

HARLEY AUSTIN



BOOK THREE

PRISM

AWAKENED CHRONICLES

OTHER TITLES BY
HARLEY AUSTIN

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SERIES

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VALOR
PROMETHEAN
NOVUS
MERIDIAN
ASCENSION

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CHRONICLES

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RELIC
PRISM
TRAVADA

PRIMAL
ATLANTICA
OBLIVION
KNIGHTFALL

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FIERCE SURVIVAL

AWAKENED CHRONICLES

PRISM

HARLEY AUSTIN

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*For my beautiful angel;
the love of my life and the very best friend
anyone could ever hope to have.*

*And for Chris;
the best brother anyone could ever hope to have
and my number one fan.*

PRISM

PROLOGUE

What's this?" Parker lifted the small gift wrapped in an elegant bow from Carissa's brother's hand. Snow was falling hard outside as people moved in and out of the small chapel to pay their respects beside the closed white casket.

"Carissa had this wrapped a week ago." Denton returned his hands to the pockets of his black overcoat. "She was going to give it to you on her birthday, Christmas Eve."

Parker just stared at the metallic gold paper that wrapped the small gift box.

"She really loved you, Parker. She had big plans for the two of you."

Parker grimaced, then nodded. The lump in his throat was growing even larger than it had all day. He hated this day. He

wanted it over even before it started. “Thanks,” he managed to choke out.

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

“I will. Later. Thank you.”

Denton then gripped his arm warmly and nodded.

Then Parker watched her brother leave through the doors of the chapel—and he never saw him or the rest of her family ever again.

1

Winter Parker was tall with thick light brown hair, a four-day well-manicured scruff around his chin, fine brown eyes so light they looked almost gold and a dimpled smile with cupid lips that could kill. Beneath that nice tie and suit jacket was a god-like build filling out broad shoulders, chiseled pectorals and abs that narrowed to a twenty-eight inch waist.

In another place and time is boss, Mauri, might have been interested in the younger guy. However, after working with him for six years in her tiny but growing company, she was confident in his business ability; but their personalities were just similar enough to be not compatible. Romance was off the table, but building her business was not. Parker was talented, smooth, easy to work with, focused, and determined. All of those were essential qualities she needed. But right now, she

needed him focused on something else other than what he was thinking about now, and had been thinking about for weeks.

"You look distracted, Parker." Mauri eyed him from across the restaurant table during their lunch meeting. She'd seen this look on his face many times before. It happened this same time every year. Barely thirty-two now, he'd been with her company long enough for her to recognize that this wasn't his happiest time of year.

Parker half-smiled. "Probably."

"Are you ever going to get past this?" she folded her menu and laid it onto their table. "How many years has it been now?"

"Four," he grimaced.

"Honestly, I don't blame you. Carissa was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. But she's not coming back and you need to move on."

"I know."

"You should do something this time of year. Something fun to take your mind off of what happened."

"I've tried. I can't, Mauri. I'd just mope around and ruin the holiday for everyone else—like I do every year."

"You have to let it go, Parker. There was nothing you could have done. It's not your fault."

"I keep telling myself that. But I always wonder, what if?"

"What if what? What if you'd have arrived ten minutes earlier? Then you'd be exactly where she is right now."

"At least we'd be together."

"Parker—I know this is painful, but, you need to get over this. You're a great looking guy. You have a bright future. You need to find a woman who will treat you like a prince, just like you treated Carissa."

Parker winced, considering her words.

Mauri continued. "I've been thinking about this for a couple of weeks now."

"Oh?" Parker questioned. "Thinking about what?"

"You're all alone during the holidays. You spent Thanksgiving at home—alone. It's not healthy. You need to be around people who love and care about you."

"It's not that bad, Mauri. It is getting better—slowly."

"I need you to get better—faster, Parker. Next year is going to be insane with growth with the new contracts. Which is why I'm splitting the company into two divisions now."

"What?" His voice rose.

She nodded. "Jack does fine running the healthcare side, it's like clockwork now, but I need someone to who can grow the IT side. That someone is you."

"Really?" Parker's eyes lit up.

"See, I knew that would get a smile out of you." She chuckled. "I want you to take the lead in growing our IT consulting. I saw what you did this year with our new clients. You're no longer going to be reporting to Jack. You'll report directly to me. And you'll be managing the IT contracts directly. Including earning the profit sharing."

"Wow. Really? Jack's not going to be happy."

"You let me worry about, Jack. Jack knows healthcare, inside and out, but he doesn't have a clue about what the IT clients are looking for. You do."

Parker nodded.

"I'm expanding our floor space in the building. The offices are already built out from the last tenant who left."

He nodded. "The law firm that moved—"

"They spared no expense in renovating that space a few years ago. There's an oak paneled office practically next door to mine with your name on it," she smirked.

"Mauri, I appreciate the confidence, but don't you think I'm a little young to be running a whole division like this?"

"Nonsense. I know my people, Parker. You've been with me for six years; you know this business. I can't have you

running off to some 'body shop' recruiter. With the profit sharing you'll triple your salary."

"Wow. Mauri. I'm—"

"Surprised?"

"Yea. I don't know what to say? I thought you'd just be hiring someone new to manage the IT side. My degree's in Computer Science, I'm not even an MBA."

"Well here's news for you, hotshot. I don't even have a degree. Wayne and I got married before I graduated; I never finished. No degree. Divorced with three kids. Now look at me. You learn as you go. Just like you've been doing for the past six years."

Parker grinned widely. Mauri was all business, but she knew exactly how to motivate people. Kind words and buckets of money. At a little over six figures, he was already earning well above what people in other companies were working the same position.

"You talked me into it, Mauri. When do I start?"

"Right after you get back from your vacation."

Parker lost his smile. "What vacation?"

* * * * *

His apartment was quiet. Parker had rented it years ago with the intention of Carissa moving in. The three-bedroom was just large enough for the two of them and hopefully a child or two. She wanted him wearing protection but it didn't always happen with the two of them. The woman had been unreal in how beautiful she was. God she needed to be fucked. Often. Every time the two of them were together they'd lay awake half the night, making love slowly, talking, getting to know each other not just intimately, but personally. Carissa was funny, witty, intelligent; amazingly smart. But she could also be all business. He loved that about her.

Parker lay propped up on one side of the couch of a bedroom that had become his home office. With a tablet in hand he flipped through pictures of her, pictures of the two of them, pictures she'd taken of him. The romance had been whirlwind. They'd dated almost two years.

After moving to Seattle, he'd found a great job with the tiny company Mauri had just started after a nasty divorce with her ex. Then he'd met Carissa while on a client call to a prospect company where she worked as an HR assistant. It was love at first sight between the two of them. He didn't get the contract, but he did have her number and the place of their first date before he left.

Carissa liked to take pictures. He complained a lot about those. Now looking back he was glad for that little quirk of hers. She also liked to make racy home videos. There were eleven of those saved on his tablet and a few more on his laptop. She liked watching the two of them being intimate. Parker sighed, sliding past the videos. He'd seen them hundreds of times; memorized every scene, her every move and nuance, her every breath.

He set the tablet onto the floor and picked up the little jewel box that had been wrapped in gold foil wrapping paper. He carefully unwrapped the box again, just as he'd done a hundred times before. The paper was getting a little worn now, but it still shone with the same sheen as the day Carissa's brother, Denton, had given it to him. Setting the bow and paper carefully aside, he opened the shiny white box and removed a blue velvet ring box tucked within it. Opening the box he smiled at the contents. A gold ring with a diamond-like inlay shimmered with the light of the dimly task-lit room.

That was Carissa. *She* was going to propose to him on Christmas Eve and this was her ring she was going to give him. She had one just like it already. Now they'd have a matching pair. He'd worn the ring many times, sometimes for months at

a time, but he'd put it away as time wore on. He liked to pretend that they'd already been married ...

Parker shook his head. The time for pretending was over. He'd put the ring away last winter after his typical Christmas depression—trying to move on.

He thought about slipping the band on again, but winced at the thought. Mauri was right. She'd moved on from a bad situation and had put her life back together. With three kids in elementary school she had it a lot tougher than he did. He slipped the ring back into the box, closed it, and set it back onto the table.

"It's time, Parker," he spoke to himself. "I love you, Carissa. But, it's time, honey. I have to move on."

2

Jack walked into Parker's new office. It was a lot bigger than their other offices across from the elevator foyer, and an order of magnitude nicer. The dark oak paneled walls and fine thick carpeting of the space made it feel like Parker had moved into a luxury apartment instead of a new office. Even the furniture from the old law firm was still there. All he'd needed to do was move his things. The room itself was big, with still empty built-in bookcases, a pair of matching leather sofas facing a fine wood coffee table, and a round meeting table with four nice chairs matching the rest of décor.

Except for the furniture, the office was still a mostly empty space with only small stacks of files and other cheap-looking desk knick-knacks Parker had moved from his cube across the hall. With only a handful of accounts, it wasn't like Parker

needed a ton of space, the built-in fine wood file cabinets along the wall held just a few hanging files.

"So how's the new VP of Brown-nosing working out?" Jack leaned against the dark wood doorjamb of the office's open door. Now into his early fifties, Jack had been balding for the past few years, except on the sides of his head. A little overweight and not the best dresser, he reminded Parker of his dad, sans the type-A attitude problem.

