

Loose Id

Jane Davitt & Alexa Snow

GIVING UP  
THE GHOST

# **GIVING UP THE GHOST**

**Jane Davitt  
and  
Alexa Snow**

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**Giving Up the Ghost**  
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## Prologue

“There.” Nick surveyed the clean kitchen with satisfaction. “Bed?”

John nodded and rubbed his shoulder again -- it was still feeling stiff and uncomfortable after his marathon wood-chopping session yesterday afternoon.

Nick came over behind him and pushed his hand out of the way. “That’s still bothering you?” Nick asked, his breath warm against the back of John’s neck as his skillful fingers prodded at and massaged the sore spot.

“Aye, but I’ll forget all about it if you keep that up.” John closed his eyes and let his head fall forward, chin to his chest.

It felt good to have Nick’s hands on him after hours of doing no more than looking at him. They’d been entertaining their friends Sheila and Michael; John’s weekly evening with them had evolved into the four of them having a meal followed by a game of cards. Tonight, each hand had been accompanied by a stream of conversation from Sheila. Her ability to talk and win most of the hands as she did it was uncanny. John could only suppose she didn’t actually listen to herself. It wasn’t that their guests would have minded him and Nick exchanging the odd touch or kiss; it’d just worked out that they’d been sitting across the table from each other the whole night. And Nick had been out all day, walking along the headland while the late autumn gale sent the clouds racing across the pale sky arching over the island. He gave a contented sigh and felt the tension in his muscles ease a little more. Nick’s fingers shifted, his attention moving to John’s neck, and John’s sigh turned to a sensual murmur of appreciation. That felt better than good.

Nick’s left hand moved from John’s neck down along his side and settled at his waist. “Let’s move upstairs.” His lips brushed over John’s ear. “As much as I love having my hands on you like this, I like it more when you aren’t wearing so many clothes.” It wasn’t as if John would even consider arguing; he let Nick lead him up the staircase to the bedroom, and stood there cooperatively as Nick undressed him. He tried to help, but Nick seemed determined to do it himself. “There,” Nick said when John was stripped to the skin. He patted John’s bare arse and pulled down the covers. “Lie down.”

John arched his eyebrows, giving Nick an amused look, but not protesting. Nick got like this sometimes; like he was trying to repay John for all the times John had looked after him in the wake of an encounter with a ghost. John wasn’t used to being taken care of, but it didn’t mean he didn’t like it once in a while, not when it was Nick doing the caring. Not when Nick knew exactly what to do to him. He lay down on the cool sheets, shivering slightly. The room was warmer than most islanders would have kept it; Nick liked it that way, but against John’s bare back that first touch of cotton was still a faint, pleasurable shock. Nick was watching him, undressing quickly, and John smiled up at him lazily, filled with good food, a few shots of whiskey, and a growing arousal. He didn’t bother pulling the covers up; Nick was enjoying looking at him, if the heat in his eyes was any indication, and John was all for anything that put that intent, hungry expression on Nick’s face. John ran his hand down his chest, pretending to scratch himself, unable to keep his grin from spreading wider. “I’m lying down, just like you asked. Any more requests?”

“Yes -- roll over.” John stretched once more, liking the feel of Nick’s heated gaze a little too much to give it up immediately, then obeyed, rolling toward the center of the bed and onto his stomach. “That’s better,” Nick said. A moment later he climbed onto the bed himself, straddling John’s waist, the warmth of him settling onto John’s arse. Thumbs dug into John’s shoulders and made him groan. “You really did a number on yourself.” It was said in the tone of voice that meant Nick didn’t expect a reply, so John just closed his eyes and listened as Nick worked on him. “God, I love touching you. I’m surprised you weren’t fighting half the island off with sticks all these years.”

John couldn’t help the soft snort of laughter that escaped him. “Well, I had a few offers now and then, but I don’t recall my door getting knocked down in the rush. And I think I’d have been a bit of a disappointment, seeing as the offers were all from women.” He flexed his shoulders, gasping slightly as Nick’s fingers dug in firmly, riding out the mild discomfort for the sake of the soothing warmth that followed. “Besides, I was waiting for you, wasn’t I?”

“I like to think so,” Nick said. He bent low and kissed John’s back, then moved his hands to John’s bad shoulder and concentrated on it, keeping his touch gentle as he sorted out where the ache was worst. “And I think

they're all crazy. Or blind. Not that I'm complaining; their loss is my gain."

"I'm not complaining about anything," John told him, feeling blissfully pampered. "Mind, you're the crazy one thinking I'm a catch, but I'm not arguing with you. No, I'm just lying here letting you do anything you want to me." His shoulder hurt but he'd had worse; chopping wood was tiring but it was nothing compared to hauling in heavy nets full of fish for hours on end. He hoped Nick hadn't got the idea that John was in too much pain to want more than a goodnight kiss. "Anything at all," he added.

Nick's voice was suddenly a soft hush in John's ear. "Are you sure?" he asked. "Anything?"

The shiver John felt this time wasn't caused by anything but Nick being this close. Turning his head just enough to catch Nick's eye, John said, "With you? Aye, I'm sure."

"Then come here," Nick said, shifting to lie beside him. He rolled John onto his side toward him, kissed him, then pushed on his hip until John was lying on his back. "There. Comfortable?" John nodded, and Nick slid lower and nuzzled at John's cock, fingertips sliding teasingly up the inside of John's thigh.

John spread his legs wider, wordlessly encouraging Nick's hand to go wherever it wanted. Even now, when he was used to the idea of taking their time making love, of kisses that were more than a brief preliminary to sex, he still found it difficult to ask Nick in words for everything he wanted from him. His hand stroked Nick's dark hair, pushing it back from Nick's face so that he could see him. He found himself caught by the absorbed look on Nick's face as his tongue traced a path over his cock, the sweet jolt of arousal almost a distraction. "You're -- you look --" He shook his head, feeling frustrated by his inability to tell the man that he looked unbelievably hot like that. "I love you." That, he had no trouble saying. None at all.

"See? I knew I was lucky." Nick looked up at him and smiled gently, then licked his lips and slid them down over the sensitive tip of John's cock. John shuddered, groaned, and lifted his hips slightly. It didn't last long enough -- Nick went back to teasing him, soft, wet little flicks of his tongue down the length of his shaft and across his balls. "I love you, too," Nick said seriously. He mouthed at the base of John's cock, wetting it, then knelt up. Nick had their bottle of lube in his hand as if it had appeared from nowhere. He opened it, wet two fingers, and, watching John's face the whole time, pushed those fingers inside himself. John could see it all perfectly -- the way Nick's lips parted, the sharp inhalation of breath, the way Nick's thigh muscles trembled. He could hear the slick sound as Nick slowly prepared himself.

"Your face..." John whispered. "You should see yourself, Nick. I see that look every time I do that to you." Nick's eyes widened slightly and John licked his dry lips, propping himself up on his elbows and ignoring the stab of pain from his shoulder. "You're tight, aye, but you want me and you open up and let me in and there're times I could come just from that. My fingers in you and that look on your face."

Nick shivered; his nipples were tight, his face flushed with arousal. "I always want you," he said. "I want you like this -- right here, on your back." He moved, straddling John again, this time with his eager erection against John's belly and his arse pressed to John's cock. "Like this." Slowly, Nick rocked his hips.

John put his hands on Nick's waist, feeling the tremor that ran through him as Nick moved just enough, just -- the slippery heat welcomed him, letting his cock push into Nick with a deceptive ease as Nick bore down on him, taking his time. Holding still took all John's willpower, but he did it, letting Nick control this, not giving into the need, the instinct, to drive up with a single thrust and take what was being offered to him. Nick grinned down at him, his face tight with concentration, and John returned it with a fierce smile of his own, groaning a moment later as Nick shifted and took him deeper still.

"Like this," Nick said again. His eyes were dark in the low light; he splayed one palm on John's chest, not resting much weight on it, more like he wanted -- or needed -- the contact. He stayed where he was, looking down at John. Then, slowly, he moved, his thighs raising him up off John, pausing before he sank back down, and if John could keep from lifting his hips, he certainly couldn't keep from grabbing onto Nick's and holding on. Nick gasped and found a rhythm, riding John with an abandon John couldn't remember from him in all their time together. He watched, enthralled, as Nick's fingers wrapped around his cock, teasing at the slick tip.

*Lucky.* John wasn't the sort to think too deeply about life, and for all that he'd experienced since he'd met Nick, he wasn't inclined to spend much time thinking about what would happen after his ended. He took each day as it came, for the most part. But at times like this, with Nick doing his best to drive him to the point where he couldn't speak coherently, he was so aroused, he couldn't help that single word coming into his head and staying there. He moved his right hand over Nick's where it lay against his chest, curling his fingers under it and bringing it to his mouth to kiss, needing to do something, needing to give something back. Nick dragged his hand roughly across John's mouth, uncoordinated, distracted, but slowly enough for John to lick and kiss and bite at it, tasting lemons -- aye, Nick had been the one grating them, hadn't he, for the fancy dessert they'd tried. John captured a single finger,

lapping at it as Nick pushed it deeper, Nick gasping as John's teeth fastened around it for a moment.

"God," Nick said, his eyes closing for a second or two as he tightened around John like a vise in a slow, maddening pulse. A bead of fluid formed at the head of his cock, framed by thumb and forefinger as he paused. John knew that drop would be sweet on his tongue, that Nick was hovering on the edge of coming right then, from just a few minutes of fucking. Of fucking himself on John's cock, and wasn't that one of the hottest thoughts ever? It made John ache with it, the way he so often ached because of Nick. Nick looked down at him and shuddered. "I don't...know if I can -- God, John. I'm so close."

John swirled his tongue around the tip of Nick's finger, looking down his body at Nick's cock, the connection between what he was doing and what he was seeing so intertwined that he could have sworn he could taste that slick, spreading wetness. Then he let the finger slip from his mouth, his hand tight around Nick's wrist, and nodded, which was about all he could do right then.

"God." Nick bit his lip and began to move again, his other hand a blur on his cock. John felt it when he started to come -- the hot, tight clench around him, the way Nick trembled. The way his mouth opened in silent ecstasy, head thrown back, the pale milk of his skin glowing. There was little more incredible than the sight of Nick coming, and John was treated to it in all its glory.

He waited, ignoring the insistent clamor of his own body, pushing the climax he was so close to back because he didn't want to miss this, any of it, not the slow slackening of Nick's hand, not the way the muscles on Nick's stomach tensed as the warm spatter of come patterned them, not the single whimpering breath Nick released as the tension left his body. And when Nick slumped forward, trembling, John pressed a kiss against the damp, hot skin of Nick's shoulder and tilted his hips up once, twice, and came in a slow, powerful rush, calling out Nick's name softly as he did.

The house was quiet, the only sound in the room their breathing until that eventually slowed and was nearly silent, too. Nick shifted a bit and they both groaned, already-stiffening muscles protesting. "If I don't move soon I don't think I'll be able to," Nick said.

"Moving's overrated." John gave Nick a kiss that landed somewhere near his ear and sighed. "But I'm thinking we need to, aye." Nick moved off him, his hand bestowing a final pat on John's chest, and John got to his feet, feeling the room spin and settle around him. "If I fall asleep brushing my teeth, you'll come and get me, will you?"

"If you start to look too sleepy, I'll pinch you," Nick promised, getting up himself and following John across the hall into the bathroom. He shivered in the cold -- he always seemed to feel it more than John did -- and started the hot water tap running, reaching for a flannel. As John brushed his teeth, Nick wiped his chest and belly clean, then offered the rinsed washcloth to John, who gave himself a cursory cleaning as well. John went back to the bedroom to keep the sheets warm for Nick, who followed a minute or two later. "Mm," Nick said, crawling in next to him and snuggling close. "What are you doing tomorrow? Anything interesting?"

"I didn't tell you?" John shook his head, settling down more comfortably and enjoying the feel of Nick's body close to his. "Sorry. Must've slipped my mind when I was making sure the place was clean enough to stop Sheila fussing over our bad habits. Aye; Simon Cready called; one of his workmen has broken his wrist. You know they're working on the extension to the community center in town? I said I'd take the man's place; it means a couple of weeks of steady work." He reached out to turn off the bedside lamp and then hesitated, wanting to see Nick's face. "You'll maybe be a bit bored by yourself all day?" It was one of his nagging worries; that the quiet life on the island would make Nick restless, eager to leave. Nick's adult life had been spent moving from place to place; this was probably the longest time he'd spent in one location and it wasn't like Traighshee had a nightlife to speak of...

Nick's hand stroked over John's bare hip. "Maybe," he admitted slowly. "It's not that I don't love it here -- you know I do. And being able to take a break like this has been amazing. I haven't felt this rested in...forever, probably." He sighed and tilted his chin up for the kiss John was aiming at his mouth. "But yeah. Maybe a little bored."

John kissed Nick, for once doing it less because he could and he wanted to, than because it gave him time to think before he replied. Nick's mouth moved against his sleepily but still holding the heat from their lovemaking. "There's maybe something you could do?" John offered a little hesitantly when the kiss wound down. He cleared his throat, trying to sound casual. "Do you have any hobbies? Because it's going to be a long winter, you know. I'm not saying you want to take up stamp collecting, mind..."

"Good, because somehow I don't see that filling up my free time." Nick sounded amused. "And you did promise to give me another lesson with the axe -- which should probably wait until you're less sore. But even if I took over all the wood-splitting duties that still leaves an awful lot of time for doing nothing but staring at the walls, and I've heard that can take even regular people to the point of seeing ghosts." It was the first time in weeks John

could recall Nick having mentioned that particular talent, as if Nick had needed time to distance himself from the ability in order to move on to this new phase of his life. “Anyway,” Nick continued, “I guess I’ll find something to do with myself.” He didn’t sound too certain, though.

John yawned, smothering it with his hand and then snapping off the light. He’d think of something Nick could do...or Nick would get a bright idea of his own. They settled down again and John nudged Nick’s shoulder with his chin, smiling into the darkness. “Maybe you should start that book you’re always saying you’re going to write.” He chuckled softly. “You wouldn’t be the first visitor to do that...start, I mean. Most of them run out of steam after the first chapter, though, if they even get that far.” “I’m not a visitor.” Nick sounded annoyed and John winced, for all that he was pleased to hear Nick sound so definite about it. “Well, no, of course you’re not --”

“Besides, most of them run out of steam because they aren’t here long enough.” Nick turned his head, the stubble on his jaw catching in John’s hair. “I’m gonna be here forever.” In the quiet, John could just about hear the gears in Nick’s head turning. “Maybe I *will* write that book, just to show you I can.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me.” John felt a little bemused by how quickly Nick had taken him up on the idea, as if it was something he’d had in his mind, waiting. “But if you think it’s something you’d like doing I can’t think of a better way to pass the time.” He gave Nick one final kiss and rolled over. A book. Well, it’d keep Nick busy until spring, maybe, and then there’d be plenty of real work for him to do...that new vegetable patch they’d been planning...the boat would need overhauling, aye, and maybe they could...He drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter One

John pulled his heavy jacket out of the closet, listening to the wind howl outside. No rain in it, though; it could be worse. December had brought one storm after another to the island, lashing it with rain and sleet, the short days dark with low-lying clouds, the sun a pale ghost. He was used to it after a lifetime living on the island, but that didn't mean he was enjoying it. With his jacket in his hand, he walked through the house to the kitchen, where Nick's laptop and an assortment of books were cluttering up the kitchen table. The man seemed incapable of working in anything other than chaos. Scrawled notes to himself, acting as bookmarks, were fluttering slightly in the draft coming from under the back door. Nick was tapping away, his fingers finding the keys without fumbling, his gaze locked on the screen.

"I'll be off, then," John said, staring at the back of Nick's head, the dark hair tousled and longer than usual. He felt as if that was all he saw of Nick these days; the hunch of a shoulder, the curve of his back. "Unless you want to take a break from that and join me? Michael was asking after you the other day, said he hadn't seen you for a while."

"What?" After a moment, Nick turned his head and looked at John. He had the vaguely unfocused look around his eyes that he often had when he was working. It was a look John didn't particularly care for, not that he'd said so to Nick, of course, as that would have required explaining why. He was fairly certain that admitting he was jealous of the attention Nick gave his writing wouldn't go over well. "Oh. Um, yeah -- Not tonight, okay? I'm in the middle of this chapter, and I've finally got some momentum going. I don't want to stop now."

"You said you couldn't stop yesterday because it *wasn't* working."

John tried to keep his voice light, even amused, but it wasn't easy. He'd been the one to encourage Nick to start the book; it'd seemed a natural step after the few articles Nick had had published. Now he was wishing he'd kept his mouth shut. Nick had told him bluntly that the money involved, assuming the book ever got published, would be minimal, as he didn't intend to sensationalize the subject matter. John hadn't been too bothered by that, although money was always tight; he'd just wanted Nick to have something to do with himself as the long winter began, Nick's second on the island. The first winter they'd been so wrapped up in each other that the months had gone by quickly, but this autumn Nick had started to get restless even before the first gale stripped the leaves from the trees.

Going from years of wandering, never settling down, to life in a small house on a small island -- well, John wasn't surprised by Nick's discontent, mild enough for the most part. There were plenty of times when Nick had turned to him and smiled, commenting on how peaceful it was; how much he loved the quiet, after all.

No; John had just been too clever for his own good, that was what it was, and now he was paying for it.

"I'm sorry." Nick sounded genuinely apologetic; he raised a hand and caught at John's sleeve, brushing warm fingers against the sensitive skin of John's wrist before turning back to his computer. "Tomorrow night, okay?"

It wasn't the first time he'd promised that, though, and John had no reason to believe tomorrow would be any different. The house felt strangely empty when Nick was working. John had put up with it for many weeks before he'd suggested tentatively one night that maybe he'd go out to the pub with Michael, if Nick wouldn't mind, and Nick's response had been affirmative but distant, as if he were barely paying attention.

It wasn't that he expected them to live in each other's pockets; he'd seen early on that Nick would never be a fisherman, not seriously, for all that Nick loved sending John's boat skimming out across the bay, the wind whipping his hair back off his face. And John had spent more time fishing than doing anything else before Nick had turned up on the island. Given a choice, though, he'd put Nick first every time, no matter how well the mackerel were biting, leaving his boat drawn up on the sand day after day. It was just a pity that Nick didn't seem inclined to do the same.

John bent down and gave Nick's cheek a brief farewell kiss. His cheek, because Nick didn't turn his head enough for a kiss on his mouth. In fact, he tensed, his fingers stalling on the keyboard, until John straightened and left him in peace.

John didn't deliberately slam the door behind him, but he let the wind take it from his hand and close it with a decisive, window-rattling thud that summed up how he felt.

The wind buffeted the side of the car as he pulled out onto the road, worry nagging at him. Something was

wrong, and, worse, he didn't know what it was. He'd tried to ask Nick more than once, but Nick had just shaken his head, insisting he was fine, that *they* were fine.

On more than one occasion, he'd woken in the middle of the night to find Nick lying awake in bed, staring at the ceiling or the wall. Knowing that Nick wasn't sleeping was one piece of the puzzle, at least. The only saving grace, the one thing that reassured John that things might not be as bad as he feared, was that Nick woke each morning eager as a puppy, hands roaming John's body, mouth warm and arousing over John's skin, and his eagerness was contagious, driving John to heights he wouldn't have thought possible at his age.

The pub was crowded when he arrived, and he had to squeeze the car in between two others. He held his jacket closed at the neck as he hurried inside, anxious to be out of the cold wind and into an environment where he felt welcomed.

"John!" Michael called from their usual table, raising a hand as the door closed behind him.

He returned the wave, and was about to head to the bar when he saw that Michael already had a pint and a whiskey chaser waiting for him on their table. Threading his way through the crowd, returning nods of greeting from various acquaintances, he felt a surge of gratitude, less for the drinks themselves, though he was looking forward to downing the whiskey to warm himself, than for the thought behind them.

"So you're by yourself again?" Michael asked, not troubling to lead up to the question.

The gratitude evaporated. "Looks like it, doesn't it." The whiskey slipped down in two swallows and John sighed, his tongue loosening. "He's busy with the writing. Sends his apologies."

Michael nodded. The pub was loud, their table tucked away against the wall, giving them the illusion of privacy. "Enjoying it that much, is he?" he asked doubtfully.

"Seems to be." John stared down into his glass of bitter. "I tiptoe around, trying not to disturb him, but to be honest, I doubt he'd notice if I took up playing the bagpipes."

Nearly choking on his pint, Michael wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and gave John an astonished look. "Should bloody well hope you're not considering it. You'd probably break every pane of glass in the house." He grinned, but even as John looked at him his expression melted into something more like concern. "You're not regretting taking up with him, are you?"

"No, I am not." John didn't even have to think about that. His life before meeting Nick hadn't been unhappy, exactly, but it had been lonely as hell. And as dreary at times as this winter was proving to be. "It's more of him I want, not less. More of his attention, anyway. Christ, he's only on chapter three! By the time he's finished, I'll be -- I don't know -- ready to use that damn computer for target practice, maybe."

"At least there you'd stand a chance." Michael mimed shooting a handgun, thankfully aiming at the wall instead of John or anyone else in the room. "I'm glad," he added, "that you don't want to leave him, I mean." When John raised a questioning eyebrow, Michael explained. "You've been happier since he's been here. Not that you ever seemed unhappy before, mind, but you've been different. Content, maybe."

"More than that," John protested. "A lot more."

Content? It wasn't contentment he felt when Nick was walking toward him, smiling a promise before dropping to his knees. It wasn't anything close to that settled an emotion. His mother and her new husband; aye, they were contented, but Christ, he wasn't at that stage yet.

"I can be quiet with him." Michael nodded as if he understood that, although he was married to a woman who rarely shut up so John wasn't sure how he'd know. John loved Sheila like a sister, but the woman could blather on about nothing for far longer than he could bear to listen, especially when she'd had a glass or two of wine. "I'm happy with him in my life. I'm just not sure he is anymore." John took a long swallow of bitter. "Maybe he's bored. With the island. With me. I couldn't find it in me to blame him. It's not what he's used to."

"Could be he just needs a bit more time to settle in," Michael suggested. "As you say, none of this is what he's used to -- not the staying in one place, not the island. It's a lot to take in all at once, and you know what people can be like. How many have come thinking to stay for good and still been here a year later? It says a lot for him that he's stayed as long as he has." John's expression must have revealed all too clearly what he was thinking, because Michael looked worried and abashed at the same time. "What I'm saying is he's not bored with you. Can't imagine how anyone could be. He's lucky to have you."

Flushed, Michael lifted his pint and poured half of it down his throat in one gulp. John wasn't surprised Michael seemed flustered; they didn't usually pay each other compliments.

Taking pity on him, and as uncomfortable as Michael with the emotional turn the conversation had taken, John cleared his throat and gestured over to the corner where the dartboard stood unused. "Are we playing darts tonight or

not? I'll get us another round in, shall I?"

"God, yes," Michael said fervently, shoving his chair back and draining his glass before standing up.

John grinned as he waited at the bar for their drinks. Michael always made him feel better. Settled. He'd have a game or two of darts, another few pints, and head home to talk to Nick, who wouldn't mind how personal the conversation got and who'd understand that he had to take a break from that damned book.

Except it was Colin Firth's birthday, and he stood everyone a drink, and it would've been rude not to have got him one back, seeing as John had known him for years, which left John too drunk to drive and so he spent the night in town, on Michael's sofa, after a slurred phone call to Nick in which he could clearly hear the tapping noise that meant Nick wasn't stopping the writing even for as long as it took to tell him affectionately that he was a pain in the ass and Nick would see him in the morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

He woke to another gray day and Sheila standing over him with a hot cup of tea. "John McIntyre," she said with disapproval. "I'd have thought you were old enough to know better by now."

"Christ, what time is it?" John rubbed sleep out of his eyes and sat up, reaching for the tea as a way to wash the sour taste of too much beer from his mouth.

"Time for you to get yourself back to that man of yours before he starts wondering what you're doing with yourself." Sheila crossed her arms, then sighed. "It's nearly seven. The children have been up for half an hour; I'm surprised they didn't wake you sooner."

"I sleep sound when I've had a few," John said ruefully. A crash from upstairs, followed by an indignant squeal, had him shuddering and sipping his tea as fast as he could. He liked children, and had been accused of spoiling not only his own nieces and nephews but the children currently chasing each other around upstairs, but God, he liked them a whole lot better when he didn't have a hangover. "Is Michael up and about?"

"Aye, and he'll be leaving in --" Sheila glanced behind her at the clock on the mantel. "Five minutes, so if you're not wanting to walk to the pub to retrieve your car you'd best be ready to go with him." It had been a while since John had seen Sheila first thing in the morning, and he couldn't say he was pleased about the reminder. He much preferred Nick's quiet smiles and coaxing hands.

Knowing that Nick would still be fast asleep, John shook his head. "I'll walk. It'll do me good."

"I won't argue with that," Sheila said with a sniff. She perched on the edge of the sofa, her face softening a little. "You know I don't mind Michael going out every once in a while, and I'm glad you're not so caught up in Nick that you're neglecting your old friends, but I'll tell you straight, he can't afford to be down the pub with you every other night. If you want to go out, it should be with Nick. He's your man, isn't he?"

John took a last gulp of his tea and put the mug down on the coffee table, making sure it went on a coaster. "It's too damn early for this."

Sheila's lips firmed in a tight line. "Fine. I've said my piece. Now get off my sofa, will you? There's toast on the table --"

"I don't want any."

"Then take your shoes, and your coat, and your leave."

John nodded, regretting it as his head swam, and stood. "I'll do that."

He started to gather up the quilt and pillow he'd used, folding them as neatly as he could, regretting his sharp words, although he and Sheila had been friends for too many years for them to watch their tongues around each other.

"Oh, give them here," Sheila said, taking them out of his arms and giving him a forgiving nudge with her shoulder. "I'll need to wash them, anyway."

"You're a good lass." John gave her a rare kiss on the cheek as he headed for the hall.

"Go and sweet talk your Nick!" she called after him. "I'm spoken for."

\* \* \* \* \*

The wind was cold, cutting right through him despite his heavy jacket. He wished he'd thought to bundle up properly, with a scarf and the thick, soft hat Nick had given him at the beginning of the winter.

The walk gave him time to think, but it was time that he didn't use. Instead, John concentrated on the rhythm of walking, one foot in front of the other. The ground beneath him was rock-hard, making his shins ache with each jarring step. His ears were half frozen by the time he got to the pub, with the sun just starting to peer above the

horizon. Predictably, the car didn't start to warm him until he'd pulled into their drive. He crept into the house as quietly as he could, not wanting to wake Nick if he was still sleeping, deliberately blocking the door with his foot to keep it from slamming. It was a sharp contrast to his behavior the night before, and John felt more than a bit guilty as he latched the door and took off his shoes and jacket, rubbing his hands together to warm them as he started up the stairs, carefully avoiding the one that creaked.

The curtains were drawn in the bedroom, the room dark. Nick was lying on John's side of the bed, arm curled around John's pillow, face hidden. John paused in the doorway and Nick twitched, then made a small sound that was a protest, as if he were dreaming.

John started to get undressed, knowing he should shower to scour the stink of smoke and beer from his body and hair before getting in beside Nick. He didn't want to, though. Not with Nick there waiting for him in their bed. He dropped his clothes onto a chair, moving quietly, and was halfway to the door when Nick moaned again, this time sounding distressed.

Abandoning his plan to shower, John went over to the bed, staring down at Nick, whose head was moving restlessly against the pillow, chewing his lip in thought. If it was just a dream, there'd be no harm done in waking Nick, easing him out of the nightmare with soft, murmured words and kisses, holding him close, until Nick stopped shaking.

If it was more than that -- well, sometimes it was better to let Nick work through it himself, or so Nick said. John never had, though. He couldn't see Nick like this and not go to comfort him.

Kneeling by the bed, he passed his hand lightly over Nick's hair, slipping it down until it was cupping Nick's face. Nick felt warm, but not feverish, the rasp of stubble on his chin prickling John's palm. "Nick? It's me, lad. It's John."

Nick twitched again, pressing his face to the pillow and closing his eyes more tightly. He whimpered, and the sound went right to John's heart.

"Love? Nick, wake up."

A shudder went through Nick; his eyes opened, and he jerked upright, gasping.

John reached out to him, rubbing his hands over Nick's upper arms, letting Nick know that he was real. The bedroom was lightening slowly as the sun rose, but it was still dim enough for Nick's face to be indistinct, blurred by shadow. John could feel the tension in Nick's rigid body, a tension that melted into a convulsive shudder as Nick's open, unfocused eyes cleared.

"Move over," John told him, shivering himself in the cool air. "Let me get beside you."

Nick swallowed, blinked, and then nodded. "God, you're freezing," he said, sliding over and relinquishing the blissfully warm spot to John. Nick's arms went around John, holding him close, his face finding the crook of John's neck and hiding there. "You're home." Nick sounded relieved.

"Should have been here last night," John mumbled into Nick's hair. Hoping that Nick didn't mind being used as a hot water bottle, he pressed their bodies together from shoulders to toes, needing the feel of Nick's skin on his. Nick's shiver in response seemed to be down to John's cold hands on his back, rather than the dream, which was something. "Didn't think you'd want me driving, though, and if I'd tried walking I'd probably have been blown out to sea. Wild night." Without thinking, his hand stroked lower, over Nick's backside, the shape of it familiar now, but all the more arousing for that. "What had you dreaming? The wind howling around the house?"

Nick shook his head, his mouth warm against John's neck, but he'd gone tense again and John didn't think it was his touch that had caused it. "No," he said. "I'm glad you didn't drive. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you." He was already relaxing, moving his hands over John's skin, wrapping himself around John. "But I missed you. I'm glad you're home now."

"So am I." John blew out a puff of air to dislodge a strand of Nick's hair that was tickling his cheek, following it with a kiss that landed in about the same place as his goodbye kiss had the night before. Nick didn't feel distant and closed-off now, though. "Sheila's kids are hell to wake up to, did you know that?"

"Not from personal experience." John could feel the smile in Nick's voice as Nick's lips brushed against his ear. "It doesn't surprise me, though. They're supposed to need more sleep than adults, but I've always thought that sounded suspicious."

Nick's hand ran down the outside of John's thigh, then up the front of it teasingly.

"What about me? I hope I'm not hell to wake up to." Nick slid down beneath the covers, breath hot against John's skin. His mouth closed around John, who gasped at the wet heat, cock beginning to harden at once.

"I'd say more like heaven, but you don't have a saint's mouth." John bit down on his lip. "God, Nick --"

He rolled to his back, his hand on Nick's shoulder, keeping them together, spreading his legs and murmuring appreciatively as Nick settled between them. The thought crossed his mind that Nick hadn't told him what he'd been dreaming about, but it was impossible to concentrate on anything but what Nick was doing to him.

If he'd been able to concentrate, he might have thought about the way Nick seemed more like a talented professional in bed than a lover, these days. But Nick's lips and tongue and hands were too distracting, taking away conscious thought and leaving John groaning and aching, fingers tight in Nick's hair. He kept at it until John was shuddering, then found the lube and slicked his cock, pressing it to John's opening.

With Nick above him, eyes dark, it was easy to pretend that nothing was wrong. "This is how much I missed you," Nick murmured, pushing just the tip of his erection inside John, making him gasp. "Did you think about me last night?"

"Aye," John whispered, trying to get more from Nick; more of his cock, maddeningly there, but not enough, more of his attention, just more -- "Wanted you with me. Always do." His hands caught at Nick's hips, tugging him forward, getting a welcome inch or two more of Nick's cock buried in him. Nick smiled, rocking his hips within John's slackening grip, pushing deeper.

It felt good, always did, but John felt frustration build within him, even as Nick began to fuck him in smooth, perfectly angled thrusts, his eyes on John's face, watching him too carefully. Nick hadn't kissed him, or let John touch him, not really. Nick was just giving John what he thought John wanted; buying some uninterrupted hours for writing with his body.

"Now you've got me." Nick shifted his weight and thrust deeper. "God, you feel good. So good, and --" Nick gasped, shutting his eyes and pausing for a second. When he opened his eyes again, his expression was one of shocked pleasure, more genuine than John had seen in weeks.

John stared up at him, troubled by the realization that their relationship had narrowed until this, just this, was the only way they had of connecting. He ran his hands over Nick's skin in rough, pleading caresses that asked for something he wasn't sure he could put into words, not even with Nick.

Especially not with Nick.

His body, less concerned with emotion than sensation, was responding eagerly enough to Nick's enthusiasm, his cock jerking, hard and slick against his belly, barely needing the hand Nick wrapped deftly around it to bring him to a climax.

It was good, aye. It just wasn't good enough.

But hot release rushed over him all the same, fluid wetting Nick's hand as John groaned and closed his eyes, helpless to achieve what he'd been hoping for even as pleasure shook his body. Nick came a few thrusts later, almost silently, and fell down on top of John, who welcomed the contact. "I love you," Nick whispered against John's collarbone, and his voice didn't sound quite right.

"Nick..." John sighed, holding Nick to him. "Love..." He broke off, but he'd said enough to get a kiss, the first he'd had that morning. Nick's lips moved on his, swift and briefly, and then he pulled out and away, leaving John feeling bereft rather than satisfied.

"You should go back to sleep," Nick said. "You're exhausted."

John rolled onto his side, propping his head on one hand and watching as Nick sat up. "I was hoping to persuade you to stay with me."

The look Nick gave him was regretful; it was clear from the dark circles under his eyes that he was the one who'd been sleeping neither well nor enough. "I'm sorry. I've just really got to get to work. This weekend we'll spend half a day in bed if you want to, I promise."

"I want to spend half, hell, all of *today* in bed with you." John eyed Nick coolly. "But I can see fine that it's not going to happen."

He waited for Nick to give him something -- an apology, another promise, no matter how empty -- but all he got was a distracted smile, and then Nick was leaving.

A few fitful hours dozing in bed didn't improve John's mood. By the time he'd showered and gone downstairs, Nick was already lost in his work. He barely glanced up when John came into the kitchen.

John got himself breakfast in silence, pushing some ham between two slices of bread and washing it down with a cup of tea. The clouds outside had lifted, blown away by the tag end of the storm, and a pale, washed-out blue sky held out the promise of a few hours of sunshine at least.

"We could take the boat out," John said suddenly. "Not for long, no, but maybe an hour or two. Might be the last chance we get; I should bring her in for the winter at the weekend."

He waited for Nick to react to the “we” but got no more than a grunt. Nick was scribbling something on a piece of paper, his gaze flicking between two books open on the table and the computer screen.

“You could take a break. Come with me,” John went on, pushing his words into the silence, hearing the acceptance of defeat in them, because he knew what Nick would say. “You’re not sleeping well, and it’s probably down to spending every hour God sends sitting at that fucking table.” His voice rose and cracked on the last words and he stepped forward and gave the table leg a kick with a booted foot, sending a book sliding down to crash on the floor, pages splayed.

Nick jumped and looked up at him, startled. There was a hint of fear in his eyes, and John felt like kicking himself for having put it there, but then Nick’s eyes hardened. “What the hell is your problem?”

“My problem?” John rubbed at his eyes, feeling weary from more than a lack of sleep. “God, Nick, if you have to ask -- it’s you. It’s that fucking book. It’s being pushed away until I canna *get* to you anymore.”

“You were the one who pushed me into starting it in the first place!” Nick protested, which was true enough. He got up, pausing to carefully bookmark the pages in the opened books on the tabletop first, and that only made John’s temper flare hotter. “And now that I have something -- something that I can work on, something to keep me from going fucking *crazy*, something I’m *good* at -- you want me to stop?” He shook his head. “Forget it.”

“I want you to be reasonable about it.” John tried to keep his voice level. “Not come to bed at two in the morning. Not eat with your head in a book. Not miss my niece’s bloody birthday party because you’ve made a fucking breakthrough.”

“You have no idea what it’s like!” Nick was frowning, full of righteous anger but not shouting, not yet. “I *need* this. There’s -- you don’t know what it’s like, being me. Being...this. Sometimes I just...I need to be something else, someone else, and I can’t...” He offered John a strained smile, obviously trying. “I’m gonna go for a walk or something. Clear my head. I don’t want to fight, okay? I can’t. There’s too much...”

“I *know* there’s too much!” John didn’t step aside, not happy to let it drop. Not now. Not now he’d got Nick talking to him. “This isn’t the first morning you’ve woken up like that, as if you’re fighting something in your dreams. As far as I know -- and I’m thinking you’d tell me about that, even if you can hardly bear to spare me a word -- you haven’t seen a spirit for months now, so it can’t be that troubling you.” He bent to pick up the fallen book, smoothing the crumpled pages flat in an unspoken apology. “It’s just that damn book.”

“It’s not the book!” Nick shouted, apparently having lost what little control he’d had left. “Christ, it doesn’t have anything to *do* with the book!”

“Then what is it?” John yelled back, tossing the book on the table. Raising his voice after what felt like weeks of being quiet in case he disturbed Nick, was a huge relief. “Because you’re damned well not the same as you were this time last year, I know that much!”

Nick went quiet then, wrapping his arms around himself. “I know. You’re right. But I can’t -- I just can’t.”

“Can’t what? Christ, Nick; I want to help if I can. But give me something to do that isn’t just keeping my distance from you, because that’s the one thing I have trouble with.” He took a single step toward Nick and then stopped. “And it’s all you want from me, seemingly,” he said flatly, reading no welcome in Nick’s face.

Nick brought a hand up and covered his face, taking a shaky breath. “It’s not that. I just...I need some space, I guess.” He looked at John, clearly upset.

After staring at him for a long moment, John nodded and turned away. “Then I’ll give you what you want.”

He grabbed his coat from where he’d left it just a few hours earlier, and left the house. He didn’t bother to look through the kitchen window to see what Nick was doing.

He’d be sitting at the table, writing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nick managed to keep it together until John left, but it wasn’t easy. It had been getting harder and harder, actually, and from John’s outburst it was obvious that he wasn’t being fooled.

When the car had gone, Nick sat down at the table, shaking. More than anything he wanted John to come back, to put his arms around him and hold him, but he couldn’t have that, so he needed to focus. Focus on what he’d been doing whenever John wasn’t in the house.

The laptop was sleeping, but at least today he had an Internet connection, even if it was so slow that sometimes he wanted to scream. It was one of the first things to go when the weather was bad, and the lack of it had put him in a shitty mood on more than one occasion. And of course there was no one to take his moods out on but John, who didn’t deserve it, so Nick had been doing what he could to keep his distance. Obviously, it hadn’t been enough.

Or maybe it had been too much.

Steeling himself, Nick opened a browser window and started searching the news.

## Chapter Two

John pushed open the pub door and headed for the bar. A pint, yes, because he couldn't stand there swilling Coke like a wee kid, but he wanted something to eat more than anything. Something hot that he hadn't had to cook himself. The sandwich he'd eaten just wasn't enough if he was going to go out on the sea.

It was early and the bar surface gleamed, still wet from the cursory mopping Geordie, the landlord, had given it. He glanced up as John approached, his eyebrows lifting in surprise.

