filled their glasses, and left.

Brandon kissed Lewis on the lips, and reached for a goblet. "No more sugar tonight, okay? And, take it slow with the wine."

Sugar intake was one thing Brandon had tried to limit, however his efforts proved fruitless whenever Lewis wasn't in his company. Too much sugar in the bloodstream irritated brain damage, and Lewis' behaviour tended to be more erratic when he'd been on a binge. Brandon leaned away. His relaxed posture changed when he saw a statuesque male striding across the room on platform boots.

"Well, well," rumbled Wayne as he reached the table, "what have we got here?"

Tarin sat speechless, cowering in mirror of Brandon's posture.

"You know Brandon's my boyfriend now," Lewis said. "You don't have to scare him anymore."

"I'm not here because of Brandon." Black eyes, set into a massive head, turned to give Tarin the once over. "I'm here because I've been struck by a vision of loveliness."

A pink blush swept over Tarin's cheeks. "You mean me?"

Wayne winked. "Yes, rosebud." He took hold of Tarin's hand and brought it up to his lips.

The sight broke Lewis into laughter. "You're going to rip Tarin's arm out of its socket."

It certainly looked that way, with Wayne forgetting to bend down, and Tarin struggling to stretch far enough for the back of her hand to meet with ready lips.

"I guess a delicate beauty like you wouldn't consider sharing company with an ogre like me." Wayne caressed Tarin's hand. "I'd be honoured if I was permitted just one dance."

"Ogre? Don't be silly!" The blush turned from pink to scarlet, and Tarin's nervous girly giggle grew louder. "You're a fine specimen of a man."

Brandon bit down on his bottom lip, suppressed a laugh, and whispered near Lewis' ear. "She told me Wayne looked like Satan's butt crack."

"Will you indulge me?" Considering the bass of Wayne's voice, when he attempted a seductive coo it sounded like a plane taking off. "I'll keep the memory of dancing with an angel inside my heart forever."

Tarin scooted off her chair, allowing Wayne to whisk her over to the dance floor. They were the worst pickup lines in the world but, to Brandon's astonishment, worked a treat. Rather than dancing, it looked more like Tarin attempted rock climbing while Wayne stomped from one platform boot to the other.

"Tarin is safe with Wayne, right?"

"You think I'd set Tarin up with a loser?"

Brandon's jaw dropped. "You told Wayne to hit on her?"

“I may have mentioned we’d be here with a beautiful woman who happened to be single.”

“I thought Wayne was gay.”

“He likes trannies. I explained everything. It’s fine. Honest.” Lewis shrugged. “He’s not as scary as he looks. He can’t help being big. He’s an accountant, you know. Has his own business and everything.”

By the time food arrived, it seemed Wayne and Tarin were inseparable. They appeared to have forgotten anyone else in the room existed, sharing a table in a darkened corner, immersed in each other.

Ice cream dripped down the handle of Lewis’ spoon. He licked it off with a sweep of his tongue. “That suit is really doing it for me.”

Brandon tried to focus away from the distracting licking. “Thank you for the tie. I love it.”

“You’re welcome. It’s a far better look than the first time I met you. You looked preposterous.”

“It’s a wonder my balls didn’t break like eggs in those pants.”

“I wasn’t sure if you’d run out of white foundation, or ran out of fake tan.”

Brandon laughed into his wine glass. “Blame Tarin for that makeup disaster.”

When Brandon offered his hand across the table, Lewis took hold. “I think it’s love.”

Stunned, his fingers tightened around Lewis’s hand. “Pardon?”

“Tarin and Wayne. I think it’s love.”

“Oh.” Brandon cleared his throat, setting down the goblet. “Yeah. Yeah, seems like it.”

“Did you think I meant you and me?”

A smirk on Lewis’ face made Brandon look away. “Why would I think that?”

“Why would you think that?”

Rolling his head to the side to regain eye contact, Brandon returned Lewis’ smirk. “Didn’t you tell me repeating what others say is a symptom of poor social skills?”

“I’ve been known to talk shit.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.” Brandon snatched Lewis’ hand. “Come with me.”

“To where?”

“Who knows, baby? All I know is we’ll find our way there together.”

He dragged Lewis to the dance floor, left him standing alone, and climbed the dais to a small DJ booth. After a quick whispered word in the DJ’s ear, Brandon took the microphone.

“Casey Lewis Blake, there’s something I’ve wanted to tell you for a while now, but haven’t had the balls to say it. Now, I’d like the entire restaurant, and the world, to know...” Brandon shouted at the top of his voice. “I love you, you crazy Goth Boy!”

In response Lewis dropped to both knees, holding his arms out, screaming his reply. “Brandon James Faulkner... I love you, too, you egotistical fool!”

**{THE END}**

## **Trademark Acknowledgement**

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