Parker scowled at him. "You're still sore about this, aren't you?"

"I'm sore about people stealing my accounts."

"I didn't 'steal' your accounts. I didn't know anything about this until yesterday when Mauri and I had lunch."

"Sure you didn't. I worked for months getting these accounts onboard and suddenly they're all yours."

"You? I closed three of the five, Jack."

"After I did all of the leg work."

"You don't even know the hiring managers I signed with."

"That's because I start at the VP level and work down. That's how it's done."

"Not. The hiring managers make the final decisions, not the VP's. This isn't the hospital. That's not how the people in IT work."

Jack scoffed. "You just keep thinking that way, hotshot. That is what she calls you now, 'hotshot'?"

"She's been calling me that since the day she hired me."

"I hired you."

Parker rolled his eyes.

"So," Jack stepped all the way into the large office closing the door, "when are you moving in?"

"I'm already moving in." Parker sat down in the high back tufted leather chair and dropped the larger of the files he'd already put away into the desk's closer filing drawer.

"I meant with Mauri."

"WHAT?" Parker gave him an ugly stare.

"Everyone's talking about it."

"Talking about what? I'm not moving in with Mauri!"

"That's not what I hear."

"Oh, good God! Is that what you think? I got a promotion because I'm sleeping with the boss?"

"If it looks like a duck; quacks like a duck and swims like a duck. It's probably a duck, Parker. How long have you two been seeing each other?"

"I'm not. Sleeping. With Mauri."

"That's not what she says."

Parker just stared at Jack for long moments. His head was spinning like he's just found himself in an alternate reality he totally wasn't aware of. He shook off the shock of hearing what he'd just heard. "Did Mauri tell you that?"

"She didn't have to. I heard it from others. Twenty people, Parker, it's a small office. People talk."

"I don't believe it. Whoever is spreading this doesn't know what they're talking about."

"Well, you can try to deny it all you like. But the 'hotshot' suddenly gets the promotion, the new office, new accounts to manage, and now you two are jetting off on a cruise to Alaska."

"I'm going on the cruise, not Mauri."

"So why'd she book herself and the kids?"

"Huh?" Parker raised his brow. Mauri hadn't said anything about herself and her kids going along.

"C'mon, Parker, we're not stupid around here."

"I didn't know she was going—"

"Sure you didn't. The whole office knows why you got the promotion, Parker. Truth be told, if I were twenty years younger and looked like you, I'd have been doing Mauri a long time ago."

"For the last time, I'm not sleeping with Mauri."

"You know the problem with you, Parker? You—are a terrible liar." Jack offered him a sarcastic grin and then left the new office closing the door.

* * * * *

"You didn't tell me you were going on the Christmas cruise too."

Marui nodded, sitting behind her new desk in a corner office two doors down that was twice the size of Parker's, a paper latte cup in her hand from the Starbucks fifteen floors below them. "And my kids; my little sister and my brother's family as well. Is that okay?"

Parker sighed with some relief.

"Parker, are you alright?"

"Yea. No. Mauri, why did you promote me? Really?"

"I told you, really. Why?"

"It's just—" he hesitated. "People are saying that I got promoted—"

"Because they think we're sleeping together?" she raised her brow.

"Yea." Now Parker was a little astonished. "How did you know?"

"That rumor's old. Giselle started it two years ago. It's why she got fired, among other things. But mostly because she was putting words into my mouth, saying I said things I never said."

"Yea, well, apparently that rumor is still circulating."

"Listen, Parker. This is business. It's competitive, not just in the market, but in the office as well. Four other people wanted the job I gave you, Jack included. Hospitals are for old folks; Jack identifies with those people. IT is for younger people, they will better identify with you. The last three contracts you closed are evidence of that. That's why you got

promoted. You're better than Jack is within this segment. Plain and simple."

Parker nodded. "What about the rumors?"

"I don't have time for rumors. People will talk no matter what. But if you really want to kill those rumors, start closing contracts on your own. That will shut people up, well, most of them anyway."

"I already have some really good leads."

"See?" Mauri sipped from her cup with a smile.

"Thanks, Mauri."

"I think this little holiday excursion will be good for you, Parker. It will take your mind off things over Christmas."

"I think it will too."

"I don't want to drag you into anything, but half my family will be there. I want you to feel welcome to join us. Or not. It's up to you. Besides, we have a few eligible women who will be there." A devious smile crossed her lips as she sipped her latte.

"Ah, don't even tell me that." Parker gave her an incredulous grin. "Is this the 'set me up with my little sister cruise'?"

Mauri chuckled. "She's not going to be the only single woman on the ship, Parker. I didn't tell anyone you were even coming. I want you to relax and have fun. No pressure."

"I thought Christie was still in school?"

"She graduates this summer. I offered her an internship. She'll be working with you, most likely."

"Oh," Parker frowned, his sarcasm thick. "No pressure, huh?"

"Christie's beautiful, Parker. And she's nothing like me." Mauri smiled.

"You are a sneaky person, Mauri, you know that?" He grinned.

"I have my moments," she admitted, a smile teasing her lips. "But, seriously, Parker. This cruise is for you. I want you

to relax and have fun. Don't worry about my family. I want you to take time for you."

3

The morning air hung still and chilly. It was not exactly heavy jacket weather as the huge ship sailed out of Seattle and up into Puget Sound. Already checked in with his luggage put away, Parker mulled about along the outside of the upper decks, watching the shoreline drift by as Seattle was left in the distance.

The overcast weather didn't dampen Parker's spirits as he found Mauri and the rest of her family gathered by the upper deck railing sightseeing the driftwood and tree-lined shores in the distance. He recognized all of them from pictures he'd seen in Mauri's office, although he'd never actually met any of them.

"Oh, Parker," Mauri began, calling attention to him as the rest of her family stood by. "Jeff, Christie, everyone, this is Winter Parker, my new VP."

"Hey, Parker," Mauri's brother was the first to shake his hand. "My sister's told me all about you."

Parker smiled. "Hopefully not too much."

"It's all good. Glad you could come along."

"I'm Christie," the tall blonde shook his bare hand with her smoothly gloved one. Parker definitely took notice. She had all of their family resemblance but was taller than Mauri and much more cute in person than the pictures he'd seen of her.

"Nice to meet you."

Then someone very short tugged on his coat sleeve. "Is your name really Winter?" the little girl who could not have been more than four asked. She lifted both of her arms straight up to him. Parker raised his brow and then lifted the inquisitive little girl into his arms until her face was even with his.

"This is Inspector Britney," Jeff informed Parker with a grin. "She's our youngest."

"You look more like a Summer to me," the tyke declared.

"And why is that?"

"You have brown hair. Winter's have black hair. That's what my teacher says."

"I think your teacher is right."

"Why do they call you Parker instead of Winter?" she asked.

"I like Parker," he smiled.

"Mommy says you're very handsome. Do you think Auntie Christie—"

"Alright, Inspector," Jeff took his daughter before she could finish asking any more questions that might actually get embarrassing.

"All settled in, Parker?" Mauri entered the conversation.

"Yea. The concierge even unpacked for me. I didn't realize I was traveling first-class."

"Call it an end-of-year bonus," Mauri grinned. "We'll need to talk about business at some point during the cruise so I can expense it."

"Nice." Parker enjoyed the warmth of Mauri's family. It was enjoyable to be feeling part of something again.

"The kids and I are going to head inside," Jeff informed. "Mauri, do you want me to take your troop too?"

"No, I'll follow you. See you around, Parker."

He watched as all of them left with six bundled kids. Only Christie stayed, still leaning back against the railing watching them.

"That's quite a handful," Parker smirked, watching them head indoors.

"Yea," she smiled beautifully, her perfect teeth gleaming behind full pouting lips. "It's nice when they're around—"

"And nice when they leave?" he added.

She giggled. "You read my mind."

"So, Mauri tells me you're about to graduate?"

"One more semester."

"What's your major?"

"Art History with a minor in Feminist Counterculture."

"Oh. Ah—nice." He faux smiled.

"I'm joking, Parker; lightening up. It's an economics degree with a minor in politics." She smirked. "Relax. I don't bite. Hard."

He flashed her coy, handsome, and dimpled smile.

"Mauri's always playing matchmaker. First she hitches Jeff to her college roommate; and now she's dragging me along to meet her new VP."

"She warned me," he chuckled. "I mean, not about you, but about what she was doing. Introducing me to you and someone else in your family."

"That's my sister. Never a dull moment when someone single is around."

"You don't sound like you're happy about being here."

"No. Don't take it personally, Parker. I dated a guy for two years in school. A supermodel, actually."

"A supermodel? Really?"

"If I told you his name you'd know it."

"It didn't work out?" Both began walking down the outside edge of the deck. A slight wind had picked up now and the chill was sending most people indoors.

"No. He ended up leaving me—for another guy."

"Oh. I'm—"

"Stop. Don't even say it. The truth is, I deserved it. Young and stupid. But I found out I'm really not ready to settle down yet."

"Oh? A party girl still, are we?" he kidded nudging his arm against hers.