"What, you again? Shall I set you a bed up in the corner, then?"

"No," John said shortly. "I just want something to eat."

"Well, Mary's cooking up some lovely steak and kidney pies, but they won't be ready for another twenty minutes."

John picked up a menu from the bar and stabbed his finger at it. "It says here that hot food is served daily from noon. It's --"

"Eleven fifty-eight by my watch. So you'll have to stay hungry for another two minutes. Unless you want to share my packet of crisps?" A hand came from the left to rest on John's shoulder for a moment, an opened bag of crisps landing on the bar, its contents spilling out onto the wood.

Geordie smiled sourly and placed a pint in front of John. "He'd probably sooner have this."

John ignored him, turning to stare at the man beside him and then frowning as he tried to put a name to the smiling face. "Andy --?"

"Thornton. Aye, it's me."

"Well, I can see that." John couldn't stop the answering smile from spreading across his face. "What the hell are you doing back here? Thought you were like the midges, and only came to annoy us in the summer."

"Are you always this welcoming to people who're willing to share their food?" Andy grinned and sat down on the stool next to where John was standing. "Here, have some crisps and tell me what you've been up to in the past year and a half."

Geordie accepted the coins John shoved across at him, and rolled his eyes. "You're looking at a changed man."

"No, he's looking at a hungry one," John said, scowling. "Will you put my order in, or should I yell and hope Mary hears me?"

"I'll tell her to hurry," Geordie said. "That way I'll see the back of you sooner."

Honors even, he moved away, leaving John and Andy in peace.

"I don't remember you having such a short temper," Andy said, but it didn't sound like a reproach. "Here, I've a table over near the window -- come sit and keep me company. Unless you've a mind to bite my head off for the slightest thing?"

Andy looked the same as he had the last time John had seen him, for all that more than two years had passed. The lad was a good six or seven years John's junior, but he'd always had a world-wise air about him, and that hadn't changed any more than his physical appearance had. As they sat down at the table, Andy picked up his own pint, half empty, and raised the glass to John before taking a sip.

"I'll try not to bite any of you," John said, half regretting his choice of words when Andy's eyes lit up with speculative amusement. Andy had made it fairly clear on his earlier visit that he'd have been happy to do more than flirt with John, but back then John had been resolute about keeping the fact that he was gay a secret. Andy on the mainland would've been more than tempting; on the island he'd been off limits.

It'd taken Nick to change that, but John really didn't want to think about Nick right then. Smiling into Andy's brown eyes, a shade darker than his thick, straight hair, he returned the toast. "Here's to good weather for your visit. What do you have planned?"

"Oh, you know." Andy shrugged as if he really didn't know. "I mostly just wanted to get away for a week. Life's been pretty hectic." He leaned back in his chair, watching John with interest. They were about the same height -- John had remembered that from before -- but Andy was more solid, muscled, and the T-shirt he was wearing underneath his open leather jacket was pulled tight across his chest to emphasize the fact. "I was actually

hoping I could get someone to take me out fishing, but I haven't had a chance to ask around and see who's doing that these days. But what about you?" Andy looked at him shrewdly. "What have you been up to? If you don't tell me -- even just a story, because it's not as if I'll know the difference, will I? -- I might get suspicious. Think that you're hiding something."

Andy had always been disarmingly frank, John reflected, making up his mind how much to tell him. "You could say that the story is that I'm not hiding anything these days." Andy made an encouraging noise and John settled back in his chair. "A year last May, I met someone and we...well, I'm living with him now, here on the island, in what used to be his uncle's house. His name's Nick; he's an American." *And he sees ghosts, had me falling in love with him in under a week, and I'm losing him*, John finished silently, feeling a sting of regret as he remembered how it had been for him and Nick. "So...no more hiding."

"But something's not right." Andy finished his pint and wiped his upper lip. John lifted an eyebrow at him in a question. "You're not talking like someone who's happy where he is. Go on, then. Tell me I'm wrong." He said it as if he knew he were right, but not as if he got any pleasure from being so. He shifted forward in his chair, leaning against the table, watching John's face.

"Things change." John took a sip of his beer, not really wanting it. "People change. It's nothing we can't sort out. He's just working a wee bit much these days, that's all." Even he found that unconvincing, but he didn't know Andy well enough to spill his heart to. It'd been hard enough with Michael.

Andy just nodded. "I'm still sorry. Things aren't always easy, are they? It's a shame." He looked regretfully into his empty glass. "Good to have everything out in the open, though. It must be an easier life in some ways."

"I wouldn't have agreed with you at the time," John said dryly. "And it's not all that much better now. My mother damn near disowned me, the minister still crosses the street when he sees me coming, and if you find yourself in the gents after I've bought you a refill, well, there's usually something written on the walls about me. Geordie cleans it off, but he might as well save himself the bother." He shrugged. "But, aye. It was worth it." He'd never doubted that. Worth it to be able to live with Nick, openly. Worth it to wake beside him in the night, with the breeze carrying the salt-scent of the sea through the window to where they lay. Worth it to walk through the town with Nick's arm slung casually around his shoulders.

No regrets that he'd shattered the image of himself that the island had accepted for thirty years in a single, crowded week. None.

"And this Nick, he's working now?" Andy asked. John nodded, and he went on, "I'll offer you a proposition then. I'd very much like to buy you lunch -- no, don't answer until you've heard me out -- as a way of thanking you for taking me out fishing. For old times' sake." Not that there were any old times to relive, as John and Andy barely knew each other and this afternoon's conversation far eclipsed all the conversations they'd had in the past when totaled together. "Please," Andy added. "I'm feeling a need to get out on the water, and I'd much rather go with you than a stranger. I'll behave myself, I promise. No falling overboard and I'll take the fish off my own hooks."

"There won't be much out there," John warned him. "I was planning to go out myself, just for a while, but I can't promise you'll catch anything." Andy shrugged, clearly not too disturbed by the idea, and John tapped his finger against the side of his glass, thinking aloud. "We could go over to Creeth; that wee island off to the west? There's a bay there where my dad once caught a salmon that damn near broke his rod, as well as his line. That storm might have brought the fish into the shallower water; we could try it, anyway."

"I'm not much of a fisherman in any case." Andy looked toward the bar, where Geordie was pulling pints for a few of the locals that had just come in; Geordie caught his eye and nodded. "Steak and kidney pie, then? Sounds like just what we need in this weather."

"Aye, it does," John agreed, and sat back as Andy got up and went to the bar, ordering and paying for their lunches.

He came back soon, tucking his change into his pocket and bringing another pint with him. "I'm happy to buy you another, but it doesn't look as if you're certain you even want that one," Andy said, nodding at John's mostly full glass. "It's not mad, wanting to go out fishing at this time of year?"

"I had more than I should last night," John told him. "And if we're going out, I'd rather be sober. It's turned out nice, but the sea's not all that forgiving to someone not paying attention. And the water's a bit cold to be swimming in."

"I'll do whatever you tell me to," Andy promised. His expression was bland enough that it was difficult to tell if he was being suggestive; John chose to believe that the comment had been innocent enough. Andy frowned. "You've not been put off it? Since your Da died?"

John shook his head. "The sea's too much part of my life for me to turn my back on it. My father had friends, aye, and a cousin, who drowned, and it never stopped him." He didn't tell Andy, but out on the boat was where he thought about his father the most; remembering past fishing trips they'd taken, with nostalgia rather than grief the uppermost emotion.

And that was something else he had to thank Nick for. He'd had the chance to say goodbye to his father properly; take one last look at him as he'd been in life.

Their food arrived, steaming gently and smelling wonderful. John dug in, enjoying Andy's talk, lighthearted and centered mostly around Andy's work as an engineer. He took jobs in far off places John had only vaguely heard of, working flat out for weeks at a time, before scooping up a hefty paycheck and then taking a long break.

His last job had been to help build a suspension bridge in the Austrian Alps, working to finish before the onset of winter, and his bonus from an early completion had allowed him to take a few months off work.

"Been just mooching around," Andy said, mopping up the last of his gravy with a piece of bread. "London, Amsterdam, hell, I even ended up at Euro Disney, though don't ask me how, because I think I was drunk when I got on the plane. Then I got tired of the bright lights and decided I wanted somewhere peaceful to wrap up my leave. I'm flying out to Kuwait a week on Tuesday."

"Well, if it's peace you wanted, you'll find it out on the water." John finished his drink and nodded at the door. "Want to go?"

"Do you need to let Niall know where you are?"

"Nick," John said shortly. There was something just a little knowing in Andy's eyes. "And, no. I told him I was taking the boat out."

"But you didn't know you'd have company." Andy grinned at him and winked. "Guess we both got lucky."

"Don't count on catching anything." John stared at Andy until he was sure the man had got the message. "Right. Let's be off."

\* \* \* \* \*

Nick didn't realize that it had grown dark outside until his head started to ache from the strain of reading in poor light. Sighing, he saved his file and closed the laptop, rubbing his eyes.

He'd spent the day doing research of various kinds and trying to sleep, something that he'd been avoiding because he was never sure when John would be home and another thing he'd been trying to avoid was too many questions that he didn't have the answers to. Progress on his book was slow mostly because so much of his time was spent on other things, although he hadn't been lying to John when he'd told him that writing was surprisingly fulfilling. For the past few weeks it had been the only thing keeping him going, really. The only thing that he had any control over, the only thing he was any good at.

God, everything was so fucked up.

Glancing at the clock, Nick was surprised to find that it was after seven. John was almost always home before six, and on the rare occasion he wasn't, he always called. He knew how Nick worried. His heart was already beating double-time; their earlier argument had been terrible, but it had never even occurred to him that John wouldn't come home. No matter how bad things were, Nick couldn't believe that John would do that to him.

Something must be wrong.

A few phone calls didn't supply any answers; no one had seen John since that afternoon.

With a growing knot in his stomach, Nick put on his coat and scarf and went out to the car. Jesus, it was bitterly cold, and the wind was picking up again. It buffeted the car, making it hard to steer as he drove toward the stretch of beach where John kept the boat. Please, let the boat be there, he thought, tightening his hands on the wheel. *Let it be there.*

\* \* \* \* \*

John stared out at the line of breakwater frothing and foaming up over the rocks. "We're not going to get out until the tide turns," he called back to Andy, huddled in the shelter of the rocks. "And then it'll be pitch-black, so we won't get out then, either. We're here for the night."

"It's pitch-black now." Andy picked his way across the seaweed-covered rocks and stood, shivering, next to John. "I'm sorry. If I hadn't insisted on exploring that cave, we'd have seen the storm rising in time to get the hell off here."

"Tourists always want to see the cave," John said unthinkingly.

"Is that what I am?" Andy thumped his arm. "I'm as Scottish as you, man!"

"You're not an islander."

"Is your Nick?"

John hunched his shoulder, feeling a sudden surge of irritation, both with Andy, who was being persistent, and the absent Nick, who was the main cause of John's current depression. "His mother was, and he is now. It's good enough." He bent down and grabbed the sodden rope at his feet. "Here, help me haul the boat up higher, or we'll not be leaving at all."

They got the boat pulled further up the beach, far enough that John thought it safe from the tides.

"I sh-should have worn something warmer," Andy said, teeth chattering as he rubbed his arms. The leather jacket he had on was far too thin -- probably had been even for fishing when the winter sun had been making its best attempt to warm them, but John hadn't noticed it then, and if he had he'd not have thought anything of it. Andy was a grown man, after all. He could take care of himself. Other than now, when he was shivering hard enough to hurt himself.

"We'll get as much driftwood as we can carry and settle in for the night in that hut at the top of the hill. Soon have a fire going." John headed for a branch half-buried in the sand, a darker shape in the gathering shadows.

Between them, they got a decent stack of firewood inside the hut, which was barely deserving of the name. It was no more than a shelter, built long before John was born, getting more dilapidated with every passing year. John had played in it as a child, and used it as somewhere to drink with Michael when they were teenagers. A clutter of broken glass in one corner told him that they hadn't been the last people to use it like that.

A steel barrel served as a fireplace, choked with ash and paper. John cleared it out, getting his hands filthy, and started a fire, muttering under his breath until the flames caught and held. The warmth of the reddish firelight was comforting enough, even if it illuminated bare walls, two rickety chairs, and a damp mattress John wouldn't have stood on, given a choice.

"I'm going to get the tarp from the boat," he said. "Then we'll cut some heather and give ourselves something soft to lie on."

It wouldn't be soft. Springy, maybe, aye, but prickly as hell. Still; better than the floor, which was nothing but dried mud as far as John could tell.

Andy was still shivering. John sighed, walking over to him and giving him a brisk rubdown, scrubbing his hands over Andy's arms. "You stay and mind the fire. Get yourself warm."

"Okay." The look Andy gave him was something like gratitude. "Thanks."

It wasn't the first time John had been thankful for the fact that he kept the boat well-stocked with supplies. There were two folding knives as well as the tarp, not to mention bottled water. Pity there wasn't any food, but they'd had a big feed at lunchtime and they certainly wouldn't starve overnight.

When he got back to the hut, Andy had piled more wood on the fire, which was burning briskly. It took them a good half hour to cut heather and create a makeshift bed on top of the mildewed mattress, tarp thrown over the rough branches.

"I'm sorry about this, John." Andy rubbed his arms again. He sounded genuinely apologetic.

"Not your fault. I should've smelled the rain coming in and not let us go so far from the boat." He pursed his lips in thought. "Maybe we could've made it, but I didn't like the look of the sea at all, and with the tide on the turn, we'd have had a job getting past those rocks in the bay."

"God, it wouldn't have been worth the risk!" Andy held his hands out to the fire, his skin scratched in half a dozen places from the heather. "We're in for a cold, hungry night, but at least we're dry."

On cue, the rain began, pattering with a soft determination against the tin roof of the shack. They exchanged glances and John chuckled. "Now, that's your fault." He gestured upward. "Watch that corner and make sure there's not a leak right over our bed."

Andy gave him a sidelong glance. "Sounds...friendly," he commented.

"Does it?" John kept his voice uncommunicative. He threw a small piece of wood into the barrel for something to do and then frowned, tensing suddenly. "I hope -- God, I never thought! They'll be sending people out to look for us -- shit, that's all I want --" He thought of Michael setting off in the dark to find him, with the sea fair boiling and the wind set to scour anything moving off the surface. "We've got to maybe signal to them -- no, they might think we were asking for help...fuck."

"Or we could phone them?" Andy suggested, taking out a tiny rectangular cell phone and flipping it open.

John gaped at him. "You had that and never thought to mention it until now, when we might well not be able to use it? God help us, when I called you a tourist, I was insulting the whole pack of them!"

"Calm down and phone your boyfriend," Andy said, as if John's temper didn't bother him in the slightest. "I've had fine reception on the island since I've been here -- granted, I suppose it's another island entirely from this one, but I don't think you'll have any trouble with it." He pressed the phone into John's hand and went over to check the roof over the tarp, keeping his back turned in what was possibly an attempt to give John a bit of privacy.

The phone was easy enough to sort out, but their phone at home rang five times before Nick, sounding breathless, picked it up. "Hello?"

"Nick? Can you hear me?" John forced himself to sound casual, both for Nick's sake and to show Andy, well, he wasn't sure what. That he and Nick were at ease with each other, maybe. "I'm fine, but I won't be home tonight."

"Where the hell are you?" Nick blurted out, and yes, he sounded worried, more than worried, genuinely terrified. "I just got back from finding out that the boat was gone. I was going to call Michael and tell him that you didn't come home and that you were probably...probably..." His voice broke.

"Nick --" John hesitated, the reassuring, loving words he wanted to say drying up in his mouth. "I told you; I'm okay. I took an old friend out fishing, the storm came up, and we got caught out on Creeth, that's all. We're going to spend the night in the hut; you remember the one? I'll be back tomorrow."

There was a long silence, but just as John started to think they'd lost their connection, Nick spoke. "Okay. You're okay." It sounded like he was reassuring himself. "Be careful, all right? God, I thought -- but you're okay."

"Aye, we are," John said gently. "Andy's teeth are chattering and we'll both be hungry come morning, but no worse than that."

"Okay, but if you aren't back by lunchtime I'm calling Michael and sending him after you," Nick said. "Both of you. And you won't..." Whatever it was Nick had been about to say, he stopped himself. "Be careful. I'll see you tomorrow."

And before John could say anything else -- not that he knew what he would have said -- Nick hung up.

John closed the phone and walked over to Andy, passing it back to him with a murmured word of thanks. The brief conversation with Nick had done more to underline how cut off from each other they were these days than their earlier argument. So brief and so distant...With Andy there, he wouldn't have told Nick he loved him, or anything like that, but six months ago he wouldn't have needed to. Nick would have known, and it would've come through loud and strong.

Rousing himself from increasingly gloomy thoughts, he went back to sit on his chair, close to the fire, Andy joining him, hitching his chair closer to the heat and to John.

"You're warm enough now?" John asked. He fumbled in his pocket and drew out a half-empty packet of mints, damp, but just about edible. "Well, now. Supper. Want one?"

"Thanks." Andy took the candy and slipped it into his mouth. "I really am sorry." He glanced at John, the firelight creating shadows on his face. "But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't glad of the chance to spend more time with you."

"Why?" John asked bluntly. "I doubt you've been pining after me for the past few years for all you made it plain you were interested last time you visited. And now I'm with someone."

"I wouldn't say pining, no," Andy agreed. "But...well, I *like* you. Is that so rare a thing to find in a person that you go all prickly and suspicious? Or is it just me that you don't like the look of?"

John gave him a considering look and grinned when Andy turned his head to show off his profile, smiling himself. "Well, your nose is a wee bit crooked."

"Broke it playing football."

"But I'd have to say I like the look of you -- I like you -- just fine, and well you know it." John cleared his throat. "If we'd met each other somewhere else; not on the island, I'd have said yes to anything you had in mind. It was just...well, you know how it was for me."

"Aye." Andy nodded thoughtfully and crunched the mint, which he must have had tucked into his cheek, between his teeth. "I didn't care for it, and not just because it stood in the way of anything happening for us. Oh, that's not to say I didn't understand --" He waved John's cut-off protest away with a hand. "But I'd have wanted more for you than that. Hiding. Not connecting with other people. It's like losing a bit of yourself. We're not meant to be alone like that."

"No..." John pushed aside the unwelcome thought that he wasn't much better off now, with Nick all but

ignoring him. "Do you -- you've not got anyone, then?"

Andy shook his head, slouching down in his chair. "I did have, for a while. Things were good for a year and a half or so, but after that..." A strained smile. "I suppose I wanted more than he did. Or maybe I just wanted it for longer."

For a long while, they were both quiet. The fire crackled and popped over the sound of the sea, a hush of waves against the shore. A peaceful, friendly, contented silence. It'd been a while since John had thought of silence as a comfort. It meant swallowed words, a wall between him and Nick, not this relaxed easiness.

"We should get some rest," he said finally. "The tide turns at five in the morning and we need to be down there on the beach before that. If it's calm enough we might try to launch the boat. Still be dark, mind you, but we'll try."

"Okay." Getting up, Andy went over to their makeshift bed and sat gingerly, then stood again and began to adjust some of the heather underneath the tarp. "Might as well be as comfortable as possible, although I'm thinking it's going to be a long night."

John stoked the fire, glancing out at the dark. The sound of the rain on the tin roof was steady, almost soothing, and by the time he joined Andy in lying down, jacket pulled around him tightly, he felt as if he might actually be able to sleep.

This close to Andy he could tell that the man was still shivering, not as much, just small, reflexive tremors as his chilled body exhausted itself trying to keep warm. They needed something hot to eat or drink, and they weren't going to get it for hours. John, inured to long hours out at sea, hands and feet numb, was suffering less, but it didn't mean he wasn't sympathetic, or concerned. Bone-deep cold was an insidious threat.

With an inward smile at the irony of it being just as awkward as it would've been if Andy was straight -- more so, in fact -- John shifted nearer to him. "Come here. Warm yourself up a bit." Tugging down the zipper of his coat, he spread it open so that Andy could huddle closer if he wanted.

Andy hesitated, which made John smile encouragingly, then moved closer. "I was going to say that this couldn't be better if I'd planned it, but the truth is I'd have preferred to be warm." Andy's breath was, at least, smelling of mint. "Christ, it's cold. How is it you're not freezing?"

"Warm-blooded," John said with a shrug, shying away a little from the implication of Andy's words. Planned? Had he? He decided that right now it didn't matter. The man needed to warm up or he wouldn't sleep. John grabbed the edge of his coat and wrapped what he could of it around Andy, giving him soft, dry cotton to snuggle against instead of a stiff, cold tarp. "Either that or it's my thermal vest."

Andy pressed still closer; John could feel the shivers running through him and rubbed his hand over Andy's back. Not too effective through the leather, but better than nothing. Andy managed to slide his hands underneath John's jacket and around to his back, hugging him and gradually the shivering stopped. "You must wish you were home with him," Andy murmured, the words barely audible over the sound of the rain.

"I wish we were both back where we belong."

John thought about Nick. Would he be staring out of the window, wondering if they were safe? Or getting on with chapter whatever it was, enjoying his solitude? Most likely the writing. Unless the power had gone out. John felt a bitter satisfaction at the image of Nick being thwarted by nature, and then sighed. He'd just carry on reading and making notes by candlelight, wouldn't he.

"If he's not making you happy..." Andy didn't finish that sentence for a few very long seconds, leaving space in which John had no choice but to think about the reality of it. "I know you think we don't know each other well, but I could see from the moment I saw you this afternoon that you weren't happy. It's not right, John. You deserve better." He sighed. "I'd give you better, if it were me."

"I love him," John said, the words coming easily in the shadows, spoken into the soft, damp fall of Andy's hair. "If he still loves me, I don't know, but I canna change the way I feel about him."

He meant it. All of it. Didn't mean he wasn't reacting to Andy in his arms, willing and wanting, all his attention so flatteringly focused on John. This was what John was used to; a quick, generally friendly fuck with a near-stranger who would move on without looking back and expect John to do the same. That was the way it had been all of John's adult life. Less than two years with Nick; not long enough to break some habits.

John knew he could have Andy if he wanted. A press forward with his hips to send an unmistakable message, even bundled up as they were; the tilt of his head that would bring Andy's mouth under his, cold lips, chapped by wind and sea, softening as he licked and bit at them...oh, it'd be easy. And after that, well, John knew just what sound Andy would make when John's hand reached down, roughly shoving past whatever Andy had on under his jeans to get to what he wanted. He could almost hear the choked-off gasp and moan, feel the smooth skin of Andy's

cock stretch and fill as he hardened.

All there waiting if he just turned his head...

"I just want to be close to you," Andy whispered, breath hot against John's ear. "Just for tonight. I'll not ask for anything more than that, not if you can't give it, but please, would you --"

With a feeling of savage gladness, John turned his head and kissed Andy fiercely, grateful that there was a way to shut the man up. Andy's fingers clutched at the back of John's vest, and his mouth opened eagerly against John's with a harsh moan.

So long since he'd kissed anyone but Nick, and his mouth felt clumsy, lacking the knowledge gained by so many shared kisses, but Andy didn't seem to notice or care. His tongue slid inside John's mouth, tasting him, discovering him, and John let him do it and did it back.

There was a moment when he thought that was all he was going to do; kiss Andy and stop, prove to himself that he loved Nick and he wasn't going to betray him. But it'd been too late from the moment he sat down at the table in the pub, smiling across into knowing, expectant brown eyes.

His breath ragged and loud, nothing of the gentleness he'd found with Nick wanted or needed, he fumbled with the button to Andy's jeans, flicking it open and tugging at the zip with an impatience that must have passed for eagerness because he could see Andy smile as he rolled away a little to make it easy for John.

Neither of them was shivering as John slid his hand inside Andy's jeans and gripped his hard erection. "John," Andy muttered, kissing him again, then again. "God, I've thought about this for so long. What your hand would feel like on me."

Andy dragged his own hand over John's hip and forward, kneading at John's cock through the denim of his jeans. John wasn't more than half-hard, but he ignored the part of him that wanted to recoil from the touch of someone who wasn't Nick and kissed Andy almost defiantly, silencing the insistent voice that urged him to stop with the feel of Andy's teeth against his tongue, with the rough slide of Andy's cock through his fist.

Then Andy's hand began to undo John's jeans, and at the first brush of knuckles against his belly, John was scrambling back abruptly enough to dump himself off their makeshift bed and onto the damp dirt floor. Which was just about where he deserved to be. He turned his head, spat out a mouthful of sour spit, glad he wasn't heaving his guts out with the way he felt, and fastened his jeans with hands that were surprisingly steady. "I can't. I'm sorry. I just can't."

It was a huge relief to say it and know that it was true. He couldn't. Not with Andy, not with anyone who wasn't Nick. Whether Nick would forgive him for this, he didn't know. Maybe Nick didn't care enough to really mind what he did, or with whom, although part of John knew that wasn't likely, no matter how far apart they'd drifted. Either way, it didn't make a difference. He just couldn't.

Andy sighed and rested his hand on his own belly where a strip of it was bare above his unfastened jeans. "Christ. You really do love him."

John nodded, not able to trust his voice right then. He stood up and walked over to the chair, sitting down heavily with his back to Andy. If it hadn't been pouring with rain, he'd have put even more distance between them, but common sense told him that there wasn't much point in a grand gesture like that. It wasn't as if it was Andy's fault, anyway; no need to make him feel guilty about driving John out into the storm.

"Get to sleep," he said, hearing the rasp of tiredness in his voice. God, he needed to do that himself, but he couldn't lie down beside Andy again.

"Don't be an idiot," Andy said. The crinkle of the tarp and the change in Andy's voice told John he'd rolled onto his side. "I'll promise not to touch you if that's what it takes, but come over here and lie down. You won't be able to sleep there, and you need it just as much as I do."

"I'm not thinking about that," John said. "I'm just..." He sighed. Nick always teased him about taking himself too seriously at times, and he supposed this was one of them. The chair creaked as he shifted position on it, jolting him out of his desolation. "Oh, the hell with it."

He stood, took off his coat, and went back to the bed, pulling the tarp back and dropping his coat unceremoniously over Andy, who grunted in surprise and then curled into its warmth. Settling himself with his back to Andy, he drew the tarp up over them both and muttered, "Good night," out of habit.

"Good night," Andy said quietly. He drew another breath as if about to add something, but then exhaled again and remained silent.

For a long time, they both lay there without moving or speaking, the sound of the rain lulling John into a doze despite the fact that he was guilty and cold and missing Nick and his own bed something fierce.

Gradually, though, he was disturbed from his light sleep by the awareness of rhythm, of Andy's breath coming in shorter, sharper gasps. He realized at once that the other man, obviously thinking him asleep, was taking care of finishing what John had started, as quietly as possible.

Except he wasn't that quiet, and for all John's sympathy -- he knew what it was like to be left wanting like that -- he really didn't care to spend the next few minutes listening to Andy jerk off. He was just about to give a sleepy murmur and roll over, hopefully enough to stop Andy without the other man knowing John had heard him, when Andy shuddered and came, his body tensing and his breath hissing out in a soft grunt. A moment later, Andy relaxed, and a minute after that he was asleep.

John settled down again, feeling the heather flatten beneath him, and did his best to follow suit.

## Chapter Three

By morning it was clear that the storm had blown over. The rain-washed sky, still dark, showed a moon and a distant sparkle of stars.

"We'll try it." John turned to Andy who looked like hell, pale and sunken-eyed, huddled into his jacket. "Come on, lad. An hour and you'll be in a hot bath with your belly full of food."

"I doubt the hotel will take kindly to me knocking on the door this early."

John hesitated. Inviting him back to the house would be the friendly thing to do, but he wasn't going to do it. "There'll be someone up and about." He thought about going to Michael's and rejected that idea. Sheila would kill him, so she would. "I could take you to my sister's --"

Andy shook his head. "No -- don't go to any trouble, just drop me at the hotel. I'll chance being shouted at if it means a proper sleep, and under the circumstances they might be willing to overlook my lack of manners."

It seemed unkind to point out that Andy was contradicting himself, so John just concentrated on getting them into the boat and across the sea. The wind was bitterly cold, but the sun was rising bright at the edge of the horizon by the time they reached shore, and the first rays of it were just starting to warm the air when John stopped the car in front of the hotel. The inside of the car had reached something close to a comfortable temperature by then.

Getting out, Andy shrugged out of John's jacket and set it on the passenger seat. "I'm sorry about -- well, I didn't mean to stir up trouble for you. I hope things work out."

"Wasn't your fault." That didn't sound all that reassuring but it was the best John could do. His thoughts were with the upcoming confrontation with Nick and he had little attention to spare for Andy. He reached across the seat and held out his hand to shake Andy's. "I'm hoping all goes well for you, too." He put the car in gear and stared ahead, at the road leading to home. "Goodbye, Andy."

Andy nodded, raised his hand in farewell, and when John thought to glance in the mirror to look back, he'd already gone from sight.

Nick was waiting for him in the kitchen when he got back home, nursing a mug of coffee at the table, and looking as tired as John felt.

"Nick. You're up early," John said awkwardly, his gaze going to the computer, which was, for once, switched off.

"I couldn't sleep." There was tension in the line of Nick's shoulders. "I couldn't stop thinking about..." He looked up, gaze troubled as it met John's. "Are you okay?"

A breath he hadn't known he'd been holding left John in a slow, wearied exhalation. "No. Farthest thing from it."

"Sit down," Nick said, abandoning the chair he'd been sitting in and gesturing at it. "I'll make some tea. You must be starving -- do you want some breakfast? I can make something." It was clear from the way he was behaving that he could tell something was wrong, and when John started to move reluctantly toward the chair, trying to sort out what to say, he suddenly found himself with Nick's arms around him, clutching onto him tightly.

"Don't," he said, working his hand free and resting it on Nick's shoulder so that he could push him back, though it was the last thing he wanted. "Nick, please -- you won't want to when I tell you, so let me tell you, will you?"

"No. I don't want to know." Nick moved a few feet away from him, turning to look out the window. "You're leaving, aren't you?" Nick's voice was flat, as if he were trying not to care but failing.

"If that's what you want me to do, I will," John told him, slowly. "And I'm thinking you will, and I wouldn't blame you." He swallowed. "Andy -- the man I went fishing with -- he's been here before, on the island. A couple of years ago, before I met you. We were never -- you know how it was with me, but I knew fine he was interested. A body can tell, you know?"

Nick didn't look at him. "Do you love him?"

"What? No!" John shook his head. "Christ, until I saw him in the bar yesterday, I hadn't given him a single thought. I barely know the man." He felt anger stir, a welcome distraction for his own guilt. "How can you ask me

that? Do you think I've been lying to you the past few years, then?"

Nick ignored that. He was standing very still, and somehow it made him seem smaller. "Did you fuck him?"

"No." John couldn't bear the questions Nick was asking him, short, cold stabs of words. The space separating them seemed impossible to bridge, even though if he'd stretched out his hand he could still -- just -- touch Nick. "Look, I'll tell you, okay? I *want* to tell you. I never had any intention of lying to you about any of this. I never have. You've always had the truth from me, and you always will." He saw Nick nod; just a small, barely perceptible movement that he chose to think meant Nick accepted that. "We were lying down, close as we could get; he was fair perished with the cold, shaking with it. And he asked, and I...I kissed him, aye, I did, and more. Had my hand on him when he touched me and I just -- I couldn't. And I'd never have done more than that, and I wouldn't have done any of it if I hadn't been so damn sad and sorry for the way it is between us now."

There was silence for a long time. At no point did Nick so much as glance at John. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say. I've never...I've never done this before." Nick cleared his throat. "Had it done. Whatever."

No, he wouldn't have. Although what Matthew, Nick's only other partner had done, never believing in Nick's ability to see ghosts even as he marketed that ability for all he could, well, that wasn't much better in John's opinion.

"It had fuck all to do with him," John said bluntly. "It was about us. About me being angry and hurt and taking that way of -- oh, God, I don't know. Hurting you back? We're talking about a minute or two, no more."

"I wasn't trying to hurt you," Nick said. He sounded terrible, as if he'd been pushed to the end of his rope or even past it. "Ever. There are just...there are things that I can't tell you. Not because I don't want to, but because I don't know how. Don't even know how to start. But now..." He bowed his head; the back of his neck looked pale under his dark hair. "Are you leaving me?"

"Well, you might not have been trying to hurt me, but you managed it. Nick, there's not a damned thing you can't tell me. And I'll leave when you kick me out and not a minute sooner because there's nowhere I want to be but with you." John went over to him then, taking a few hasty steps, putting his hands on Nick's shoulders and turning him. "These things you can't talk about, they're to do with what you are? What you do?"

Nick shuddered at his touch but didn't pull away; at least that was something, although it was considerably less than John would have liked just then. "I don't know what they are," he said, his face turned to the side. "I think -- maybe I'm just going crazy. Not like that's a surprise."

"I'd have noticed," John said with certainty. "You're not, and never think it. Tell me, will you?"

"I've been dreaming." Nick said it quickly, then looked surprised, as if he hadn't expected to give up his secret so easily. The surprise changed, just as quickly, to suspicion, and that hurt more than John would have anticipated. Nick did pull away then, rubbing his wrist with his other hand -- sometimes it ached in the cold weather, John knew, although Nick rarely complained. "At first I thought it was real. That it was going to happen, but then...and I keep looking, every day, and it isn't anywhere. Not in the news, and it would have to be, wouldn't it?"

"If I knew what you were talking about, I could maybe answer that." John tried to sound patient, but, really, he was close to -- no, he'd never hit Nick. No matter how tempting the idea might be. "What is it that you've been dreaming about? Someone who's died? Calling to you in your dreams, maybe, because you're too far to reach?"

He still didn't really understand how this all worked; he'd just been grateful that the few ghosts hanging around on the island had let Nick ease them out of their misery and onwards and after that Nick had been left in peace, for the first time in his life. If the ghosts were reaching him in his sleep, though, the peace might be over.

"I don't *know*." Nick sounded frustrated, and well he would be after God knows how long this had been going on. He was still close enough to touch, but John kept his hands to himself. "I'm starting to think it's not real. Not yet, anyway."

"A premonition, you mean?" John frowned. "Like what happened with Sandy that time? But you shook his hand; you touched him and he'd have died in a few hours if we hadn't stopped it. This sounds more...distant? Does that make sense?"

Nick shook his head, but it wasn't a denial. "I've thought about this. I've thought about *all* of this, and I don't know why it's happening. All I know is that it's something I'm supposed to stop, somehow, and I have no idea how." He was trembling, and John realized what a toll this must have been taking on him. "I don't think I can do this."

John reached out instinctively, too used to comforting Nick when he was like this to remember that Nick might not want the hug he usually got. He saw Nick flinch back and sighed. "Nick -- please. Let me, will you?"

The pain in Nick's look nearly stopped John's heart. "No," he said. "This is the part I don't think I can do."

John let his hand fall back. "Right. I see." He blinked at Nick, seeing him through eyes blurred with tiredness.

"I don't know what to say, then. Don't know what you want me to do."

"Yeah, well." Nick looked down as if he was studying his shoes. "I guess neither of us has done this before."

John waited, thinking that he owed Nick time to decide what he wanted.

"Look, why don't you go upstairs and get some sleep," Nick suggested finally. "We can...we'll talk later, when I'm not so...whatever."

Nodding seemed like something John could do, but it took all his strength to turn and walk away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nick sat at the kitchen table, staring at his half-empty coffee cup, until he knew that John was in bed. Not that he had any idea if John was really sleeping, and there was part of him that hoped that he wasn't. Hoped that John was lying up there awake, racked with guilt.

The other part of him, the part that loved John, hoped that the other man was getting some rest. He'd looked terrible when he'd come in, and Nick's first instinct had been to comfort him, an instinct he hadn't been willing to ignore until John had forced him to. He hadn't wanted to hear what John had to say.

And now that he had, he felt sick and alone. Work, the furthest thing from his mind, Nick got up and went outside with no idea where he was headed. The sun was shining brightly now that the previous night's storm had passed, but it was still cold. A glance into John's car revealed that John's heavy winter jacket was on the passenger seat; Nick opened the door and took it out and slipped it on. It felt warm and soothing, the way John's arms around him would have.

He walked with no direction in mind, following the road into town because it required less care where he put his feet than walking across the countryside would have. Walking had become second nature since he'd come to Traighshee; driving was something he could do again, now, but he didn't think it would ever be something he did without purpose.

It was still early, and the town showed little life -- most everyone was asleep, tucked warm into their beds, just like John was at home. Suddenly overcome with despair, Nick stopped, trying to draw a deep breath. He didn't hear the car until it was beside him and someone reached out to touch his arm.

"Nick? I thought you were John at first, in that jacket." It was Michael. "Are you all right?"

A bark of laughter escaped him before he could stop it. "All right?" Nick echoed. "No, I don't think I am."

"You don't look it," Michael agreed. He rubbed his hand over his chin. "I'm on my way into work, but I've time to talk." He smiled. "Always time to talk here, isn't there?"

It'd taken Nick a long time to relax into the pace of the islands, where people worked hard, but took their time doing it, and deadlines weren't taken too seriously. He still wasn't sure it'd ever come naturally to him.

"Get in," Michael said, his hand gently urging Nick toward his idling car. "We can drive along the cliff road and stop at the lookout; it's on my way, and you can cut across the fields to home easily enough from there."

Nick let Michael put him in the car -- it was easier than arguing with him, and he'd been sleeping so little that even the walking he'd already done had tired him out -- but he didn't say anything.

"I take it John's all right, or I'd think you'd be looking a sight worse," Michael said, shutting his door and starting the car toward the cliff road.

"He's...I don't know how he is," Nick said, watching out the window. Usually the island's scenery filled him with wonder, but this morning it just looked bleak and empty.

"Well, I heard he didn't spend a very comfortable night," Michael said, chuckling. "Getting himself stuck out on Creeth, like a daft summer visitor, or something! Wait until I see him; he'll not hear the last of that in a hurry, I can tell you."

It didn't surprise Nick that Michael already knew about it. Gossip in a small community spread fast, and he supposed, looking at it objectively, that it was bound to get discussed. As Michael had said, it was funny looked at one way. Nick just wasn't at that point yet, and doubted he ever would be.

"Do you know the man he went out fishing with?" Nick asked.

"Andy? Aye." Michael was watching the road, but he glanced at Nick, puzzled. "Been here half a dozen times or so. Never in the winter, though, not before now."

The thought of John kissing a man Nick had never even seen made him feel almost physically ill. "They were...they..." He couldn't say anything else, the silence stretching long and taut.

“Fuck.”

It looked like he'd said enough.

Michael steered the car off the road onto the close-cropped grass that bordered it and turned off the engine. “The stupid bastard,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry, Nick.”

“So am I.” Nick was tempted to make excuses for John, to protect him in the eyes of his oldest friend, but instead he said, “I don’t know what to do.”