"No. More like a nice Catholic girl. Just seeing what the world has to offer."

"Hmmm," he nodded.

"What about you? Looking to settle down?"

"I—wouldn't exactly say that. Maybe in a few years."

"You're a lot better looking than what I expected."

"Ah—thanks?"

"I'm a little type-A, Parker. It runs with the women in our family. Get used to it."

"And I thought Mauri was type-A." He smirked.

"I can take a little getting used to. I tend to shoot from the hip and apologize later. A lot."

"No worries. I work for your sister."

"She's ten years older and a little more polished than I am. We're both still apples from the same tree."

"I can see that."

"How about dinner later?" she smiled, stopping by the railing.

"I thought Mauri had made plans for everyone tonight already."

"Oooh, good exit. No worries, Parker. It's a seven-day cruise. I'll catch up with you later."

Parker watched her walk off down the deck, her short jacket riding high around her thin waist just above a really snug pair of Seattle denim's that fit her ass like a thong swimsuit. He shook his head. The cute co-ed had 'danger' written all over her. Parker shook his head, still watching her jeans. This cruise could easily become something very interesting.

4

N ight had fallen hours ago, but Parker was still up. Ever the night owl, he'd often roll into work at eleven instead of eight, but he still put in more hours than Jack ever did.

At this hour most people were either in one of the ship's private lounges or already tucked away in bed. He wandered the public corridors; window-shopping at the tiny now closed stores along the interior mall. The tall corridor ended at the aft of the ship in a kind of windowed observation lounge where several gas-flamed fireplaces still burned, surrounded by comfy seating arrangements. Only two other people were in the huge room this late and neither of them noticed him as they were amorously lip-locked.

He found one of the more private seating groups well away from the couple making out, and sat by the fire looking out the window at some shore lights in the distance moving slowly by.

He'd traded in his casual jeans and button down for a pair of dark-grey yoga pants, a snug long-sleeved Adidas t-shirt and cross trainers. A paperback in his hand, he opened the half-read sci-fi story and immersed himself in its worlds, reading by firelight.

Parker wasn't exactly sure how long he'd been reading, but several chapters had gone by when firm fingers began gently working over his shoulders. It wasn't so much startling, but his mind now drifted out of the book and focused on the fine sensations someone was pushing into his traps.

"You didn't answer your door. I thought I'd find the night owl out here, somewhere."

He recognized Christie's voice.

"Couldn't sleep. Way too early to go to bed."

"So I've heard. Sis says you work till midnight sometimes."

He breathed a soft groan at the nice backrub she had delivered. "Sometimes."

He felt her hands lift away and then watched her walk around the side of the couch to sit beside him. Christie wasn't exactly dressed for the cold weather outside; then again, neither was he. She'd traded in her jeans for some smooth cotton leggings and an oversized deep V-neck light pink fleece with very long sleeves that half covered her hands.

"Your company isn't very talkative," she said softly while nodding toward the amorous couple on the other side of the room who hadn't stopped kissing the whole time he'd been reading.

Parker set the book aside. "I don't think they're interested in talking," he offered quietly, watching them briefly.

"It looks fun."

He nodded while still watching the couple before tearing his eyes from them. "They were doing the same thing when I got here an hour ago," he grinned.

"Do you kiss?"

"Ah—" the question totally caught him off guard.

"Tell me you've made out with someone before."

"Of course," he grimaced.

"Just checking."

"You stopped by my cabin?" he raised a brow.

"You said you liked to stay up late. I was up. I thought you might want to talk—or make out. Evidently this is the place to do that, not your cabin."

He grinned. "I don't think I've made out with a girl just to make out since high school."

"Oh, so once you hit thirty you're too old now?"

"I didn't exactly say that."

"So who was the first girl you ever kissed?" Her eyes met his with an inquisitive stare.

"You're not going to know her."

"I don't need to. What was her name?"

"Jennifer Prima."

"A Latina girl?"

"Yea."

"Was it fun?"

"I was terrified."

"So was the first guy I kissed. Brandon Newell."

"*You* would terrify me too," he grinned.

"You're too old to be terrified. Chicken maybe, but not terrified."

"Is that a dare?"

"It's a dare, Parker." Christy smiled.

"You're not so scary." Parker moved himself closer to her. If he was going to take a dare from a girl to kiss her, planting his lips on Christie's wasn't going to be hard. The woman was beautiful. Her long almost blonde hair flowed over her shoulders. She said she'd dated a male supermodel before, but she was easily built for the same line of work and definitely looked the part. His lips hovered an inch from hers.

"What are you waiting for?" Her eyes were already closed.

"I took your dare. Tell me the truth."

"You're on," she breathed feeling his lips caress hers so lightly it sent tingles down her spine and into her leggings.

"Are you wearing underwear?" he kissed her lightly, folding his lips into hers.

She returned his nice lip play with some of her own, including a sweet, quiet, breathy answer. "No."

Her hand already rested on his chest while her lips led his deeper into hers. The co-ed could kiss.

"Are you?" she asked.

She tasted his tongue gently as he opened her mouth with his own. Damn. Parker kissed well. Their lip play went from warm to heated in the span of a moment. Both drew closer to each other on the cushions by the firelight. There was some talent between the two of them making out. Parker wouldn't exactly call it chemistry, but Christie knew her way around a guy. Her touch, her lips. Both were completely immersed in the rising warmth of the moment.

Parker drew back to catch some breath. Christie's lips were not just enticing, but magical. If they kept this up the front of his yoga pants were going to get indecent. They were already getting there.

"You didn't answer my question." Her forehead rested on his while her lips stole a brief kiss between his breaths.

"Maybe." He smiled stealing his own kiss from her.

She withdrew her lips from his to look at him, one leg folded beneath him so they could face each other in their embrace. Parker looked down as well. Never mind getting to indecent. He was already there. Even dark grey, the thin material of the workout pants didn't hide anything beneath them.

"My guess would be 'no'," she stole another kiss then drew him into her lips again. Her hand was already resting on his

thigh. He wasn't all that surprised when her fingers began lightly exploring the thick bulge pushing out from the front of his pants. He wasn't exactly wanting to go there with her but her light touch was subtle. Between her lips and her lightly teasing fingers, Christie had his pulse racing and his cock so hard he was throbbing.

His own fingers slipped to the front of her leggings in his own version of light teases that had her raising one of her knees and rocking her hips softly on the cushions while their lips and tongues played a new round of makeout.

5

Parker woke to morning sunlight streaming into his cabin through half open drapes. He glanced at the clock on the bedside table. It was almost 10:30. Way too early to get up. The room was chilly and the thick bedding tangled up all around him. At least he was covered and warm. He pushed himself up onto his elbows to look around. He was alone in his bed and the room. He found a folded piece of paper next to his pillow written on the cruise line's stationary.

'Great kiss, Parker,' was all it said.

He groaned and fell facedown into the soft bedding. "God." This wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind when the two of them had started making out last night by the fire. Maybe it was the underwear question? Probably. He'd discovered rather quickly that not only did Christie know how to kiss, but she didn't like wearing panties either. He didn't

really fault her for that. He'd gone commando in his yoga pants as well. But by 2:00 AM neither of them were wearing anything in his cabin. The woman was practically acrobatic the way she'd made love. One thing was for sure. He wasn't the only one doing the fucking last night.

She'd taken charge several times and now Parker was wondering if he needed to turn in his guy card.

He was totally sore between his thighs. If his glands were any more empty—hmmm, he winced reaching his hand around his sore male. Thank God he was flaccid. If he got hard again now it would really hurt.

What was he going to say to his boss? 'Sorry, Mauri, I just fucked—' no, scratch that, 'your sister just fucked me into oblivion last night.'

He was pretty sure Mauri already knew her own sister. But it was himself that Parker now wondered about. It had been years since he'd been with anyone. Years since he'd *wanted* to be with anyone. So what was last night? A college tryst? He wasn't exactly sure what to think about it. But getting naked with Christie last night wasn't altogether terrible—it was pretty mind-blowing in fact. It was a little different having a woman all over him. "Hmmm," his cock throbbed slightly just thinking about her. No. He had to keep himself from even going there, thinking about her riding him last night. He was still too sore. Parker relaxed back into the sheets and his pillow with another soft groan. It would be afternoon before he'd wake up again.

* * * * *

"Where've you been? I haven't seen you all morning?" Mauri found him eating a late lunch in one of the ship's dining rooms. She helped herself to a chair and sat down.

"Late night."

Mauri nodded. "With Christie—I heard. We talked this morning at breakfast."

Parker raised his brow, a new feeling of alarm rising in his gut. He suddenly realized that he was doing the company intern and she'd not even started her new job yet. Or the company intern was doing him; he hadn't quite sorted that out yet.

"She said you two were up late, talking."

He nodded.

"What did you two talk about?"

"I don't remember talking about much, Mauri. Your sister's beautiful. Just—being brutally honest."

"She did say you 'might have made-out' in your cabin."

"That would be accurate." He agreed taking another bite of his sandwich.

"It's none of my business, Parker; but if I didn't know better, it sounds like the two of you made it a litter further than first base last night."

Parker put down the sub roll. She watched him grimace. "Probably."

"Christie wouldn't tell me exactly, but I can read my sister pretty well, Parker."