There was a sigh of breath and then Michael turned his head to stare out of the window, at gray sky and sea. “If it was Sheila -- och, I don’t know what I’d do. Beat seven shades of shit out of the man, that’s for sure, but she’s mine. I don’t think I could bear to be without her.” His fingers, powerful, strong fingers, on a wide, work-scarred hand, curled around the steering wheel, squeezing it tight. “I -- once, just the once, mind -- before we were married --”

“I know about that.” John had told him, on a beach in spring, a long time ago.

“Aye? She doesn’t know. She’d forgive me, but she’d always be wondering if I’d do it again, and I wouldn’t, not ever, but it’d be asking a lot for her to believe that.” Michael cleared his throat. “It’s the first time he’s done this? Gone off and slept with someone else?”

“He didn’t,” Nick admitted. Michael gave him a funny look, and he explained. “He didn’t sleep with him. He... kissed him, and...” Describing this to Michael was hard beyond just saying it out loud. The waves were crashing onto the beach like they always did, like nothing had changed. “I guess it didn’t go a lot farther than that. And things have been...well, not exactly good. For a while.” He realized Michael’s actual question was still sort of hanging. “Yes. It’s the first time.”

“And you’ve never...?” Michael cleared his throat again.

“No! God, no.”

“I wouldn’t have thought John would’ve even looked at another man, to be honest.” Michael gave him a sidelong glance, obviously starting to reassess where the blame lay. Nick couldn’t blame him. John had been Michael’s best friend for as long as they’d known each other and Nick was a newcomer. “After all you’ve gone through I’d have thought you were settled.” He frowned and said slowly. “Content. Aye. Like me and Sheila. But you’re not, are you?”

Nick shook his head. “I don’t know if I can be. I don’t know.” He couldn’t look at Michael, so he looked out the window again, pulling John’s jacket more tightly around him even though he wasn’t cold. “I was, for a while, I think. But then things started to go wrong, and I didn’t know how to fix them, and...I don’t know, maybe this is my fault as much as his.”

“I don’t know about that.” Michael shrugged. “I mean it. I don’t. I see you two together, and I think you look happy, and then I see John with this little frown, watching you -- he does that a lot, you know? -- And I wonder what’s going on, but I don’t feel comfortable asking. And I’ve been fair gagging Sheila sometimes, because she was all for a bit of plain speaking, and I didn’t think it was anyone’s business but your own.” There was a wry, humorless smile twisting Michael’s lips now. “Even now, there’s enough people talking about you two; I didn’t think you needed anymore. Maybe I was wrong, if it’s come to this. Are you kicking him out, then?”

“I don’t know.” Nick was starting to think that he could make a recording of himself saying that and use it to answer pretty much any question. “He said he’d go if I wanted him to, but I don’t. Want him to.” He looked at Michael, finally having absorbed something the other man had said. “You don’t think he’s happy with me?”

“I think that’s the question he’s asking about you,” Michael replied. “We don’t really talk about it much, but the other night in the pub he was, well, wondering if you were maybe a wee bit bored. Of the island. Of him.”

“No,” Nick said, frowning. “God, no! I’ve been...distracted, sure, but I’m not bored. I love it here. I love *him*.” He flushed, aware of how awkward this was. “So you think he’s been unhappy because he thinks I’ve been unhappy?” Michael nodded, and Nick sighed and leaned his head against the window glass. “God, how does stuff like this happen?”

“You’re asking the wrong man,” Michael said, starting the engine again and pulling away. “I once had Sheila mad at me for two months before I worked out that she’d had her hair cut and I hadn’t noticed. And by the time I did, it’d grown back to how it always was, anyway.”

“Maybe I’ve been too caught up in my own head,” Nick agreed. “He’s said stuff about me spending too much time writing, but I guess I really didn’t hear him. Or didn’t want to.”

Michael paused the car at the crossroads, looking at Nick expectantly, and he nodded. “Yeah. Could you drive me back to the house? I really need to talk to him.”

John's car was still in the drive when they got back; Nick let out a breath he hadn't even known he'd been holding.

"Thanks," he said to Michael, opening the door.

"No trouble," Michael said.

Nick stood in the drive, leaning against John's car as Michael left. He'd wait until John woke up, he decided, and then they'd talk, no matter how much neither of them really wanted to. But they weren't going to get through this without talking about it, even if all Nick wanted was to pretend none of it had happened in the first place. The thought of John kissing someone else, touching someone else...

He swallowed hard and went inside to find a note on the kitchen table.

*Couldn't sleep. Going to take a bit of a walk. I'll be back soon.*

*John*

He could hear John's voice saying the words; see the stutter of the pen where John had set it against the paper to write "love" before his signature but then changed his mind. John's writing was precise and careful, old-fashioned even, and it looked like him somehow.

While Nick was debating whether to wait for John to come back or to go look for him, the phone rang.

"Hello?" Nick sounded impatient and he knew it.

"Yes, this is Carolyn Mosser with DeltaZone Airlines; I'm trying to reach Dominic Kelley. Is this his residence?"

## Chapter Four

John had known Nick was back as soon as he'd walked in, even before the sound of Nick's footsteps overhead reached him. The house didn't feel empty as it had done when he'd woken from his doze. Taking the stairs slowly, he wondered if it was a good idea to talk in their bedroom; maybe he should see if Nick wanted to come back to the kitchen where they could --

His thoughts cut off abruptly as he reached the open door. His suitcase, the one he'd bought new for their trip to the States earlier in the year, lay open on the bed, half-filled with his clothes, and an assortment of toiletry items were piled up beside it.

"You're...what are you doing?" Stupid question, when it was obvious. He knew he deserved this, but it hurt that Nick was so eager to see the back of him that he couldn't even let John do his own packing, or wait for him to arrange somewhere to go.

Nick looked up at him. God, even worn out and hurting, the man was one of the most gorgeous things John had ever seen. "My father's dead," he said, straightening up with one of John's T-shirts in his hands.

"God, I'm sorry," John said automatically, even though everything Nick had ever said about the man -- and it wasn't much -- had left John thinking that Nick was better off without him. He'd walked out on his wife and young son when Nick was a child, after all. "What happened?"

"Plane crash." Nick was wooden, moving from chest of drawers to the bed and putting the shirt into the suitcase as if he was on auto-pilot. "Probably the one that I..." He stopped, his face in profile, eyes closed. "I don't even care about him. I don't."

"Then why are you --" John replayed Nick's words in his head, hearing them properly this time. "Christ. That was it? This is what you've been dreaming about? A plane crash?" Let it be something small. Not hundreds of deaths for Nick to blame himself for, even though John knew damn well there wouldn't have been a thing Nick could've done to prevent it.

"I kept looking for it in the news. I didn't know what else to do. There weren't enough details for me to figure it out." Nick smoothed out John's clothes in the suitcase. "I have to go. I already booked the flight, and...would you come with me?" It sounded as if he was steeling himself for John to refuse.

"I thought --" John gestured at the open case, stepping into the room. His eye was caught by a second case, already fastened, standing behind the door. Nick's case, battered by use. "I thought you were kicking me out." He pushed his hand through his hair, rubbing at the back of his neck as he studied Nick. "Aye. I'll come with you. If that's what you want." He walked over to Nick, who had straightened and was looking at him with eyes that were still blank with shock. "Nick..."

He touched the back of his hand to Nick's face, stroking it gently. "Come here, will you?" he whispered, pulling Nick into his arms without a thought for anything but taking that stricken, frozen look off Nick's face. Better the anger or the hurt than that.

Nick melted into the embrace as if nothing were wrong between them, clinging to John. "I don't think I can do this alone." He sounded numb, pressing closer to John for warmth and comfort that John was more than happy to give.

"Don't have to." John tightened his arms around Nick, leaning into their embrace and feeling as if he didn't want to let go for a long time. "I'll be there." He turned his head a little, brushing his lips against Nick's cheek. "Just where *are* we going, anyway?"

"Florida." Nick's breath was warm against John's neck. "Can you imagine? What the hell was he doing there?" He pulled back and looked at John properly. "We have to be in Glasgow for tomorrow morning; it was the first flight I could get us on, and I figured anything sooner we might not have been able to get there in time for anyway. Are...are you sure you want to go?"

Florida wasn't somewhere John had a very clear picture of. Alligators, key lime pie, and Mickey Mouse, maybe, with the odd palm tree and hurricane thrown in. It wasn't somewhere he'd ever wanted to go, not really.

"I'm sure. If you've packed, I'll make a few calls; let people know we're going so they can keep an eye on the place." He turned to look out of the window, ignoring the blue sky, which could cloud over in minutes, and

watching the branches of the closest tree instead. “Lucky the wind’s died down or we wouldn’t have even been able to get off the island, let alone leave the country.”

He took Nick’s face in his hands and kissed him, for once feeling no flare of desire. “You’ll be fine, Nick. Just fine.”

\* \* \* \* \*

John dragged his attention away from a fifteen-foot-long stuffed alligator decorating the foyer of the hotel they’d chosen and frowned. Nick had just asked for a single room with two beds, passing his credit card over without looking at John.

The journey had been hard on both of them, and John wanted nothing more than sleep, hours and hours of it, deep and dreamless sleep while his body and mind caught up with what had happened to it over the past few days.

Didn’t mean he wanted to do it in a narrow little single bed, though.

Even discovering that two beds meant two queen-sized beds, each big enough for two, didn’t make him feel better. The last time they’d had a king-sized bed; wide and luxurious, and they’d used every inch of it, too, sprawled out across it, mouths on each other, hands roving, happy, the two of them.

He dumped his case in a corner and collapsed onto one of the beds, deciding that his legs might as well be back in Scotland for all the good they were.

“I feel like the time we had a run of salmon and we fished for two days and nights with hardly a break,” he said, the words emerging from his mouth but echoing distantly as if someone else had spoken them. “Can we sleep for a bit, do you think, or is there someone you want to call first?”

“No, no, it’s okay. Go to sleep. I don’t think I could, but you go ahead.” Nick sounded awful and looked worse. “I think I’ll take a shower.”

John undressed slowly to the accompaniment of the water running in the bathroom; Nick had shut the door, but he could still hear it, the rush of the water against the plastic hotel shower curtain enough to have his eyelids closing despite himself. He pulled down the covers and crawled between the sheets wearing nothing but his boxer shorts, the fabric crisp and clean against his skin.

He was nearly asleep when the bathroom door opened, and roused enough to open his eyes. Nick’s hair was slicked back away from his face. The towel around his waist was pulled tight; normally it would have been half hanging off his hips, revealing the tempting line of his hip bone, but now he turned away from John as he put on a pair of cotton sleep pants and lay down on the other bed.

The room was quiet -- it was late afternoon, John thought, although it was hard to keep track when traveling, and the hotel wasn’t crowded at this time of day. John was nearly asleep again when he heard Nick clear his throat. “John?” he asked softly, as if unsure if John were awake.

John managed a questioning grunt by way of reply and then forced his eyes open. “M here, love.” The endearment came easily when he was this tired; it took more effort to remember that he and Nick weren’t quite right than to forget it.

“Can --” Nick rolled onto his side, looking at John. He licked his lips nervously. “Can I sleep with you?”

“Aye. Of course you can.” John was too sleepy to feel more than a distant relief. He threw the covers back and moved over, making room for Nick. Nick slipped in beside him and John drew the covers up over them, sighed, and settled down the way he always did, although he never woke that way, his arm across Nick’s chest, his head on Nick’s shoulder.

Nick was warm against him; he smelled of unfamiliar shampoo, but other than that and the sheets, John could have thought they were home in their own bed. “Go to sleep,” Nick whispered.

“I *am* asleep,” John told him.

“I can tell.” Nick might actually have sounded a bit amused, although it was difficult to tell through John’s own exhaustion.

“I feel...” John turned his head a little, murmuring the words against Nick’s skin, feeling his lips touch it in what wasn’t a kiss, not really. “We’re a long way from home.”

“We are.” Nick’s arm around John’s shoulders squeezed slightly in a half hug. “Too far. I wish we were there instead of here.”

“You’re here. I’m here.” John made it a definite kiss this time, dizzy with the feel of the world spinning under him, far too fast. Thousands of miles...hours lost or relived, he wasn’t sure which. None of it felt real. Last time they’d flown to the States they’d planned it for weeks; he’d been prepared. This was too sudden, too violent a

disruption to their lives, and given the way things were between them, he didn't feel as if he could ask for or give reassurance the way he normally would have.

It wasn't going to stop him kissing the smooth hollow of Nick's throat, though. Not when it was there, and Nick wasn't stopping him. He wasn't wanting to take it any farther than that -- he didn't think he could -- but kissing Nick was what he did before he went to sleep and it didn't feel right not to.

"As long as you're going to stay," Nick murmured. "With me, I mean. If you left...I don't know what I'd do." He tilted his head obligingly, giving John better access, but he wasn't entirely relaxed.

"Staying...Go to sleep, will you? Please? Can't if you don't..." John wasn't sure that what was coming out of his mouth made sense, but he hoped it did.

"Shh. I am," Nick said, reassuring. "It's okay." It barely mattered at that point; John had been holding onto consciousness by sheer force of will, and sleep was already pulling him under whether he wanted it to or not.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nick woke around the same time he would have at home. Of course, it was five hours earlier in Florida, the sky still dark and the hotel almost disturbingly silent around them. John had rolled over and was sleeping with his back to Nick; needing the comfort more than he wanted to worry about their relationship, Nick tucked himself up against John, one arm over his waist. John murmured sleepily but didn't really wake up, and after a while, Nick fell back asleep himself.

When he woke up again, the sun was rising. They hadn't thought to close the curtain that led to the balcony off their room, and the sunlight was streaming in. Nick crept from the bed and went to shut the curtain, but ended up slipping behind it and opening the sliding glass door to the balcony into the warm Florida air. He rubbed his arms with his hands, surprised that he wasn't cold but still wishing he'd stopped to put on a shirt.

Behind him he heard the faint rustle of the sheets as John stirred awake. John always seemed to know when Nick left the bed, no matter how deeply he was sleeping.

"It's not raining, then?" John's voice, soft, and with a lilt to it that was going to get every waitress, cab driver, and store assistant they met commenting, admiring and dredging up relatives who were Scottish, had been to Scotland, or owned something tartan, sounded amused. "We should've stayed home. There was a nice gale on the way."

"Come out here," Nick said. At that moment, the wonder of the morning had him firmly in its grasp and nothing else mattered; not why they were there, not even that things had been so shaky between them. "You have to see this sunrise."

John got out of bed and joined him, slipping his arm around Nick's shoulders in a brief hug before walking to the edge of the balcony and staring out at the spectacular landscape neither of them had really taken in the night before. The hotel was on the beach; directly beneath their third-floor balcony was a narrow strip of thick-bladed grass, bordered by a concrete path, and then the white sand began, lapping up like a sea against the buildings.

Nick knew John's eyes would be on the sea, though; the wide, endless expanse of it, holding the shifting colors of the sunrise now, though it'd be intensely blue soon. The rush of the waves made it feel like home. A different shore, but the same ocean.

"Aye, that's something," John said after a while. He turned his head, studying Nick with the same concentration he'd given to the view. "You look better for the sleep. Are you hungry? You ate next to nothing yesterday, not that I can blame you." He wrinkled up his face. "By the time I'd got all the plastic wrappings off that meal on the plane, they were coming around to take the plates off us."

Nick's stomach growled at the suggestion of food, but he only had eyes for John; he reached for John's hand and pulled him closer, hugging him, inhaling his scent. Holding John like this gave him a profound sense of peace, one that he wanted to keep for as long as he could, even though he knew it would only be a few minutes. "I've missed this." He meant it as an apology. "I didn't realize what was going on. Well, I did, but I didn't know how bad it was. I'm sorry." The last words were whispered, but he knew John would be able to hear him.

"I wish you'd been able to tell me." John's hands on his bare back, stroking it slowly, firmly, were easing muscles Nick hadn't realized were tense. "I feel as if I've done nothing but let you down, somehow, what with that and -- and it's the last thing I wanted to do." John pulled back enough that Nick could see his face, the blue eyes bright against the skin that even in winter was still tanned because John spent more time outside than in; always had, always would. "I love you." John's gaze didn't waver. "Very much."

"I love you, too. More than anything." Nick stroked John's cheek, rubbed a thumb over his lips. "I don't know why I didn't tell you. I think, at first, I thought it was just a dream, and then I really thought...it had to be, I don't

know, my mind playing tricks on me.” But deep down, he hadn’t really thought that, or else he wouldn’t have spent so much time scouring the Internet for reports of planes having gone down. “But I should have said something.” The secret had driven a wedge between them that had done more damage than Nick would have thought possible.

Above them, seagulls cried out, wheeling in wide circles over the beach. Even this early the beach wasn’t empty; a couple was walking their dog, and someone else was running down close to the water, where the sand was hard and packed.

Nick’s peaceful mood was already evaporating. “Can we get room service for breakfast?” he asked. “I don’t think I want to be around a lot of people right now.”

“Fine by me.” John leaned in and kissed Nick, his lips tasting somehow of home. “Do you think they do waffles? I liked them last time we were here, and those wee frozen ones we get aren’t anything like the same.”

“We should probably give up on them and get a waffle iron,” Nick said. “It can’t be that hard to make waffles.” Not that he’d ever been much of a cook, of course, but he’d learned some things in the past year, and weren’t waffles just pancakes cooked in a waffle iron?

While John went to take a shower, Nick called room service and ordered breakfast for them, then he went back out to the balcony and sat down, letting the warm sunshine seep into his bones and trying not to think about what the day ahead was going to hold.

He heard the shower finish but didn’t go back inside. Out here, with a salt-scented breeze whipping away each thought of his father and the others who’d died on the small plane, some thirty or so, he thought, he could cope. Inside, closed-in, he was a target. He knew that it didn’t matter; if the spirits wanted to talk to him, they’d find him wherever he was, but he wasn’t feeling very logical right then.

Even when a tap on the door, and the murmur of voices told him that their food had arrived, he stayed where he was, his eyes taking in the blue and white and green around him without seeing details.

Then John appeared, his brown hair damp and tousled, a white, skimpy towel hitched around his hips, looking flushed. “I didn’t know where the dollars were that you got at the airport. Had to promise I’d remember his name, and tip him later.” He glanced down at himself, shaking his head. “He’ll remember me, that’s for sure. I damn near lost this towel trying to go through the pockets in your jacket.”

“Sorry,” Nick said, even though he wasn’t really. A little part of him, the part that was still stung at the thought of Andy, didn’t like the idea of anyone else seeing John in nothing but a towel, but that was stupid and he knew it.

He got up and they went inside; the wheeled cart was over by the door where John had left it. Nick carried the trays to the small table in the corner and laid out the food while John got dressed, then sat down with the newspaper that had been tucked between the trays. He didn’t really want to look at it, but he knew there’d be a lengthy story about the plane crash and he needed the information whether he wanted it or not.

“What’s that?” John asked, standing behind him with a hand on Nick’s shoulder as he opened the paper and found the story. “Oh.”

“Uh huh.” Forty-one deaths; he’d been wrong about that. The chaos in his dream hadn’t made an accurate head-count easy, but Nick’s stomach still clenched at the thought of it. “There weren’t any problems with the weather,” he said, even though John could read just as well as he could.

“No...” John sounded abstracted. “Says they’re assuming something mechanical, but won’t know for sure for a while, yet. Do you -- do you know, then? What happened? Or was it just your dad you saw?”

“I never saw him.” Nick turned his head and looked at John over his shoulder. “I had no idea it had anything to do with him until I got that phone call. God, that was less than two days ago.” It felt like they’d traveled at least a week in that time. “Do you think that’s why I was having the dream? Because of him?”

John blinked at him, looking puzzled. “Well -- aye, don’t you? Planes crash all the time -- bigger ones than this -- and you don’t get visions of them. And generally, you have to be close to where someone died to see their ghost or get one of those premonition flash things, so, aye, I’d say it was your dad that made the connection happen.”

He sat down and picked up the coffee Nick had poured for him, giving Nick a worried glance. “You’ll see him, won’t you?” he asked. “It’s why we came. He’s no claim on you, not after how he left you, but you won’t let his ghost walk if you can give him a chance at peace.”

“I don’t think I’ll have a choice,” Nick said. He probably needed the resolution with his father just as much as his father had; his biggest fear was that his dad wouldn’t be amenable to it. Ghosts weren’t always eager to work through things, no matter how necessary it was. “They might all be there. Everyone who died.”

It had been a long time since he’d voluntarily walked onto the site of a serious disaster like this, and John had

never seen him in that kind of situation. The ghosts who were ready to leave messages for loved ones were rarely patient enough to wait their turn, and trying to separate out one voice amongst a sea of them had pushed Nick into a state of near-catatonia more than once.

John glanced around the room and then over at Nick. "You'll remember you promised you'd always tell me if there was one with us? Is there? Has it started?" He picked up the paper from the table, looking at the small map of the crash site. "It's about ten miles north of us, I'd say."

They'd picked up a car at the airport yesterday, so driving wouldn't be an issue, and they had maps that the rental company had given them. The woman at the counter had seemed relieved to discover that Nick would be driving rather than John, whose accent had been immediately obvious, even in the little they'd needed to speak.

Nick realized he hadn't answered John's question, although his silence had probably been answer enough. "No, there's no one here now. I think you'd be able to tell if there were." Firmly reminding himself that he needed to eat, he poured syrup over his waffles and took a bite. "You need to eat, too, you know."

"I can't always tell," John pointed out, although from Nick's experience, John usually could, sensing them in the vague way a person afraid of cats could tell if one was in the room. "And don't worry about me. I'm eating. See?" John loaded his fork with a wedge of waffle, topped off with a chunk of strawberry, and dripping with syrup and butter, and then took a bite that ended up with him mopping his chin and frowning at his sticky fingers. "Followed by another shower..."

"The best food's usually messy," Nick said distractedly, his eyes already drawn back to the newspaper story. He read it again from beginning to end, then sighed and folded up the paper, tossing it onto the bed and turning his attention toward his breakfast.

John had already half finished his and was nursing his second cup of coffee; he'd been quiet while Nick was reading, which Nick appreciated.

"I don't know how this is going to go," Nick said. "Being there, I mean."

"It'll be crowded. And usually you've been invited by the relatives, or you're by yourself." John eyed Nick. "You're going to have to be careful, or you'll have a crowd of idiots trailing around after you."

That happened. Not as often as people sneering or getting angry with him for anything from blasphemy to taking advantage of the bereaved, but it happened. Ghost groupies, Matthew had called them, more approvingly than Nick had liked, but then, Matthew hadn't just been his lover, had he? He'd been Nick's manager, Nick's agent. Nick's buffer. John hadn't had much, if any, experience with that part of what Nick did; it just hadn't been an issue on a remote Scottish island.

Somehow, Nick thought it might be here.

He took one more bite of waffle and set down his fork; eating too much would be just as bad as not eating at all, and he didn't want to have to deal with the consequences. "When stuff like this happens, the ghosts aren't all that interested in waiting their turn to talk to me. Through me." He was never sure which phrase was better. "I can get...kind of confused. It's pretty overwhelming. I'm probably going to need you to keep people back, if you can, and to make sure I don't do anything stupid."

Stupid like walk into a wall, or walk into some angry relative's fist, or fall flat on his face, all of which had happened at one time or other. When his brain was on overload like that, his eyes didn't always transmit to his brain the way they should.

"I can do that. Keep people back."

Nick hadn't seen it himself, but he knew that Michael wasn't the only one on the island who'd had a reputation for being the first into a brawl and the last one left standing. John was wiry, his muscles earned through work, not exercise, and Nick had a queasy feeling that John would probably enjoy punching someone who threatened Nick.

John's mouth curled in a smile. "I won't," he said, reading Nick's expression. "Go wading in, fists flying. And don't tell me it's not what you were thinking, because it was." He stood and came around the table to Nick, crouching down beside Nick's chair, his hands loosely clasped on his knees. "I promised you I wouldn't get into fights, remember? When you saw the state of Michael's face after the one in the bar? I'll just be...charming," he finished, nodding. "Aye. I'll reason with them." He stood in one smooth, easy movement, dropping a jaunty kiss on the top of Nick's head. "And if they won't listen to reason, and give you the space you need, I'll...think of something." He smiled, looking younger, happier, as if hearing that Nick needed him had given him a reassurance that Nick's hug on the balcony hadn't. "I'm a very resourceful man, did you not know that?"

"Of course I did," Nick said, nodding and finishing off his cup of coffee. "You always have been." It was true;

John had accepted him almost immediately, not to mention accepting his abilities. It was something he'd never expected to have, someone who knew what he was and loved him despite it. No matter what had happened between them -- no matter what John had done, and Nick didn't have any reason to think it was more than what he'd admitted to -- it was important that Nick remember that.

He'd never find another man like John, and he didn't want to.

Standing up, Nick rubbed his forehead and moved to his suitcase to get out some clothes to change into.

## Chapter Five

The land was scarred where the plane had crashed; deep swaths of burned trees and churned-up grass sketching out its final, brutal landing. John stared at it through the open car window, his heart thumping, his breath catching in his throat. He'd seen similar scenes on television; pitied, commented, and changed the channel, feeling a genuine, if fleeting sympathy, no more.

This was different. It was a terrible, ugly reality, from the blackened earth to the thick, rank stink of fuel and fire. He shuddered, swallowing down sickness as his mind gave him an image of how it must have been for them, falling out of the sky, the inside of the cabin filled with screams, the impact, the terror of surviving that only to feel the heat rise...

No one had survived. None. In a way, that seemed kinder. It would've been a hell of a lot to live with.

Forcing himself to look away from the broken, twisted remnants of the plane, John scanned the area. The makeshift parking lot held about twenty cars; some, he assumed, belonging to the investigators who were climbing over the plane, supervising its removal. There were no camera crews, but over to the left he saw a tall man, his blond hair bright in the sunlight, talking into a small recorder, an ID badge hanging from his jacket.

And, clutching flowers, huddled and weeping, or silently staring, were the relatives of those who had died, small clumps of them, scattered around one of the prettiest spots John had ever seen, if he kept his head turned away from the crash site and pretended that part didn't exist.

It was a beautiful day. He'd never seen such an intense blue sky, such green grass. Never seen so many birds, gaudy-winged and noisy, never thought to see a snake curling sinuously around a log, a seemingly endless length of green and brown as wide as his wrist.

His hand found Nick's and squeezed it. His was shaking; Nick's was cool and still.

But Nick's eyes were wide, unblinking.

He tightened his hand on Nick's again, hoping for some kind of reaction, and Nick shook his head a bit, blinked, looked at him. "There's nothing yet," Nick said, and when John's face registered his surprise, explained, "They're probably still in shock, the ones that are here. They might not even know what happened; I guess it depends on how quick it was."

Nick didn't flinch as his eyes traveled to the wreckage of the plane. He didn't pay any attention to the grieving families; he wouldn't, John thought. He didn't consider himself one of them, as he hadn't known his father, and he wasn't there for them, not really. He was there for those who had died, the spirits of people whose lives had been cut short by this tragedy, who might have things they needed set right before they could move on to where they belonged.

Swallowing, Nick entwined his fingers with John's, keeping hold of him. "Whatever you do, don't go anywhere, okay? No matter what happens?" He sounded almost frightened underneath the facade of calm he was trying to maintain.

"I won't." John's thumb rubbed in slow circles on the back of Nick's hand. "Whatever you need, I'll be there, love." He followed Nick's gaze. "Do you want to get closer?"

"Not really." Nick gave him a strained smile; it was hard to tell what he was thinking, and not for the first time John wished he could read Nick's mind, know what was going on behind those eyes. "Yeah, okay. Let's go."

There were police nearby, quite a few of them actually, but they seemed more interested in soothing the grieving families than they did with what Nick and John were doing. The two of them made their way closer slowly, skirting the area with caution. It was fortunate that the plane had gone down where it had, considering how the surrounding area was more crowded with neighborhoods, homes and businesses than John had ever seen in most of Scotland. The devastation could have been so much worse.

The tall man with the ID badge on his jacket gave them a curious glance, and Nick dropped John's hand almost instantly. It seemed an odd thing to do, as Nick had never been particularly concerned with people knowing about their relationship, but when John turned his head to look at Nick's face he realized that Nick had stopped walking at the same time, rubbing his arms with his hands as if he were cold. "There's someone here," Nick said. "Well, of course there is, but...someone who knows. He's looking for me."

This was...well, not familiar, exactly, but John had done it before. He began talking, keeping Nick anchored in reality as much as possible, without distracting him. "Someone from the crash? Or an older ghost?"

"I don't know." Nick reached blindly for John's arm and caught at the sleeve; he often wanted the physical contact. "I don't know."

They stood very still, but after a moment Nick shook his head.

"I don't know. It's gone. It might be too low on energy to talk." Nick had mentioned something about that before, that sometimes the ghosts needed to gather their energy before they could interact with him.

"Do you want to wait?" John could feel sweat prickle his forehead; the damp heat was new to him and he felt suffocated by it. "Or maybe go and, well --" He couldn't think of a good way to say it, but he remembered what had happened after his father had drowned. "You'll have to claim the body. See when you can arrange the burial and all that."

He hoped there wasn't a lot of paperwork, but he was fairly sure there would be. God, that was the last thing Nick would need; endless forms to fill out, asking for information he probably didn't know, except the basic details like --

"Nick? What's your dad's name?"

"Brian," Nick said absently. "Brian Hennessey." He glanced at John. "I'd know if he were here, wouldn't I? I mean, I know I only met him the once after I was a baby, but still...it seems like I'd know. Like I'd be able to feel something different."

"He's family," John agreed a little sourly. Brian. Well, Brian didn't deserve a son like Nick and knowing his name wasn't making John feel any more kindly toward him. "No matter what. You don't get to pick and choose with family, and he's close in some ways, if not others. Aye, I'd think you should be able to tell, so maybe he's not here? Not yet?"

"Maybe he won't be here at all. Maybe...maybe he went on. Maybe there wasn't anything he felt he'd left unfinished." Nick sounded more upset than John would have imagined given the way he'd talked about his father in the past.

"Maybe," John agreed cautiously, not sure if that was what Nick wanted to hear. "Most people do, don't they?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the tall man start to walk toward them. Slipping his arm around Nick's shoulders, he turned him so that his back was to the advancing man. "Let's go, Nick. We can come back later."

Nick nodded, leaning against John as if for warmth although they were both overdressed for the weather as it was. "Is it cold?" he asked, but before John could respond, the man behind them called out.

"Excuse me -- did you have a family member on this flight?"

To John's surprise, Nick stopped and answered, looking over his shoulder. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Maybe?" the man repeated, sounding intrigued. "You don't know?" His eyebrows were fair, too, John noticed, a shade or two darker than his hair. He walked quickly, closing the distance between them. "Or are you just thrill-seekers? Always plenty of them. Nothing we like better than a disaster, is there?"

"Speak for yourself," John said roughly. The man barely glanced at him. All his attention was on Nick, his forehead wrinkling as if he was trying to remember something.

"They called me." Nick's voice was rough, too, and for an instant John thought he was talking about the ghosts, until he added, "The airline. They said my father was on the plane. But his --" He swallowed, looking away. "He hasn't been identified, so I can't know for sure. Not yet."

"There isn't always a lot left to identify," the man said. His words might have been cruel or at the very least thoughtless, but his tone made it clear that he was doing his best to be helpful. "Not with stuff like this. Believe me, I've seen."

"You come to take a look at crashes a lot, do you?" John wasn't usually rude to strangers, but his protective instincts were screaming at him that the man represented a threat. He just wasn't sure what it was.

"All in a day's work," the man said lightly, tapping his ID badge and then noticing that it had twisted so that it was blank. Smiling, he flipped it, exposing a single word, 'PRESS' and his photograph. "Greg Duncan. I'm a freelance reporter." He held out his hand for Nick to shake. "And I'm sure I've seen your face before."

Nick kept his hand outstretched for a moment after Duncan had let go of it, the look on his face uncertain. "Nick Kelley. This is John McIntyre." John shook hands with the man as well. "I can't imagine where. I've been living in Scotland for the past couple of years, and I've never even been in Florida until last night."

Tilting his head to the side, Duncan frowned. "You're sure? You look so familiar. I didn't see you on TV?"

Some kind of interview?"

"No." Nick's face was closed off again.

"What do you do?" Duncan pressed on.

"He's a writer," John said softly, finally drawing the man's attention away from Nick. "And we'll be leaving now, if you'll excuse us, Mr. Duncan."

"A writer?" Duncan shook his head slowly. "No, that wasn't it."

John turned between Duncan and Nick, blocking the reporter's view and slipping his arm around Nick. It felt odd and right at the same time. "Goodbye, Mr. Duncan."

Nick allowed himself to be drawn away, his expression still withdrawn.

"Nick?" John murmured as they walked toward their car. "Still just us, is it? You're awful pale."

"Am I?" Nick sounded a tiny bit more like himself. "I don't feel...I don't know." He was quiet then until they reached the car; he leaned against it heavily, apparently needing the support, and John couldn't help but think that he could have leaned on *him* that way if he'd needed to.

Maybe this was all going to be more difficult than he'd thought.

Still, the look Nick gave him was a grateful one. "Thanks for not telling him, about --" Nick gestured at himself. "He might figure it out anyway -- hell, people are going to know one way or the other. But I wasn't ready." He did look pale.

"None of his damned business." John didn't glance back. He knew Duncan was watching them, speculation darkening his gray eyes. "Are you okay to drive?"

"Yeah, I think so." Nick grabbed onto the front of John's T-shirt and pulled him closer, pressing his face to John's collarbone. He muttered something that John couldn't understand.

"What?" John rubbed the back of Nick's neck. "Couldn't hear you, love."

Nick lifted his face. "I don't want to see him. Even if he's...not recognizable. He wouldn't be, would he? Like that guy said."

It took a moment for John to realize he was talking about his father's body and not his ghost. "You --" John was lost for words. He wanted to be reassuring, but it wasn't like Nick had a choice..."Nick, maybe we can explain to them that you haven't seen him since you were a child; that you wouldn't know if it was him. And if you do see his ghost, well, he might not...maybe he wouldn't be...damaged..." He faltered. He'd seen his own father's ghost and it'd been an experience he'd never forget, but the love he'd felt for his father had made it less of an ordeal than a comfort. Nick wouldn't have that.

"I'll be there with you," he said. There wasn't anything else he could offer by way of help. "And we don't have to stay. Not this time. You won't see any of them if we're back at home. We can just get on the plane and go."

A shudder went through Nick and John tightened his arms around him automatically. "No," Nick said. "We can't. I can't. I have to...this is what I have to do. I have to know for sure."

"Aye," John said with a sigh. "I know you do." He kissed the side of Nick's face and then moved away reluctantly, already steeling himself for what they were going to see. The spirits might not show themselves to him, but dead bodies were all too visible and John wasn't looking forward to that, at all.

## Chapter Six

Nick was grateful that driving had become possible again -- he'd barely been able to handle getting behind the wheel for a good six months after the accident that had broken his wrist and killed Matthew. It was strange how things like that worked; he hadn't been worried about being on the plane the day before at all, despite the crash he'd seen all too vividly in his dreams night after night.

"Turn left just there." John pointed and Nick followed his directions, pulling the car into the parking lot beside the large public building that housed the morgue. God, walking into a morgue -- the implications of that hadn't even occurred to Nick until now. Of course, most of the ghosts he'd encountered tended to linger either at the site of their deaths or, less often, the place they'd had strongest ties to when they'd been alive, so maybe the morgue wouldn't be full of ghosts.

He hoped.

"I really, really don't want to do this," Nick told John as they got out of the car. "You know, just for the record."

"I really, really don't want to do it either," John replied. "So you can add that to the record, too." He looked at the double doors and visibly braced himself. "I don't like the way these places smell. There's no air."

Since John practically lived outside, in good weather or bad, Nick could see why that would bother him, but there wasn't much he could do or say. Exchanging one last, commiserating glance, they walked through the doors, and began the transfer from reception desk to elevator to morgue.

It didn't take long once Nick had told the receptionist he was a relative of a crash victim. They obviously wanted the bodies identified and removed as soon as possible; the extra workload must have been making for all sorts of administrative nightmares. Nick wasn't sure if the lack of waiting time was something to be grateful for or not.

Beside him as they walked down long corridors, always close enough to touch, John was silent, swallowing often, his eyes a little glazed. Nick felt a twinge of guilt that he was making John go through this, but he knew that John wouldn't have waited outside, wouldn't have let them be separated.

The next receptionist looked tired, and the waiting room was busy. Nick told her who he was, and he and John sat down, managing to find two chairs together. The people around them were locked in their own grief, their gazes fixed blankly on the bare walls, their hands clasped tightly in their laps or clutching at the person next to them. The room held no hope, no possibility of a miracle.

Unless the person you were looking for wasn't one of the bodies. A mistake, an error, a change in plans that meant someone who was listed as being a passenger on Flight 57 to Miami had never gotten on board.

From the expressions on the faces around them, Nick didn't figure many people were thinking that.

After a long wait, in which people were called through to look at the bodies and, since they never came back, presumably sent out through a different door, it was Nick's name that was called.

The man waiting for them behind the door was wearing a lab coat and holding a clipboard. He was also frowning at the clipboard. "Brian Hennessey?" he asked.

Nick's stomach twisted a little bit. "No," he said. "Nick Kelley. Um, but yeah."

"But you're here for Mr. Hennessey." The man was still frowning as he flipped to another page. "Why are you here?"

"Because the airline called me," Nick said, looking at John uncertainly. "Is something wrong?"

"Mr. Hennessey's remains have already been identified."

"By who?" John asked, looking as puzzled as Nick felt. He turned to Nick. "Your dad didn't get married again, did he?"

"Not that -- I don't know." Nick tried to work out why the idea bothered him. "It's possible, I guess."

"It wasn't his wife," the man said. "And we've got you down as next of kin, but with you being out of the country we weren't sure how long it would take for you to get here. She had photographs, documents... we're trying to get the bodies processed as quickly as possible, you see." Belatedly, he seemed to realize that he was talking to

someone who'd just been told that their father was dead. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thanks," Nick said, not really knowing what else to say. He guessed it shouldn't have surprised him that his father had a girlfriend, even if his impression of the man had been that he didn't give a shit about anyone but himself. Plenty of women seemed to be attracted to men like that. "Could...can I see him anyway? Just for a minute?"

The man hesitated for only the briefest of instants. "Yeah. Sure. Of course." He stepped away from them. "It's right this way." They followed him into a room with a door at each end. In the center of the room was a wheeled gurney with a sheet draped over it; the shape underneath the sheet looked too small to be a human being. That probably wasn't a good sign. "He's already been identified, so I don't have to stay if you'd like a minute alone."

Nick nodded. "Thank you."

When he and John were alone, Nick reached a trembling hand out, but as soon as his fingers brushed against the cotton sheet he yanked his hand back.

"I don't need to." He wasn't sure if he wanted John to talk him into it or out of it. "See him, I mean. It's not what happened to his physical body that matters."

John cleared his throat, his voice lowering. For most people, that would be a sign of respect, or atavistic, if unacknowledged, fear that speaking too loudly might wake the dead. Nick suspected John just didn't want anyone to overhear him.

"I could look first. Tell you if it's bad. It'll bother me, maybe, but not as much. I didn't know him, after all."

"I don't know," Nick said. He didn't. But he told himself firmly that this might be his only chance to see his father again, ever. If his dad's ghost didn't turn up, then this was it. "No. I think I have to."

He could feel John's hand settle on his lower back as he drew the sheet down slowly, only revealing the top third or so of the remains on the gurney, and stared at them. They were burned to black in some places.

They didn't look human, and closing his eyes didn't take away the sight of them. Nick had to turn, walk away from John and the gurney, and press himself against the wall, hands over his face. "Cover it up," he mumbled, hoping John would be able to understand him. "Please."

There was a rustle and then John was behind him, standing close, between Nick and what was left of his father's body. His father's body. That twisted, charred lump of human remains had been Nick's father.

John's hands were on him, the clean, familiar smell of him wiping out the reek of disinfectant and death. John was shaking a little, too, which helped, but his hands were steady as he rubbed Nick's arms, forcing some warmth into Nick's chilled skin.

"It's over, it's done," he whispered into Nick's ear. "Over. We can go now, love."

Nick wanted the comfort of a real hug, but he didn't think he could bear to turn around knowing that he'd see the sheet-covered gurney again. "But it's not, is it? It's not over. I mean, maybe it is, but maybe it's not." Maybe his father would whisper into his other ear in the very next second, or in ten minutes, or in ten hours. He'd never know for sure until it happened, and sometimes the waiting...sometimes it felt like the waiting was what was driving him closer to his own death instead of the inevitability.

"This part is over." John pulled Nick back against him, wrapping his arms around him, a solid barrier for Nick to lean against. "Do you think you're up to getting out of here, because I really don't think they'll like it if I throw up over their nice clean floor."

That snapped Nick from his haze of self-involvement; he turned in John's embrace, keeping his eyes shut, and hugged him. "Yeah. Let's go."

Somehow, between the two of them, they made it out into the hallway, which was blissfully empty. At the far end was a sign that said "Exit," and they headed toward it without hesitating. Stepping outside into the fresh air -- even if it was too warm -- was such an enormous relief that Nick stopped and pulled John to him again, holding on.

"Are you okay?"

John took a deep breath and released it with a shudder. "Aye. Sorry."

He patted Nick's hip and then stepped back, his eyes going to a red car, the top down, a short distance away. Nick followed John's gaze, seeing a woman dabbing at her eyes, her head bowed. His throat constricted. God, so many people left grieving. As he began to look away, the woman's head came up sharply, as if she could sense that she was being stared at, her mouth tight and angry.

Nick gave her an apologetic smile and turned to John. "I think we need to go back and get some paperwork signed, don't we? So that we can arrange the --"

“You!” The woman had gotten out of the car and was walking toward them quickly, lush curves and a spectacular amount of auburn hair doing a good job of taking attention away from the slight sag of her features. Late forties, Nick guessed, dressed ten years younger. “Are you Nick? Nick Kelley? You are, aren’t you!”

“Um...yes?” Nick tried not to let his eyes be drawn to the jiggle of her breasts, because that was rude, but she definitely could have used a more supportive bra. “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

She reached out a hand and he shook it; she grabbed it with her other hand, holding his between both of hers. “No, but I know you. You’re Brian’s son, aren’t you? I’d have known you anywhere.” She blinked. “Oh, but you don’t know me! I’m Alicia. Alicia Kent?” At Nick’s confused look, she clasped his hand more tightly. “I was your father’s girlfriend.” A dramatic snuffle; it was hard to tell if it was genuine or not, but Nick liked to think that he could read people pretty well. “We’d talked about getting married, you know. He was...he was on his way to see me when the plane...”

“You’re the one who identified him,” John put in, more, Nick thought, to divert Alicia’s attention than because he wanted an answer. It had to have been her, after all.

“Don’t remind me.” She shivered, which did look real. Nick couldn’t imagine many people being unmoved by what fire did to flesh. “God, I can’t believe it, you know? He had so much going for him...” Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “He told me you lived abroad. England.”

“Scotland.” There was a note of affront in John’s voice.

“Yeah?” She shook her hair back. “Well, that’s part of England, isn’t it?”

“No.”

John took a deep breath to say more, but Alicia hadn’t really heard and was already going on. “And England’s a long way from the States, so I can’t help but wonder what the hell you’re doing here for a man you haven’t thought about for twenty fucking years.” She scrabbled inside the white leather bag slung across her shoulder, taking out a pack of cigarettes and a gold lighter. “You knew about it, didn’t you?” She lit a cigarette and took a long drag, her gaze traveling between them, shrewd and dry-eyed now. “You’ve been here a few days, getting ready to put the screws on, haven’t you? Dear Daddy left me, boo hoo, kiss it better with a nice chunk of cash.”

Nick had no idea what to make of this woman; all he did know was that he didn’t like her, and he didn’t think John did, either. “Knew about what?”

“Please.” Alicia blew smoke directly at him. “I’m not stupid -- I know there’s no way you’d be here otherwise. So did you finally break down after all these years and call him? Is that how you found out?”

“I might be able to answer that if I had any idea what you were talking about.” Nick took half a step back to be further away from the cigarette smoke she was exhaling. “I was on some list in a computer somewhere as my father’s next of kin and they called me when the plane went down. We came. That’s pretty much all there is to it as far as I know, so if there’s more to the story, you’re going to have to share it.”

“Or walk away,” John put in.

Alicia threw him a wary, assessing look. “Brian got lucky, just like you two lover boys were hoping to. Well, his luck ran out, which I have to say doesn’t surprise me.” Her eyes got a little wistful. “At least he hit the big one before he went. It’s what he would’ve wanted.”

“Got lucky? Marrying you, you mean?” John returned her appraising look, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck as he looked her over. “You’re well-off, are you, then?” He sounded skeptical and Nick shared his doubts. Alicia was flashy but it was the kind of flashy John referred to as “shop-soiled”; the convertible was a bright red, but the paint was pitted and peeling on one door.

“I am now,” Alicia said, preening. “Or at least I will be once I can figure out where he stashed it; I’m all he had when it comes right down to the wire. You never had any time for him,” she gave Nick a scornful look, “and that other brat’s just a kid.”

Nick felt, if it was possible, more confused than he already had. “Wait. What?”

“Look; I don’t care how far you came -- that money’s *mine*.” Alicia narrowed her eyes and stepped in closer to Nick, then actually jabbed him in a chest with a pointed-nailed finger. Did people really *do* that? He almost laughed. “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll stay out of my way, because I’ve waited a *long* time for my ship to come in, and I’m not just going to step aside and let you take it away from me.”

Wondering just when she was going to run out of clichés, and still in the dark, Nick exchanged a glance with John and then opened his mouth to speak.

“As you’ll see from the way we’re staring at you, we don’t have a bloody clue what you’re on about,” John said, forestalling him, sounding...foreign, somehow, the lilt in his voice in sharp contrast to Alicia’s strident tones.

He sounded surprisingly reasonable and calm. "What money and what kid? Nick doesn't have any brothers or sisters as far as I know, and I think he'd have got around to mentioning them at some point."

Alicia's eyes narrowed. "This innocent act isn't fooling me," she warned them.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, woman," John said, finally losing his temper, something Nick had been expecting to happen much earlier given the stress the man was under. "Will you speak sense or be on your way? Answer my bloody question!"

Clearly taken aback, Alicia stammered out, "Brian had another son -- you didn't know? He's...I don't know, seven or eight. He lives in Atlanta with his mother. But Brian never loved her! She tricked him into getting her pregnant; she wanted to marry him, but he saw right through her." At John's glower, she went on meekly. "Brian won some money, about a week and a half ago."

Nick was so stunned to learn that his father had another child that he barely heard her as she continued to talk about the money -- some kind of lottery thing.

"It's mine!" Alicia was defensive again now. "He would have wanted me to have it."

"Fine," Nick said, more to shut her up than anything else. "Keep it. I don't want it."

Her lips curled in a sneer that looked more at home than a smile would have been. "We're talking about a hundred thousand and change; you can't tell me that's not worth fighting over."

"Would that be dollars?" John sounded interested. "So, maybe fifty grand in real money? Och, I'd fight hard enough if Geordie overcharged me for a pint, but that much money is more trouble than it's worth. The taxman'd likely grab most of it, and to be honest there's not a lot to spend it on where we live." He gave her a smile that didn't look remotely friendly and added softly, "He's told you that you can keep it. Anything else we can do for you? Because I'm thinking it's time you left."

"Well, aren't we Mister High and Mighty?" Alicia took a last drag off her cigarette and dropped it to the ground, then put her hand on her hip. "No wonder everyone thinks English people are all snobs."

"Scottish," Nick said, choosing to focus on that instead of any of the other things she'd said because he knew it would bother John. "Just go, okay? I don't think we have anything else to say to each other."

Alicia smoothed her hair back and adjusted her leather purse strap. "Fine. Have a nice life. I know I'm going to." And with a toss of her head she was gone, clicking her way back across the parking lot in her high heels, which made her hips sway to and fro in a way she probably -- mistakenly -- thought was alluring.

"God, I need a drink," John muttered. "Or is it too early?" He turned to Nick. "You'll pay her no mind," he said authoritatively. "She's up to something, that one, and I don't trust her as far as I could throw her." He cast a dark look at the convertible as the engine started. "And I'd like to. Throw her far, far away."

"If the opportunity arises, you certainly have my permission." Nick thought he sounded as weary as he felt. "You think she was lying about the kid?" He shook his head before John could answer, and went on, "I don't know...I mean, she didn't seem smart enough to come up with something like that just to push me -- us -- off balance."

They watched as the car drove away, then went back inside and dealt with the paperwork. As he signed the last form, Nick was aware of a familiar and not entirely welcome prickling sensation just outside his skin. He always thought of it as his aura reacting to the presence of a spirit, but he'd never heard of anyone else having precisely that reaction, so it was hard to say for sure.

Hard to say, maybe, but it didn't leave him with any doubt.

He waited until they were outside the building again before he stopped John, bending over slightly and bracing his hands on his thighs just above his knees, breathing. The ghost wasn't getting too close, but it was insistent, following him. Nick tried to focus and found his eyes drawn to the cigarette butt that Alicia had discarded. His chest felt tight, panicky, in a way he couldn't explain. "You're going to have to drive," he told John.

"Nick?" John reached out, resting his hand on Nick's arm. "What is -- oh." He slid his hand into the pocket of Nick's jacket and took out the car keys, the jangle of the metal discordant and loud to Nick's ears. "Just over here, love. Not far."

Leaning on John and trying to breathe slowly, Nick made it to their car, collapsing into the passenger seat and closing his eyes. He was aware of John beside him, but the reality they shared was starting to slip away.

"Do you want me to get us out of here?" John sounded calm. "Outrun it, maybe?"

"Yes," Nick said immediately, but that was just his instinctive reaction and he knew that John knew that, too. "No. I don't know." His skin was crawling; the spirit was dark and angry, coiled up, waiting to spring its horror on

someone. On Nick, and he didn't want it.

He leaned forward and covered his eyes with his hands, trying to breathe. This was going to be bad, and he couldn't --

"Yes," he said again, and this time he meant it. "Yes. Go. Drive."

"Right." John gave Nick's back a brief, reassuring rub. "Buckle up."

Nick fastened his seat belt, usually the first thing he did when he got into a car since the accident that had killed Matthew, and leaned back, the traffic noise and insistent sunlight both dimmed and washed-out. Too much to think about, too much to deal with --

"Back to the hotel?"

"Yeah. Do you think you can find it?" Moving made things easier; put a little distance between them and the ghost.

"Aye. I've the maps, don't worry." John seemed confident that he'd be able to get them where they needed to go, so Nick concentrated on the sound of the car's engine, on the feel of his khakis against his palms where they were curled around his knees.

Ten minutes into the drive -- and it was only a total of twenty or so back to the hotel, Nick thought -- he knew. "It's not enough. It's...he's too strong. He's mad -- um, angry, not crazy, although maybe that, too. He's from the crash. He has to be." He kept his eyes closed because he thought that if the ghost suddenly manifested in the car he might go crazy; he couldn't deal with that, not in the car. Not in the car. "God. He's so strong."

"So are you." John sounded very sure about that but Nick couldn't share his confidence. "I can't feel him at all. Not even got the creepy-crawlies up my back."

They drew up at a red light and John twisted around and put his hand over Nick's, squeezing it. "Nearly there --" His eyes widened and he jerked his hand back. "God!" He licked his lips, his eyes meeting Nick's. "I see what you mean."

The blast of a horn behind them as the light changed to green jolted them both. "All right, damn it," John muttered, slamming his foot down and sending the car shooting forward. "I'm moving, aren't I?" He gave Nick a sidelong glance. "Can you see him? Or do you not want to try right now? I could maybe put the radio on...distract you?"

"I don't want to -- I can't, not in the car. I can't." Nick felt panicked, trapped, and he had to fight the instinct to throw the door open and jump out of the moving car.

"Ignore him."

John turned a corner, going fast enough to get a warning screech from the tires, and headed toward a glimmer of blue. The ocean. Their hotel was by the ocean. Nick stared at the water, willing it to get closer, but it wasn't working.

"Did I tell you?" John's voice was casual but pitched loud enough to have Nick turning to look at him. "Sheila's youngest has started playing the recorder."

"What?" It was unexpected enough to be distracting.

"Oh, aye." John nodded, indicating a turn and slotting the car neatly into a space in the left-hand lane. "Got plans to be in the next school concert, so she has. Sheila keeps hiding it, but wee Mary always seems to find it, usually before breakfast, just in time to get in a bit of a practice before school. She's getting really good at --"

John broke off, nodding at the hotel. "There we are. You want to go in? Or find a quiet bit of the beach?"

"Is there one?" Nick tried to see, but the sand looked crowded to him, and the thought of all those people around, all those people *watching* him, made him feel worse again. At least John's attempt to distract him had worked for a little bit. "No, inside. Okay?"

## Chapter Seven

He could barely pay any attention to what he was doing as John parked the car and they went through the lobby of the hotel and up to their room. Acutely aware of the spirit lurking behind him, he had to turn and look over his shoulder while John was unlocking the door.

"This is going to be bad," he said, going inside. He paced in circles, waiting for it to hit. The door clicked shut - if only it could keep everything out -- and he sat down on the end of the bed, then immediately got up again. "It doesn't happen like this. They're almost never this strong, and they don't leave their...John..."

"Right here." John went to him, standing close but not touching him. Nick couldn't blame him. John didn't see or hear the ghosts, not really, but he picked up on them enough to be, well, spooked, and the feelings usually intensified when he was in contact with Nick.

Not that it had ever stopped John giving Nick a hug when he needed it.

"Is he talking to you yet?"

John and he had developed a routine of sorts, with Nick finding that if he split his attention between John and the ghost, initially at least, he stayed in control more.

Giving in wasn't usually the best tactic; not when you were dealing with spirits who defined pissed off at times. This one, though...

Nick inhaled and his perspective changed, like the view from a camera's lens circling. He followed it, spinning, and then the spirit was there, black and full of hatred. It felt like it was clawing at him, and he jerked backwards away from it. "Don't touch me," he warned John. "This is...just don't." He didn't want John to feel this.

Seething hatred like nothing he'd ever known. There was terror threaded through and behind it, but the anger was so much stronger. He couldn't *see* the ghost, and somehow that made it more upsetting because he knew he couldn't turn his back on it. It had been behind him, following them, all this time, and he hadn't wanted to know, and now...now he had to watch it and he couldn't *see* it.

Nick knew he had to try to explain to John what was going on. "He's here. He's...God, he's so mad. Furious. He wants to --"

"Not be dead?" It wasn't a frivolous question; some ghosts were ghosts just because of their inability to accept their deaths.

"Maybe." It wasn't a real answer because Nick didn't have one; the spirit wasn't just angry at the circumstances, it felt like it was angry at *him*. "He thinks it's me. Who did whatever made things go wrong, and he's...No. No! I'm just someone you can talk to, or through, that's *all*. I wasn't even there."

The ghost -- Grant, his name was Grant, was that a first name or a last name? -- didn't believe him. There was a weird sound, like Nick's ears had popped, and then something that felt like a hand shoved him and he stumbled backwards.

Oh shit. He hadn't been counting on a physical manifestation.

"Get out of here," he hissed at John, hoping he'd understand it was him and not the ghost being spoken to. If this angry spirit did something to hurt John, Nick would never forgive himself, never.

"Not a chance in hell." John shook his head, standing his ground. "Not this time." He looked as solid as the rock of the island he came from, his blue eyes dark with determination. "Keep talking to him, love. Make him see."

"I can't, not and worry about you, too," Nick said, but he knew he was fighting a losing battle on that front. "At least keep back. Get against a wall or something."

He couldn't tell if John obeyed, too caught up in what the ghost was bombarding him with to spare any more thought to his partner. Grant was shouting at him inside his head -- not with any words that Nick could understand, just a senseless barrage of furious sound. It *hurt*. He moved back, trying to put some distance between them, not that he could see Grant nor did he think it would really do any good, and the ghost shoved him again. This time, already moving, he lost his balance and fell.

"I want to help you!" he cried, resisting the impulse to cover his ears because it wouldn't make any difference.

*This is all your fault!* The words were such a shock that Nick recoiled, almost overwhelmed. *Why did you do*

*this to me?*

"I didn't! I didn't have anything to do with it, I swear. I can hear you, that's all. I can help if you tell me what you want."

*I want you to take back what you did. Undo it!*

"I *can't*," Nick said desperately. "I would if I could, but I didn't do any of this. You were on a plane when it crashed." He was nothing if not an expert on how to say these things. "No one survived. No one."

Grant roared; the room seemed to tremble with it. *No! No.*

"I'm sorry." Before Nick had even finished, though, his ears popped again, painfully this time, and he collapsed forward onto the rug, knowing only that the spirit had fled. "He's gone. Not for good, I don't think. He wouldn't listen." The carpeted surface felt solid and comforting underneath him.

John was there, kneeling beside him, before Nick had chance to do more than catch his breath, pulling him up into his arms in an awkward hug, with Nick sprawled half across John's lap. It wasn't an ideal position, but Nick wasn't complaining. John felt pretty comforting, too, right then.

"God. Every time you do that, I just -- God --" John was shaking, his hands hard, painfully tight on Nick's arms, his eyes scanning Nick's face anxiously. "Tell me you're okay."

The first time Nick had kissed John had been moments after he'd dealt with a ghost. The memory of his bedroom back home, sunlit and cool, swam into Nick's head. They'd kissed, and, yeah, they'd been on the floor, then, too, grabbing at each other, desperate as hell to touch and feel and fuck, and it'd all been new and a little bit scary...

Nick twisted around as John's grip slackened until he was straddling John, kneeling across him. The room was very quiet now, the hotel all but empty of guests at this time of day; the cleaning staff had been and gone. Just him and John and an ache of need to get something back under his control amongst the chaos his life had become in the last few days. Longer.

He wanted John. He *needed* John, and he hadn't kissed him properly for so long, hadn't fucked him without thinking, always, about the dreams. The man John had turned to didn't matter right then. Never had mattered to John, if what he'd said could be trusted, and Nick did trust him. Always.

"I'm okay," Nick said, reassured by the words even as he took John's face, his beloved, stalwart face, between his hands. "He'll be back -- he's too strong not to -- but he's gone for now. It's just us." He kissed John, hard, wishing that there was a way to crawl inside him and be safe, and stay safe. "I want you. John, please. Please."

There was a moment's hesitation, as if John was thinking about all that they hadn't had time to work through, and then he made a small, soft noise in the back of his throat that sounded like agreement to Nick, and opened his mouth as Nick kissed him again.

John's tongue was warm against Nick's, his hands reassuring and at the same time powerfully arousing even though all they were doing was holding onto Nick's waist. Nick delved into John's mouth again and again, desperately eager, anxious for more.

"There's a perfectly good bed over there," John said finally, murmuring the words against Nick's throat as he bit down gently, sending a pleasurable chill over Nick.

They'd said that to each other that summer afternoon, as well, and a dozen times since. It was good to smile, remembering.

"Okay," Nick said, "Okay, okay. Come on, we can --" That was all he could manage between kisses, but somehow they got from the floor to the bed, and somehow Nick managed to get John's shirt off him along the way. He pushed John down onto his back and ran his lips from throat to collarbone and then down to one nipple, worrying at it with his teeth and loving the way it made John squirm.

"Ahh..." John was already voiceless and pliant, everything about the way he was moving telling Nick he could do what the hell he wanted and get nothing but John pressing against him, eager and ready for more. They weren't into anything extreme, and didn't really care who was giving and who was getting. They let their moods guide them, rarely needing to discuss what they'd do; their lovemaking moved toward a common goal and how they achieved it seemed to fall naturally into place.

Like now. When Nick wanted this; claiming John back as his own, making John feel wanted again, because he knew damn well he'd neglected him. Not that it made what John had done right, but Nick could understand it, at least.

He sat up, stripping off his own shirt and capturing John's hands as they rose to skim over his chest.

“No,” Nick said, but he bent to kiss John in apology even as he pushed John’s hands down to rest at his sides. “Let me do this.” He didn’t wait for an answer; just dove back in, worshipping John’s skin with his hands and his mouth until John was gasping and helpless.

Nick licked his way down to the waistband of John’s slacks, fingers fumbling the button free and sliding down the zipper. He slid his hand inside and grasped John’s erection, smiled against John’s stomach when John groaned.

The early afternoon sun was pouring through the window, painting the pale skin of John’s stomach gold, hazing each crisply curling hair with light. Skin that covered hard flat muscles, bunching and tensing under Nick’s questing, teasing fingers and tongue. It was a rediscovery, a revelation, as if the times he’d been with John recently had been a dream, imperfectly remembered and fading fast.

This was real. Nick’s tongue had the taste of John’s skin on it; his nails were raising faint marks as he scored them with a slow deliberation across the smooth skin of John’s inner thigh, revealed inch by inch as Nick worked John’s slacks down and off, his other hand returning to curl loosely around John’s shaft, feeling it quiver and fill, hard and ready in moments.

Tighter, harder, getting a gasp and an arch upward from John. “Nick...” It was his name and a plea, all in one.

“Shh. I’ve got you.” He slid lower, pressing his lips to the head of John’s cock before licking it slowly with his tongue, feeling the impossibly soft skin and listening to the harsh sound of John’s breathing.

Nick took him in and sucked on him gently, taking his time, careful not to provide enough stimulation to bring John any closer to the edge. When he finally released him, John brought a hand down and touched Nick’s hair; Nick lifted his face and kissed work-scarred knuckles.

He was achingly hard inside his khakis. Trying to think wasn’t working out so well for him just then, but he knew he hadn’t brought any lube, and he wasn’t sure if John had, either. Not that they couldn’t make do -- he moved lower, spreading John’s thighs wide with his hands and licking at the sensitive skin of John’s balls before sliding his tongue in a wet, lazy path to John’s entrance.

“That -- oh, God, that feels...” John’s voice trailed away to nothing, his fingers moving restlessly, softly through Nick’s hair, then moving lower, his fingertips brushing the back of Nick’s neck before cupping it firmly, sending a shiver racing down Nick’s spine. His foot nudged Nick’s leg. “Why aren’t you naked?”

“M getting there,” Nick muttered, turning his head to scrape his teeth across John’s inner thigh. “Don’t rush me.”

John chuckled, but the sound was cut off by another gasp when Nick licked him again. He rubbed a fingertip over John’s opening, getting him good and wet, then pushed his finger inside slowly, feeling the hot clench of John’s body. John gave a low, appreciative moan and rocked his hips. Nick slid higher and took John’s cock into his mouth again, sucking it as he fucked him with one and then two fingers. He wanted to feel John come, wanted to taste the warm rush of it over his tongue.

And John was fucking him back, taking Nick’s mouth, his ass lifting to push his cock deeper, never more than Nick could take, the two of them finding a rhythm that worked. Nick was lost in the feel of John’s body drawing his fingers in, tight and welcoming, even as his lips rounded into the perfect shape for John’s cock to fuck.

Close. So close...and Nick wasn’t sure he could ignore the insistent throb from his own cock for much longer.

John gave a needy moan that verged on anguished and Nick realized that he’d speeded up without noticing, both fingers and tongue, driving John toward a climax he wasn’t trying to avoid. He felt the first warm spurt of salty fluid, then another, swallowing in frantic, greedy gulps, gasping and drowning in the taste and smell, loving the sounds John was making for him.

One final spasm of John’s body around Nick’s fingers, one last twitch of his cock between his lips, and John was spent, gasping for breath but otherwise going completely relaxed.

Desperate beyond measure now, Nick pushed up onto his knees, one hand supporting him and the other scrambling to get the front of his slacks opened; he shoved them down to mid-thigh and reared up over John. With the tip of his cock poised at John’s entrance, every muscle in his body ached from the stress of holding back. “Can I?” he asked, panting. “Please. God, say yes.”

“Why in the name of God would I say no?” John smiled up at him, a fierce, hungry smile, his hands rising to curve around Nick’s ass and pull him closer.

The sound Nick made as he slowly pushed his cock inside was a hoarse but triumphant groan; it had been so long since it had felt like this, like claiming someone that belonged to him, and he’d forgotten how perfect it was.

Pulling back a little -- and God, that was hard to do when he wanted so badly to stay inside -- he slid both hands down John’s legs to his ankles, drew them up over his shoulders so he could push deep inside again. He bent to kiss

John, but ended up moaning against his lips instead when John's hands squeezed his ass, asking for more.

Nothing but a welcome waiting...Nick sank deeper into John with every slow thrust, willing his body to wait, not wanting this to end. John was still hard, or hard again, and he was flushed, eyes half closed, his mouth parted on a panting, shuddering breath when Nick pulled back from the kiss.

"God, you're so beautiful," he said, not thinking, just feeling the tight heat of John's body around his cock, seeing John's damp and swollen lips. Nick slid out, only halfway this time, and then back in again, finding a new rhythm of quicker, shorter thrusts, each one going so deep that it wrenched groans from both of them. He kissed John fiercely, his mouth hard and unforgiving, even though that wasn't how he felt. This wasn't about punishing John for what had happened; it was about taking him back, reclaiming him. "Oh, God."

John's head moved on the pillow, in what had to be a mute protest at Nick's description, but his mouth stayed in contact with Nick's skin, and within a moment Nick had John's lips back against his to be kissed and bitten, John's tongue flicking against his, their shared breath warm. He could feel John's hands traveling over his back, short fingernails doing a good job of scoring his skin just deep enough to spice the sensation with a slash of pain, spurring him on.

Then John's hands gentled deceptively, sliding smoothly back down to Nick's ass before his fingers dug in hard. His voice was hoarse, the words ground out against Nick's shoulder. "Want you. All of you. Nick, please..."

Nick tensed and froze, trying to hold back, not wanting this to be over so soon, but he was too close; he leaned back, lowered John's legs to the bed and then rolled sideways. One desperate gasp and he was moving again, fucking John deeply -- and the angle was different, somehow almost better -- and pushing his tongue into John's mouth. He slid a hand between them and wrapped his fingers around John's cock, stripping it ruthlessly as he started to come. "Ah! God!"

He shuddered, hips jerking, eyes locked on John's face as John came too, striping their stomachs with fluid and crying out with the force of it.

He could see everything he was feeling in John's eyes; relief, pleasure, love, and it was almost too much, but he couldn't look away. He only lost the close-up dazzle of John's blue eyes when John eased them apart; he returned at once to kiss Nick, a long, slow kiss with a hand cupping Nick's face tenderly, a smile on his face as the kiss ended.

"You're back," John said. "God, I've missed you, Nick."

Nick slid his hand from John's hip upward to his waist and wrapped an arm around him, hugging him tightly. It was all too much, and he couldn't even find any words; he just clung to John while the other man hugged him back and murmured soothing things.

At some point, just after he'd decided that they really should go and shower, maybe eat, he fell asleep, still held by John, still holding him.

## Chapter Eight

They napped for a couple of hours, which Nick normally preferred not to do, but at least the dreams had ceased, which was an incredible relief. Awake again, they had a quick, late lunch at the restaurant across the street from the hotel and then went back to the crash site with Nick behind the wheel again. He still felt shaken and worried when he thought about Grant's angry spirit, but he couldn't let that distract him from what he had to do.

There was a news reporter -- not the one they'd met before, although he was standing nearby -- talking to a camera at the top of the slope, with the remains of the airplane spread out across the ground below. "Only one body remains as of yet unidentified by family members, and officials expect to be able to close the file on that body as soon as the requested dental records are received."

"Grant," Nick murmured to John, not thinking anyone else would hear, but the other reporter, the one from before, went still and turned his head to look right at them.

The tall man immediately walked over. Duncan, Nick remembered, looking at the ID badge. "How did you know that?" he demanded, then frowned just before his eyes went wide. "I know who you are. You're the psychic!"

That got the attention of several people nearby, which was pretty much exactly what Nick didn't want. "I don't know what you're talking about," he lied.

"You know who the body is. Anyone else, I'd say it was a guess, but I remember you now. You're the man who found the body of that hiker earlier this year and left the country before giving any interviews with anyone." Duncan tilted his head, studying Nick closely, and then smiled. "I saw a photo of you in the police report, but it didn't do you justice."

"You've made a mistake," John said flatly.

"I don't think so." Duncan shook his head slowly. "It was a good story, and I got curious, so I did some research on your friend here. Never know when it's going to come in useful. That hiker wasn't the first body he'd found, and what with the police not bothering to ask him too many questions, I'm guessing they know him, and trust him."

"Well, we sure as hell don't know you, and we don't have any reason to trust you."

"No?" Duncan lowered his voice and positioned himself so that he was between the onlookers and Nick and John, his eyes fixed on Nick. "Look, I'll be up front with you; I don't believe in psychics. Not really. But I know a good story when I see one, and if you lost someone on this flight...well, that's just perfect, isn't it? Human interest angle covered and who doesn't love a ghost story?"

"Perfect?" Nick said, his voice was too loud, and he lowered it before continuing. "I'm surprised you can find a job anywhere considering your attitude. This is how you talk to people who've just lost someone? How often do you end up getting punched in the face?" Nick wasn't a supporter of physical violence, but even he was tempted by this guy. "Get out of here and leave us alone."

Duncan shook his head. "This is public property. I have as much right to be here as you do. Maybe more; at least I'm providing a service to the public."

"I don't see how." John's face was as unfriendly as it got, which sent a flicker of pleasure through Nick, dispelling some of his anger. John was so easygoing usually that it was a shock to see him reacting -- overreacting, even -- to Alicia and Duncan, but it was impossible to miss the instinct to protect Nick that was causing his temper. Nick found himself touched by it, even though he was well able to take care of himself.

"I was at the morgue right after you," Duncan said, avoiding John's comment deftly. "Asked around because I knew there was something about you...you weren't even the one who identified your father's body. You don't even share his name, do you? So if I'm wrong, and you were close, then I'll apologize, but I'm guessing I'm right." He grinned, his eyes sparkling. "I'm *always* right."

"I don't care if you're right or not." Nick knew it wasn't a real denial anymore; there wasn't any point bothering, since Duncan obviously knew who he was. "And I did come to identify his body. You think I'd -- we'd go into a place like that for the hell of it?" That little flicker of anger was still there.

"No, but if you'd known there was someone else here to identify him, you wouldn't have come all this way,

would you?" Duncan was watching him shrewdly, all his attention locked on Nick like John wasn't even there, and that was disconcerting in a way Nick couldn't have put a name to. "It must have been an entire day's trip from where you are. Scotland, right?"

At least he knew the difference between England and Scotland, which was more than Alicia had. Nick found himself relaxing a little bit. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right."

"So?" Duncan's smile invited more. Nick was aware of the calculation behind the charm; aware enough to identify it as a trick of the journalist's trade, but it didn't mean he was completely unaffected by it. It wasn't as if he'd ever made a secret of who he was and what he did, after all; not really. If it'd been Matthew standing beside him instead of John, Matthew and Duncan would probably be negotiating a deal for an exclusive interview right now, with Nick all but forgotten.

No. Not a secret...just not something he mentioned unless he had to. There was a difference.

And now, maybe, he had to.

"Okay. Fine." Nick looked at John, but it was hard to tell what his partner was thinking. "But not here, and not now." Despite the incredibly beautiful weather and the way that the landscape would have been picturesque if it hadn't been for the debris from the crash, there was a pall over this place, and being interviewed by this guy wasn't what he was here for.

"Wherever you want." Duncan reached into a pocket and handed Nick a business card. Their fingers brushed together. "There's my cell phone. Tonight?"

Nick nodded. "I guess." Might as well get it over with as soon as possible.

Duncan nodded, looking satisfied, and walked off quickly enough to make Nick suspect that he didn't want to risk Nick changing his mind.

As soon as the man was out of earshot, John rounded on Nick. "You're going to give this jerk everything he wants? Just like that? Since when do you do interviews?"

"It's not like he was just going to give up and go away quietly," Nick said, trying not to show how taken aback he was by John's attitude. And it wasn't like he couldn't understand it; his own first instinct had been to say no and get away from Duncan as fast as he could. "And this is different. There might be people who'll need to know who I am, what I can do. At least this way they'll be able to find me."

"Oh? You're planning on hanging around for a while, are you, then? Because once word gets out about what you can do, it's not going to be just the people connected with the crash who're going to be after you, and it won't end here." John shook his head, his gaze fixed on Duncan as he got into his car and drove away. "He's trouble, that one. And he thinks you're the way for him to get a story, does he?" John hunched his shoulder expressively before making the all-purpose sound that Nick guessed this time meant he wasn't happy. "Hmmp. Might explain the way he was staring, maybe."

"Staring?" Nick had no idea what John was talking about. He sighed and raised a hand to his forehead, rubbing it fitfully. "Look, don't be like this, okay? I can't right now."

"But you can get interviewed by sleazy gits like him?" John's mouth closed in a tight line before opening and biting out a terse, "Fine. Have fun. What do you want to do now?"

Nick felt sick knowing that John was angry with him, but this wasn't the time or place to do anything about it. He tucked his hands into his pockets, realizing that it made him smaller, less of a target, and looked across the hillside at the wreckage. "Go down there, I guess. If they'll let us." They'd seen people who were obviously relatives standing down amongst the debris earlier in the day, though, so he didn't think it would be a problem.

John bit his lip, his annoyance visibly draining from him. "I'm sorry. He just -- he rubbed me up the wrong way, somehow." He sighed, running a tanned hand back through his hair and ruffling it up. "Want to tell me I'm being an idiot? You can, if you like, you know; I'll not stop you. Not when it's true."

"You're being an idiot," Nick said, relieved. He reached out and touched John's hand. "Not really. I'm glad you look out for me; I don't know what I'd do without you. I just...I think I have to do this."

"Why?" John gave him a puzzled look. "I just don't see what good you think it'll do. He's one of those people who write about Elvis living on the moon; it's not like he'll take it seriously. You heard him; he doesn't even believe in what you can do. Probably thinks we're a pair of conmen."

Nick shrugged. "We'll show him we're not. And even if he doesn't believe us...I don't know if that matters." He was grateful for this conversation because it delayed what he needed to do. He could feel the first twinges of it, a ghost -- not Grant, thank God -- edging closer to him, needing him in a way it was almost impossible to be needed.

"You've got that look on your face," John said gloomily. "Have we got company, then?"

Guilt for having made this a part of John's life was pushed aside without much effort, because the ghost was already twisting tendrils through Nick, tugging him in the direction of the wreckage, and he didn't have any choice but to follow. He hated feeling like a child to the spirit world's Pied Piper.

"Yeah," he managed, starting down the hill. "Come on."

He was aware of John following him, but he didn't stop until he was near the torn-off wing of the plane. He knelt beside it, reaching out to touch the sheared metal.

"It's okay." Nick whispered it; he didn't need to be loud for the ghosts to hear him. "Whatever it is you need to say...I'm here."

It came at him all in a rush, images that were unusually blurry -- had the woman lost her glasses? It all happened so fast that he could barely keep up, and he had to put a hand down to balance himself; the grass was dried out like straw, stiff and prickly against his skin. She'd been afraid, but she knew that she was dead.

*Selena. My sister. I need you to tell her I'm sorry.*

"I'll find her," Nick promised. "Sorry for what?"

*I told our parents a secret I shouldn't have. It wasn't mine to tell.* There was a sensation of grief and guilt, so strong that Nick gasped. The flickering heartbeat of an unborn baby on an ultrasound screen. Bloodied gloves. An aching in a womb he didn't have. *I'm so sorry. I don't know why I did it -- I was jealous, maybe. That they always loved her more. They thought she was so perfect, and...anyway. I shouldn't have done that, and I'm sorry. I don't want her to hate me.*

John knelt down beside him, his arm curving around Nick's shoulders, supporting him. Nick couldn't spare him more than a glance, but John looked fairly calm, as if he sensed that this woman wasn't anything like the threat that Grant was.

And she wasn't. Tale told, the ghost waited, although for what Nick didn't know. He couldn't tell her that it was okay and have it mean anything; for all he knew, her sister wouldn't forgive her.

He could lie, but they always seemed to know when he did that...

"I'll tell her," he said finally, not sure what else she wanted. "I'll make sure she knows. You've done everything you can here, and it's time to go now."

There was a wave of sadness so intense that Nick felt tears well up in his eyes; he fumbled a hand out and caught at John's sleeve, then half turned and pressed his face to John's shoulder hard enough that it hurt. She was going, fading away, and then she was gone, leaving them alone on the hillside.

"She's gone," Nick whispered, still feeling the emotion of it. The sorrow was a deep ache that made it hard to breathe.

John nodded. "I can tell that much." His shoulder lifted slightly as he ran his hand over Nick's back, the slow pressure comforting. "They leave everything feeling brighter. Emptier." He helped Nick stand, never letting go of him. "Do you know who she was? Did she say?"

Nick shook his head, still clutching at John's sleeve. "Her sister's Selena. I think her name was something with an A -- Anne, maybe." The sunshine on his skin felt unnatural, too white, and he wished he'd bought sunglasses when he'd seen them at the airport. He'd been too exhausted then, and too distanced from John, to be able to really think about anything. He lifted his face and looked at John, whose nose was starting to look a bit pink. "We should get sunblock. Hats." Nick managed a smile. "You know, really embrace the tourist experience. God, I love you."

"A hat?" John looked horrified. "I don't wear hats." His hand slid over Nick's as he spoke, linking their fingers. "And the only thing I want to embrace is you." He held Nick's gaze, giving him a faint smile. "But I'm by way of being shy, so I'll wait until we're back in our room to do that."

They stared at each other for a moment and then John said softly, "I love you, too. Never doubt it."