"I'm fired, aren't I?"

Mauri laughed. "I don't *think* so. I brought you on this cruise to introduce you to other people. I sort of hoped the two of you would hit it off, but, this isn't exactly what I expected."

"Yea. Me neither. One thing sort of led to another and we just—" he didn't finish his thought. "I'm still trying to figure out what happened last night."

"Christie can be a little forward. No doubt."

"Maybe it's just the two of us. Bad chemistry."

"You don't end up sleeping with someone with bad chemistry, Parker," Mauri corrected.

"No, I guess not. Explosive chemistry?"

"Obviously." She smiled.

"It's not funny, Mauri. Christie's your sister and she's going to be working with me in a few months."

"Listen, Parker," Mauri began, "I think I know what happened last night. Christie had been dating one of the hottest men I think I'd ever seen."

"She said he was a supermodel."

"He was—is. They broke up just this year. I think she's still reeling from that. And then you show up, someone's who's just as hot as her last boyfriend."

"Really? You think I could be a supermodel?"

Mauri scowled. "Don't even think about changing careers, mister. I have millions riding on your good looks and personality here."

"No worries, Mauri. I'm not going anywhere. I just got a promotion, remember?" Parker picked up his sandwich again.

"You're both rebounding."

"Is that what this is?" he munched.

"I'd bet money on it."

"Now I *really* don't know what to do." He frowned.

"Recognize it for what it is. It's not real, Parker. I'd tell Christie the same thing. In fact, I will later. Now that I know."

"She's going to hate me for telling you what happened last night."

"You didn't tell me a thing, Parker. I wasn't born yesterday. I read people pretty well. She knows that."

He nodded, still frowning. "I'm sorry."

"For what? For being Human?"

"It's going to make it difficult when we start working together this summer."

"Let's worry about Winter now and let summer take care of itself."

"You did not just say that," he half grinned.

Parker opened his cabin door after the subtle knock. Christie stood out in the hall. It was evening and he'd been invited to join the family for a Christmas dinner in one of the ship's banquet rooms. Dress was casual and Christie had dressed in some nice black jeans and a warm white mock turtleneck that wasn't hiding any of the curves of her chest.

"Hey. Mind if I come in?"

"Sure." He closed the door after she'd entered.

"Mauri and I talked this afternoon."

Parker nodded. "We did at lunch."

"I should probably apologize. Trust me, it will be the first of many."

"I didn't exactly try to stop you."

"Parker—I—had a fun time with you last night. But I think my sister is probably right. That's all it was."

He nodded. "We're both kind of rebounding."

"I'm rebounding; I'm not sure what you're doing. Mauri said you lost someone."

Parker nodded. "Four years ago."

"I'm sorry. Tell me you've dated since then?"

He shook his head.

"Really?"

"I know. I'm a mess."

"You are a mess, Parker." She moved up to him as both just automatically embraced. "A hot mess."

"What are we going to do?"

"You tell me?" Her lips met his.

It took only a moment before he needed to be tasting Christie's tongue again; and only a few more before his hand was on her ass and her fingers were unbuttoning his jeans.

6

At 2:00 AM the ship's interior was night lit with festive decorations. Dinner with Mauri's family had been casual and fun earlier in the evening, but now everyone had returned to their rooms except for Parker, who'd somehow found himself in Christie's cabin.

God, the woman could kiss. This time he'd fucked her screaming into his mouth. Christie was beautiful when she was coming. He needed to make her come. He'd lain in bed watching her sleep afterward. Sore and empty between his own thighs, he'd quietly dressed back into his briefs and jeans again and left the cabin to wander the decorated Christmas-lit decks.

This was getting out of hand. He'd only met the co-ed yesterday and now the two of them were acting like newlyweds. He was pretty sure this wasn't going to last. At

some point the whole thing was going to somehow blow up in their faces and both of them were going to get hurt all over again. Christie was right about one thing however—the two of them together were totally a hot mess.

The dance clubs were still open. The music was just as loud and annoying as the people moving in and out of them. Parker wasn't feeling very festive at the moment. He wandered up to another deck to escape the noise and found a pub with a still open door; although, all of the chairs had been set on top of the tables for cleaning. He wandered into the place and up to the bar anyway.

"Closed?" Parker asked.

The bartender turned around. "Two minutes ago. What would you like?" he smiled.

Parker returned his smile with a grin. The guy was tall, like himself with the same trimmed scruff but darker hair. His eyes were what caught Parker's attention the most. Piercing blues like nothing he'd ever seen before. The guy looked a lot like himself, broad-shouldered with a thin waist. His tanned skin and dark hair reminded Parker of someone who might be Latino but, then maybe more Middle-eastern ancestry. He didn't know. He had a calming, smooth voice as well.

"Nothing, actually. A Coke maybe."

"Sure." It took only a few moments for the bartender to set a large glass of the soda with ice and a black straw in front of him. "You're up late again."

"Again?" Parker looked at him curiously.

"I saw you last night in the aft lounge with your friend. People leave glasses there all the time. I have to go pick them up. She's pretty cute."

"Yea. Too cute." Parker took the stool he was standing next to and drew a long drink from the glass. The bartender said nothing as he dry towed a mug.

Parker reached into the small pocket of the front of his jeans and removed the gold band with the fine diamond inlay.

A soft whistle floated from the lips of the bartender.

Parker smirked.

"Let me guess? She's loaded and proposed to you with that?" he nodded at the wide men's band Parker turned in his fingers.

"No. Nothing like that. It was a gift from someone else. A few years ago."

"*She* proposed to you?"

"Yea. In a manner of speaking," Parker grinned.

"You didn't marry her?"

"She—passed away, before I could."

"Oh. Jesus," the bartender backpedaled. "I didn't mean to open my big mouth. I'm sorry."

"No. Don't worry about it. I'm over it. Mostly."

"Sure you are." The bartender smirked. Twisting the towel around inside the glass.

Parker met eyes with him. "Doesn't look like I am, does it?"

The guy behind the bar shook his head.

Parker sighed.

"You—ah. You want to talk about it?" The bartender put away the glass.

"Not really."

"I'm off as soon as I close and lock those doors," he pointed to the front entrance of the pub. "I usually head up to the pool after work to unwind. There's never anyone up there this time or year, or night."

"Thanks. I'm not sure I'm up for a swim at 2:00 in the morning in forty degree weather." Parker grinned.

"Suit yourself. A soak in the hot tub might help clear your head. It does me."

"Thanks. I'll think about it."

"I'm Brayden, by the way."

"I saw the name tag." He shook his hand. "Parker."

"Well, Parker. I'm out of here. You know where to find me if you want to talk."

"Sure. Thanks for the Coke." Parker slipped off his stool.

"Parker," Brayden set the still mostly filled glass of soda in the sink. "Just so you know. That ring you have? This isn't the first time I've seen one of those."

Parker's brows lifted, his eyes staring at the bartender's for long moments.

7

Parker found himself on the outside aft deck of the ship, standing beside a huge illuminated hot tub in a cold wind without a jacket and without a swimsuit. He watched as Brayden snagged a couple of dry but cold towels from a cage rack and then began untying his dress shoes and removing his socks.

"You're really going to get undressed in this weather?" Parker looked around the very empty pool area. Steam was rising off the lighted waters, but no one else was on the deck.

Brayden unbuttoned and slipped out of his satin branded black work shirt, folding and laying it neatly onto the deck next to his towel. Parker was suddenly impressed. Good grief the guy was cut, a lot deeper than he was. He'd obviously spent time in the gym. Parker smirked watching Brayden undoing his work slacks and then slipping them off until he was

wearing just some white cotton bikini briefs. The lower half of Brayden was just as thick and cut as the upper; and he was doing a not so bad job of filling out the briefs that covered his front and backside. Was Parker really that enamored with how Brayden's fully rounded glutes were only half covered by the designer briefs? Brayden folded his pants onto the deck and then slip into the slowly churning, steaming warm water.

Parker knelt by the edge and immersed his fingers into the pool. The water was definitely a lot nicer than the air above it.

"You should come in for a dip, Parker. You'll freeze to death out there."

"I want to know more about my ring."

"So do I—"

"You said you'd seen one like it before?"

Brayden immersed himself to his neck and leaned back into the chair, a warm jet pushing water against his back. "I've seen a few of them, actually. Three or four times."

"People wearing them?"

He nodded.

Jesus it was cold out on the deck. This was going to be a short conversation if he didn't find a jacket.

Brayden watched Parker slipping off his casual shoes and then stuffing his socks into them. He drew off his shirt and laid it neatly onto the loafers. Already his nipples were standing on end as he unbuttoned his Levis and stepped out of them. It was fifty-fifty whether or not Parker wore jeans commando or with underwear. He was glad he'd put some on now, but he wasn't sure if the thin white material was going to stay opaque once it got wet. Probably not. He'd worry about that later. It was freakin' cold at the moment and the only thought on his mind right now was slipping into the warm water.

"Better?" Brayden watched him sink down to his neck.

"Yea." Parker nodded. "This is really nice."

"Told you." Brayden grinned at him.

"You do this every night?" Parker moved to a seat next to Brayden's, feeling a jet of warm water pulse against his back.

"Almost."

"So you've seen a few of these rings?"

"I have, Parker. Usually on really nice-looking people; a couple of guys and a really hot blonde once."

"Were they together? Like a family?"

"No. All different trips. All of them preferred hanging out in the pub. I talked with a few of them."

"What were they like, these people?"

"Nice looking, like you. Intelligent. Nice to talk to. They tipped well."

"Do you remember any names?"

"I don't, Parker. I see so many people. Even if I thought I remembered someone's name it would probably be me just thinking I remembered their name. But I never forget a face. I can still see them in my mind's eye."

"I wonder where they got their rings?"

"I'm sure the same place you got yours."

"Carissa gave it to me. Just before she died."

"Sorry to hear that. Was it cancer? You don't have to answer that."

"No, it's fine. It was an accident. A truck driver ran a light. Hit and run. The driver never even stopped."

"Jeeze. Did they catch the guy?"

Parker shook his head. "No. That's what was so frustrating. Probably why I'm taking so long to get over her. No closure. I doubt they'll ever find the guy who did it now. It's been four years."

"That's really sad, Parker; I'm sorry. I bet her family was devastated."

"I wouldn't know. After the funeral they all just dropped me. None of them would even talk to me. Carissa and I dated for almost two years. I knew all of them pretty well."

"Wow. I can see why you're so interested in these rings."

Parker closed his eyes and relaxed into the waters churning around him. Brayden was right, the warm water was practically melting him into a puddle. "What about you?" he asked.

"Me?"

"Yea. You look like an underwear model; but you're tending bars on a cruise ship?"

"You should talk, Mr. Perfect. Why aren't you modeling?"

"Because *I* don't look like *you*." Parker smirked.

"A couple more days a week in the gym and you would. Easily."

"Is that what you do aboard ship? Hit the gym?"

Brayden nodded. "For the last two years."

"I don't know that I could live on a cruise ship for that long."

"It's not really by choice, trust me."

"What do you mean? You can't just leave?"

"No. I mean I can, if I want to go to jail. It's a bit of a short story with a bad ending."

"What did you do?" Now Parker was curious and for the moment forgot all about the rings.

"I—" Brayden sighed with a grimace, "sort of stole some money from the cruise line. They found out."

"And you're still working for them? Don't they usually fire people for stealing from the till?"

Brayden chuckled a half smile. "I wasn't stealing from the till, Parker. I'm a CPA. I used to be an assistant controller in the company's Victoria offices."

"Oh—" suddenly Parker was all ears in surprise.

"My mom was diagnosed with cancer."

"Oh, no."

"Her doctor said he could save her, but Canadian Medicare said it had advanced too far for them to do anything about it. They denied treatment."

"Seriously?! What did you do?"

"We got her private treatments, in Seattle. Until we ran out of money."

Parker nodded connecting the dots now. "So you sort of borrowed from the cruise line."

"I had every intention of paying it back. It's not like it was millions."

"I guess they found out about it."

Brayden nodded. "Yea. Circumstances being what they were, they said I could pay it back. They wouldn't report it to the police."

"What about your mom?"

"She went into remission for about a year, but then it came back with a vengeance. She didn't make it."

"I'm sorry."

"Yea. It was no fun. So now I'm stuck working on a boat for six years paying back my 'loan' from the company."

"Six years?"

"It beats prison, Parker. Besides, it's not a bad gig. They did have me working in housekeeping. The company didn't want me working anywhere near money. But the captain's a good guy. He thought I'd be better suited to bartending. At least I can keep my tips."

"Is that why you come up here?" Parker asked.

Brayden closed his eyes nodding, lowering himself a little deeper into the water. "It helps me relax. It's no fun being a prisoner. Even if you are serving the time on a luxury cruise ship."

8

Brayden?" Parker left his seat and turned toward him, resting his knees on the bottom of the pool. "Hmm?" he watched Parker, his pecs half rising out of the water. "Have you ever tried to lookup where these rings maybe come from?"

Brayden left his seat shaking his head, kneeling in the pool now in front of Parker. "I haven't seen that many of them to take notice. I just noticed yours tonight."

"Sure," Parker nodded. "I wonder who makes them?"

"I guess we could look online."

"There's an inscription on the inside of the band, but, I've never been able to read it. It looks like Hebrew or something."

"You've never tried to translate it?"

Parker shook his head. "Honestly, this is the first time I've ever really thought about it."

"Well, do you want to go check it out online?"

"I do, but," Parker looked at where the two of them were and where the doors to the inside of the ship were, a good thirty yards away. "I'm going to freeze to death between here and there," he smirked, nodding at the far side of the deck.

"It's not that bad if you move quickly. I usually just take my things inside and dry off in the corridor."

Brayden stood up out of the water; its depth now hit him a little higher than mid-thigh. His wet briefs did their own version of a wet t-shirt contest and left nothing to the imagination of what was concealed beneath them. The uncut guy filled the front of his briefs with an impressive thick male. Parker watched Brayden move to the edge of the pool and step out of it. His now mostly transparent underwear didn't hide the guy's fantastic back curves either. Jesus the guy looked good in wet underwear. Parker had been complimented many times in gym for how he looked, mostly by other guys either genuinely impressed or hitting on him. But this was the first time he could remember where he was having a hard time pulling his eyes away from another guy.

Parker watched Brayden gather his things, including his towel, still soaking wet. "Coming?" Brayden asked still standing beside the pool, steam rising from his skin and cooling quickly.

"Ugghh," Parker stood up out of the pool.

Brayden watched him step out dripping and steaming wet into the frigid air. Parker may not have been as bulked up as he was, but the guy had some nice cut bulges in all the right places, especially where his half transparent briefs covered him.

"Jesus, Parker. Hung much?" Brayden chuckled at the guy dripping wet out of the pool. "I think those shorts are a bit small for you."

"You should talk, dude. You're bigger than I am."

"Yea. Not." Brayden countered as both guys moved quickly for the doors and entered the interior of the ship still dripping wet and freezing cold. Each dried off quickly. The warmth of the corridor felt good after being outside for only a minute. Parker watched as Brayden just wrapped the towel around his waist and then gathered his shoes and clothes. Parker did the same. He didn't actually want to get dressed now anyway. His underwear was still soaking wet and putting dry cold jeans over cold wet briefs didn't sound fun. Both guys headed down the corridor.

"Where's your cabin?" Brayden asked as both headed for the elevators.

"B deck."

"Oooh, nice. You paid extra." He chuckled.

"My boss paid extra, actually." Parker hit the button next to the elevator doors. "She takes her family to different places each Christmas. Last year it was a 'Disney Christmas' in Florida."

"I've always wondered about doing that," Brayden remarked as the elevator rose a couple of decks. "It would be weird though, having Christmas without snow."

"Seattle has Christmas without snow—a lot."

"But you're an hour from Steven's Pass. You have all the snow you want."

"True."

The doors opened and the two guys walked wrapped in their towels past the rooms of Mauri's family. Parker eyed Christie's door as they walked past and then let the two of them into his own cabin, closing the door behind them.

"A stateroom." Brayden looked around at the nice décor of the now dimly lamp-lit room. He'd never actually been in one of these, even when he worked in housekeeping. The security manger had insisted he be kept away from the luxury rooms thinking he'd be a security risk with the more wealthy

passengers. He wasn't interested in stealing people's things. The security manager was a dickhead anyway. "Your boss must be loaded."

"She is now. Wasn't that way a few years ago. There were years she was barely able to make payroll week-to-week as the company grew."

"Glad to hear she's doing well." Brayden set his things onto a chair and lifted off his towel, folding it so that it could dry over the back of the chair.

Parker watched him walk past to the sliding doors that led out onto a small balcony. His still wet white briefs were now only about half as transparent as they were when he'd left the hot tub. He didn't appear to be in any kind of hurry to get dressed. Parker's eyes half danced over the back of Brayden's male ridges and backside curves. Jesus the guy's ass was nice. He wondered if that was from just his workout or if it was genetic? Probably a little of both.

Well if Brayden wasn't getting dressed, he wasn't going to. The room gave them privacy. Parker set his things into another chair and folded his towel to dry as well.

"You can see the lights of Ketchikan now." Brayden pointed into the distance as Parker walked up from behind him. We'll be there at first light. They'll be doing the Christmas tourist thing there all day. We won't be leaving until tomorrow again."

"Great. So we'll be stuck in tourist hell for the next 24-hours?"

"Yea. Unfortunately." Brayden tried to conceal a yawn. "The ship has Internet. With a stateroom, it should be free."

"It is. I've already been online. It's not the fastest, but it's not bad."

Parker went to the table and lifted the top of his MacBook. He sat down in the chair and began trying a few searches for his ring, but all he seemed to be able to bring up were jewelry

sites selling rings that kind of looked like the one he had, but they weren't the same.

Brayden fluffed a pillow and propped himself up on one side the queen bed. "Anything?"

Parker shook his head. "Nothing like what I have."

"Do an image search."

"I thought I was?" Parker looked up from his screen.

"No, I mean take a pic of the ring from a couple of different angles and then let the search engine try to match what you have."

"It can do that?"

Brayden nodded. "I do it all the time looking for micro brews. I have a collection of pictures of just about every brew brand you could imagine."