*Do you?* Nick wanted to ask, but he drew a shaky breath instead and turned away without letting go of John's hand. He was so confused. "We need to find her. Selena. And..." He could feel more ghosts waiting, wanting him, but there were too many people around and the thought of being overwhelmed like that was more than he could handle just then. "I'll need to come back. Tonight? Once it's dark and everyone's gone." He didn't know if everyone would be gone, or how to work out the timing with Duncan. He felt a short, very sharp longing for Matthew, who might not have asked what he wanted but who would have, at least, taken care of everything. "I don't know how to do this."

John's hand tightened on his. "The easiest way, aye? Anne? Well, there was a passenger list printed in one of the newspapers; I'll check that and see if we can get her full name, and then --" He hesitated a moment. "Then you can ask that reporter to help you find her sister. He's probably been interviewing everyone he can get his hands on,

and we might as well use him. Call him when we get back to the hotel and arrange to meet him early tonight and tell him what you need. We'll come here afterwards, as late as you like. How's that sound?"

"Yes," Nick said, so grateful that he would have done anything John had asked of him just then, no matter what it had been. "Yeah, let's do that." He was so tired, even though they'd slept for a few hours in the middle of the day, and he didn't know if it was because of jet lag or the sheer emotion of the situation, of finding out that he had -- God, a half brother somewhere, maybe.

"And you'll eat something," John went on, sounding, for a moment, disturbingly like his mother, who was never going to be anything more than polite to Nick as long as she lived and probably not after, "and rest, because you're all but dead on your feet."

It wasn't the best choice of words but Nick couldn't really argue with him. He was.

"Yes," he said again, following the gentle tug of John's hand. "Yes, I am."

\* \* \* \* \*

John scrawled the details of the two Annes and one Angela he'd found on the passenger list onto a piece of paper and pushed it over to Nick. "They're the most likely. Do you want to ring him, then?"

Nick nodded, the pallor under his tan still making him look exhausted. They'd eaten, with Nick's eyes half-closing as he chewed listlessly at another meal from the limited room service menu, and then fallen asleep, the thick curtains drawn against the sun. John had woken first, staring down at Nick's face, frowning even in sleep, tense and worried. It wouldn't get easier on him, not until they were on their way home, and John hated knowing that for certain, because it meant that there was nothing he could do to help.

It'd been one hell of a day and it wasn't over yet. John stabbed the pen he'd been using into the notepad, punching small holes in the paper for no good reason at all but to be destructive, as his mother would have told him, before snatching the pen away and rapping his knuckles with it.

He'd been waiting for Nick to bring up the twin subjects of his father's girlfriend and son, revelations which had to have left Nick feeling stunned, then curious -- about his brother anyway. John didn't think that there was much mystery to Alicia. Nick hadn't said a word, though, and the vague disquiet John had felt about that had been channeled into his response to Duncan.

How Nick had swallowed the thin story the man had fed him, John didn't know. Or missed the looks. Plain as day that the reporter had taken a fancy to Nick, or was trying that angle to get what he wanted.

John wasn't sure which of those options annoyed him the most, but he was damned sure Nick wasn't going to meet Duncan alone.

"Uh-huh," Nick was saying into the phone. His eyes went to the paper John had been mangling, then his gaze lifted to meet John's questioningly. John shrugged, and Nick's lips twitched in an almost-smile. "Yeah, but you'll have to decide where. We don't exactly know the area." He smiled properly this time at something that Duncan said. "No, probably not. It'd be kind of hard to talk. Uh-huh. Yeah, I guess." Nick reached over and took the pen from John's hand, scribbled something onto the crumpled paper. "Listen...I need to ask you a favor."

John didn't like the sound of that, or the hopeful tone of Nick's voice, but it wasn't as if they didn't need the help, and they were rather limited as far as where that help might come from.

"I have a message for the sister of one of the people who died, and I need to get it to her. Yeah -- all I know is her name is something like Anne -- um, not the sister, the one who died -- the sister is Selena." Nick read the names John had written down to Duncan. "Yeah, I don't know for sure, but...thanks. Thank you. That'd be great. Okay. We'll see you in a little while." He hung up the phone.

"So he's going to help you." John didn't make it into a question; there wasn't any point when he knew the answer. "That's...good." He nodded, trying to look convincing, and knowing before Nick grinned at him that he hadn't come close. "When and where?" he said gruffly.

"At his hotel. First he kind of suggested some restaurant where they have country music and line dancing, but he was kidding." Nick smiled slightly at the memory. "He said he was just going to be hanging around tonight working on some stuff, so whenever." He looked uncertain suddenly, in the same way he had earlier when they'd been back at the crash site and he'd admitted he wasn't sure how to handle the situation. "When do you think we should go?"

John shrugged. "We should give him some time to get the information we need before we see him." He looked around the hotel room, feeling suddenly hemmed-in. "Look, why don't we do what you said; do the tourist thing for an hour or two." He gave Nick a small, hopeful smile. "I'll buy you a drink with a wee, fancy umbrella in it, if you like, at one of those bars on the beach, and we can maybe...well, we could...talk?"

Usually, that would be the last thing he felt like doing when they had a problem, but there were times Nick needed pushing, and this felt like one of them. And John had had enough of Nick's silence.

"Okay." Nick didn't sound thrilled about the idea, but John tried not to take that personally; it wasn't as if he was looking forward to it, after all.

They found a bar that wasn't quite as crowded as the rest -- technically it was the dinner hour and the place didn't serve much in the way of food, so most people had probably departed for restaurants at this point. Nick did, indeed, order a drink that came with an umbrella; some sort of fruit based thing. John found himself approving based solely on the fact that the thing had to provide some vitamins, which Nick was looking like he needed, then silently berated himself for turning into his mother.

Leaning back in his chair, Nick sipped at the drink, then licked his lips. The crash of the waves was audible from where they were sitting even over the sound of the music.

John took a sip of beer, light and sharp and cold, and fiddled with a fraying corner of the woven mat in the center of the table. "You have a brother."

It seemed to be more of a conversation stopper than a starter. Nick stared at him in silence and John tried again. "It must be -- well, I can't think of a word. And I can't imagine how it feels because I've always had my sisters so I'm used to it. You'll be wanting to go and see him?"

"If he even exists," Nick said, not looking up. His eyes were focused on John's fingers as they frayed the mat further, though, so at least he wasn't denying John's presence. "He might not. She might just have been...who knows."

"She sounded pretty angry about it," John pointed out. "I don't think she'd have made it up. Especially if she thinks the boy's entitled to this money your dad's supposed to have won."

Money he was glad Nick didn't seem interested in. Lord knew they could use it; the house needed a new roof and his boat was getting old...but they'd manage, the two of them, without taking money from a dead man's pockets.

Nick was quiet, staring at his glass. "He probably should have the money," he said. "If he does exist, and if the money exists, and if there's a way to get it." He sounded far away, though, and John didn't like it.

"His mother can fight this Alicia for it." John nudged Nick's foot gently under the table, wanting to jolt him out of his self-absorption. "You've got enough on your plate; it's not your problem. I just thought you might want to meet him, but if you don't --"

"It's not that." Nick was silent long enough that John wondered if this whole idea had been a bad one, but then his gaze flickered up to meet John's. "What if he doesn't want to meet *me*? What if he doesn't even know about me, and finding out just...fucks things up for him?" He lifted his glass, plucking the paper umbrella out and dropping it onto the table before downing most of the drink in several swallows. "My own father didn't want anything to do with me; I don't see why this kid would."

"Your father was a stupid fucking --" John stopped himself. Nick didn't need to hear an opinion John had kept bottled up for as long as he'd known Nick. Not now, when it had ceased to matter. "He left your mother, not you, and he lost his chance to get to know you, which serves him bloody well right. Your brother's different. He's a child, like you were, and he's lost his dad, just like you did. Could be you'd have a lot to say to each other."

He stretched his hand out across the table, palm up, curling the tips of his fingers under the rolled-up cuff of Nick's shirt and rubbing his knuckles against Nick's wrist for a moment. That, just that, was enough to have his pulse jumping. He'd missed touching Nick so much in the weeks Nick had been so caught up in his dreams. Missed the casual kisses as they worked together in the kitchen preparing a meal, chatting away about something or nothing, both of them knowing how easily the kisses could turn heated, frantic, until they were fumbling at zips, trying to get to skin, grinning at each other between hard, hungry, frantic kisses. Christ, he'd shoved Nick up against the kitchen table once and gone to his knees to get him off, only to find he was still clutching a carrot in his hand.

Smiling at the memory of that, and of the expression on Nick's face as he'd looked down, John let his hand lift to cup Nick's face, careless for once about who might be looking. Let them look. "And he'll be lucky to have you in his life," he said softly. "The same way I am."

"I'm the one who's lucky." Nick sounded as if he meant it, but his eyes didn't quite reflect the same openness that they might have a month or two ago, and they clouded over far too quickly. He raised his own hand and caught John's, then kissed it. "What if he doesn't show up? My dad, I mean. What if he was happy the way things were and he doesn't...what if he doesn't have anything to say to me?" Worse, John thought, would be if Brian had messages to pass on to others but nothing for Nick, but he was certain Nick had thought of that already as well. Nick bit his

lip, then sighed and said, as if he were trying to convince himself, "It doesn't matter. I said goodbye to him a long time ago."

There was nothing John could say to that. It was true, but he didn't think Nick believed it.

He finished his drink in a long swallow, teeth aching from the chill of it. "That Duncan's had time to find out what we wanted. We should go."

Aye. Go. Before he gave into an impulse he'd been fighting and asked Nick what had gone wrong between them. That was a conversation John really didn't want to have in public. He had a feeling it was going to go badly but then, the silence wasn't working either.

But Nick didn't move, just continued to sit back in his chair, nearly empty glass in his hand. When John looked at him, he said, "We don't really talk, do we?"

"We never had to." John could see the tables around them, filled with people chattering; animated, smiling faces -- but how much of what was being said was important, he didn't know. Not much, probably. It was difficult for him after a lifetime of hiding a lot of what he was thinking and feeling, but he didn't think it was any easier for Nick, either. "We always -- I *thought* we always just...knew." He smiled wryly. "That sounds like something off a greeting card, doesn't it? But I'd have put money on us being the one couple on the island who could share what we were feeling because of what we'd been through together. I never thought you'd shut me out the way you did."

He'd known that would happen. Known that as soon as they started to talk, it'd all pour out of him. He folded his hands in his lap, fingers tightly interlaced, gripping hard enough to hurt, trying to distract himself from the memory of his bewildered, confused pain, then gave up and put them on the table. It hadn't helped.

"I'm sorry. That was the last thing I'd ever want to do." Nick was watching him. "I couldn't even really see that I was doing it; everything was too...intense. I didn't know how to deal with it, so I guess I tried not to." He shifted his chair closer and reached for John's hand, holding it tightly.

"I told you." John stared at him, feeling his temper rise, although he didn't pull his hand away. "Over and over, I asked what was wrong, tried to get you to talk, to come out for a bit...I thought it was that book of yours, which was bad enough, but it was worse and you still didn't tell me. I'd have understood. I'd have helped." He dropped his voice, because it was that or start to yell. "You never gave me the chance. Weeks of it, Nick. Weeks, and me thinking you'd had your fill of me --" His free hand clenched into a fist and he forced it to relax.

"I'm sorry," Nick said again. "How many times do you want me to say it? At least I wasn't running around with someone else behind your back, kissing him and -- God." He drew a shuddering breath. "I don't want to fight. I really don't. Please."

"I don't either." John took a breath that did nothing to help the tightness across his chest. "And if I stay, we will." He stood, pushing his chair back neatly under the table. "I'm going back to the hotel. I'll get a taxi, or walk, maybe. I remember the way. You...if you still want me with you tonight, come by for me after you've finished being interviewed."

He turned away quickly, making his way through the tables without looking back, knowing Nick was probably just watching him go without lifting a finger to stop him.

## Chapter Nine

Nick tried to go after John, but he was so stunned that the man would get up and walk out on him that he sat there staring for too long; by the time he managed to get to the front door, a sudden crowd of young people had appeared, blocking his way. There was no sign of John by the time he made it out onto the sidewalk. Maybe, he told himself, John just needed a little time by himself.

It was hard to find Greg Duncan's hotel. Nick made two wrong turns and ended up halfway back to his own before he realized the mistake he'd made and turned around. He had the piece of paper with Duncan's room number on it in his pocket and checked it as he waited for the elevator, trying not to wish that John was beside him. He'd learned a long time ago that wishing that things were different didn't help.

Greg smiled at him when he opened the door. "Where's your shadow?" he asked, stepping back to make room for Nick to enter.

"He's my partner," Nick said, emphasizing the word and staying where he was. "If you can't deal with that, maybe we shouldn't do this."

"Business partner as well? Doesn't that get a little...smothering?" Greg shook his head. "Sorry. Force of habit. Look; come in, will you? I promise to behave." He gave Nick a wink. "Until I've finished interviewing you, anyway."

He had to be kidding, Nick told himself. He went in and Greg shut the door. Over on the table near the mini-fridge was a laptop, Greg's cell phone, and a bunch of other things piled up -- papers, notebooks, file folders. "Kind of small for an office," Nick said, gesturing.

"Temporary base." Greg shrugged. "I'm used to it. I've got a rented apartment in Boston, but I'm never there. Always on the move, you know? And I can write anywhere."

Nick knew exactly. It was how his life had been until he met John, after all.

"Yeah." Nick noticed a half-eaten plate of food on top of the dresser. "Oh, did I interrupt your dinner? I thought --"

But Greg was already waving away the importance of the food. "Nah, don't worry about it. It wasn't that great to begin with, and once it started to get cold...you'd think I'd be used to hotel food by now. I guess you never get used to some things." He pointed to the padded chairs near the table. "Sit. Can I order something for you? A drink?"

"No. Thanks." Nick thought he'd already had enough if he was going to be driving back to pick up John -- assuming John was even there. Maybe he shouldn't have come. But he was here now; he might as well get this over with. He sat down in the chair that faced the one in front of the computer. "So what do you want to know?"

Greg sat down and spread his hands expansively -- which brought one hand close to a small tape recorder. He cocked an eyebrow at Nick, who shrugged and nodded permission, and then pressed a button. "Everything. What I found out about you was sketchy to say the least and the police wouldn't give me anything. So let's start at the beginning. What can you do, how do you do it, and when did it start?"

He leaned back in his chair and smiled, looking, for the moment at least, genuinely interested and sympathetic. Since he'd made it clear he didn't believe in psychic powers, Nick couldn't see that attitude lasting long. It didn't bother him; he was used to people thinking he was a conman or deluded; including Matthew, to a certain extent, which had always irritated him.

John's unquestioning acceptance of his powers had been such a relief after that...

"It started when I was young. Just a kid." Nick tried to organize his memories into something that would make sense even though it probably didn't matter -- Greg would probably rearrange everything he said. "I saw stuff, heard stuff. I didn't even know what it was at first, and then I didn't know that *everyone* didn't see it. I guess I was pretty confused. And gradually I started to realize that these...voices, and whatever, were trying to communicate with me. And I couldn't just leave them when no one else could hear them." He shifted in his chair, trying to get physically comfortable when it was impossible to be emotionally comfortable. "I don't know how I do it. I just do."

"Is it inherited? Could your father do it?" Greg's eyes were oddly intent now. "Is that why you came here; to talk to his...spirit?"

"I don't have any reason to think he could," Nick said. "I don't...I didn't really know him. He left my mother just after I was born; I met him once when I was in my early teens, but that was it."

"Your mother's dead, isn't she?" Greg had lost his smile. "That's public record," he added, as if to forestall a protest from Nick. "I ran a background check on you, and it came up. Like your other partner dying a couple of years back." He sighed, a long, slow exhalation. "Death follows you around, doesn't it? Or do *you* follow it? How do you make a living from something like this, anyway?"

Nick swallowed, a little unsettled. "I don't," he said. "Anymore. I used to -- Matthew and I did. Not much of a living, I guess, but enough. If I followed death around I wouldn't have moved to one of the most remote places in Scotland in an attempt to find some peace." His voice was sharper than he'd meant it to be.

"Yeah, about that." For the first time, Greg's voice turned skeptical. "What happened there? From the bright lights to the boonies? Aren't you bored out of your skull?"

"No," Nick said truthfully. "I'm not bored at all. I love it. And John's there. It's where he grew up; he'd never dream of living anywhere else."

"'Whither thou stayest'?" Greg misquoted, his mouth twisting. "Does he know what you've given up? You could have been huge; the way you look; what you can do...we're talking TV shows, books, interviews on primetime, not just with a hack like me in a cheap hotel room. You weren't even tempted back then? And now? Now that you're back where *you* grew up? Not even a little bit?"

Nick hesitated. "That's not what I want," he said slowly. "I have to help -- I don't know how *not* to -- but I don't want publicity for it." He frowned because that wasn't quite right either. "I just want people here to know that it might not be too late to say goodbye to their loved ones. That's all."

Greg considered that in silence for a moment and then met Nick's eyes. "But it is too late. They're dead. You can't seriously expect me to believe that there's any way to communicate with them." He shivered, the sharp movement looking involuntary. "I saw some of the bodies. They died screaming, terrified -- and you're going to lie to the people they left behind, and pass on some bullshit messages of how they're in a good place, with Uncle Johnny and Auntie May? I know you might think that's a comfort, but it's a lie." His gaze hardened. "Isn't it?"

"No," Nick said. "No, it's not." He stood up. "Look, I knew you didn't believe this when I walked in here, and you're certainly not the first person who told me they thought I was a liar, but I don't want to do this. Not now. Well, probably not ever, but definitely not now --"

Greg turned off the recorder, his face calm again. "Why? Why not now?" He got to his feet and took a step forward, close enough that Nick was aware of him on a deeper level than was usual, each outward breath Greg took warm on his face. "Why did you come here? Your...partner didn't want you to, but you did anyway. You say you don't want the publicity and you're not trying to persuade me you're genuine, so why are you here?" His mouth curved in a smile that Nick had to admit was charming. "Well?"

"I thought maybe people might believe me faster, if they knew," Nick said, but he was uncertain again, not knowing what his answer was supposed to be. Not knowing what the answer actually was.

Greg sighed, his smile turning rueful. "Damn. My ego's crushed, but I'll survive." He gestured to the chairs. "Look, sit down, will you? Let's start over. I was...distracted, before, and a little off-balance."

As always, Nick was willing to give a person another chance. "Your ego?" he asked, sitting down.

Greg sank into his chair and picked up a pen, twirling it slowly between his fingers. His hands were well-cared for, Nick noticed absently, smooth, tanned, with neatly clipped nails. He thought of John's hands on him, rougher, scarred here and there, mementos of encounters with rock and rope; fishing was far more physical than Nick had realized. At least it was the way John did it. Gentle hands, though, when they had to be, sure and certain.

Nick dragged his eyes up to Greg's face and saw that the man was slightly flushed.

Greg tossed the pen aside and leaned forward, his knees bumping against Nick's.

"I thought -- God, I can't believe I'm admitting this -- that maybe you were interested in seeing me. When you turned up alone..." He rolled his eyes. "But I guess I'm a reporter first and foremost, because I couldn't resist asking you a few questions, and I blew it, didn't I? Got you pissed off at me when that's the last thing I wanted."

"I'm not." Nick wasn't. In fact, he was too stunned at what Greg had just said to think much of anything. "I had no idea. Why can't you believe that there might be more to the world than you can see or hear? Or is that you don't want to?" He often suspected that was the case for many people -- that the thought of ghosts was so disturbing to them that they couldn't *let* themselves believe.

"It's asking a lot," Greg protested. "Come on; if I told you there was an invisible pink elephant in the corner over there, what would you think? Would you trust me? Of course you wouldn't. And in your line of work you must

have come across plenty of people who're taking advantage of people's grief and gullibility. I don't get that feeling from you, but it doesn't mean I'm prepared to accept that you can really do what you say." His eyes were shrewd. "There's a rational explanation for everything. Like that name you pulled out of the air, for instance."

"Grant? You think so?" Nick could feel the tension in his shoulders and upper arms. "What about the fact that his parents both abandoned him when he was too small to remember either of them? Is there a good explanation for that? How about that he drove a car into a brick wall about four years ago and cracked his spine? They said if it had been a few millimeters higher he would have been paralyzed."

"You knew him before he died?" Greg looked startled. "I'm sorry, I didn't --" Nick shook his head and Greg laughed uncertainly. "You *didn't* know him? You just picked all that up from talking to his ghost? Look, I don't want to be rude but you couldn't know any of those things. Or you're just dreaming them up out of thin air." He tilted his head, his expression serious. "I'm going to need more than that."

"I don't care," Nick said wearily. "Check his records -- can't you do that? See if the crack's there in his spine. T-6, whatever that means. Do you want me to try to read you? Is that what you're getting at? It won't work." He shook his head again. "I get that sometimes -- psychic flashes -- but not on command."

"Anyone but you, I'd say that was convenient." Greg sighed. "It's no use. I can't see you as a conman. And trust me, in my line of work you get good at picking up on them. So I'll go as far as to say I believe you mean it, even though I still can't get my head around the idea of messages from beyond. How's that? Good enough for us to stay friendly?"

"That depends," Nick said.

"On what?" Greg was frowning, but more in a curious way than anything else.

"On if you got that information for me. About Anne's sister, Selena?"

"Oh. That was easy." Greg twisted around in his chair and grabbed a piece of paper off the table. "Name, address, phone number, email...Good enough?"

Nick reached eagerly for the paper, looking at it to make sure he could read the handwriting, just needing to see it. "Thanks," he said. He folded up the paper until it fit into his closed hand, not wanting to put it into a pocket. Of course, having the information meant that he'd have to contact Selena. Tomorrow, he told himself. Then he looked at Greg. "What would be good enough? Proof, I mean. For you."

"I'm not sure anything would." Greg sounded almost regretful. "Even if I saw it myself I'd be wondering where the hidden camera was. It's the price you pay for being a good investigator; you have to be suspicious and it's a hard habit to break. I'd like to be able to tell you differently but I...like you too much to do that. To lie. Even if it means losing the chance to interview you, and losing the chance to...well." He grinned, swift and sweet. "I could rent a kilt, maybe? Would that help?"

"With what?" Nick was genuinely confused for a few seconds; then he realized, again, what Greg was talking about. "Oh. Uh...not really. I mean, don't get me wrong, you're a good looking guy and I'm sure you're...great, and everything, but I'm not like that. I don't want anyone but John." It was true, and yet he hesitated as he said it; things with John were so fucked up, and part of him doubted if John would even be there when he went back to their hotel room. "Anyway, why would you want to? With someone you were suspicious of."

"I told you; I think your motives are pure." Greg ran his tongue over his lips and smiled. "Had hoped the rest of you wasn't, but even so, I don't see why it would matter. I'm not talking about death do us part; just some fun. You're...different. Hot as hell, yes, but that's gettable anywhere. You just attract attention and the funny thing is, I don't think you know it. Your John does, though. That came over loud and clear. Didn't like me looking one little bit."

Nick didn't want to feel anything -- didn't want to feel warm and pleased, definitely didn't want to feel the first thin stir of arousal -- but somehow he couldn't help it. He shifted in his chair and bit his lower lip. "He and I are about more than just fun." It didn't sound particularly convincing.

"That's very nice," Greg said lazily. "As long as you get the fun, too." His gaze was openly appraising, openly appreciative now. "He seemed the staid and sober type to me. Possessive. Christ, I was just looking...where's the harm in that?" He leaned in a little. "Now, if I'd done this..." His fingers dragged slowly along Nick's leg, stopping well short of his groin but still leaving tingles. "Right in front of him, well, maybe then he'd have a right to get pissed. Seeing how you're his property by the sound of it."

"I'm not his property." Nick said it with just a hint of warning, even though there were ways in which he *did* belong to John and always would. But for some reason -- and he wasn't sure what it was -- he didn't get up and walk out.

“Committed? And you’re heading back to that dinky island?” Greg shook his head. “What a waste.”

“It’s not,” Nick said gently, feeling suddenly sorry for the man. “It’s not a waste.” He smiled a little bit and ventured, “No hard feelings?”

Greg chuckled. “Nah. But you can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“So...” Nick leaned forward in his chair. “If I’m not mad at you and you’re not mad at me...”

“Yeah?”

“You think you’d be willing to do another favor for me?” Nick asked.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the way back to the hotel Nick got lost three times, but he finally made it in one piece. His chest ached with tension as he unlocked the door to their room.

John was sitting on the edge of the bed; his head jerked up as Nick came in. He didn’t say anything, but the relief on his face was clear. The room was dark, lit only by the light spilling out of the small bathroom, and he could see that John was cradling a half-empty bottle of water in his hands. John took a slow, careful sip from it, and then his control cracked. He dropped it to the floor, where it teetered and fell, launching himself across the space separating them and taking hold of Nick in a hug that verged on frantic. “God, I’m so bloody sorry.” John’s arms tightened convulsively, making Nick gasp, and then slackened. “I’ve been sitting here thinking you were going to go by yourself. I’m so bloody sorry for leaving you like that.”

Nick hugged John back, grateful beyond words that he was there and still wanted him. “Shh,” he murmured, stroking John’s hair. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” John shook his head, his breath warm against Nick’s neck. “It’s not right between us anywhere these days, and I don’t know what to do to *make* it right.” He pulled back a little so that Nick could see his face, screwed up and tense. “I’ve never done this before. You’re my first -- God, I don’t know what to call it! Relationship? It’s all still so bloody new, you see. Having you always there, living with you -- I’ve never done it before and even now I wake and you’re beside me and it’s like a dream. Like a dream,” he repeated, his voice desolate. “Aye. And I can tell you I’m sorry, and we can go to bed, sure enough, but it’s not changing anything. It’s not making it right like I want to.”

“Then we’ll try something else,” Nick said, with more confidence than he felt. “Until we can figure out how to make it right.” They had to; the thought of not being with John made Nick feel physically ill. “Just tell me you want to. Tell me you’re not giving up on me. On us.”

“I wouldn’t be feeling this way if I were giving up.” John rubbed at eyes Nick could see now were damp with rare tears. “I don’t think I could, anyway. You matter too much to me. I love you, remember?” He sniffed, the prosaic gesture breaking the tension. “Christ, I’ll be sobbing on your shoulder in a minute...Will it be the jet lag, do you think? Because it’s not something I’m in the habit of doing.”

“Your body can get pretty screwed up from the time change,” Nick agreed, leading John over to the bed and sitting both of them down. “It’s okay. We’ll figure everything out.” He smoothed John’s hair back with one hand. “Maybe we should lie down for a little while and try to get some sleep?”

“Are you tired, then?” John asked as they kicked off their shoes and settled down on the bed, facing each other, automatically finding a position that let them hold each other. “I feel like we’ve done nothing but sleep, somehow.” He leaned in and pressed a hesitant kiss to the corner of Nick’s mouth, quick and light. “We could maybe just rest a bit before we go...”

“Let’s do that.”

They lay there quietly for a minute, slowly relaxing, and then Nick began to run his hand along John’s back -- up over his shoulder, fingertips pressing into the tense muscles there. Down along his spine, to his waist, rubbing gently, then back up to John’s neck, fingers sliding into his hair and ruffling it. John sighed. Nick took that as a good sign and let himself continue to fiddle with John’s hair, mussing it only to smooth it down again.

Less hesitantly now, John kissed Nick again, an unhurried, closed-mouth kiss, his hand cupping Nick’s face, his eyes happier than Nick had seen them for a long time.

“You’re supposed to be getting some rest,” Nick reminded him, but kissed him again anyway, thumb and fingertips massaging away the tension at the base of John’s skull and the back of his neck.

“This *is* restful,” John murmured. “I touch you and I can’t think about anything else. And when you do that...” He made a contented sound and tilted his head back encouragingly.

“You’re really tense.” Nick focused the tips of his fingers on rubbing each rigid spot he could find, slowly and

gently coaxing John to relax. It felt so good to touch John like this, to demonstrate with his hands how much he loved him, and Nick found John's lips again with his own, kissing him in light, open-mouthed kisses that were more teasing than anything else.

"Aye?" John was smiling a little against Nick's mouth. "You can tell that, can you?" He gave Nick a final kiss, his tongue flickering across Nick's lip, and rolled to his stomach. "Go on then," he said, his voice muffled by the pillow. "If you're that determined to get me relaxed, you might as well do it properly." He rotated his shoulders experimentally. "Maybe a wee bit stiff..."

"More than a wee bit," Nick countered, moving until he was straddling John's hips so that he could get a good grip. John groaned when Nick's thumbs dug into his shoulder muscles, his ass flexing underneath Nick in a way that wasn't at all unpleasant. "Breathe. That's it. Nice, deep breaths."

John did as he was told, his back rising and falling in a slow, regular rhythm as his body surrendered to Nick's touch. Nick could feel each muscle group become lax under his hands, see John settle and spread out on the bed, sinking into the covers as if he'd become heavier somehow. There was something oddly trusting about John like this, as he allowed Nick to coax and urge him toward a half-doze.

He kept going until John's breathing was so slow and steady that he was sure the man was asleep, then eased off him and lay down beside him. He didn't intend to fall asleep -- he could definitely feel the pull of it, but he thought if he did he'd sleep the night through.

John looked so peaceful, his eyelashes resting gently on his cheeks. Nick couldn't resist reaching out and touching his face; he stroked light fingertips over John's cheek and jaw and lower lip.

Under his fingers, John's lips pushed out in a kiss, slow and sensual. Okay, maybe he wasn't asleep after all... Nick held his fingers steady and John kissed them again, his mouth lingering, dragging across an inch or two of skin with a drowsy deliberation.

"I thought you were sleeping." Nick pressed closer, tracing John's eyebrow with a fingertip.

John smiled faintly. "I am. Fast asleep." He tilted his head and nuzzled the inner crease of Nick's wrist, fastening his lips on the place where Nick's pulse was beating and sucking at it until Nick felt his skin throb in response.

"Very convincing. There's no doubt in my mind." Nick shivered as John's teeth scraped very, very lightly over his wrist. He was getting hard just from this.

"Good..." The word was breathed, not spoken, leaving Nick's skin flushed with a transient heat. This was a side of John he hadn't seen before and he wondered if it would have happened without the trauma they'd been through; if John's innate caution had been shattered by guilt and the fear of losing him. Then John's tongue traced a line that ended in the center of Nick's palm and Nick's cock twitched at the same time his fingers did.

He gave a small, startled moan when the tip of John's tongue teased the sensitive webbing between two fingers, then curled closer to John. "God. That feels..."

"Shh..." John murmured chidingly, his lips curving in a smile. "You'll wake me up." His accent still did things to Nick, even after all the months they'd been together, the musical drawl of it distracting him from what John was actually saying, sometimes. John's tongue pushed more insistently now, separating out Nick's middle finger and licking at it in a spiral that ended at the fingertip.

Even knowing what would come next didn't stop Nick from reacting when John sucked on the captured fingertip, biting down hard enough to send a shock of arousal racing through his body. Nick moaned again, the sound throaty, needy, and watched the shape John's mouth made as it circled his finger and drew it deeper.

"John," Nick whispered. His world had narrowed to nothing but this space, and John the only thing in it; his body reacted with longing to everything John did, erection hardening as if it was the part of him being worshipped by John's incredible mouth.

His finger was released in a slow slide and John kissed it, his hand closing around Nick's wrist, his thumb stroking across the sensitized skin of Nick's palm. He stared at Nick in silence, his expressive face pleading. Nick couldn't think of anything he'd refuse John right then.

"Will you -- I want to show you --" John shook his head, rolling his eyes. "Listen to me. I can't think for wanting you." He held Nick's hand to his face, turning his head to kiss it again before moving closer, his mouth finding Nick's.

John's lips on Nick's were soft, but even that simple touch was enough to fill him with yearning. He groaned and pulled John closer, licking his way into John's mouth until the other man's hand tightened on his hip, breath hot and sweet.

It wasn't enough; Nick needed to feel John's skin against his own. Reluctant as he was to move away, he did so for just as much time as it took to remove John's clothes and his own, then lay down beside John again, stroking his bare hip.

He felt John shiver under his touch and glanced down, moving his hand so that it followed his gaze, traveling over John's chest, dusted with brown hair, his nipples tight and hard, and on to John's flat stomach, the line of hair there a shade darker. John took a sharp breath, his muscles contracting, and Nick smiled, and crooked his fingers, scraping them with a deliberate roughness over the taut skin. The head of John's cock brushed his wrist and he let his hand slip off to the side, less out of a desire to tease than to see --

John made a choked, desperate sound and rolled his hips, seeking more contact. It was hard to decide whether to kiss him or watch him; Nick got distracted by the sight of the shadow of John's hip, though, and ended up foregoing the kiss in favor of stroking his fingertips lower. The soft hair of John's inner thighs was worth lingering over, and the feel of the skin there was just too much -- Nick had to bend down and lick John's nipple, feeling John's gasp and shiver as if it were his own.

This close, this aroused, the smell and taste of John's skin and the way it felt against Nick's tongue weren't three separate sensations, but one, washing over Nick and leaving him needing more. He spread his fingers wide; let his tongue lap fiercely at John's skin.

"God --" John's voice was shaky, but the hands sweeping down Nick's back were steady enough.

This still wasn't as much as Nick wanted, not by a long shot. He grabbed onto John's hip and pulled him closer, rubbing against him and finding his lips in wide, hungry, open-mouthed kisses that had them both moaning softly. He could feel John's cock at his hip, leaving a damp spot on the skin, and that realization made his own erection twitch and ache. "Please," he whispered, without even knowing exactly what he was asking for.

John pushed against him urgently, his cock riding the hollow of Nick's hip, his hands tight on Nick, his mouth fastening on Nick's throat. He was going to leave a mark on the skin, Nick thought, feeling the heat and the pull of John's mouth and teeth, a dull, warm, welcome pain radiating from the spot.

"Like this?" John moved back just a little, reaching down to take Nick's hand and bring it to his cock, putting his hand on Nick's. "Together?"

"Yes." Nick could barely manage to gasp the word; he was too desperate. The feel of John's cock in his grip, hard and hot, and the feel of John's hand moving on his own erection...sweat was beading on his thighs and the back of his neck, his hips shoving forward eagerly, his breathing ragged as his arousal grew.

It didn't take long. It couldn't, the way they both felt, and yet in the end it wasn't the strong, perfectly timed pass of John's thumb over the head of Nick's cock that sent him over, but the look on John's face as he came, eyes fixed on Nick's. His mouth was open, panting, his face contorted with the force of his climax, but Nick didn't feel excluded, the way he sometimes had these past few months. *He* was doing this to John, *he* was making John cry out and shudder, and John was doing it to him, too, a loop of action and reaction that wound about them tightly, binding them together.

By the time it was over, they were both gasping for air in between kisses, and Nick didn't care at all that they were slick going to sticky. He never wanted to let John go, and he realized that he was murmuring as much. "You can't leave me," he was saying. "Please, John, never leave me. I need you."

"Not going. Never going. Never." John couldn't have gotten much closer to Nick but he was trying anyway, his leg sliding between Nick's, his upper arm hugging Nick hard. "*Never*. God, Nick. Love you. Love you so much."

John was crying, Nick realized, tears gleaming bright in his eyes before trickling slowly, unnoticed, down his face. Nick reached up to brush them away, carefully, gently, tracing each hollow and curve on John's face, just as he had earlier.

"Shhh." Nick hated to see John so upset, but he didn't know what to say that would help. "It's okay. Really. We're okay. We love each other -- that's what matters. Everything else we can work out." He hoped it was true; he *felt* that it was, deep down, but he wanted it so badly that he was afraid he was just fooling himself.

Nick got a nod from John before he rolled onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. "These ghosts," John said abruptly. "Can they affect us? Emotionally, I mean? I know I get scared around them --"

"You're not scared of them. You just know they're there."

John smiled without humor. "Oh, they scare me spitless, sometimes, Nick lad. I'm just too stubborn to show it. No, I'm thinking, things were going fine for us until you started getting these dreams of the future, or whatever they are; any chance it, God, I don't know, spilled over to me, or something? Because when I think of how I felt back on the island, what I did -- it wasn't *like* me."

Ah. Well, that would have been a nice excuse. “I don’t know,” Nick said, trying to find the right words. “I don’t think so. I’ve never known that to happen.” He rubbed a hand along John’s far side and got a bit more comfortable, pillowing his head half on his arm and half on John’s shoulder. “There weren’t any ghosts there, anyway. Just...I don’t know what it is that shows me what’s going to happen in the future. I’m sorry. I wish it was that simple.”

John sighed, looking uncomfortable. It wasn’t like him not to take responsibility for what he did, but the whole mess had been full of so much blame on both sides that Nick couldn’t blame him for wanting to find something that would absolve them both.

“I wish it, too, but I should know better at my age. Aye, well.” John glanced down and arched his eyebrows. “I’m thinking we need to get cleaned up a bit before we go out. Because I love you, I’ll let you go first.”

“You’d better not. Come with me.” Nick smiled at John and got up, tugging at his hand.

They showered efficiently and got dressed again; Nick was beginning to realize that they were going to be here long enough that they’d have to do laundry at some point, a thought that he found pretty depressing. He’d assumed that being back in the States, regardless of the reason, would feel like coming home, but it didn’t.

It wasn’t until they were standing on the hillside where the airplane’s wreckage lay, though, that he really felt out of place. He didn’t belong here, and he didn’t *want* to be here.

But he didn’t have a choice.

## Chapter Ten

“Just us, pretty much,” John commented, glancing around. Some emergency lights shone, illuminating the wreckage, the hum of the generator powering them a constant thrum in the background. There were two security guards in a small, temporary cabin, one of whom had come out to check their credentials and nodded when Nick had mentioned his father, glancing down at a list of names. After warning them not to get close to the plane itself, he’d gone back to the cabin and left them in peace. “Or am I wrong about that?”

“Wrong and wrong.” Nick closed his eyes and breathed, feeling the presence of one spirit and then another coming closer. “Two. Three. Four.” He looked toward the makeshift cabin again, but he couldn’t see the guards and hoped that meant they couldn’t see him. “Let’s go around the other side where we’ll have a little more privacy.”

John nodded and they started around to the left, away from the cabin. The ground was smooth and grass covered, but the grass was dry where they were walking, crunching under their shoes. Still, they had to step carefully around smaller pieces of debris, and concentrating on that gave Nick a few moments of reprieve before they found a likely spot to stop -- there was a large rock that provided a decent place to sit -- and they were at him again.

He reached for John’s hand. “God, there are -- five, six of them, and they’re all -- I can’t do it all at once. You’ll have to take turns. It’s okay, I won’t go until you’ve all had a chance, I promise, it’s just --” It was hard to reason with them, and he searched out John’s eyes, looking for strength.

“That many?” John swallowed and nodded. “Right.” He glanced around. “You heard him. He’ll stay. Just...get in line, will you?” Nick couldn’t remember John actually talking to the ghosts before, and although he wasn’t sure they could hear him, for some reason John doing that made him smile, just a little, which helped.

John patted the pockets of his jacket and took out a pen and the receipt from the last meal they’d eaten at Stella’s restaurant, back on the island. There was something incongruous about seeing the familiar scrawl of Stella’s writing here in Florida, but Nick didn’t have much time to think about it. Trusting John to scribble down anything he said that might be useful, Nick opened himself up to the clamoring voices swirling around him, pressing close.