"You collect beer bottles?" Parker scowled.

"No, I collect art. It just happens to be in the form of brands from all over the world."

Parker mused the idea for a moment. He nodded. "That could be interesting. To see how other people design and market."

"Exactly. That's what I collect. Ideas."

Parker got out his iPhone and found the ring again in the small pocket of he jeans. He took several pictures of it, including the inside and then uploaded a couple of the photos. At first there didn't seem to be much; just more of the same old jewelry sites. But then another of his images seemed to hit some blogs that had a few images very similar to the ring he had. He studied the blog but didn't find a whole lot. The ring image was just being used as an avatar for some lady posting shopping advice online. Still he wondered where she got the image. It looked almost exactly like his own ring.

"Hey, Bray—have a look—?" Parker looked up to see Brayden, his head rolled to one side and the guy totally out, asleep. Parker smiled and chuckled in the dimmed light of the

lamp-lit room. Jeeze. Poor guy. It looked like he was going to have a roommate for the evening. But Brayden was still dressed in half wet briefs and laying on top of the comforter.

Parker got up and woke him.

"Huh?" Brayden was half groggy.

"You should crash under the covers. It'll get cold tonight."

"No. I'm okay, just—" he yawned.

Parker could tell the guy was dog-tired. "It's okay. You can head back to your cabin later."

"Are you sure?" Brayden began slipping himself between the sheets in a sleepy stupor.

"Yea, it's fine. Let me have your underwear. I'll dry them with your towel."

Brayden slipped out of the wet briefs under the covers and handed them to Parker.

Parker clicked out the light closest to Brayden's side of the bed and then laid the wet underwear over his towel.

He sat back down at the table and his computer and started typing in searches again. But for some reason he couldn't help but keep looking over the top of the screen at the handsome guy sleeping peacefully under the covers.

9

Hmmm.” Parker released a soft waking sigh. He’d been dreaming; finding himself in a small co-ed locker room. It was cold, with walls made of ice. Both men and women were showering in the dense steam. He’d been soaping the front of some girl he’d never seen before while someone else soaped his chest. Her chest was amazing and pert as his hands slipped all over the front of her. Soon others, guys and women had joined into the soap-fest. He’d grown really hard and had begun moving himself sweetly against the soapy skin of the girl in front of him while feeling another guy moving his rod against his thigh while someone looking like Marylyn Monroe with large breasts rubbed herself against him from the other side. Everyone was moving next to each other like some steamy soapy dance floor, all of them covered in huge lathery-slick suds. Parker moved his hard rod

between the girl's thighs as she turned around to get her front soaped by someone else in the dream.

"You know that's waking me up, Parker," Brayden breathed a soft, quiet groan.

"Hmmm?" Parker's sleepy vision slowly cleared.

"That feels nice, but you woke me up." Brayden yawned.

"Huh?" Parker now woke to find himself snuggled behind Brayden in a warm spoon. "Oh! Jesus—" alarm shot through him as he quickly moved away, pulling the sheet away from Brayden next to him. Brayden turned from his side lifting himself up onto his elbows, watching Parker who'd just totally freaked out. "God—Brayden. I'm sorry! I—I just—" Parker felt mortified. "I didn't realize you—"

"Parker." Brayden half grinned. "Relax. Do I look offended?"

"You're—you're not?"

Brayden shook his head with a handsome grin.

"Jesus, Bray, I was just—ahhh, I can't believe—"

"Parker. Relax. Get over it. I wasn't exactly pushing you away here."

Parker's alarmed feelings quieted. Looking at Brayden, he didn't appear upset at all. "I was dreaming. I didn't mean to—I'm sorry I woke you."

"Stop apologizing. It was nice."

Parker's ruffled feelings took a U-turn. "Nice? You didn't mind—me?"

"We kind of like each other; you know, in case that wasn't obvious in the hot tub last night."

Parker thought about the two of them in the pool. Then nodded with a sigh of some relief. "Yea, I guess I was kind of staring at you, wasn't I?"

"I was checking you out too. Not that you noticed."

"I guess I was too engrossed in talking about the rings."

"You were. It's all right. I could see you were a little preoccupied by it."

Now Parker was looking at Brayden's chest and part of his abs that had been uncovered by the sheet.

"What?" Brayden half smiled watching Parker scanning him.

"Oh. Nothing." Parker sighed. "You do look nice."

"Thanks. So do you. I vaguely remember getting undressed last night." Brayden smirked.

"You weren't exactly coherent. You looked like you needed some sleep."

"That always happens after a hot tub with me. I guess I should have warned you."

"No worries. I liked watching you sleep. I've just—never been turned on by another guy before."

Brayden watched Parker slip his hand under the sheet trying to calm his rod. "Maybe you just weren't around the *right* guy?"

"Evidently not." Parker winced with a breath. He was still throbbing.

"It's not just you. I'm just as hard as you are right now."

"You are?"

Brayden nodded sliding away the sheet revealing the rest of his abs and most of his bare spire that had risen tall over the top of them.

"Oh." Parker couldn't help but feel impressed. "You're, ah, not exactly small."

Brayden relaxed back down into his pillow his hands folded behind his head closing his eyes. He rocked his hips slightly.

"Is that supposed to tease me?" Parker watched him stretching now. "Because if it is, it's working."

Brayden broke a mischievous grin.

Parker moved up beside him again, wrapping one thigh around his and pushing his own rock hardness against Brayden's side. He slipped his hand over Brayden's smooth thick chest, his palm moving over one of his oval nipples that was already so firm it felt like a pencil eraser.

Brayden was looking into his eyes now. He unlocked his fingers from behind his head and wrapped his arms around Parker, smoothing one of his palms over Parker's own chest.

"God that's nice." Parker wrapped himself closer to Brayden trying to touch as much of his skin with Brayden's own as he could.

Brayden drew a tense breath.

"You okay?"

Brayden nodded. "I've just never actually been with another guy like this." He smoothed his hand over Parker's skin and then down to his ass, gripping one side as Parker rocked himself in a warm snuggle. "I think I've wanted to, but—"

"Hey." Parker could see Brayden was maybe a little nervous. "That makes two of us then." He smoothed his hand down Brayden's chest, slowly over his abs until his hand had slipped under his tall cock all the way into a thick black bush around the base of his rod.

Brayden drew a rippled breath. "You're kind of hot, Parker." He rocked his hips. What he really needed right now was Parker gripping him, but the guy just wasn't getting the message. The way Parker was teasing him was just making Brayden harder and harder.

"I think you're about to get kissed, Parker."

"Yea?" Parker leaned in closer to Brayden's lips. He'd been watching them for the past few moments.

"Yea," Brayden whispered into their kiss as both of their lips met softly.

Both discovered that something about the two of them together like this generated some explosive chemistry. Parker had often looked at other guys in the gym before, but he never really wanted to linger his eyes on them. He didn't want to just makeout with Brayden, he wanted Brayden feeling like he felt. Something about moving under the sheets with Brayden in his arms triggered feelings he didn't know he had.

Four years of being a celibate monk, then suddenly on this cruise he'd been laid by both Christie and Brayden. Sure, Christie was beautiful, but Parker wasn't feeling what he thought he should be when they'd gotten suddenly intimate. He wanted to fuck Christie; but with Brayden's lips folded into his own at the moment, their hard bodies moving slow and warm, tightly embraced, he wanted to make love to him. Brayden seemed to feel the same way.

"Is this okay?" Brayden asked, looking into his eyes, his fingers dancing lightly over the helmet of Parker's thick spire. Parker wasn't quite as big as Brayden, but the two were close in size.

Parker nodded, his hips rocking softly. "More than okay."

Parker found himself infatuated with Brayden's foreskin. He was experimenting with ways to tease Brayden's tip that had been wetted with some gel. "You're going to make me come, Parker," Brayden breathed warning into their kiss.

"You and me both, Bray."

"Hmmm," Brayden whined into their kiss. He was right at the edge.

A gentle knock sounded on Parker's cabin door.

"Oh, God, Parker, don't stop. Please—"

"I'm not stopping," Parker whispered. "They'll go away."

Christie knocked on the door several more times. She'd not seen Parker in any of the dining rooms. It was almost noon. He'd miss the ashore time in Ketchikan with her. He had to be somewhere.

"Hmmmm!" Brayden whined softly, trying to be as quiet as he could as Parker's teasing fingers pulled him over the edge. Parker watched and felt Brayden's muscles flex all around him. Brayden gripped Parker's cock while his suddenly pulsed, shooting warm seed onto and all over Brayden's own chest.

"Ahhh-ahhhh!" Brayden's face crumpled in deep release as he called out between their lips ultra quietly.

Parker watched him completely taken by the moment as Brayden pulsed his passion over and over, whimpering softly.

"God, you're beautiful, Bray—" Parker breathed whispering, watching the guy come forcefully while wrapped around himself.

Brayden had been trying to look at Parker the whole time. He didn't know what to say. He wanted to be kissing him, but he could see Parker was enjoying watching him in the throws of an unusually deep climax. God he'd come hard. The way Parker teased his foreskin and tip were mind-blowing.