Amazingly, one of the spirits’ voices stood out more clearly than the rest; they faded into the background, grumbling with impatience but willing to wait for now.

The woman who talked to him then had four small children at home and a husband who she believed -- and Nick didn’t have any reason to think she was wrong -- loved her very much. She didn’t have a message to pass on to them; she just needed reassurance that they’d be all right without her; that it was okay for her to move on. “Celia,” Nick said to John. “Harris? Harmon? It’s okay; they’ll be okay. Really.” The woman’s ghost wasn’t convinced. “You can trust me, I know. It’ll be fine. They’ll grieve, and then they’ll heal and go on living.”

Celia’s spirit sighed, sad but resigned, and faded away. Nick opened his eyes in time to see it -- a wisp of white vapor in the vague shape of a woman, becoming more and more transparent until there was nothing left to see. Nick’s head ached just beneath his temples, and he lifted a hand to rub at the right side of his head just as the other five ghosts converged on him at once, all of them wailing and reaching for him.

It was unexpected enough that Nick gasped and reeled.

*You have to -- and I’m -- under the bed, and he needs to know because -- five, oh six nine eight nine -- mother that I always did, because I can’t rest without -- me, I can’t wait -- her not to trust him, he acts honest but he’s not, and --*

Too much; too many voices at the same time, men and women, vehement and none of them willing to wait. Nick wrapped his arms around his head, only dimly aware of John talking to him, and stumbled forward, fell to his knees. The voices were sharp, stabbing into his brain like knives, icy hot and not belonging there.

*Can’t! You have to -- you’re the only one who can -- in the inside pocket of my leather jacket at the back of the closet -- I never meant to hurt him, that was the last thing I wanted to do, please -- NOT READY TO --*

The ground was strangely cold against Nick’s hip and upper arm, but he didn’t care. He made a sound of pure desperation, hands over his ears like that would stop the noise, and felt his body spasm as it rebelled against the cacophony.

\* \* \* \* \*

This was the part John hated. Nick was being attacked -- and anyone who said it was all in his head would get his fist in their face because the man was suffering; you only had to look and listen to get that -- and there wasn't a thing he could do to help.

A fight, bodies bruised and bloody at the end of it, that he could understand. It was something he'd grown up seeing and doing, wading in with Michael beside him, exchanging fierce grins.

The struggle Nick went through with the spirits, well, that was something entirely different. It was never a fair fight, not really, but at least it was usually one on one; this was an onslaught, a deluge, and Nick was drowning before his eyes, words spilling out of his mouth, senselessly spurting, a jumble of worries, petty and serious, from God knew how many lives.

"Back off. Get the fuck away from him --" John was yelling the words even as he fell to his knees beside Nick, the paper he'd been holding fluttering away in the freshening breeze, carrying rain now.

Nick was huddled, rocking, his hands over his ears, the sight enough to make John's breath catch thick and rough in his throat.

"Nick -- Nick, love. Come away, we have to go --" He cradled Nick, trying to lift him. "You! See what you did?" Pointless, but he had to yell at something, someone. "He'd have helped you if you'd just given him some fucking space, damn you all to hell..."

It occurred to him, a sick, soft punch of guilt, that if it existed, that might be where some of them were going. Nick didn't believe in hell, and John didn't either, not really, but a lifetime of churchgoing on a Sunday -- that had ended abruptly when Nick arrived, as the minister wasn't fond of having his kirk desecrated by the likes of John and Nick -- had left him superstitious to a certain extent.

He had some of what Nick had blurted out locked safe in his mind; some of it he hadn't been listening to because concern had distracted him, and he hoped Nick could recall it later, but enough was enough. They had to get out of here while Nick was still sane.

Nick's head lashed from side to side, the heels of his hands pressing hard to his eyes now as if to keep out whatever it was he was seeing. He burrowed in close against John's chest -- would have been clutching at him if he'd had a free hand, John suspected. He wasn't screaming or shouting or making any of the sounds John thought that he himself would have been making under the same circumstances, but his breathing was tight to the point where it almost whistled, and John's attempts to get him to uncurl and straighten out were fought as if Nick didn't even know who he was.

"Nick..." John kept talking to him, his words almost as sense-free as Nick's had been, his hands stroking at skin, tugging at Nick's arm. It wasn't working. None of it was working, and he wasn't sure he could carry Nick, not like this.

He wasn't going to leave Nick. That was certain. The security guards might be -- no, they wouldn't be helpful, not really.

It began to rain, big, warm, splashing drops pouring silently down, then increasing in number and volume, falling hard enough to sting. John had stood under showers and stayed dryer. Gasping, his clothes plastered to him in a matter of moments, he tried to shelter Nick at first, curving over him as much as possible. Then he noticed that the rain seemed to be doing what his efforts hadn't managed; Nick was still thrashing about, but one hand had slackened and was batting at the water drops, and he seemed to be aware of the fact that he was getting wet.

Leaning closer still, John put all the appeal he could into his voice. "Nick. Nick, I need you. You've got to stand up, love. Or let me carry you. Nick?"

"I can't," Nick gasped, making John's heart sink for a moment before he continued. "I can't -- there's too many, they have to *stop*..." His hand found the front of John's shirt and closed around a fold of the fabric in a near death grip, the other hand moving to press knuckles against his temple hard enough that it looked painful. His body jerked as if he'd been struck by an invisible fist. "I can -- just --" He made an obvious effort to get his limbs to work, and John shifted quickly to support him, getting him onto his feet, reeling like a man who'd had far too much to drink. It was difficult to hold onto him properly; Nick was so wet that his clothes slid across his skin, gravity threatening to take him right out of John's grasp leaving him holding onto nothing but a sodden shirt.

John murmuring encouragement, they made their way back toward the car. Twice, Nick jerked again like someone had hit him, whimpering and trying to wrap his arm around his head. Bloody ghosts didn't have any respect, John thought fiercely, wishing he could do something to shut them up.

He had to lean Nick against the car to get the door open, had to practically manhandle him into the passenger seat. The whole time Nick said nothing, and as soon as he was sitting he curled in around himself again into what

was nearly a fetal position, rocking slightly.

John got in quickly, the rain beating a violent tattoo on the roof of the car, making it less of a haven than a besieged space. He managed -- just -- to get Nick's seatbelt fastened, pushing, gently at first, then with more force, on Nick's knees, trying to get him into a more normal position.

Then he drove, as fast as he could, tires spinning in the mud, the car sliding on greasy slickness, until they got to the road.

Nick gradually relaxed as they got further from the crash site, but his hands were still splayed over his face as if he was shading his eyes from too much sunlight, his knees still pulled up as close to his chest as they could be. He didn't say anything, though. Didn't look at John, didn't reassure him. Just sat, tense and silent, as John drove.

Finally, the reaction from what had happened catching up with him and making him feel shaky, John pulled into the hotel car park, the rain beginning to ease, and turned off the engine.

"We'll stay here until you're ready," he told Nick, unfastening both their seatbelts and slipping his arm around Nick's shoulders. "It's going to be all right."

He felt Nick's body twitch convulsively, a reaction which answered him well enough. All right was a long way off, but he had to say something...

It felt like a very long time that they sat there, the sound of the falling rain a gentle patter and the lights of the hotel and other cars passing by like diffused halos in the darkness, Nick tense in his arms. John was starting to get to the point where he was worrying over what he'd do if Nick *didn't* come out of this, if he stayed like this, when Nick finally gave a little sigh and a whimper and turned to press closer to John.

John got both his arms around him and kissed the side of Nick's face, trying to find the right words and settling for a questioning "mmm" that let Nick reply if he wanted to. He wasn't sure Nick was able, even yet, for anything too involved in the way of conversation or movement, although he wanted quite badly to get them both to their room and lock the door.

Not that it would keep the spirits out, but it'd make John feel better.

"Mm hehdurs," Nick muttered, or something like it.

"Try that again, love."

Nick shifted and inhaled sharply, his hand resting on John's thigh curling into a fist. "Head," he said more clearly. "Hurts."

"Aye, well, you've had people tramping around in there with their hobnailed boots on," John said, the anger in his voice all directed at those people, not at Nick. "Bloody stupid gits, the lot of them. Could they not just wait?" His hand, gentler than his words, pushed through Nick's hair to the back of his neck, massaging the knotted, tense muscles carefully. "I want to get you inside, love. Tell me when you're up for that, will you?"

"Mm-hm."

They stayed that way for at least as long as they'd already been sitting. John continued to massage Nick's neck and the back of his skull. Eventually, Nick tensed up slightly and straightened, pulling away from John and reaching for the door handle.

"Hang on." John got out quickly and went around to help Nick out. Nick was a little unsteady on his feet and his green eyes were sunken in a face that was the same color as the cheese John's aunt used to make from her goat's milk, but he was walking at least.

The hotel had side entrances as well as the one leading to the main lobby, and John had parked close to one of them, which allowed him to get Nick up to their room without encountering more than a few curious stares from people who most likely thought Nick was drunk.

Once inside their room, with Nick going to their bed immediately and collapsing onto it, curling up again, although looking less withdrawn, John felt himself relax, just a little.

"God, that was awful." He sat beside Nick and started to take off Nick's shoes. "Can I get you something to drink? Water, or coffee, or maybe one of those wee bottles from the minibar?"

"No." Nick opened his eyes and looked at John. "Actually, a wastebasket would be good. I think I'm gonna throw up." He did have a sickly tinge to him all of a sudden, and John didn't hesitate in grabbing one of the small rubbish bins and holding it for him as Nick was wretchedly ill. "Head thing," Nick said afterwards in what was meant to be an explanation, and John patted his shoulder and went to rinse out the bin in the bathroom.

Nick had pushed up to the pillows and was lying on his back, well propped up, by the time John sat down on the bed again.

“Sorry,” Nick said. His eyes glittered with tears in his pale face. “Not the first time. Maybe the worst, though.”

“Aye, it looked pretty bad from where I was standing, too.” John reached for the bottle of water the maid had put on the bedside table, uncapping it and holding it to Nick’s lips so that he could rinse his mouth out. Then he got a handful of tissues and wiped the clammy sweat from Nick’s forehead before handing him a clean one and saying firmly, “Blow.”

Nick couldn’t even muster up a proper look of bemusement, but he blew his nose as directed, then rubbed at his temples fitfully. “Feels like they’re still in there,” he muttered. “You think it would show up on some kind of brain scan?”

“I don’t know. Have you ever been tested? You know, to see what happens when you do...what you do?” Visions of horror films and medical shows jostled in John’s head and he shivered. “Maybe not a good idea...”

“Probably not.” Nick’s eyes closed again. “I don’t think they’d be able to tell.”

“No...” John didn’t want anyone digging around inside Nick’s brain anyway. “Is there anything you can do to keep them away? Or at least away enough that they’re not all...” he waved his hands around helplessly, “in your face like that?” Still thinking of the horror films he’d seen, he finished vaguely, “Like garlic and vampires?”

“Maybe.” Nick rolled onto his side and curled up again; come to think of it, this probably wasn’t the right time to find a solution to the problem. Not until Nick was feeling better, at any rate. “Do we have any aspirin or anything?” Nick sounded truly pitiful.

“I think there’s some, aye.” John got off the bed and went into the bathroom to root around in Nick’s toiletry bag, sure he’d seen a small bottle in there. He found it and shook out two pills, then changed his mind and made it four. His head was aching, too.

Nick sat up, took the pills, and sighed, leaning back against the propped-up pillows John had been using. “Thanks.” His eyes slid closed again.

“You should get undressed. Get some sleep.”

“Don’t wanna move,” Nick mumbled. “Can’t I just sleep like this?”

“You won’t be comfortable.” John patted Nick’s shoulder. “Just let me, okay?” Trying not to jar Nick, who was slipping into a drowsy haze before his eyes, he began to strip him, easing damp, clinging clothing off and tossing it aside. When Nick was bare, his chilled skin covered in goose bumps, John tugged the covers down, lifting Nick’s legs unceremoniously, and then pulled them back up over Nick. “There...”

Getting undressed himself, and taking the time to towel his hair dry, he crawled in beside Nick, feeling completely exhausted.

Nick curled up around him; neither of them was exactly warm, but their shared body heat and the embrace were both comforting, as was Nick’s slow and steady breathing. “You okay?” Nick asked, his mouth against John’s bare shoulder.

John took the time to think about that. “I’ve been better, but I’m fine now you’re back with me. When I couldn’t make you hear me...” He sighed, pressing a kiss against Nick’s still-damp hair. “That wasn’t so nice.”

“I wanted to hear you.” Nick murmured the words sleepily. “You were the only one I wanted to hear.”

“Could you?” John asked curiously, keeping his voice casual and low. “Could you hear me at all?”

Nick was quiet, but his thumb rubbed back and forth over the skin of John’s rib cage, letting John know he was still awake. “I’m not sure,” he said. “I think so. It was like you were really far away, and I couldn’t *really*, but I knew it was you. I knew you were there.”

“I wasn’t going anywhere,” John assured him. “Not without you.” He hesitated, bringing his hand up to capture Nick’s and squeezing it in a gesture meant to comfort himself as much as Nick. “Do you want to talk about it? Because you don’t have to. It can wait.”

“About having them all in my head at the same time?” Nick sounded just about done in, but that didn’t seem to be enough to keep him from talking. “It’s...like being in the middle of a hurricane. Or maybe a tornado. Trying to tell one thing from another, trying to concentrate on one voice over another, but there’s no way to do it, not when they’re all so loud.”

“You said some things that might be useful...” John sighed, suddenly overwhelmed by it all. His life was usually so damn *quiet*...“Tomorrow. The hell with them. The hell with everything. You’re here with me and you’re safe. The rest can bloody well keep. Go to sleep, now, Nick.”

He shifted position until he could find Nick’s mouth with his for one clumsy, sleepy kiss, and then closed his eyes.

## Chapter Eleven

When he opened them again, the room had gone from dark to lit with filtered sunlight and he was alone in the bed. John rolled over and blinked sleepily toward the door, where Nick was collecting a wheeled room service cart from one of the hotel employees. “Thanks,” Nick said, in a hushed voice, clearly not realizing that John was awake, but when he turned to push the cart into the room his eyes met John’s. “Shit,” Nick said, at normal volume. “I didn’t mean to wake you up. If I’m quiet will you go back to sleep?”

John sniffed at the welcome smell of food and coffee, his stomach giving a plaintive growl. “Not a chance. I’m starving.” He gave Nick a stern look. “And shouldn’t that be me saying that to you? What’re you doing up and about?”

“Like you said -- starving. My stomach was growling so much I’m surprised it didn’t wake *you* up.” Nick moved carefully, as if his head ached, but his color was much improved and the way he transferred an enormous bite of what looked like fried potato and sausage into his mouth before he’d even sat down made it clear that he was feeling better. “Come on; if you don’t, I might eat everything.”

“You’d not take pity on me and save me a mouthful?” John shook his head sadly, getting out of bed and heading for the small bathroom. “If my share’s gone by the time I get back, there’ll be trouble.”

He emerged a few minutes later, wearing one of the hotel’s robes, and found a full plate of food waiting for him -- and Nick in the process of stealing a luscious chunk of melon from a small bowl beside it.

“Eat your own!” John snapped, trying to hold back his grin at Nick’s unrepentant smirk. “God, you’re as bad as the gannets down at the dock.” He picked up a strawberry so big it’d been quartered, and walked around to Nick, holding it in front of Nick’s mouth. “Here.”

Nick’s lips parted expectantly, and John bent down, kissed him hard, and then popped the strawberry in his own mouth. “Mine,” he said, relishing the sweet tanginess of the ripe fruit. “And so is the strawberry.”

“Tease.” Nick smiled and went back to eating his own meal, thick toast spread with dark jam disappearing in a very few bites. “I forgot how much a really bad night like that takes out of me. I’m always really hungry after.”

John sat and reached for his coffee. “That’s interesting, when you think about it,” he said thoughtfully. “As if you’d been using up a lot of energy.” He’d never really questioned what Nick did from a practical point of view before, but it was occurring to him that the more they knew about it, the more chance there was of being able to come up with ways to make this easier on Nick.

At the moment, he was like a man fighting a fire by spitting on it. Be nice to give him at least a bucket of water...

“You were tired last night and you haven’t been eating properly since we got here; do you think that made a difference, then? If you’re rested, you can cope better when they come at you like that?”

“I don’t know.” Nick shrugged, but he seemed willing enough to talk about it now that it was daylight and they were safe in the room -- or maybe it was just John thinking those things. “Maybe. It couldn’t hurt. I don’t think I’ve ever had that many come at me at the same time before. Three or four, a couple of times, but I think that was the most, and this was...well, pretty intense.” He ate the rest of his toast, then used a dampened fingertip to pick up the crumbs left on the plate. “I think you were right, though, about trying to find some way to deal with it when it’s like that. Someone brought it up one time, when I was with Matthew, but...he didn’t think it was a good idea.”

The “bloody typical” that rose to John’s lips got swallowed along with a mouthful of ice-cool fresh orange juice. “Why was that, then?” he asked in as carefully neutral a tone as possible. Privately, he could come up with several ideas why a man hell-bent on his partner getting rich and famous off a gift he didn’t really believe in, but could see the potential of, would resist anything that might block the spirits getting through, but Nick didn’t need to hear them.

“He said he thought it wouldn’t be fair. You know, to the ghosts. When they needed me.” Nick sounded doubtful, and it was a relief to know he was capable of doubting Matthew’s sincerity even though the man was long dead and couldn’t use him anymore.

“Oh, and you don’t count? What about being fair to *you*?” John shook his head. “Never mind. After last night, it’s pretty clear that none of them are going to get helped unless there’s some way of making them behave.” He gave

Nick a hopeful look, trying to remember himself. "You didn't get enough to work out what any of them wanted? There was something about a leather jacket..."

"Was there?" Nick rubbed his forehead, looking confused. "Hm. I guess. Wait. Could you hear them?"

John snorted. "Not likely. No; you were talking to yourself. I was supposed to be writing it down, but..." He wasn't sure what had happened to the pen and the paper had blown away. "I was too worried about you to be paying much attention, though, to be honest. Just the jacket stuck in my head, the way things do."

"Yeah, I kind of remember that. And something about something that was under a bed. And a combination." Nick shook his head. "Maybe later I can try to figure some of it out. If things are quiet." Which they didn't seem likely to be as long as they were in America, John thought.

"So what was this idea to keep the ghosts away? The one Matthew didn't like?" John wasn't going to keep harping on it if it bothered Nick to remember Matthew, but if it was something that could help, well, it was worth a few sad memories.

"I don't know." Nick seemed to have lost interest in his food, but he'd certainly eaten enough already. "Once Matthew said no...I didn't really pay that much attention. I didn't even think about it. I guess that's pretty stupid, considering."

"No, not stupid." John reached across the table and patted Nick's hand. "You can usually cope just fine, after all. It's just -- well, I can't see you being able to do it here. Too much going on; your own dad being involved, and all the other stuff..." He felt tired just thinking about the avalanche of problems that had hit them in the past few weeks. "You need a wee bit of help." He considered it for a moment and then asked tentatively. "You don't have any contacts? Anyone like you that you could call?"

Nick leaned back in his chair, looking thoughtful. "I guess I do. I mean, not here, not close by, but there's a whole network. I think. There's this woman in Virginia -- Isabel. She might know what to try. You think I should call her?" He clearly wanted reassurance that John was all right with the idea.

"If you want to help those people, I don't see that you have much choice," John replied. "And I know you; you'll try going back, and I don't think -- Nick, I'm not wanting to interfere, but seeing you like that..." He took a deep breath, trying to push away the images of Nick hurting, lost to him. "If there's something that can help, I want you to get it, okay? Call her."

"Okay." Nick got up and came over, leaning down to kiss John with a mouth that tasted of coffee and melon.

While John finished his breakfast, Nick sat on the edge of the bed and talked on the phone. He made more than one call, his voice soft and tentative in a way John hadn't heard it for a long time, and by the time John had finished eating, Nick hung up the phone and turned to him. "There's a place nearby; Isabel thought the woman there could help us, and she'll be in the shop in about an hour. So if you want to go..."

"I want to go." John decided that telling Nick he didn't plan on letting him out of his sight for the rest of the trip might not go down well, but it was how he felt. Back on the island he was fine with them spending hours apart if only for the pleasure of having Nick walk in, hair ruffled by the wind, full of what he'd seen, a smile on his face that he saved for John. Here, in a foreign country, surrounded by so many damn people, John wanted Nick near him.

"Oh, by the way...Last night...did he come up with anything useful? That reporter?" John tried for a casual tone and failed miserably.

Nick gave him a funny look. "He got that woman's information for me -- her phone number and stuff. Selena. I'll have to call her later." He glanced down at his hands. "You were right about him."

"Which part?" John sat down on the opposite side of the bed, moved until he was kneeling behind Nick, and put his hands on Nick's shoulders, working the tense muscles slowly. "The part where he had his eye on you? Aye, I was." He put his mouth on the one place on Nick's neck that always made the man shiver and bit down. "But he didn't see you do that, now, did he?"

"No," Nick said, shuddering in just the way John had known he would. "And he never will. Never."

John kissed where'd he'd bitten, feeling a sudden pang of arousal, sweet and fierce. Nick always did this to him, always. Under his mouth he felt Nick's skin give up a taste and smell that was enough to have him hard just from that, but he eased back a little, thinking of how shaky Nick still looked.

"I love you," he said, speaking the words against Nick's shoulder as he took one last kiss, his lips brushing over the smooth, warm skin. "And no, he won't. But if he helped you, I'm glad of that."

"It doesn't mean I think I owe him anything." Nick turned and looked at him. "He didn't want -- anyway, I don't know what's going to happen. I mean, I don't know if he'll actually use the interview, or what. I tried to explain why I was doing it, but he's sort of like Matthew -- not wanting to believe."

Nick couldn't have said anything more reassuring. John knew -- now -- why it'd never worked out between Nick and Matthew and that had been the reason right there; Nick couldn't love anyone wholeheartedly who thought that he was deluded or a liar.

And why the hell should he?

John couldn't take much credit for his instant, complete belief in Nick; he'd felt the ghost in the room himself, after all. But mostly, it'd just been that looking into Nick's face he'd seen nothing but sincerity and a deep weariness, and felt an urge to protect Nick that had left him unable to do anything *but* believe, because anything else would have hurt Nick.

Simple as that.

"He is, is he? Oh, well. Do you want to call this Selena? Or maybe leave it until after we've been to the shop?"

"I think I'll leave it for now," Nick said. "Focus on one thing at a time. I have directions --" he gestured toward the single piece of hotel writing paper on the bedside table "-- and I don't think the shop will be too hard to find. I hope."

\* \* \* \* \*

It wasn't. John half expected a shop dealing, he assumed, in mystical stuff -- his mind conjured up crystals, incense, Tarot cards and maybe the odd skull -- to be tucked away down a small, dark alley, but it was part of a plaza with a courtyard, set between a clothes shop on one side and a video rental store on the other. The place seemed exotic to John's eyes, with lush palms around a central fountain, splashing into a large pool, and an intricately laid sidewalk of white and blue-gray stone, but he supposed for here, it was normal.

Pretty, though. He glanced into the fountain and saw a flicker of fin as a fish swam by, noting the sign telling people not to throw coins into the water. Aye. Pretty.

"Looks like it's open," he said, seeing that the lights were on inside the store. A display in the window echoed the theme of water and vegetation, with fabric in all shades of blue and green hanging down, draped and twisted, forming a background for the crystals John had expected. The display was lit so that some of the crystals radiated rainbows; others were tucked away, drawing the eye subtly.

They went inside; the door bumped a small wind chime as it opened, the tinkling sound of metal against metal no doubt signaling to the shop's employees that customers had entered. There was a girl behind a counter just giving change to a young man who was holding a bag with the shop's logo printed on it. "Have a nice day," she said, her eyes lifting from the man's to meet John's. "Hi. Is there something I can help you find?"

Nick stepped forward. "Hi. I called a little while ago; I'm looking for Misty?"

"Melissa." Another woman's voice came from a doorway off to the right that John hadn't noticed; she was leaning against the doorframe. "You're Isabel's friend."

"I know her," Nick said. "Saying that she's a friend might be stretching it."

"If she told you about me, you're a friend." Melissa straightened up. She was wearing a long, flowing skirt in darkened hues and a green, gauzy blouse. Her hair was blonde with blonder highlights -- couldn't be natural, John thought -- but her eyes were dark. "Come on back. We'll have more privacy."

More privacy, but precious little space. Melissa sat down in a huge, wide chair, upholstered in dark green velvet, looking like a mermaid floating in the ocean. Which left one wooden chair for Nick after John had taken up a position leaning against the wall and refused to move. Nick still looked tired and he was the one who needed to speak to Melissa after all.

The small room was shelved, and the shelves were packed; John had the edge of one digging into his shoulder and was trying not to breathe too hard, in case he dislodged a neat stack of joss sticks, the slim packages redolent of patchouli, which brought back a few memories. They'd burned them to cover up the fact that they'd been smoking in Michael's bedroom...which had just convinced his mother that they were doing drugs. She was a chain smoker herself; she probably wouldn't have even noticed the smell of tobacco, come to think of it...

"You've come a long way," Melissa said, her eyes curious as she studied John's face. "Scotland, right?"

"That's right." John blinked at her. "And you'll have family there yourself."

He wasn't sure how he knew; she sounded American enough. But there was just something about her that felt familiar.

She grinned. "My grandfather. Born and bred on the banks of the Clyde. But he emigrated when he turned eighteen and never went back." Giving him a nod, she turned her attention to Nick. "Now you...you've got problems. Your aura's a mess, for a start, but that's a side-effect, not the cause. What can I do to help?"

"I don't know. Isabel thought there might be something. She mentioned it years ago, but..." Nick seemed unsure how to finish that. "I guess it wasn't the right time."

"And now it is, because you're falling apart," Melissa said shrewdly. She gave herself a little shake and stood up, slipping past John to stand behind Nick's chair. "May I?" She rested a hand on Nick's shoulder.

"What are you going to do?" Nick asked.

"Oh, just a little patching. It won't hurt, I promise."

"Okay."

Melissa's hands stroked lightly over Nick's hair as if she were trying to get a feel for him. It was odd, watching someone else touch him like that and seeing Nick relax into it; normally he flinched, kept his distance. "Hm, yes," Melissa said. "You've been in over your head, haven't you?"

"He's good," John said defensively. "Damn good at it. You should see him." Melissa gave him an amused look and Nick a surprised one. John felt his face flush. "Well, he is..." he mumbled.

"I wasn't questioning that," Melissa said, moving her hands over Nick's shoulders. "We all get in over our heads sometimes. You came because of the plane crash?"

"We think my father was on the plane." Nick looked uncomfortable. "I mean, he was. We don't have any reason to think he wasn't."

"And you were estranged." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah. Pretty much since I was born." Nick closed his eyes as if to concentrate. "I'd been dreaming about it. The crash."

"Ah..." Melissa's breath hissed out. "That can't have been easy, but the reality...so much worse."

"It is," Nick agreed. "I've had this problem before -- too many of them wanting to talk to me at the same time, and I just...can't handle it. I can't hear one over the other, and it feels like...well, like my head's going to explode, pretty much. Isabel thought you might be able to help."

"You've been doing this how long?" Melissa asked.

"Oh..." Nick thought for a few seconds. "Twenty years, give or take."

"And you've waited this long to look into something that will help?"

John held back a sour comment about people who didn't want to kill gold egg-laying geese. "He's asking now," he pointed out. "Can you help him? Because without something, if he goes back there -- and I know he bloody well will -- they'll tear him apart."

"No, they won't." Melissa sounded confident. "We won't let them. I'm still not sure why you didn't do something about this sooner..." She patted Nick's shoulders, then stepped back, shaking her hands as if she were flicking water from them. "I take it you're the one who picks up the pieces?" she asked John.

John rubbed at the back of his neck, feeling awkward. "Well, I don't know about that --" he began.

Nick turned and smiled at him. "Yes, he does."

"Thought so," Melissa murmured. "The rock and the sea...one shifting, curious, deep, the other solid, an anchor point."

God, he was more like a rotten stick of wood in a patch of quicksand than an anchor. John shook his head, feeling guilt rise up and choke him. He'd never be able to undo his betrayal of Nick, no matter how much he regretted it. His condemnation of Matthew seemed the height of hypocrisy now. Matthew, for all his faults, had never been unfaithful as far as John knew.

He forced the words out of his tight throat. "What is it that he needs?"

"First, he needs you to stop blaming yourself and focus on the present," Melissa said, so frankly that it was difficult to be irritated with her. "Whatever it is...it's not worth it. Believe me. I might not be able to see it that clearly, but I know that much. As for you..."

She looked at Nick and moved to the other side of the room, passing by John again. Picking up a paper sack, she began to open a variety of little drawers in a large cupboard, scooping up what looked like dried herbs and dropping them into the bag. "Tea. Smells pretty bad and tastes worse, but it does the trick, at least temporarily."

"How does it work?" Nick asked.

"Not as easy as drinking it." Melissa peered into another drawer, then added what looked like a twisted stick to the sack. "You need a circle, with sea salt, and four candles at the quarters, and the still-warm body of a baby goat. What do they call those? Kids?" John blinked, and she grinned. "I'm kidding about the goat."

John wrinkled his nose up at the pun, which got him another grin. "Candles? Lit candles? Because last night the heavens opened when the ghosts came close."

"That wasn't the ghosts; that's just Florida," she told him. "You get them lit and the circle will be sealed; if they go out after that, as long as the salt line stays intact, so will the protection. The tea is just to sharpen your senses and focus your power; it'll let you separate the spirits out into individual voices; invite the one you want to deal with into the circle and ignore the others until you're ready for them. When the tea's power starts to fade, the circle will keep them back. Tell them to go, and they'll listen; they'll be scared of getting trapped inside the circle; if you invite them in and then step out without breaking the line, they're stuck in there."

"The line has to get broken eventually," Nick objected.

Melissa nodded. "Sure. But *he* can do it, not you. They can't hurt John, and if you're far enough away, you'll be safe. They usually can't move far from where they died."

"Or where they're buried," Nick said, then shrugged when Melissa looked at him and smiled. "I'm not completely clueless, you know."

"Oh, I know." Melissa looked into the paper sack, wrinkled her brow, and added one last ingredient. "This should be enough to keep you going for a while -- you only need a pinch, and I'll write it all down so you'll be able to make more later." She thrust the sack into John's hands and sat down again, reaching for a pad of paper. "I should probably type this out and make photocopies."

"There's that many folk in need of it?" John asked in surprise.

"Probably not." Melissa glanced up from her scribbling. "It's hard to know. I think it's safe to assume there are a lot of people who deny what they are, or who don't even recognize it. I think a lot of people have the ability as kids and then lose it because they can't deal. But yeah, I've run into a few who could use this stuff, and it seems a little archaic to be handwriting notes from memory. I may be a witch, but this is the twenty-first century."

"Well, I don't need it," John said. "I can sometimes tell they're there, no more than that, but I like it that way. The thought of them being in the room with me and not knowing gives me the creeps."

Melissa and Nick exchanged a small, private smile, barely there, and John sighed. "If there's one in here now, I'll be very cross, you know that?"

"There's always something," Melissa said. "The earth's too old for there not to be. It's like a background hum; so faint we don't hear it unless we try. But, no, there's no manifesting spirit here, I promise." She gave John a considering look. "So you can sense them? That's interesting, but not all that surprising. You wouldn't be such a good match for this one if you couldn't."

"Well, if you're right, I'd say the creepy-crawly feeling was worth it," John said, meaning it. She was right, too; if John hadn't been able to assure Nick with conviction that he believed in what he did, they'd never have got together.

"I don't know what I would have done without him," Nick said. John looked over at him, meeting sincere eyes.

"I can see that." Melissa finished writing and tore the piece of paper off the notepad, handing it to John. "Come on out into the store and we'll get the rest of the stuff you need."

In the main part of the shop, Melissa gathered some plain white candles and as many small glass cups to put them in.

"Carrie, can you get these guys a package of the regular salt?" Melissa bustled over to the counter and set down her armful of supplies as Carrie bent down and took a regular supermarket package of salt from below the register. "We have the fancy sea salt for people who are into the ritual of expensive spell components, but the regular kind's just as good and a hell of a lot more affordable," she explained. "When you use this up, you can replace it with some from the grocery store."

That was good news. John couldn't see the small shop on the island stocking anything fancy in the way of condiments for when they got home.

It took a short while to get what they needed packed up and paid for. Melissa filled a sturdy bag with woven raffia handles with the supplies, and then, a gleam in her eyes, tossed in a small bottle of massage oil from a display on the counter. "On me," she murmured.

John blushed and then rallied. "No offense, but I'd rather use it on *him*," he said with a nod at Nick.

Melissa smiled, her gaze lingering on the handwritten sign beside the display. It was a little hard to read from where John was standing, but he thought he could make a guess at the theme since there was an awful lot of pink and red. He just hoped the oil wasn't scented with flowers. "None taken. Enjoy."

“We will,” Nick said. He was still fairly quiet -- intense, John might have called it, and had been the whole time they’d been there -- but now he looked grateful. “Thanks. I really appreciate all your help.”

“Well, you know where to find me if you run into any trouble,” Melissa said. “And I mean it. Call. My cell phone number’s on the bottom of that piece of paper.” She nodded at John, who assumed she meant the paper with the ingredients she’d given him, which he’d folded and tucked into his pocket for safekeeping.

“I’ve got it,” he assured her. “Thanks.”

He just hoped it worked.

## Chapter Twelve

Nick sighed as he hung up the phone and leaned back against the headboard of the hotel bed. Passing on messages from the recently deceased was almost never pleasant, even in Selena and Anne's case when the message was something that made the family member feel better. "Well, that's done," he said to John, who'd been looking at the newspaper over at the table.

"You're good at that," John said, glancing over at him. "I'm thinking it's not easy, though? Sometimes they must not want to hear what you have to say?"

"I guess." Nick stretched his socked feet toward the end of the mattress. "I definitely like it better when I only have to talk to the ghost, that's for sure."

Over on the wall the air conditioning unit was humming soothingly; sunshine streamed in through the sliding glass doors.

"I don't know if I'm all that good at it, really," he went on, reaching for the paper bag from Melissa's store and pulling it over onto the bed. He looked inside and found the bottle of massage oil that Melissa had given them, and grinned. Uncapping the bottle, he smelled the oil tentatively, but it was pretty inoffensive -- it smelled a little like cinnamon, maybe.

John tossed the paper aside and came to join him, leaning over the bottle and copying Nick's sniff. He must have approved, because a slow smile spread across his face as he lifted his gaze to meet Nick's.

"I was thinking we'd need to go shopping, but maybe this would do instead?" John's mouth was close now, close enough to kiss, and Nick didn't have any problems with that at all.

Putting the open bottle down on the night table, he slipped his hand behind John's neck and tugged him closer, John's moan lost in the kiss that followed, their tongues meeting, tasting, exploring.

Nick was hard almost instantly, like someone had flipped a switch. He lay back, pulling John down with him, on top of him, the weight of him arousing and comforting at the same time. He'd needed this comfort last night, but he hadn't been in any condition for it then; now, he wanted the reassurance.

From the way John's hands began to touch him, eagerly, intimately, pushing up inside Nick's shirt, they were both feeling the same way. John knew Nick's body so well now; knew just where to make his fingers press a little harder, where to avoid because it was ticklish, and Nick didn't like being tickled, curling up into a tense, irritated ball.

John wasn't doing anything wrong today, though. Nick relaxed into the gentle and not-so gentle caresses, his own hands busy tugging John's clothes up and off, cooperating with John's efforts, so that before long they were naked to the waist. John's teeth teased at Nick's nipple, sending shivers of arousal through him, John's tongue swiping wet and hot across the hard, kiss-bruised skin.

Nick gasped, squirming wildly, as John's hand dipped down, cupping Nick's erection and rubbing the heel of his hand against it roughly. "God, you're in the same state as me," John whispered thickly. "How do you get me like this so fast?"

"Magic." Nick laughed, squirming again, and rolled them until he was the one on top with John pinned to the mattress. He unzipped John's slacks and shoved his hand down inside, groaning against John's mouth as his fingers found hot, hard flesh, damp at the tip.

He slid down, scraping his own teeth over John's nipple and feeling the other man's gasp and racing heartbeat as if they were his own. Maybe they were and he just couldn't tell anymore. Nick mouthed at John's collarbone, licked sweat from the skin, and squeezed John's erection until another bead of fluid formed to slick his thumb rubbing across the head.

The sounds he was getting from John were an echo of the ones in his head; wordless, needy, happy. This was simple. This, he could do without worrying or wondering. It was John, and he loved him, and was loved in return, and nothing was going to come between them again, because the way he felt right then, there wasn't any room.

They were one. One flesh, one hunger -- and all Nick had to decide now was how they were going to do this, because he wanted it all; John inside him, thrusting deep and smooth; John around him, open and welcoming.

“God, why can’t we both fuck each other at the same time?” John said, in such a precise copy of Nick’s own thoughts that he was left blinking in surprise.

He opened his mouth to answer and with an equally precise timing -- though much less welcome -- the phone rang.

Nick was worked up and covered with a thin sheen of sweat -- even his lips were salty from tasting John’s skin -- and the last thing he wanted was to answer the phone. “Ignore it,” he muttered, rubbing his still-clothed cock against John’s hip and licking a stripe up the side of John’s throat on the way toward his mouth.

“But shouldn’t we --” John started.

“No.” Nick kissed him to keep him quiet, then kissed him again because it was so good, then a third time because he couldn’t stop. He steadfastly ignored the phone until it stopped ringing, but there was only a brief pause before it started up again, insistent, refusing to be ignored. He groaned and turned, reaching for it. “One minute,” he promised John as he picked up the phone. “Yes?”

“I knew you were there,” a familiar woman’s voice said triumphantly. “It’s Alicia. We need to talk.”

Oh, God, not her. “About what?” Nick asked, stalling and tucking the phone between cheek and shoulder. He reached for John’s cock again; it was sticking up out of John’s slacks, flushed and shiny, and he couldn’t keep from touching it.

“You know what. Tell me what room you’re in; I’m coming up.” Alicia wasn’t, Nick knew, the kind of woman to take no for an answer, and if he didn’t tell her, she’d weasel it out of the hotel staff and be knocking on the door in five minutes anyway. For a minute he considered hanging up and letting her -- in five minutes he and John could both get off. But it wouldn’t be the same.

“Six thirteen,” he said, and sighed as he hung up. “It was that Alicia woman. My father’s girlfriend. She’s coming up. To talk.” He knew that the disappointment and frustration he was feeling was clear in his voice, but apologized anyway. “I’m sorry. We’ll get rid of her as soon as we can.” Unable to resist, he bent and took the head of John’s cock into his mouth, sucking at it, the bitter saltiness washing over his tongue.