"Jesus, Bray," Parker watched the guy continue to pulse dry now, again and again. Brayden had already shot a lot more than he ever delivered when he came. After a few more moments, Brayden's pulsing waned. The guy winced with Parker's fingers still teasing him. Then Brayden opened his mouth wide as an after shock of something intense rocketed through him.

Parker had done *that* on purpose. Parker was always super sensitive after coming, he figured Brayden would be as well. But Brayden didn't complain. He just took the torture. Parker had Brayden lifting his ass totally off the sheets in near pain he

was so sensitive, but he just whimpered quietly as Parker teased him.

Finally Brayden began to settle as the sensitivity waned. His chest was rising and falling quickly as he tried to catch some breath.

"Ohhhh, Jeeze. God Parker you're going to kill me," Brayden whispered, even though the knocking on the door had stopped a minute ago. Both were watching each other. "I think you've done other guys before."

Parker shook his head. "No. Just you."

"Hmmm," he relaxed into a deep kind of after glow.

"You shoot way more than I ever do."

Parker slipped his fingers through the wet seed that had landed all over Brayden's chest and abs.

"I do?"

Parker nodded.

"You're moving your fingers through my sperm, Parker."

"Yea."

"It's not gross—I mean, to you?"

Parker shook his head. Maybe he should feel like it should be, but, "It's part of you, Bray."

"You're making a mess, Park."

"You're already a mess, Bray."

"I like being a mess next to you."

"Yea. That makes two of us."

Brayden's fingers were moving again over Parker's rock-solid spire. Brayden moved himself over the top of Parker and began kissing him around his neck and chest.

"What are you doing?" Parker watched him as his kisses moved down to his abs.

"I've never had a guy in my mouth before."

10

Hey Parker.” Christie finally found him eating a late lunch. “What time did you leave? I missed you this morning.”

He nodded. “I know. I’m sorry. I couldn’t sleep. I was up late surfing and reading.”

“Night owls. I don’t get you guys.” She sat down across from him at the small lunch table. The cafeteria wasn’t exactly busy at 2:00 in the afternoon.

“Where is everyone?”

“Ashore. Doing the tourist thing.”

He nodded.

“There’s a concert tonight in town by the square. Interested?”

“A Christmas concert?”

“I know, right? I just thought it would be fun.”

"I've been to Leavenworth when they do the tree lighting thing. I think I'll pass. Tourist towns give me hives."

"Me too, but, it would be better with you."

"That's a nice thing to say."

"You're kind of growing on me, Parker."

"Christie," he met eyes with her. "Do you think we're kind of moving fast—I mean, too fast?"

"Are we?" She raised a brow.

"I don't know. I was thinking about it last night."

"We're kind of awesome under the covers, Parker."

"We are. I'm just—I mean it's really fast. For me."

"Is this the 'I don't want to sleep with you anymore' talk?" She suddenly didn't look happy.

"Honestly, Christie, I don't know what it is. I'm just thinking about it."

She got up from the table. "Well, let me know when you figure it out, Parker." He watched her turn and storm out of the room.

* * * * *

The night air wasn't nearly as cold as Parker thought it should be. Brayden walked right beside him, both bundled warmly for the chilly weather. Snow was everywhere, but the town had done a really good job of keeping it cleared from the sidewalks and streets. Both moved along the walk looking into shop windows decorated with festive lights and natural Pine-fir garlands.

"That's all she said?" Brayden asked after Parker had finished telling him the story.

"Yea. I guess she was a lot more into me than I was into her."

"She's really cute."

"You don't fall in love with cute."

"I did." Brayden grinned at him while playfully nudging his shoulder into Parker's.

"Knock it off." Parker glared at him with a half smile, then returning the gesture. He really wanted to be holding Brayden's hand, but the public display of their affection was something that was still a little new with him. Besides, Braden had already mentioned that cruise staff were forbidden to fraternize with the passengers. He didn't want to out his new friend to other crew who might be lingering in the crowds.

"So what do you think about the two of us?" Brayden asked.

"I know you're not going to be sleeping alone tonight, that's for sure." Parker assured him.

Brayden chuckled. "Seriously though. Be honest."

"I am being honest."

"Parker," Brayden groaned.

"I don't know, Bray. I just came off of a really long," he sighed, "and rather dark time in my life. I don't want to push anything. If it happens it happens."

"I was thinking the same. About you. All day today."

"It's a little surreal. Sleeping with another guy, I mean."

"It is surreal. Let's just enjoy the time and wait and see what happens."

"I think that's a good plan."

Both walked together, mulling through shops with overpriced Christmas knick-knacks and totem-pole souvenirs.

Back out on the street they were making their way toward where the music was playing.

"Are you going to see her again?" Brayden asked.

"You mean am I going to sleep with her again?"

"I know. I'm being nosy."

"No. Even if I hadn't met you, I don't think it was going to last. Christie's hot, but she's a little intense with the type-A."

"You're type-A, Parker. That's why it won't work."

"I'm type-A? I don't think so."

Brayden chuckled. "Thank you for proving my point."

Both exchanged grins.

"Hey, did you find out anything about your ring last night," Brayden pointed into the window of a jewelry store they were passing on the sidewalk.

"Some. Other people have seen these. Someone said in a post that you have to be on the dark web to find out more about them. I'm not even sure I know how to get onto the dark web."

"You have to know people. And have the right access credentials."

"You've been there?"

Brayden nodded. "I—sort of used the darknet to learn how to take the money I needed from the cruise line."

"You're quite the underworld kingpin, Bray."

"Not really. I got caught."

"Can you get us on it again?"

He nodded. "I still have my codes. If they still work."

"Do you want to stay for the concert?"

Brayden grinned. He could see Parker was really interested in what he could find out about the ring. "No. It sounds like a high school band anyway. Let's go see what we can dig up on your ring."

11

Both guys sat close to each other by one of the fireplaces. Not even midnight yet, the lounging area was a bit more populated with people quietly talking here and there. The amorous couple was even back from the night before last, but they hadn't started making out yet.

Parker had loaded a Tor client onto his MacBook and logged into some site called 'Blackbook' with Brayden's old username and key.

"What the hell is Blackbook?" Parker watched as a list of screen names and destinations began filling the Tor browser.

"Darknet social media. Like Facebook, only this is the dark side. Facebook makes you use your real name," Brayden was shaking his head. "These are all anonymous, aliases of different people all over the world," Brayden pointed. "They could be underworld hackers, kids, or FBI agents."

"FBI?"

Brayden nodded. "The feds haunt the darknets looking for illegal activity, mostly money launderers and kiddie porn."

"Great," Parker frowned. "Now *I'm* going to get arrested."

"You're not doing anything illegal. Do an image search for your ring again."

"Why wouldn't it have shown up before?" Parker found the folder where he'd stored the images of his ring. "Doesn't Google know everything already?"

"No, Google *doesn't* know everything, only places it's allowed to index. With this client we're searching the deepweb now. Places Google doesn't know about and usually isn't allowed to go."

"Wow. I had no idea."

Both watched as the software uploaded the image and then began searching, returning results almost immediately.

"That was fast," Parker mused. Clicking through the links the search returned he found images of stolen jewelry for sale at really good prices.

"Jesus, we *are* going to get arrested."

"Not." Brayden assured. "The client anonymizes our IP and client signature. No one even knows where you are."

"That's convenient." Parker clicked on another link.

"Otherwise, no one would bother to use the darknets."

"Hey, look at this." Parker enlarged the next image.

"Yep. That's your ring all right. I told you there was more than one of those."

"Who owns that pic?"

"How do I find that out?"

"It's like Facebook. Just click on it and see if anyone claims ownership."

"Uploaded by someone named HermesV," Parker mused.

"See if they're in chat," Brayden pointed.

Parker clicked over the chat window. "It says they're live."

"That never means anything. Type something to them. Better yet, just upload your pic to them. See what they say."

Parker dragged the image into the chat window. Almost immediately, they got a reply.

"Nice"

"Can you tell me what this is?" Parker typed.

"Ring"

"Great." Parker rolled his eyes. I'm chatting with a nine-year old.

"I know it's a ring. I want to know more about it. Where do they come from?" he typed.

"Is it yours? Or someone else's?"

Parker looked at Brayden.

"Mine. It was given to me by someone who died."

There was a long pause before another message popped up. *"Who?"*

"Uh-uh," Brayden warned Parker. "We don't give out personal info on the darknet."

Parker nodded. *"My fiancé."*

"Do you still have the ring?"

"Yes." Parker typed.

"With you?" Came the reply.

"Always." He typed.

There was a long pause. Parker looked at Brayden. Waiting.

"Look, they're typing again," Brayden pointed to the screen message. Parker's eyes grew wide as he read the message.

"She's not dead."

12

Parker visibly shook with emotion sitting on the side of the bed back in his state room. His stomach twisted in knots.

Brayden watched him carefully. "It's just a cruel joke, Parker. They don't know who you are. It's completely anonymous. They're just jerking around your emotions. Or they were trying to be nice. Like she's in Heaven."

"No. It's more than that. I know it is."

"You're upset. This whole cruise has been an emotional roller-coaster for you."

"She's not dead, Brayden."

"You went to her funeral. That's when her brother gave you the ring. You told me that."