“Stop it.” John groaned the words, his hand coming to Nick’s shoulder, starting to push him away, and then squeezing it hard. “Oh, fuck, no, don’t stop --” His other hand raked through Nick’s hair, tousling it with restless fingers. “Do we have time? Do we?”

“Not for you to fuck me,” Nick muttered, stroking John’s shaft and licking the tip. “But for this. If you want to.” There wasn’t much doubt in his mind; he took John in again, sliding his lips down until he could feel the head of John’s cock at the back of his tongue, making his mouth and eyes water, hand kneading John’s balls.

John convulsed under him, his hands clawing at the sheets as he fought to lie still. Nick appreciated the effort; any deeper and he’d choke and he didn’t want to do that because they were running out of time. His mind went to Alicia, picturing her standing, high-heeled foot tapping impatiently as she waited for the elevator -- no way she’d use the stairs. Waiting, walking through the opening doors just as his tongue swirled and swept across the cock stretching and filling his mouth; tapping at a button with a red, sharp nail as John’s hands flexed and tightened helplessly on the bunched-up fabric; watching the floor numbers change on the display as John cried out Nick’s name and came hard, flooding Nick’s mouth and throat, his hands reaching out to smooth over Nick’s head.

And rapping at their door far too soon.

Nick swallowed, licked John twice more to get him as clean as possible, and sat up, glancing down at himself. His slacks were loose enough that if he didn’t tuck his T-shirt in, he’d be fine. “Here, take your stuff into the bathroom and get dressed.” He grabbed John’s shirt and his own, then kissed John firmly, smiling at the still-dazed expression on his face as they both got up. He yanked his shirt over his head on his way to the door, listening for the click as the bathroom door shut before opening the one that led to the hallway.

“You should have answered the phone the first time,” Alicia said, pushing past him and into the room. Her hips swayed in her tight skirt as she turned to face him.

“We were busy,” Nick said mildly.

“I bet.”

“I don’t have to talk to you,” Nick reminded her. “What is it that you want?”

Uninvited, she walked over to the table and sat down, her eyes flicking over the rumpled bed knowingly. “Money,” she said bluntly. “I told you; Brian got lucky and he was going to share it with me. And you can say you don’t care about it, but we both know that’s bullshit.”

The bathroom door opened, and Nick felt John’s reassuring presence at his back. Not that he needed help dealing with Alicia -- she was no threat to him, and she didn’t feel malicious, just greedy -- but it still felt good not

to be facing her alone.

“You know, your life would be simpler if you believed people when they were telling you the truth,” John said. “He doesn’t want money from a dead man he didn’t know or like that much, from what I can tell. Why is that so hard to accept?”

Alicia sniffled and fumbled in her purse for a tissue, dabbing underneath her eyes the way women did when they didn’t want to smear their makeup, although it seemed to Nick she was deliberately going around wearing enough eyeliner that she closely resembled a raccoon. “I just can’t believe he’s gone,” she said, her voice suddenly different. “He would have wanted me to have that money, and without it...I don’t have anything. I need it. I didn’t want to say anything before -- I’m so embarrassed -- but I’m a month behind on my rent and my landlord says he’ll evict me if I don’t pay him soon. And I haven’t been feeling well. The doctors think it’s something to do with my lungs.”

Yeah, all the cigarettes you’ve been smoking, Nick thought. “Look, I don’t want the money, okay? I didn’t even know about it until you told me.”

“But that doesn’t mean it’s yours,” John put in, his voice hard, his eyes on Alicia. “My father died a couple of years back and it was...we weren’t expecting it. He hadn’t made a will, but it didn’t matter. It went to my mother, and if she’d have passed on before him, it’d have come to my sisters and me. I don’t know how you do things over here, but I’m thinking it’s similar, and that money’s half Nick’s and the other half belongs to this brother of his. If Nick wants you to have his share, then fine, but it’s not all yours, lady, no matter how much you want it to be.”

“I never knew you British people were so cruel!” Alicia wailed, burying her face in her handful of Kleenex. “I’m not as young as I used to be, you know. Brian and I...we had a *connection*. I was very special to him -- he told me so all the time.” She lifted her head. “It’s not as if I’ll find someone else to take care of me when I’m old. That money...it’s all I have.”

Nick had finally caught on to what John was thinking. “It might be all my father’s kid has, too. He could use it for school or something. Hell, maybe he needs it to buy sneakers. Or food. Are *you* really that cruel, to take money away from a little boy?”

The Kleenex dropped away. “Him? Josh? He’s doing just fine,” Alicia snapped. “And so is his slut of a mother. She hooked up with a guy after Brian saw through her and he adopted Josh when they got married.” A brooding look passed over her face. “She has a hot tub. *And* a pool.”

“How in God’s name do you know that?” John demanded. “Atlanta, you said she lived in...that’s a fair way from here, isn’t it?”

Nick shrugged, as lost as John was. “I guess.”

Alicia’s lips thinned. “So I kept tabs on her. So what? I needed to know if she was going to come sniffing around my Brian again, didn’t I?”

Fed up, Nick sighed. “Look, just take the money, okay? I’m not going to stop you.”

“I can’t.” Alicia sounded genuinely distressed now. “I don’t know where it is. Brian said...he put it somewhere, somewhere safe, and he was going to come and see me, and then we were going to...I know about you. Brian told me. I thought, maybe...”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” John muttered, echoing Nick’s thoughts.

“What?” Alicia rounded on John, her eyes flashing. “He does it all the time for strangers! Why not for his own father?”

“Who’s also pretty much a stranger,” John pointed out wearily. “And why the hell should he put himself through that for you?”

“It’s just one question!” Alicia tucked her hair back behind her ears, but there was enough hair spray in it that it sprung forward again immediately. “How long could it take?”

“You have no idea,” Nick said. He was suddenly tired, and his balls ached, but there was a part of him that would always wonder if he didn’t make an effort to talk to his father’s spirit, and having Alicia there wouldn’t make it much worse than he was already expecting it to be. “Okay, fine.”

“So?” Alicia glanced around the room and tapped her foot impatiently.

“It doesn’t work like that.” Nick sat down on the end of the bed. “Tonight. At the crash site.”

Looking doubtful, Alicia asked, “What, do you need a bunch of candles or something? A...a pentagram?”

“No, but we need to be there, and doing it in the middle of the day will attract too much attention.”

It was disconcerting how easily and completely she accepted what he could do. Greed, not trust, motivated it,

he supposed, but it was still a small relief after Greg's doubts. He really didn't think he could have coped with defending himself to Alicia.

Something that looked like apprehension flashed across her face. "These ghosts -- Brian would never hurt me, I know that, but the others who died -- it's safe, isn't it? It'll just be him you...summon up, or whatever?"

"It's not that simple," Nick said. "And no, it's not always safe, either. Unless you want to trust me to talk to him without you there and pass the information on?" He didn't think she'd go for that, but it was worth a try.

Alicia snorted. "I'm not telling you when I was born, but --"

"It wasn't yesterday," John finished for her. "Fine. You don't trust him. So be there. But for the love of God, don't go wearing those heels. You'll break your neck, and then you can ask Brian yourself, for all the good it'll do you."

He got a glare and then Alicia very deliberately turned her shoulder on him, giving Nick what he supposed was meant to be an appealing look. She didn't seem to be able to turn off the charm, even though she must have figured out by now that neither of them were buying it. "I'll go. It...it's the least I can do. Saying goodbye, I mean."

"After you've finished asking, 'Where's the money?' of course." John put in.

"You've got a big mouth, mister," Alicia tossed over her shoulder. She focused her attention on Nick again. "What time? And should I bring anything? I have photos...some of his things..."

She was trying to help, Nick realized, and maybe she did want to say goodbye. She'd definitely been crying outside the morgue.

"We'll be there around ten," he told her. "But if it gets out of control -- and it might -- don't -- just don't stay, okay? Get out as fast as you can."

"Before the goblins get you," John murmured. He really wasn't behaving well, but because it got Alicia sweeping out of the door a minute later, her face tight with annoyance and determination, Nick found it easy to forgive.

He stepped over and locked the door behind her, leaning his head against the smooth surface long enough to listen to her bustling her way down the hallway, then turned to John. "I think I might actually hate her." The fact that his father must have at least *liked* her only verified that they hadn't had much in common besides DNA.

"Aye," John agreed as Nick moved over to him and pulled him close. "She's not an easy one to like, is she?"

"God, no. I always thought people like her didn't really exist. You know, that they were just characters on TV shows and stuff." Nick slid his mouth wetly along John's throat and his hand down to squeeze John's ass.

"Can we not talk about her when you're doing that?" John asked plaintively, his hands working at Nick's clothes even as he arched his neck back to let Nick do what he wanted. Which was another slow slide of his lips against John's skin, and a little, just a little bite to finish, because it made John shudder when he did that. "She's one hell of a mood-killer."

"I don't think anything can totally kill my mood when you're around." Nick licked John's jaw, then the edge of his ear. John had unfastened the front of Nick's pants and slipped a hand inside, rubbing him through the thinner fabric of his underwear. His erection sprang back to life, eager after being so neglected earlier. "I want to be inside you. I want...God, John." He found John's mouth with his and kissed him, tongue thrusting in to taste John's.

John felt as eager as he was, despite the fact that it wasn't long since he'd come, not really, returning Nick's kiss with a hunger and heat that sent Nick's head spinning.

They made it to the bed in a stagger, still kissing, discarding clothes as quickly as possible, pants kicked off, shirts unbuttoned one handed and tugged free in rough, impatient jerks that left their skin reddened in places. It wasn't easy to strip off when neither of them wanted to break the contact between them, but the lure of skin on skin was too strong.

Nick wanted John naked. Wanted to see the flush rise under his skin as Nick palmed it, stroked it, wanted to be able to kiss and lick any of it without waiting for more than the time it took to lean down and press his mouth to John's body.

Pulling John with him, he got onto the bed, sprawling across it and grabbing the bottle of oil.

"Don't stop this time," John said, his hands passing over Nick's body in long, sweeping caresses as if he couldn't get his fill of touching, his voice close to pleading. "Don't stop until you've come in me, you hear?"

"I won't." It was a promise Nick intended to keep. He fastened his mouth over John's nipple and sucked hard, feeling the skin tighten and the twitch of John's cock against his stomach. He flipped the top of the oil bottle open and tipped some out onto John's skin, running his hand wetly through it and down to John's erection. His palm

tingled with something more than arousal, and John gasped.

“What the bloody hell is that?”

“It warms up when it touches skin,” Nick said, stroking John’s cock to demonstrate and feeling the heat of the oil spread. He knelt back and used both hands, one working John’s erection and the other fondling his balls before slipping down to tease at his entrance.

“God.” Nick pushed two fingers in slowly. John was so hot inside; his hips jerked upward, one arm thrown over his eyes as the oil’s warmth soaked into him, and Nick loved every second of it. John’s cock was reddened, swollen, the flared head of it as familiar as Nick’s own. Nick twisted his wrist slightly, finding the small spot that made John curse and sob, arching up off the bed.

“Oh, you...” John murmured shakily. “Nick...” His hand reached down, his fingers dragging restlessly through the last of the oil puddle on his stomach, leaving swirls of translucence on the taut skin, gleaming richly in the light. Nick imagined John coated in the oil, chin to toes, slippery and hot, and moaned, just as John begged, “More... harder, Nick. Please...” the words broken and stumbling because it took a lot to get John to ask for what he wanted sometimes.

And when he did, Nick always gave it to him. He eased a third finger inside John’s body, feeling the tension build and ease as John adjusted to the stretch.

“God, yes,” John whispered, parting his legs wider, pushing down, fucking himself slowly on Nick’s fingers, his face twisting with pleasure.

Nick didn’t want to wait, but he did; he stroked John’s cock wetly, then groaned when John’s hand fumbled its way to his own erection and slicked it with the oil. His cock throbbed and burned -- he’d been waiting too long already -- and he had to close his eyes and take a deep breath to find control.

“Love?” John said, and Nick opened his eyes and looked at him. “Now. No stopping, remember?”

“I remember,” Nick said shakily. Unable to even think anymore, he braced himself over John, lined up, and slid into him, the slick heat of the oil making them both moan. “Oh, God. Oh.”

John’s fingers, slippery and smooth, closed around his arms, digging in hard enough that Nick knew he’d be left marked. They clung to him for support before John eased his grip and lifted his hand, tracing Nick’s jawline and leaving a tingle of heat behind on his skin and the scent of the oil heavy in every breath he took.

Nick held still for as long as he could bear it, buried deep inside John, feeling the pulse of his body, the tight, welcoming pressure around his cock. John was breathing in short, anguished gasps, clearly doing his best to wait for Nick to start fucking him, failing with every breath, because with every breath his body moved and Nick could feel it, every quiver, every tensed muscle.

It was like being on fire, the heat creeping below Nick’s shaft to his balls where they rubbed against John’s skin, and he just...broke. Started moving, thrusting into John with abandon, chasing the release he’d been denied before, reckless and desperate. He bent and kissed John once, almost as a sort of apology, before losing himself completely.

There was the sound of two bodies coming together, fast and rough, and the scent of the oil hung heavy in the air. This wasn’t going to last long, Nick could tell, and yet he was so caught up in what was happening, in how it *felt*, that it seemed to go on forever. It was like time had stretched out, each tiny movement seeming to go on for minutes when in reality it couldn’t have been more than seconds. “Oh,” Nick gasped. “Oh, John, God, I don’t think I can --”

The sound he got back was incoherent; the hand raked down his back to his ass, pulling him deeper, less so. John’s eyes were fixed on him, giving him something to focus on, something to distract himself from the way his body was clamoring for an end to what was the flipside of torture, because it felt so good, so very good, and it couldn’t last, it never could.

John’s mouth shaped a word Nick recognized as his name just before he came, his body locked into immobility, then straining with all its strength to ride out the waves that flooded it. Nick saw it all on John’s face; the struggle, the surrender, the peace; felt the warm, wet, splatter of release on his belly, the convulsive clutch of John’s hands.

Nick continued to thrust, poised on the edge of release but still fighting it. The hot clench of John’s body was incredible, and each gasping breath rasped in Nick’s throat. John relaxed underneath him; spread his thighs wider, slid a hand up along Nick’s side to his chest and pinched a nipple just hard enough to send a little jolt of pleasure through Nick’s groin to his cock.

“Aye, love,” John murmured, watching him, and those two words were the end of Nick. He came undone with

a triumphant cry, buried deep inside John, cock pulsing his pleasure into his lover until he was spent, sated.

They lay together for a long time, kissing, lips clinging without urgency, Nick's body relaxed and peaceful. There didn't seem to be anything to say that they didn't both know, weren't both sure about.

Finally, John stirred, grimacing as he glanced down their bodies. "We're messy."

The sheets were damp with sweat, oil, and come, and so were they. Messy didn't quite cover it, but all Nick could come up with was a lazy, "Mmm," of agreement.

John grinned and cuddled in closer again. "Well, if it doesn't bother you --"

Running a hand down John's back, Nick sighed with a combination of pleasure and regret. "I didn't say that. At least we can sleep in the other bed tonight. Assuming we don't get that one messy, too." He rubbed his lips against John's ear. "Okay, come on. Shower."

They were both satisfied enough that they didn't do more than caress each other lingeringly in the shower, and by the time they were dressed again Nick felt better than he had in days. He pulled John down into his lap on one of the chairs and kissed him.

"Let's just stay here," he murmured, hugging him tightly. "No going out, no going...God. I wish we could."

"Can't we?" John asked, leaning in to press a line of kisses from Nick's ear to his mouth, light dots of kisses that made Nick smile. "There's nothing to be done until tonight, is there? Although we're not going home until I've gone swimming at least once. I've never been in a warm sea before; doesn't seem natural, somehow, but I'd like to try it."

The thought of it was painfully appealing; Nick pressed his face to John's chest and moaned softly. "Could we? Really?" he begged.

"Who's going to stop us?" John smiled. "In fact, if we don't start doing some tourist-type things, we'll probably get deported or something. Not that I packed my swimming trunks, mind you --"

"You don't have any." Nick had seen John swim, and he did it naked if they were somewhere quiet, or wearing a disreputable pair of shorts with a tendency to fill with water and balloon out. "But there's bound to be a store selling them in the mall behind the hotel."

"I'm not wearing those skimpy little bits of nothing," John warned him. "Those Speedo thingummies. Not if you're around me half-naked wanting suntan lotion rubbing on your back."

"Sunblock," Nick corrected. "And you're supposed to put it on half an hour before you go out in the sun anyway, so that won't be a problem." He tightened his arm around John's waist. "But no, I wouldn't want you wearing one of those either, not when there'd be all those women -- and some of the men -- watching you."

"Is this the part where I'm modest and say that's not likely, not when you're around?" John asked with a chuckle. "Because take it as said. Have you seen yourself, love? You turn heads even here, where every other person looks like a model or a bloody film star. And back home, well..." His hand cupped Nick's face, his thumb stroking across Nick's mouth, leaving the taste of him on Nick's lips, familiar and sweet. "You stand out. I'm just...well, I don't frighten children, but no one's going to be looking at me. And I don't want them to. Just you."

"I'll never get tired of looking at you," Nick said. "But you're nuts if you think other people don't." They did, and often. Maybe John's looks weren't startling enough that people mistook him for someone famous, but there was something honest and almost striking about him -- the shape of his jaw, the sensitivity in his eyes.

"Aye?" John said doubtfully. "Well, I won't be looking back." He glanced away for a moment, his lips tightening, and then met Nick's eyes. "You know that, right? I don't want to keep going on about it, but God, Nick, I've not wanted anyone else since I first saw you getting off the ferry. Never will."

"I know." Nick wrapped a hand around the back of John's neck and pulled him in for a kiss that turned out to be a little fiercer than he'd planned. "I'll never want anyone but you, either." Unable to resist the lure of John's lips, he kissed him again, more slowly.

"Are you sure you want to swim?" John murmured, rolling his head against the loose clasp of Nick's hand, and giving a little sigh of pleasure when Nick obligingly flexed his fingers, digging them gently into the muscles there. "Because staying in is starting to look good, even if you've worn me out."

"We can rent an umbrella and sleep on the beach," Nick suggested. He'd seen a page in the hotel's information book about it. "But I'm just as happy to stay in. We can swim tomorrow instead."

John wriggled off his lap. "We're swimming today," he said firmly. "So stop trying to seduce me. I want an umbrella to sit under, and, aye, one in my beer. There's a bar on the beach. I saw it." He grinned, holding out a hand to haul Nick to his feet. "And I want to send Michael a postcard of this place. Chances are it'll arrive after we've got

back, so I'll get to see how green he turns."

"You're mean," Nick said, going to find his shoes. "Trying to make your friend jealous. He'd never do that to you."

John just snorted.

## Chapter Thirteen

A little more than an hour later they were on the beach under an umbrella, sitting on thick towels and holding sweating beer bottles -- without paper umbrellas, but John hadn't complained. The beach was crowded, and most of the people were tanned and toned.

Nick grinned at John. "This was a good idea."

"I feel like I need a label around my neck telling everyone I'm from a place that hasn't seen the sun in the past three months," John said ruefully. "I'm all patchy."

He wasn't, but it was true that he didn't have the smooth, cultivated tan of most of the people around him. Nick really didn't care. John's body was strong through hard work and it showed in the way he moved with an unhurried, economical grace. And when last summer had come and John had peeled off the layers that had kept him warm through the winter and the chilly spring he'd tanned to golden-brown in what seemed like a matter of days. Nick didn't doubt that by the end of the week, if they were still here, John would turn that shade again.

"At least you have *some* tan," Nick said, digging his toes into the hot sand just outside the shadow of the umbrella. "I'm as white as a...well." They both knew how that sentence ended, and he didn't want to say it out loud right now. Now, they were on vacation. They were relaxing. They were drinking beer and watching people fifteen years younger play Frisbee, and Nick felt unbelievably peaceful. "Anyway, there are some people who are almost as pale as me. I'm sure they're on vacation from somewhere like the Arctic, but..."

"Just don't burn," John said lazily, taking a long drink from the bottle he held. "You won't want me touching you if you do, and I'd hate for that to happen." He squinted up at the cloudless sky. "God, this place is just unbelievable. Do you think we could move over here?"

There wasn't a chance in hell of that happening, or that John was being serious, but Nick was willing to play along. "Sure. We'll get a condo by the beach and I'll write my book while you..." He thought about it. "What would you do? Back home you sort of, well, you do everything."

"Have to," John said. "There's not that much work going; if you're not flexible, you go under." He shrugged, emptying the dregs of his beer into the sand and putting the bottle down. "So I fish when the fish are running, drive the taxi when it's tourist season or I'm picking up the man of my dreams..."

"Very funny."

"I wasn't joking...and the rest of the time, I do what needs doing. I could find work here if I had to." He stared out at the blue water, his expression unreadable. "I'd leave the island if you wanted that. I love it there; it's my home, but I'd never put it before you."

Nick thought about taking his hand, but settled for patting his knee instead. "I love you even more for making an offer like that," he said. "But I'd never ask you to. I wouldn't let you." There was a confidence in his voice that felt right, like the little switch in his head that had been flickering back and forth between on and off had settled on a position for a while. "Besides, I love Traighshee. It's my home, too. It's *our* home."

He rested his hand on John's thigh, rubbed it a little, feeling the muscle relax. The water was an incredible shade of blue, and the air was warm enough that every breath made Nick's chest feel heavy.

"It's pretty, though. We should come back in a couple of years, when all this is behind us and we don't have to worry about anything but having a good time."

John nodded. "Just because we live on the island doesn't mean we're tied to it. I'd like that." He stretched, the movement lazy and sensuous, utterly relaxed. Nick liked seeing him like that, free of the tension that had plagued them both recently. "Well, if I'm going to swim, I'd better do it now before I fall asleep." He stood, shading his eyes with his hands as he looked at the waves, rolling in majestically and crashing onto the white sand with a sound that ended in a soft, bubbling hush. "Sharks. They have sharks here, don't they? Oh, well. I'll take my chances. Are you coming?"

"Sure." Nick wasn't much of a swimmer, but the ocean here didn't look any rougher than it was back home, so he figured he could hold his own. They started down the beach toward the water, feet stinging on the hot sand as they dodged sunbathers. "We should have brought sunglasses. I forgot how bad it is. If I ever knew."

They reached the hard packed sand closer to the ocean, damp and cool. It was a relief to the soles of Nick's feet, and the water was warmer than he'd expected as it washed over their toes.

"I've had colder baths," John said wonderingly, kicking his foot through the water and sending up a fine spray, dazzling in the sunlight. "And it's still winter...doesn't seem real, somehow."

The current didn't feel as strong as it did in Scotland; the sand pulled away from underneath Nick's toes gently, tickling his feet, and he closed his eyes and took a deep breath through his nose. He'd never have mistaken it for home -- the smell of it was thick with civilization, hundreds of different scents combined together. At home the air smelled wild, clean.

Nick opened his eyes; John was walking backwards into the water, watching him. He bent down, cupped water in one hand, and flung it at John, splashing him. "I thought you were swimming."

John's eyes widened with an outrage Nick was completely certain was fake. "You splashed me!"

"Yeah." Nick grinned and did it again. "You look good wet."

Shaking the droplets from his hair John bent and scooped up a double handful of the ocean. "So do you."

He aimed low, for Nick's chest, but some water still reached Nick's mouth, warm and salty. He licked his lips, tasting it, and eyed John warily, both of them having trouble keeping the smiles off their faces.

"Tell you what, I'll save you the trouble of retaliating," John told him, falling backward into the next wave and sinking under for long enough to get completely wet. He popped back up, spluttering and wiping his eyes. "God, it feels..." He shook his head. "Let's go deeper. It's barely up to my knees here."

"Okay." Nick wished they were alone and could indulge however they wanted to, without worrying about what people would think. At home there were miles of beach where they could have kissed without being seen, but the water was almost always so cold, even in the summertime, that you had to keep moving or risk turning blue.

He followed John out into the deeper water until it reached his armpits, marveling at how warm it was and still eyeing John, waiting to see what they'd do.

"Is this where we decide to either shove each other under or give up?" he asked, running a hand across his chest in a way that might -- just might -- have been a bit calculated.

"I don't mind calling a truce. We're both soaked now, anyway." John looked...interested, tempted, his eyes holding the blue of the sky and the ocean, his lips curved in a smile of pure happiness. They were far enough away from anyone else that they could talk without being overheard but Nick wanted to do more than talk. He thought about sinking down under the water, out of sight and finding John waiting to kiss him, their eyes closed against the sting of salt, their mouths sealed together, tongues touching, hands gliding over wet skin.

Nick sank down into the water and paddled over to John through the big, gentle swell of the waves. "So what do you think?" he asked. "I guess it makes sense that people like to come here on vacation. Especially at this time of year." He reached a hand out and touched John's hip just above the waistband of his newly bought and slightly too large swim trunks. "Thanks. For coming with me. I don't think I could have done it without you."

"Well, I'd sooner be back home, shivering in an empty house, going to bed alone, and missing you -- that goes without saying -- but I don't mind suffering like this. It's good for the soul."

John sounded abstracted, Nick noticed, hiding a smile as the next wave washed past and somehow left John a foot closer, his fingers hooked inside the waistband of Nick's shorts. To anyone watching -- if there was anyone who cared -- they were still a respectable distance apart, but under the restless water their hands were on each other and John's foot was sliding up Nick's leg, caressing it as gently as the waves.

"Oh, so I should try to line things up so that you'll suffer more often?" Nick asked, moving his hand to John's inner thigh. He felt buoyant in the salt water, the top of his head was hot from the sun, and he wondered if this was the way people's brains got baked. He was pretty sure he didn't care.

"Depends on your definition," John answered. He shuddered and Nick knew, without looking, without moving his hand, that John was hard and Nick'd done it to him with no more than a touch. "I'd say feeling like this and not being able to do anything about it qualified, mind."

"Does it?" Nick felt surprisingly playful; he loved knowing that he could arouse John with so little effort. Hell, he loved being able to arouse him, period. And knowing that John was hard was enough to make Nick's cock stir, too. "Maybe we should stay out here for a couple of hours. You know, since it would be good for your soul."

John grinned mischievously and moved back, so that Nick's hand fell away. He gave John a surprised look as John lay back, his hands sculling the water to keep him afloat, and then gasped as John's foot rubbed across his groin, John's toes curling and uncurling around the hardening length of his cock.

“Something wrong?” John asked innocently. “Maybe a wee fish nibbling at your toes?”

“I don’t know. It feels bigger than a wee fish,” Nick said. “Maybe it’s one of those sharks you were talking about.” He caught John’s foot and held it by the ankle, pressed it against his shaft. “Hm. Nope, doesn’t feel like a shark.” Licking salty water from his lips, he ran his other hand up along John’s calf, massaging the muscle and helping keep the man afloat in the waves at the same time.

John’s eyes were alight with amusement. “Sharks bite. Aren’t you worried?” His heel ground down gently, giving Nick just enough stimulation to bring him fully erect, which felt different under water, somehow, the sensations slightly distanced

“Me? Worried?” Nick was aware that there were a couple of people edging closer off to their right, but not close enough to worry him. He couldn’t reach much higher than John’s mid-thigh without altering their position fairly drastically, and he was enjoying the way John’s foot was rubbing against him too much to do that. “Besides, I think you’d protect me, wouldn’t you?”

“With my life,” John promised. “But maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s not a shark.” How John was managing to wiggle his toes that accurately, curling them around the head of Nick’s cock, Nick didn’t know, but it was getting hard to stop his emotions showing on his face. “Maybe it’s a lobster. Aye. With nippy claws.”

“I like lobster,” Nick said, grinning and pushing John about six inches away, then holding him there. “For dinner.” And, with John’s ankle firmly in his grip, he started to tickle the sole of John’s foot mercilessly.

The water churned up around them as John began to flail his arms, shouting out with laughter as he tried to squirm free and getting in a few kicks with his free foot. “Nick! Stop it! Och, you daft bugger, you’ll drown me!”

He got more Scottish when he was worked up, Nick reflected, easing up a little. It was enough. John snatched his foot back, flipped over, and planted a kiss on Nick’s nose. “You daft bugger,” he repeated, the words loving.

“More than you know,” Nick agreed, pulling him close and not caring who saw. He kissed him, ran a hand from the top of John’s head down to the back of his neck, wiping water through John’s hair like it was a seal’s pelt. Pressing their noses together, he added, “Good thing you’re daft enough to put up with me.”

“That’s not daft,” John said. “It’s the most sense I’ve shown in years.” His hands came to rest on Nick’s shoulders, warmer than the water. “And now I’m wishing this water was a bit colder because I don’t think I’m ready to go back to that umbrella just yet.”

“We’ll have to distract you.” Nick did his best to sound solemn, as if the problem were John’s alone. Then he gave John the quickest kiss ever, said, “Race you to those kids on the red raft,” and whirled and took off toward the raft. He knew he had no chance of winning -- John was a far better swimmer than he was -- and in fact he’d barely gone twenty yards when John shot past him, arms moving in smooth, efficient strokes. By the time Nick reached the raft, John was already talking to one of the kids.

“He won!” the little girl told Nick as he joined them. “By kind of a lot.” She seemed pleased, as if she’d already decided to adopt John as a friend.

“He always does.” Nick smiled at her; her dark hair was pulled back in two tousled pigtails and she was missing one of her front teeth. “He grew up near the ocean. I think he might be part fish, actually.”

Her eyes went round. “Like Ariel? You’ve got a tail?”

Nick had been volunteered for babysitting duties for John’s nieces and nephews, not to mention Michael and Sheila’s kids, often enough to know who she meant; he’d sat through every Disney film available at least six times, it felt like, and from John’s snort of laughter, he knew, too.

“No, pet, he’s just teasing you. But I do live on an island.” He waved his hand at the horizon. “Way, way on the other side of the ocean.”

“Is that why you talk funny?” she asked.

“Me? I talk just fine,” John said indignantly.

She giggled. “No, you don’t, but you sound cute.”

“Cute? Och, that’s terrible.”

“Men don’t really like to be told they’re cute,” Nick explained.

“My daddy doesn’t mind. My mommy calls him that a lot.” The little girl pushed her bangs out of her eyes and glanced behind her, where three other children were laughing and pushing each other off the raft into the water. “Where are your kids?”

“We don’t have any.” Nick felt pretty neutral about that; he’d never thought it would be an option for him, more because of his psychic abilities than because of a lack of a partner with a womb.

That got a disappointed “oh” and Nick felt a pang of sympathy because she’d probably been hoping for someone new to play with; the other children, one of whom looked enough like her to be her brother, were older and seemed to be doing a good job ignoring her.

“But I’ve got a niece about your age,” John offered.

“Back on the island?”

“Aye.”

“Maybe I can visit and play with her.”

“Maybe,” John agreed.

The sun went in, lost behind a cloud, and a gust of wind, warm and stale swept across the bay.

“Another storm coming...” John said, squinting up at the sky. The clouds were massing on the horizon, ominous and heavy. John patted the edge of the raft. “You and your friends had better get back to shore, pet. It’s going to get rough out here soon.”

“Okay.” The girl turned, treading water, and shouted, “Come on, you guys, it’s gonna rain!” Then she turned back toward Nick and John and said, “Bye.” Her hand brushed Nick’s shoulder briefly, and

*Lily, her name was Lily -- only that was short for something longer and spelled funny, like Lilibeth or Lilianna -- paddling through the waves from shore out into deeper water. He could see through her eyes the small pink beach toy floating just out of reach, the raft to her right but ignored because she knew that if she could just...reach...just a little bit further...*

“Nick?” John said, close at his side.

*...And then the water choking her, salty, burning in her nose and lungs, bubbles all around, her legs feeling heavy and useless as she fought her way back toward the surface, and --*

Nick gasped, tearing himself away from the flash, and looked around wildly. Lily was swimming toward shore, moving steadily. “There’s a toy,” Nick said. “It’s pink, and --” He saw it floating in the water not far from the raft and swam to it, grabbed it. “Lily!”

She turned and he saw recognition in her eyes as he held up the pink plastic dolphin.

“No, stay there,” he called. “We’re coming in.” And John unquestioningly followed him toward the sand, at his side as their feet touched solid ground under them and he handed over the toy.

“Thank you,” Lily said, smiling her gapped smile at him.

“You’re welcome,” Nick told her. He was starting to feel the reaction now, and although Lily had turned away without noticing, running over to her parents who were already starting to pack up towels and the remnants of a picnic, he knew John was giving him a worried look.

“Nick? Love, are you all right?” John said quietly. Nick felt John’s arm slip around his shoulders and let John lead him back to their umbrella. The sand was gritty, clinging to his wet feet in a thousand sparkles of white and gold, making them heavy, each step an effort. “Here, come this way, that’s right...Sit down for a bit; catch your breath, we’ve time yet before the rain comes.”

“I saw her,” he said, knowing he shouldn’t, people might hear, this wasn’t the time or place, but unable to stop himself. “She went back for that toy...” John lowered him into a sitting position on one of the towels and sat beside him. “She was drowning.” Nick looked up and found John’s blue eyes on him.

“You saw her?” John asked, putting a careful emphasis on the middle word. “Like Sandy, that time, you mean?”

Nick nodded, knowing he didn’t need to do more. John knew what it was like for him when this happened, when a possibility, a future that was going to happen, was spread out for him to read.

Or change, rewrite. Make right. Because it wasn’t right that that little girl would die like that, and now she wouldn’t.

“And she’s safe. You saved her.” John shivered, reaching out to pull Nick to him in a hard, clumsy hug. “God, Nick. I can’t...if we hadn’t been here; if we’d stayed in our room, hell, if we hadn’t had that race to the raft...I can’t get my head around it all sometimes.”

“I know.” Nick pressed his temple to John’s cheek and held onto him. “It’s...it’s happening all around us, all the time, and there are people I could save but I *don’t*, because I don’t *know* that -- “ John murmured to him soothingly and he stopped; it was the kind of thought process that went nowhere, because there was no way he could save everyone. Worse, he wasn’t sure he’d have wanted to even if he could.

Around them, people were packing their things and heading out toward the road, but he and John stayed where

they were for another few minutes. A woman walking past caught Nick's eye and smiled, and that easy acceptance gave him the strength to straighten up.

"I hate that it can happen like that," he said softly. "So unexpected, you know? Just out of nowhere."

John nodded. Nick supposed John had got used to the way Nick didn't, if he could help it, touch strangers; it had become automatic for him to be careful handing over money, or accepting change, a habit to walk through crowds keeping himself apart. It was one reason he liked living on quiet, sparsely populated Traighsheel.

"But you saved her. Whatever you saw -- it's gone now. Like a dream." John turned to look at the ocean, where the waves were starting to show white caps now and turn gray under the darkening sky. "She wouldn't have stood a chance out there, and more people might have died trying to save her. You stopped that." He glanced back at Nick and gave him a small smile. The first drops of rain began to fall, warm, full splashes, striking the umbrella and Nick's outstretched legs. "Come on, then, before we get wet."

"We *are* wet," Nick pointed out.

"That's different." John stood up and began to take down the umbrella. "Grab the towels, will you?"

Nick did, and they trotted back toward the hotel, turning in the umbrella at the small rental shop and going back up to their room, toweling their hair dry while they waited in the elevator. The rain was falling steadily outside by the time they shut their door, and Nick went over to open the curtains so they could see it. His swim trunks were sticking damply to his legs, so he stripped them off and turned to see John doing the same, the sight of his pale skin making Nick almost weak with arousal. "God, I love looking at you."

John's gaze traveled over him, appreciative enough to leave Nick's skin heating, tingling, as if he'd been touched. "I could say the same. You're just... Christ, you're hot, Nick. And there's more to the way I feel than that, and you know it, but sometimes that's enough." He walked over to Nick and drew the curtain closed again, the stiff, thick material brushing Nick's back. "I wanted you out there. I was aching with it and it hadn't been that long, but it didn't matter. And I want you again now, with the smell and the taste of the sea on you." He slid to his knees, nuzzling his face into Nick's stomach and turning his head to run his tongue across the head of Nick's cock, moaning as Nick's hips jerked forward instinctively, forcing John's lips to open for him. "God, yes..."

The heat of John's mouth on Nick's chilled skin was startling; he stroked his hand over John's head and blinked slowly, eyelids at halfmast as he watched John's lips slide over his shaft. His knees were wobbly, his chest tight. "Fuck," he said shakily. "Christ. John." John glanced up at him, then slid one hand up Nick's inner thigh and the other up around the back to his ass, kneading it. Nick's cock throbbed and filled, damp with John's saliva as John's pink tongue slicked across the head of it.

John murmured something, not words, just sensation, a thrum and hum across skin that felt thin, stretched, hot now, and his tongue stroked and licked lower, curling around the tight weight of Nick's balls, tasting and exploring.

Nick could feel the tension in the tops of his feet, the backs of his calves, his forearms. He was moaning now, little moans that slipped out with each warm lick of John's tongue. He ached deep inside; needed to feel John push into him, stretching him, making him gasp and cry out and come and then putting him back together afterwards with kisses and soft words and reassurances. There were never enough reassurances as far as Nick was concerned -- he could listen to John tell him that he was gorgeous and wonderful and loved until the end of time and would always want more.

There were tears in his eyes; he tilted his head back and took a shuddering breath, looked at the ceiling. "I love you," he whispered.

John rocked back on his heels and stood, his arms going around Nick, giving him somewhere safe, somewhere certain to be. "I love you, too." He felt John's fingers brush at the few tears that had spilled down, wiping them away, then John's hand slipped into his and John drew him over to the bed.

It felt good to stretch out on the cool sheets with John kneeling beside him, smiling down at him. His body was quivering, energized by what he'd done on the beach and what John was doing to him now, long, slow caresses, with John's mouth following the path his hands were taking,

"Turn over," John said, rolling Nick to his front and straddling him. "I want -- God, I want you. All of you --" His mouth was on the back of Nick's neck, biting and sucking at the skin as Nick shuddered and squirmed. "So hard -- God, you've got me so hard.... Feel me..."

Nick spread his legs wider, arching his back, feeling wanton and not caring, as John's cock, thick and full, nudged between his legs, riding the crease of his ass.

"Oh God, just fuck me." Nick writhed underneath John, trying to get the other man into position, not caring at all if there was lube because he *needed* to feel John inside him. "Please. Please..."

John grabbed Nick's hip and steadied him, kissing his shoulder. "Shh, love." He stretched, reaching for the massage oil on the bedside table, and a moment later slick fingers were pushing into Nick, making him groan. He would have begged John for more as soon as he'd caught his breath, but John knew him so well -- knew that waiting wasn't something he could do right then -- and fingers were almost immediately replaced with cock, hard as it slid into him.

"You feel...Nick..." John's breath caught and Nick felt John's hands tighten on his hips as John completed that smooth push inside him. "I want you."