"And where is her brother, Bray? Her mom and dad?"

"I don't know, you said they disappeared."

"Isn't that a little strange?"

Brayden nodded. "It is."

"This is my way back to her." He held up the band.

Brayden sighed. "I'll see you around, Parker."

"Bray—don't—" Parker stood up from the bed.

"Don't what?"

"Don't leave me. Not now."

"You're a wreck, Parker. You're chasing ghosts. And even if you do find out what happened to her, where does that leave me? You're more than just still in love with her; anyone can see that. You're never going to get over her."

"It's not like that, Bray."

"Use your head, Parker. If she's not dead, where'd she go? Why'd she just all of a sudden leave? A week before she's about to propose to you? Your fiancé wasn't treating you very well—and her brother was obviously in on it. Maybe he was just trying to make you feel better with the engagement thing?"

"Denton Dark worked for somebody, Brayden. Somebody in the government, I think. Somebody important. He never actually told me, but he and Carissa would talk sometimes. She wasn't exactly an open book to me."

"You dated a woman for two years and you never found out what she did or what her family did?"

"I know. You're right." He nodded. "It sounds stupid. She said she worked in media. I visited her office a lot in the Columbia Tower. I never really saw what she actually did. Or Denton. She said she worked in HR, but, it did seem more like she was running the place half the time. The truth is, I'm not exactly sure what she did there."

"And you think her brother is like some kind of spook—CIA or FBI maybe?"

"Or maybe Secret Service. I don't know. But think about it. You said it yourself. She dies and then the whole family just vanishes." He snapped his fingers. "Gone. Her parent's home

is cleaned out, abandoned; no one's cellphone numbers work anymore. Like they never even existed after the funeral."

Brayden nodded. "Yea. I have to admit, that's more than a little strange."

"And—there's more. You're probably not going to believe this, but—"

"But what?"

"Sometimes, when I'm wearing this." He held up the band on his finger. "It's like I can feel her. All around me."

Brayden offered him a polite smile.

"I know. You think I'm imagining things."

Brayden said nothing.

"I don't want to be alone tonight. I need someone to hold on to."

Parker looked pathetic. Brayden stared at him for long moments. Then shook his head walking up to the guy. "Jesus." He took Parker into his arms. The guy was still trembling as both tightly embraced. "I'll hold you, Park."

Brayden felt Parker exhale softly; then heard him whimper quietly. He could feel him weeping as both held each other tightly. "Don't worry, Park. I'll stay with you. I'm not going anywhere."

13

The loud knock on the door of their state room jarred both guys from sleep. This time Brayden was spooned behind Parker most of the night.

“Uhhh,” Parker groaned quietly. “Not again. Go away.”

“Your ex-girlfriend is persistent.” Brayden mumbled, lightly kissing his shoulder.

But then suddenly both guys heard the door of the cabin unlock and watched as two uniformed police officers entered along with a ship’s officer. Both guys sat up onto their elbows with astonished looks.

Brayden met eyes with the porter. She didn’t look all that happy seeing him in bed with a passenger. But Parker’s eyes were focused on Christie pushing past the officers. Her hand went immediately to her mouth as a look of shock and horror washed over her face.

"Oh my God!" fell out of her mouth. The color was draining from her face. She quickly turned and ran out of the cabin.

* * * * *

"What's going on, Jeff?" Parker found himself in a small business conference room the police had setup in the executive part of the ship, away from the general population. "The police asked me all kinds of questions about Mauri and your family. Then they wanted to know where I was all night. I asked what was going on but they won't tell me anything."

Jeff didn't look happy. "Then I'll tell you. Mauri's dead, Parker."

Parker just blinked at him. "Huh?!"

"We took all of the kids for a sleepover in our cabins last night after the concert, so she could have a break. She died last night in her sleep."

"Oh my God. Jeff—I—I don't know what say?"

"I don't think there's anything anyone can say at this point. The police are keeping it quiet for obvious reasons."

"Yea, who wants to be on a ship where someone just died."

"Not just died, Parker. Mauri was murdered."

"WHAT?! What happened? How?!"

"The police won't say. But it sounds like someone was in her cabin last night. I don't know what happened or how. But all of us are on their 'persons of interest' list now."

"You mean we're all suspects."

Jeff nodded. "None of us are going to be allowed off the ship until the Canadian authorities have more information."

"Jesus, Jeff. You're sister was one of the nicest people I think I've ever met. Who'd want to kill Mauri?"

"I don't know the answer to that, Parker. I have no idea. The police are trying to sort all of that out."

"So that's why they wanted to know where I'd been all night."

"They said you were with another guy all night. I saw the ship's video."

Parker nodded. "Mauri wanted me to meet someone on the cruise; I guess did."

"I'm happy for you, Parker. Really," Jeff half smiled. "Mostly I'm happy because now I know you didn't do it."

Parker nodded.

"Christie's been pretty upset all morning though. About her sister and now this thing with you and this other guy. I think she really likes you."

Parker rolled his eyes with a sigh; then nodded. "I've been trying to let her down easy, Jeff. Your sister doesn't let down very easy."

"She'll get over it," he half smiled. "But with Mauri gone, we're going to need someone to keep things going back in Seattle. Please don't let Christie run you off, Parker. I have a feeling our family is going to really need you to keep things going smoothly at Signature. A lot of people will be depending us. Please tell me you won't be leaving."

Parker nodded.

* * * * *

"I should bust your ass back to housekeeping, Mr. Michaels." The Captain glared at Brayden in his office. "Fraternizing with passengers is not just against the rules, it's bad for business."

"I'm sorry, Captain. It won't happen again."

"Damn right it won't happen again. I'm terminating your employment, Mr. Michaels. As of now. The minute the police are through with their investigation, you are off my ship the moment we hit a Canadian port. Understand?"

"Yes sir." Brayden pursed his lips.

The captain ended the recording device on his desk; then sighed.

"At ease, Brayden."

Brayden took a more relaxed stand but still stood at half attention.

"I *have* to make this official. It's all over the police reports now. The minute corporate looks at those they're going to wonder why I didn't take action."

Brayden nodded, looking at the captain.

"I don't care who you sleep with, Brayden. It's none of my business. Passengers are a no-no, but—we all know how things are sometimes. You're not the first crew to sleep with a passenger, you won't be the last."

"What about my loan? Are they going to report me now?"

"If I know anything about legal, probably. Soulless bastards are all by the book. You'll have thirty days to pay back the loan."

"Where am I supposed to get the money, Captain? I can't come up with that kind of money in a month!"

"I don't know, Brayden. I wish I could help."

He nodded.

"Listen. I'm closing off that section of B deck so the police can work. We're moving everyone to other staterooms. Clean out your gear from your residence quarters and move them to A2."

"Captain? A deck? That's one of the honeymoon suites."

"So it is," the captain grinned. "I've already assigned your Mr. Parker to the same cabin. The rest of the cruise is on me, Brayden. Just make sure you get off in Vancouver once we're underway again."

Brayden nodded. "Thank you, Captain."

* * * * *

"Fired!?" Parker looked stunned.

Brayden had already fallen backward onto the overstuffed plush bedding of the suite's huge bed with a deep sigh. "Yep. I'm screwed."

"Why?! I thought you said the Captain was a nice guy?"

Brayden lifted up onto his elbows. "He is a nice guy. He assigned both of us to this suite."

"But he still fired you."

"He didn't have a choice, Parker. I get it. I broke the rules. It's a big rule too. No fucking the passengers."

Parker pursed his lips nodding.

"The police have the two of us on body cams naked in the same bed. At some point corporate's going to notice the report and wonder why the Captain kept me on. He's got himself and his own career to worry about. He already stuck his neck out bucking security and moving me to bartending."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go to jail; as soon as legal reports the theft to the police. I can't come up with three hundred thousand dollars in thirty days, Parker."

"You stole that much?"

"Over the course of a couple of years, yea. I was paying Mom's invoices with corporate funds. Until auditing caught it."

"Ohh, you didn't actually steal money."

"Six of one, half dozen of the other, Parker. Theft is theft. Doesn't matter how you do it or what it's for. Altruism notwithstanding."

Parker flopped back onto the bed next to him. "God, what a mess."

"You or me?"

"Both. I can't believe Mauri's dead."

"What happened. Did she have a heart attack?"

"No one told you?" Parker sat up onto his elbows.

"Told me what? The police asked me like five questions and then let me go."

"Someone *killed* her. It's on the DL but the police are calling it a homicide."

"What?! How?"

"They aren't saying. Apparently, whoever found her immediately called the police."

"Yea. That's protocol."

"The police aren't letting anyone off the ship."

Brayden nodded. "I heard the captain had canceled all shore leave for the crew. I didn't realize it also included passengers. That's pretty rare."

"Well, someone on this boat just murdered my boss last night. I'm sure the police don't want whomever just up and leaving."

"You can't run from the police like that, Parker. They always find you. Whoever killed your boss thought they could get away with it. Somehow. They're not going to try to run. That would be way too obvious."

"You sound like a detective," Parker grinned.

"No. I've just seen way too many re-runs of *Law and Order*."

"I'm still trying to figure out who would want to kill her?"

"I'm sure the police are as well ..."

* * * * *

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