Nick nodded, his breath rough and harsh in a mouth dry with longing. John had him. All of him. He rocked his hips in an agony of need, fucking himself on John's cock, easing back and forward, only willing to lose a few inches, even if getting them back sent a delicious shiver through him. John let him, holding still, and then moaned, sounding as desperate as Nick. "Oh, you've got to...I want to...Nick --"

"Whatever you want." Nick meant it. Right then he would have given John anything, no matter what the cost. "God, just..." With enormous effort, he forced himself to stop moving. "Fuck me."

"Plan to." John's teeth were gritted by the sound of it. "But you don't have to stay still. Together, aye?"

Nick didn't get a chance to answer; didn't need to. John plunged into him, over and over, deep, solid thrusts that filled him, gave him what he needed right then the way he needed air. There'd been times with Matthew when this had felt like an invasion, left him feeling a little empty afterwards, a little used, but never with John. It was a joining, a fusion of their bodies that left him closer to the man he'd fallen in love with so easily and at such a cost to them both.

He hitched himself up onto his elbows and knees, eyes screwed tightly shut as he pushed back to meet John's thrusts. "Don't stop," he begged, even as John's hand closed around his erection and stroked it roughly; he knew he wouldn't last, not like this, but he still wanted it to go on as long as possible. There were times he'd thought he'd never have someone like John, that his life with Matthew had been all he'd ever know, and he hadn't even realized what he'd been missing until he'd stepped into John's life and discovered that it was everything he'd ever wanted.

Hard, perfectly timed strokes coupled with the relentless slam of John's cock into him...he loved that when he needed this from John -- or wanted to give it -- it was his for the asking. With his body still in shock from the vision, still humming, itching, he needed to be overwhelmed with sensations he'd asked for, not been forced to endure. At times like this he wanted John's love expressed through strength, wanted John's hands to leave marks he could see, however fast they faded, wanted to hear John's voice, deep and musical, crack and falter as he cried out his name.

"God, yes." He had to say something, because it was so good, so good that he couldn't even hold himself up anymore; he collapsed forward, forehead pressed to the mattress and his ass still up in the air as John fucked him. Each thrust forced a little moan from him, because John's hand on his erection was perfect. John knew just how to touch him, and John's fingers riding the ridge just under the head of his cock, John's thumb slicking across the tip -- it was too much. Nick was coming, crying out as the pleasure tore all the way up into his gut. "God," he muttered. "John. God. John."

"Nick!" He wished he could see John and the look on his face, but he didn't really need to; it was all there in that single word, passion and love and need, tumbled together. He rode out the final blur of thrusts as John reached his own climax, the heat of it spreading through him, and then let himself collapse face down on the bed, John covering him, warm and heavy and *there*.

For a long time neither of them moved, waiting for breathing to return to normal. Nick liked things the way they were, anyway; it was comforting, reassuring to have John's solid weight on him, and he almost would have liked to fall asleep like that, but he wasn't really sleepy enough to do that no matter how comfortable he was. "We should move."

"Mm," John murmured, not moving either.

"Soon."

"Mm?" John jerked suddenly as if he'd been jolted awake. "Am I squashing you, then? You should've said..." He slid off, rocking the bed slightly, and lay beside Nick, his arm immediately coming to rest across Nick's shoulders. "Better, love?"

Nick snuggled closer, not that there was really all that much closer to get. "I didn't mean soon as in now, I meant soon as in eventually." He licked John's throat, tasting his faintly salty skin, and sighed with contentment. "You aren't that heavy, you know."

"If I keep eating key lime pie for dessert that might change." John's hand smoothed down Nick's back in a slow sweep. "You're just so..." He shook his head, his lips finding the pulse at Nick's temple and kissing it. "You

look at me and I can't think, you know that? It's like you're all there is, all I can see. It's never been like this with anyone. Never close."

"I never thought I'd have anything like this." Nick felt exposed in ways that had nothing to do with nudity, but he wanted John to hear this. "After Matthew died -- hell, even before -- I thought there was something about me that prevented me from being really close to anyone. You know I went to Traighshee thinking I'd live out the rest of my life there, alone. I never thought, not even once, that I'd meet someone who'd understand me the way you do." He stroked a hand over John's hip absently. "Someone who'd love me. I go around all the time with this feeling, like... like my heart in my throat, maybe -- because it's so incredible to think this might be real."

"Aye..." John kissed him, a light brush of the lips, no more, and then another, deeper, softer. "Well, it's real, love, I promise you that." There was a glint of amusement in John's eyes now, chasing away the emotion that was becoming just a little too intense for Nick to handle. "And us needing another shower is real, too, so I hope they got around to giving us new towels." He gave Nick's ass a pat with enough sting in it to have Nick mouthing a reproachful "ow" at him and then rolled off the bed.

The combined exertion of their swim and the sex, followed by a warm shower, was enough to have Nick's eyes closing. He barely remembered the end of the shower; he was vaguely aware of John helping to towel him dry, and then of a pillow against his cheek.

## Chapter Fourteen

The insistent ringing of the telephone woke him from a deep, dreamless sleep; he fumbled a hand for the receiver and knocked it onto the floor. "Shit," he said, leaning over the bed and grabbing it. "Yeah. Um. Hello."

An unrecognizable voice on the other end of the line said, "Well, hello to you, too. Charming phone manner you have there, Nick." Slowly, Nick's brain provided the information that it was Greg Duncan.

"Hi. Sorry. I was asleep." Nick sat up, glancing at John, who didn't seem to have been disturbed by the ringing of the phone or his voice. He moved over to the other bed.

"Asleep?" He could hear Greg processing that and managed to focus on the clock beside the bed. Just after six. Okay, most people were awake at six in the evening... "Well, I'm sorry to have woken you."

"No problem. I've got somewhere I need to be later, so it's just as well."

He could sense the stirring of interest at the other end of the line as clearly as if Greg was in front of him, gray eyes sharpening.

"Somewhere to be?"

"Personal business," Nick said flatly.

"You know, you could be a little friendlier when I'm calling to tell you I got what you wanted," Greg said, the reproach in his voice laid on a little too thickly to be genuine. Nick imagined a reporter grew a pretty tough skin.

Still, that didn't mean he was wrong. "Sorry. It's just been kind of a long couple of days, you know?"

"Yeah." Now Greg did sound sympathetic, and it made Nick like him, just a little bit. "Do you have a pen? I've got that information on the kid you asked me about."

"Uh-huh, hang on, just a second." He found a pen and paper. "Okay, go ahead." He wrote it down -- Joshua Denbrough, adopted by his mother's new husband, William, address, phone number.

"Is that what you wanted?"

"That's great, yes. Thank you." What he was going to do with it, he didn't know yet. Having a way to get in touch with his brother was freaking him out; the thought of actually doing it was even worse.

Greg's voice became ultra casual. "You know, if you wanted to pay me back...we never did really finish that interview. I got some information from you, but not much. And what I'd really like is to see you in action. Any chance of that, do you think?"

"I don't know." There were too many factors. "Give me a second to think, okay?" Nick considered everything - he didn't know how things would go tonight, trying to use Melissa's tea for the first time. But maybe it would be better for John if there was someone else there? On the other hand, John didn't like Greg. "Let me talk to my partner and I'll get back to you. I think we can work something out, but I don't want to say yes without asking him."

"He doesn't like me, does he?" Greg sounded a little bit amused. "No, no, that's okay. I probably wouldn't like me, either, if our positions were reversed. You know how to get in touch with me -- give me a call when you figure it out."

They said their goodbyes and Nick hung up the phone quietly, then moved over to the bed where John was still sleeping.

"John?" He stroked his hand over John's hair gently.

The soft grumble John gave, twitching away from Nick's hand and burrowing his head deeper into his pillow, made Nick smile, but a second touch, this time a small shake of John's shoulder, had John waking up.

"Nick?" John yawned widely and blinked his eyes open. "Did you say something? Thought I...ohhh..." He yawned again and then sat up. He had a knack Nick envied of waking up and being alert a moment later; Nick was more of a slow starter in the morning. "Did the phone ring?"

"Yeah. Greg Duncan had some information for me. About Josh." Nick shifted, rested a hand on John's leg. "I thought, if I wanted to get in touch with him...well, probably his mother, actually. He's just a kid. I don't know. Maybe I won't want to."

"You will," John said with more certainty than Nick felt. "He's family; how can you not?" He raised his hand

to cup Nick's face. "And I'm glad the man found out for you; saves us doing it, with all we've got on our plate." He patted Nick's face and then raised his arms over his head, stretching and giving a third and final yawn.

"Too much," Nick agreed, then started to worry. "Is it? I know you weren't counting on all of this when you said you'd come with me..."

John gave him a baffled look. "Well, I didn't expect you to discover long-lost family members, no, but I wasn't expecting it to be fun, Nick. We came here because your father died; this isn't a holiday, for all I'm making the most of the scenery." He sighed, pushing the covers back and giving Nick a quick hug. "You might be the first man I've been with for longer than a night, but I loved Michael for years and there wasn't anything I wouldn't have done if he'd needed me. How can you not think the same applies to you?"

"I know. I know it does." On the surface Nick couldn't help but worry, but deep down he knew that John was as steadfast and loyal as anyone he'd ever meet. "I'm just being, I don't know. I'm thinking too much, maybe. Do you want to go have dinner in the restaurant next door? That Mexican place?"

"Mexican?" John said doubtfully. "Will it be a wee bit spicy, do you think? Stella did one of those theme nights of her at the restaurant; 'South of the Border' or something like that, and I've never seen so many people begging for water after two mouthfuls of the chili she'd made." He looked thoughtful. "She sold a lot of beer, too."

"Mexican beer is one of the best reasons to eat Mexican food." Nick got up and started to search for some clean clothes. He hadn't been doing a very good job of keeping them sorted, and it was hard to remember which he'd worn enough to consider them dirty and which he hadn't. He held up a shirt and looked at it. "It won't be too spicy if they know that's not what you want. And some of it's not spicy at all. Trust me, it'll be good."

"Fair enough."

John began to get dressed, too, picking out darker clothes, which reminded Nick of what they'd be doing after they ate. Which effectively took away his appetite before they'd got there, and he hadn't even mentioned Greg's idea to John yet...

"He wants to come with us," Nick blurted out, and John looked at him. "Greg Duncan. He wants to see what I do. And I thought, tonight, maybe, because if things get bad again, it might be good to have someone else there. Other than Alicia, I mean, since she's kind of...well, I don't get the impression she'd be very useful during a crisis. But I told him I needed to talk to you about it."

It took a while for John to answer, and Nick watched John's face with some anxiety. John wasn't all that good at hiding his emotions, although he seemed to be trying to keep his expression blank, and there was some hurt showing.

"I managed last time," John said finally, sounding a bit stiff. "But..." He blew out a gusty breath. "Okay, fine. And if Alicia has hysterics, I hope to God it's him she grabs, not me." He gave Nick a sidelong look. "You really think he's interested in this article he says he wants to write? It's not just a way to, well, get to hang around you?"

"I really don't think he wants me like that." Nick decided the shirt he was holding would do and slipped it on. "He said as much. I mean, he probably wants to have sex with me, but I think he's looking for conquests, not a relationship. And he's curious. He can't figure me out, and I think that doesn't happen to him very often."

"He wants to have sex with you," John repeated, focusing in on Nick's first words. He sounded grim but a moment later he chuckled. "Well, he can't. And that's not me being possessive, unless you want me to be; he's just not got a chance, has he?"

"Of course not." Nick was a little bit -- but only a little bit -- surprised that he even had to say it. "Not that I mind you being possessive." That was kind of appealing, actually, in more ways than one. "But I'm not interested in him at all. Not even slightly. I don't see anyone else but you." He went over and kissed John, then looked into his eyes seriously. "There's no part of me that wants him. I swear."

"He's not *that* bad-looking," John murmured teasingly. "And I don't mind you looking; you wouldn't be human if you didn't. I just..." His lips found a place on Nick's neck that John always seemed to aim for. He wasn't sure if it was because John knew it made him shiver, or if it was just the natural place to kiss, in the curve of his neck. "Just like hearing you say that, because it's how I feel, too. And if he wants to come along, he can. Call him. Tell him to meet us there, if that's fine with you. You're in charge when it comes to this, love, not me."

John moved away a little, searching for his shoes, his shoulders relaxed now as if what Nick had said had gotten through to him. "Did Matthew watch?" he asked suddenly. "Stay with you like I do?"

Nick thought they must have talked about this before, but maybe they hadn't. "Not like you." He started to button his shirt. "He was there, when he could be, and he'd talk me through it afterwards, but he never knew how to help the way you do. With you, it's like...instinct. But you're wrong about one thing." John looked up at him. "I'm

definitely not in charge.”

John winced, then his face smoothed out. “Maybe it’ll be different tonight. Tea and candles...maybe tonight you’ll call the tune and they’ll be the ones dancing.”

“That’d be nice,” Nick said. He couldn’t even begin to imagine that happening, but he was sure it would be nice.

They finished getting dressed, and then John boiled some water in the small kettle the hotel provided and brewed some of the tea, pouring it into an empty water bottle and giving the murky, greenish liquid a dubious sniff.

“Sooner you than me,” he muttered, “but if it does the job...”

“I don’t care what it tastes like if it works,” Nick told him, reaching for the phone to call Greg, although the herbs in combination did smell worse than the seaweed on the rocks back home.

He made the conversation brief, giving Greg a time to meet them at the crash site, and then they left.

The restaurant was next door to the hotel. It was crowded, but they got a table almost immediately anyway. When their waitress came to get their drink orders, Nick gave John a “trust me” look and asked for two Negra Modelos.

“You’ll like it,” he said when she’d gone. “I think. It’s dark and a little bit bitter.”

“I’m trusting you,” John said with a nod. He gave Nick an impish look. “Putting myself in your hands. Do with me as you will. Totally at your mercy --”

“It’s just *beer*,” Nick said, pretending to be irritable but unable to suppress a grin. “If you don’t like it, you can get something else.”

“It’s *beer*,” John parroted. “Why would I want anything else?” He fiddled with his napkin, the bright red cotton a splash of color against his navy blue shirt. “This is it, tonight, isn’t it?” he asked. “We do this and finish it. Go to see your brother; fly home. It’ll all be over soon, and we’ll be back on the island.”

Nick didn’t see it being that simple; there were dozens of loose ends; his father’s funeral for one, and if there was money hidden somewhere, there’d be legalities involved in even a simple transfer. His thoughts must have shown in his face, because John nodded, looking resigned.

“Soon,” he said quietly, his foot bumping Nick’s under the table. “We’ll just take it one step at a time, aye?”

“God, I want to go home just as much as you do.” Nick was fervent, his chest tight with it. “Probably more.” He looked toward the bar, hoping the waitress would be back with their beer, but there was no sign of her. “Not as much as I want a beer, though,” he added ruefully.

John laughed, the sound rich and easy, turning heads. “When they arrive, I’ll drink to that.”

As if she’d heard them, their waitress appeared a few moments later, a friendly, if professional, smile on her face. “Enjoy,” she murmured, unloading her tray efficiently and tucking it under her arm once it was empty. “Are you ready to order?”

“Um, I think we need a few minutes.” Neither of them had done more than glance at the menus they’d been given, and Nick wanted to be able to figure out what John would actually like. The waitress went off again, and Nick watched anxiously as John tried the beer. “Well? What do you think?”

“I like it,” John decided, taking a less cautious sip. He picked up his menu and studied it. “How hungry are you? We could split some of these nachos, maybe, as a starter?”

“We should probably carbo load.” Nick glanced up in time to catch John’s slightly confused expression. “Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do before you run a marathon or whatever? Eat a lot of pasta?” He looked at the menu again. “I guess this wouldn’t be the right place, in that case. It’s more like protein overload, with all the meat and beans. Yeah, nachos sound good.” He was hungry enough that everything looked good, really.

“I want a chimichanga,” John said after a moment.

“Why that?” Nick asked.

John grinned. “It sounds interesting.” He repeated the word adding a solemnly thoughtful, if misquoted, “choo-choo” at the end that had Nick choking over a mouthful of beer as he couldn’t help laughing. “But they don’t have meat in them, so maybe I’ll go for a beef burrito. How about you?”

“I was thinking something with shrimp. Maybe fajitas.” Not that there weren’t shrimp available in Scotland, but it wasn’t the kind of thing they cooked at home and it wasn’t one of Stella’s specialties either. He had a sudden thought. “I wonder if I shouldn’t eat too much? For the tea to work, I mean.”

John shrugged. “Can’t see why. And Melissa would’ve said, wouldn’t she?” He rolled his eyes when Nick continued to look doubtful. “You don’t eat, then I can’t, not with you watching every bite I put in my mouth, and

I'm starving, so if you don't want me to waste away to nothing, order something, will you?"

"Okay, okay." Nick grinned and set his menu down as the waitress came back over to take their orders. That taken care of, they made small talk for a little while. He was aware of John trying to steer the conversation toward something a bit more serious more than once, but he just wasn't ready; he needed some more time to relax. Even admitting that much to himself made him feel guilty, because he *should* be dealing with the situations that surrounded him. And, somehow, John knew when to back off.

It wasn't until the waitress had delivered their nachos and gone off again that Nick finally felt prepared to talk about something less casual than the beach and the sunshine and the tourists.

"Sorry," he said, waving a hand. "About...you know. I think Traighshee spoiled me. I forgot what it was like to have to deal with all of this. I...I kind of liked it. Forgetting."

"I don't blame you," John said, his expression sympathetic without dripping pity. "You've had to deal with what you can do for years with no breaks; you were due a holiday."

Nick didn't feel a bit hungry now, but he knew he needed the calories for later, so he carefully slid a tortilla chip free from the pile and ate it. The sour cream was still cool, and it cut the heat of the salsa perfectly. "That might have been more than a holiday."

"A sabbatical?" John suggested. "And one you can go back to. I think you've sorted out all the local ghosts, and I can't see there being many new ones. Not on Traighshee. It's a quiet place, when all's said and done." He picked up a fully loaded chip, dripping with salsa, and gave it an appraising look before shrugging and eating it in one mouthful. "Mmm," he said, swallowing, his tongue dealing efficiently with a single smudge of sour cream at the corner of his mouth. "And there's always your book."

"I might have to rethink that." Nick knew some of the problem -- maybe most of it -- had been his dreams and the fact that he hadn't wanted to share them with John. But his writing had definitely been a sticking point between them, too, and he wanted to avoid getting back into the rut they'd been in. He'd missed John, and he didn't want to lose him; not to Andy or anyone else.

"What?" John gave him an incredulous look. "Rethink it? In the name of God, why? From what I could see, you were enjoying yourself, and it was proud of you, I was. Your name on a book's something worth having." His indignation subsided and he grabbed another chip. "Besides; you've got to do *something* with your time and you'll never make a fisherman, love."

That was true enough; despite a fair number of fishing trips, Nick still couldn't bring himself to touch a fish until it was long dead. The way that they flopped around made him want to run in circles screaming. "Well, I'll have to change my hours or something, at least. I don't want things the way they've been. It's not good for either of us."

"You could try just writing in the morning, maybe, when I'm usually out..." Nick's face must have given him away, because John's words trailed off. "It doesn't work that way, does it?"

It wasn't a question and Nick couldn't have given him more than an apologetic shrug by way of reply even if it had been. It wasn't a matter of watching the clock -- which wasn't something he had any experience of, anyway; when it was going well, when the words were pouring out of him, there was nothing else he wanted to do

"It'll be different, though," John went on, his voice steady. "Part of it was that you were waiting for the other shoe to drop, right? When you first started writing we managed well enough."

Nick nodded, remembering. "Yeah. You're right; it was different then. I just got so caught up in everything, though, and I don't think I knew it was happening. I don't want things to go bad like that again. And...what if I don't see it this time, either?"

"You know it's a danger, now," John pointed out. "And *I'll* see it. Count on that. I won't try and stop you doing it -- I can see the look you have on your face when you're working, and I'd sooner get between a mother and her newborn -- but I can maybe distract you if I'm feeling lonely." He picked up his beer and took a drink, the slow swallow and the deliberate arch of his throat enough to make it clear how he'd be trying to get Nick's attention.

They'd been intimate only a few hours before, and yet the temptation to reach out and run his fingers along John's throat was strong. Nick looked down, then distracted himself by eating some more. "Just promise me you'll say something. Make rules, if you need to, about when I have to stop. If we agree to it beforehand, I'll have to listen." He needed reassurance, was hoping John would give it to him.

John's eyebrows, the brown of an autumn leaf, as Nick had told him once, in a rare poetic moment, drew together. "Rules? We've never bothered with them before. Can't we just...I don't know, play it by ear, maybe? I promise I won't let that distance grow between us again. God, I couldn't. It --" He looked across the table, his face screwed up in a grimace. "It was like being frozen. Like being dead. I couldn't sleep right; I was drinking too

much...I'm not blaming you for that; I'm a grown man, but it's not something I want to go back to. I won't let it happen. I swear."

"Okay." It wasn't really that simple, but if there was anything Nick was good at, it was putting his trust in John. The man had proven himself time and time again; stepping up to the plate and taking control of situations even when he'd had no idea how to deal with them. "I can deal with playing it by ear, as long as it's your ear and not mine." He offered John a rueful smile.

"If that's what you want," John said after a moment, his gaze going to the approaching waitress before returning to Nick. "But for a man who faces down ghoulies and ghosties, you've a low opinion of your own courage."

"Well, it's not like anyone ever offered me a choice." Nick knew it was likely he would have refused if they had, or at the very least that he would have been tempted to.

The waitress delivered their meals, asked if they needed anything else, and then disappeared promptly when it was clear that she'd interrupted their conversation.

"I think we scared her off," Nick said, taking another sip of beer.

"She just doesn't want to ruin her chance of a good tip," John said with an edge of cynicism that surprised Nick. John was frowning now, staring down at the plate in front of him without picking up his fork -- or knife -- looking disturbed. "It's going to be bad tonight, isn't it? Worse than last time, even with that tea stuff. You'll call him, if he's there, and it'll be --" He shook his head and then glanced up. "You never said; did you get any sense that he was there, amongst all the voices? Anything that stood out?"

"It might not be worse. Just different, maybe." Nick tried to catch up to all the questions John had just asked. "No, I don't think he was there. Not that I know for sure I'd even recognize him if he had been, but...I just don't think so." Another thought occurred to him. "There's that other --" he lowered his voice, leaned closer to John across the table, "-- ghost. Grant. I still don't know if he's going to show up. I probably shouldn't have told Alicia she could come." The angry spirit was likely to lash out at anyone around him, and Nick didn't want to be responsible for her getting hurt.

"Him." John shivered. "Aye, well, he bothered you, and he had my blood running cold, but he can't do much to her, can he? She doesn't strike me as the sort to notice anything beyond her nose, that one."

"She might not," Nick agreed. "But he's strong. Stronger than any spirit I've ever come across. I don't know what he's capable of."

"He could hurt her physically, you mean?" John blinked as Nick nodded, taking that on board, before finally picking up his knife and fork and beginning to eat. "She'll have to stay well back," he said between mouthfuls. "With that reporter. I'm not leaving you, if that's the case."

Nick appreciated the sentiment; he tried to picture the evening ahead of them as he used his own fork to rearrange the vegetables on his plate. "I don't like the idea of this whole circle thing. I mean, I do, it's fine, and I need it, but...I've always done it the other way. The way I'm used to."

"I can see that," John agreed. "It's not the time you want to be playing around with something new; not with so many of them coming at you." He grimaced and then said gently, "But I don't see that you have much choice, love. Last time...it didn't work. That's the top and bottom of it. If you've been given a shield it makes sense to use it to protect yourself."

"I know. You're right." Nick picked up a tortilla and started to put together a fajita, piling shrimp and vegetables on before rolling it up into a somewhat awkward burrito-shaped thing, then taking a bite. "Mm. This is good. You should try some."

"I think I've lost my appetite," John said, staring at the door. "Was he supposed to join us here?"

"Who?" Nick turned to look and saw, to his surprise, Greg Duncan talking to the hostess. The man was nodding and smiling, really turning on the charm if the way the blonde hostess was glancing down coyly and tucking her hair behind her ear had anything to say about it, and then he looked right at Nick and started toward them. "I didn't even tell him where we were going," Nick said with dismay, quickly, before Greg could get close enough to hear. "I don't know how he --"

"I knew I'd find you," Greg said warmly. "You said you were walking, so there were only so many places to end up."

"We're not walking now," John said pointedly. "We're eating. Together. In peace." Greg pulled back the chair beside John and sat down, his face showing no sign of annoyance at his tepid welcome. "Or we were," John finished.

"Oh, I won't get in your way," Greg promised, already managing to subtly exclude John, taking advantage of the empty space in front of him and leaning across the table a little, his gaze locked on Nick. "I just thought it'd be a good idea if I was...prepared. You know; for what to expect. Do I need holy water? Garlic? Is that why you're eating here?"

"I don't know if holy water would do anything." Nick had never even considered it. "Garlic wouldn't -- I don't think they can smell. Oh, unless you meant it's supposed to have some magical ability or something." He looked down at his plate awkwardly, not sure he wanted to admit that they'd gone to see someone in that line of work earlier that day. It just seemed so...hokey.

"I think he's trying to be funny, Nick." John's voice was cool but his mouth was tight with annoyance. "No one's asking you to tag along, mate. And if this article you're planning on doing is going to be full of jokes like that, you can bloody well forget about it!"

"Take it easy," Greg suggested, slouching in his chair and slinging one arm across the back of it. "I want a story, true, but that's not the kind of story I write. Go online and check if you don't believe me -- you won't find that kind of thing. I don't need attention that badly that it's worth being all *Enquirer*-sensationalist. Hell, I'd be writing for one of those rags if I did."

"Then maybe you should tone it down." Nick gave him a firm look, because he couldn't just sit there and let Greg be a jerk, not even when he knew John could take care of himself.

Greg opened his mouth, visibly reconsidered what he'd been about to say, and then sighed. "Fine. Can I admit that even though I don't think anything's going to happen, it's possible, just vaguely possible, that I'm very slightly freaked out at the idea of what we're going to do?"

"He'll be the one doing it, not you," John put in, his expression not softening. "You'll be standing way back, taking care of Alicia if she needs it. And feel free to do what you have to do to shut her up if she starts shrieking, because Nick won't need the distraction."

"You said there'd be someone else there but you didn't say who. Alicia? That's...oh." Greg stared at Nick, frowning now. "She's the woman who identified your father, isn't she? Why does --? God, you're going to try and speak to him, aren't you? To your father? Oh, this is just fantastic! Great human interest angle..."

"It's really not," Nick said, even though he knew it was, knew what Greg meant. "It's my last chance to see him -- talk to him -- so I'm going to try to take it, if I can. That's all."

"It's a hell of a lot more than that." Greg's eyes bored into his. "And you know it."

Nick looked away, then looked at John even though he was talking to Greg. "It's personal. If you're not going to be able to respect that..."

"Oh, I will. I do. Honest." Greg smiled reassuringly which, as far as Nick was concerned was wasted effort. "And if you want me to provide a shoulder for the lady --" John snorted but left it at that. "-- to cry on, well, I can do that." He tilted his head. "I'd like to record it, if that's okay? Just me, don't worry, and a very small digicam. You won't notice it, but it'll add some color to it if I can provide pictures, some documentation."

"They won't believe you," John said flatly. "They'll just think you've faked it. And the ghosts don't usually show as visible to anyone but Nick, anyway."

"Not usually, but sometimes? Have you -- John, is it? -- have you seen them?"

Greg was quick. Too quick, Nick reflected. And he didn't believe for a moment that Greg had really forgotten John's name.

"It's him you're interviewing, not me." John turned his attention to his food, although he did no more than pick at it before tossing his fork down with a clatter. "Oh, can we just get this over with?"

"Sorry," Greg said, without a hint of genuine apology in his voice. "Didn't mean to put you off your dinner."

"We kind of were anyway." Nick caught the waitress's eye and shrugged a little with one shoulder; from her understanding look, she'd gotten the message.

Greg hadn't shifted his position at all. He was as relaxed and casual as if they were friends talking about old times. "My car's just down the block. I can drive."

Nick hesitated, but to his surprise John nodded. "Aye, we can do it that way." He saw the look Nick was giving him and shrugged. "Last time...it was tricky driving and keeping an eye on you and I know what I'd sooner be doing." He stared at Greg. "Can you drive fast if you have to?"

A sparkle of amusement lit Greg's eyes. "Och, aye."

"That sounded terrible," John told him.

“Want to give me lessons?”

“Not top of the list of things I’d like to do to you, no.”

“And what would be top?” Greg’s eyes widened as John deliberately made one hand into a fist and then let it relax again. “You know, assault comes with some nasty consequences over here.”

“It’d be worth it.”

Nick sighed, giving the approaching waitress a grateful smile and reaching for his wallet.

“Hey, no, I can get that.” Greg held out a hand for the check, and the waitress hesitated long enough for Nick to take it from her.

“You really can’t,” Nick told him, handing over his credit card. “But thanks.”

“Don’t thank me for not helping.” Greg was frowning. “Save the thanks for when I’ve actually done something, okay?”

“I won’t be holding my breath,” John murmured.

Greg frowned more deeply and shot John an irritated look. “Hey, I got the addresses and phone numbers he wanted, didn’t I? I don’t get credit for that?”

“Oh, you do, you do,” John agreed. “Trouble is, making a move on Nick canceled it all out as far as I’m concerned.” He smiled easily at Greg, but Nick knew him well enough to see that John was spoiling for a fight, held back only by the fact that they were in public and they had a job to do. “You were wasting your time,” John said softly as Greg flushed.

“Couldn’t know that until I tried,” Greg said. He did seem less at ease now, though, and Nick wasn’t sure whether to feel pleased or guilty about that. “I didn’t get as far as I have in my career by not going after stuff I wanted.”

John didn’t take his eyes off Greg, the tension between them thick enough to touch. Smell, even, like the crackle and burn of ozone before a storm. “He’s not yours to want. He’s mine to love. And I do. Now get out of that chair and to your car and don’t be saying another word to me that implies otherwise or I’ll take the pleasure of thumping you over whatever comes after.”

They were all speaking quietly, but heads were still turning and Nick saw the waitress hesitate as she began to walk back with his credit card, her face troubled.

Time to go.

“Not here,” Nick said. “Hopefully not at all, but definitely not here.” He smiled at the waitress and added a generous tip to the bill before signing the slip and giving her the white copy, aware that John and Greg weren’t looking at each other and that Greg hadn’t gotten up and left the table the way John had told him to.

Still, as soon as the waitress thanked them and left, Greg did stand up and head for the door without looking back. John got up at the same time Nick did, hands curled into fists and his shoulders tense.

“He doesn’t mean anything by it,” Nick said, stepping closer to John and keeping his voice low. At John’s disbelieving glance, he added, “I mean, he’s kind of a jerk, but it doesn’t matter. You *know* I wouldn’t do anything with him, even if I wasn’t crazy in love with you.”

He saw the anger on John’s face fade, to be replaced by guilt. “I know. I do. I’m sorry.” John eyed Greg’s back as the man left and started to follow him, his steps as reluctant as his next words. “You want me to apologize? To him, I mean?”

Nick snorted. “I think he probably owes you more of an apology than you owe him, and I doubt you’ll get it.”

To his surprise, though, when they joined Greg beside the shiny black car, the other man looked ashamed. “Sorry,” he muttered, then lifted his head and said it again to John. “Sorry. I didn’t realize -- but that’s no excuse. No hard feelings?” Greg offered John his hand to shake.

John took it at once, giving Greg a nod of acknowledgment that was guarded, but friendly enough. “No. And if I was out of line in there, well, I’m sorry for that. I’ve got a temper on me and I’m not looking forward to this, if you want the truth.”

“See, that’s where we’re different.” Greg rubbed the back of his neck. “I can’t wait to see what happens, no matter how on edge I feel. Plus...well, I guess I was trying to get you riled up. My mother always said it was the scientist in me, wanting to see what would happen, but I think it’s more a psychology thing.” Then, as if he’d revealed more than he’d meant to, Greg turned and unlocked the car. “I hope one of you will sit in front with me, but if not I guess I’d understand.”

“You sit in front,” Nick said quickly, touching John’s elbow. Better to have John in the front than in the back,

stewing.

John took advantage of Greg getting into the car and closing the door, leaving them in relative privacy, to say quickly, “Nick -- it’ll be fine. I’m not worried about that. Just about you.” Unusually, as he was rarely demonstrative in public, John leaned in and kissed Nick, his mouth warm, comforting.

Any other time, Nick would have clung to John and claimed another few kisses at least, but Greg was waiting and so were half a dozen ghosts, so he gave John’s hand a squeeze and then let go. John got into the front seat and Nick got into the back; Greg’s car was considerably nicer than their rental, the seats firm and soft and smelling of leather. “At least it’s not raining,” he commented, looking up at the darkening sky.

“Yet,” John said succinctly.

“Does it usually rain when you do this?” Greg asked, sounding interested. “I know I’ve read that people have reported drops in temperature when there’re spirits about. That sort of hard data’s always good to have.”

“It rained last night.” Nick watched out the window as they pulled out onto the main road. “I think it was last night.” It seemed like days ago. All of this did, really; it felt like months since they’d left Scotland.

“I don’t think it’s supposed to tonight,” Greg said. “Though if it does I guess we could count that as some kind of proof.” He sounded doubtful.

“I wouldn’t count on it,” John said dryly. “And, no, I can’t say that I’ve noticed it, but then we’re from Scotland; it’s raining more often than not there. Rain’s normal.”

“I’d rather avoid it when I’m holding a camera.” Greg was a careful driver, something that Nick found surprising.

“Because you want the footage to come out okay?” Nick asked.

Greg glanced in the rearview mirror, then shook his head. “Because I don’t want the camera to get wrecked. It’s new.” He grinned suddenly, and it transformed his face.

John smiled, turning to stare out of the window, at the dazzle of streetlights against the rapidly darkening sky, looking relaxed enough that Nick relaxed, too. “Then let’s hope it stays fine.”

## Chapter Fifteen

The guards were likely tired of them at this point, John mused as he turned to look in their direction. Still, it seemed as if a number of the smaller pieces of debris on the crash site had been removed that day; the larger pieces of the plane were where they'd been the night before, though. "They've started cleaning up," John commented, mostly to Duncan, who was standing beside him, the tiny video camera in his hand.

"Once they've taken about six million photos, a hundred movies, and a few thousand measurements, they usually start carting stuff out." Duncan looked up and around. "As soon as the area's clear, no one'll be interested anymore, and then they can stop with the police rejects." John gave him a questioning look, and he clarified, "The guards. Most of them are ex-cops."

Nick, who'd been sitting nearby reading over the notes Melissa had jotted down for him, made a sudden choking noise. John looked at him, concerned, but Nick just said, "Okay, this stuff tastes like shit." He was holding the screw-off cap from the bottle in his hand.

"What is it?" Greg asked, shifting to reporter-mode way too fast for John's liking.

Nick forced down another swallow, his eyes watering. John bent down beside him, ignoring Greg, and patted Nick's back. "Must mean it's good stuff, then. My granny always said if it tasted nice it wouldn't cure what ailed me."

"Yeah, well, it won't if I puke it up, either." Nick wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, gagged, then set the bottle down beside him. "Okay, if that's not enough...it'll have to be."

"Magic juice?" Duncan asked doubtfully.

"Pretty much. It's an herbal thing. Tea. It's supposed to help me focus, or something." Nick put the cap back on the bottle, still half full, then rummaged around in the bag and brought out the candles and the package of salt.

"I'm not even going to ask," Greg said.

"Good," murmured John, but he gave Greg a smile when he said it. The man wasn't so bad now he'd backed off a bit, and John could sure as hell sympathize with how out of his depth Greg must be feeling.

It was the way he felt every time he thought about what Nick did.

Arranging the candles at the compass points and sprinkling the salt in a circle didn't take long enough to quell the nerves John was feeling. He studied the candle at his feet, shifted it an inch, and looked at Nick. "Good enough?"

"I hope so." Nick stepped into the circle and went...well, the only way to put it was still, really. It never lasted long, and there was always a nervous tension hanging in the air, but for a moment or two it was like watching someone turn to stone, and it never failed to make John's heart skip a beat. "Tell him to --"

"Hellooooo!" Bloody Alicia. They'd forgotten all about her, but here she was, tottering down the hillside on the very high heels she hadn't had the sense to exchange for a sensible pair of shoes. "I hope I'm not too late. Did I miss anything exciting?"

Nick sighed and opened his eyes. "No; we were just getting started." He looked at John imploringly.

"You're to stand well back." John pointed at a slight rise in the ground. "With him." He nodded at Greg, who was looking a little stunned at the turquoise suit Alicia was wearing, the jacket low-cut and clinging. "He's a reporter," he added, guessing that Alicia would get a kick out of that. "And he's going to be filming this."

"A movie?" She actually fluffed her hair. "Well, make sure you get my good side, honey."

"He's not a magician," John said tersely. "And he's here to film Nick, not you."

But Duncan seemed willing to turn on the charm even for Alicia once he'd gotten over his surprise at her whirlwind arrival -- he guided her back up the hill half a dozen steps, talking to her in a low, cajoling voice that had her flirting with him in seconds.

Good. Let the man keep her busy.

"Don't let her touch me, okay?" Nick said, watching her intently. "During, I mean. It wouldn't be the end of the world if she did, but -- I think it'd freak me out."

"I can understand that." John rolled his eyes. "Just look at her, will you?" he muttered. "Och, well, as long as she's happy." He hadn't known her long, but he had a feeling life was more peaceful when she was like that, and right now, for Nick's sake, he was willing -- more than willing -- to sacrifice Greg if that's what it took. "She won't get past me, love. Neither of them will."

"I know." Nick smiled at him, but didn't reach out to touch him, as if somehow he thought that leaving the rough circle of salt and candles on the ground, even just with a hand, would spoil the effect. He raised his voice a bit. "Okay, here we go. Keep quiet if you can."

Not much chance of that with Alicia, John thought, but he didn't spare the two of them so much as a glance.

Nick went quiet again.

A moment later there was a faint breeze -- warm, because of where they were, but only smelling slightly of the ocean. Instead of making John feel secure, the fine hairs at the back of his neck stood on end. Nick licked his lips as if they'd suddenly gone dry, one hand opening and then closing again into a fist.

"No," he said clearly. "No, you have to wait."

"Wait for what?" Alicia asked in a loud voice.

"Shut up," John mouthed at her, his words barely audible.

Alicia's face stiffened with outrage, but Greg, earning John's undying gratitude, reached out with one hand, the camera he was pointing at Nick never wavering, and murmured something that looked like a more tactful version of John's command.

She subsided, her foot tapping impatiently, and John turned his attention back to Nick.

"Yes," Nick was saying, clearly talking to the ghosts. "I know, but it's okay. You'll all get a turn, I promise." He flinched. "I know; I'm sorry. I wasn't ready to handle all of you before. But I am now. Okay. Come in."

Alicia said something to Greg, but it was quiet enough that John didn't do more than glance in their direction.

"John?" Nick said it in a way that let John know what he needed -- someone to take notes. There was a pad of paper and a pen in his pocket, and he took them out and held them at the ready as Nick went on. "Alexander. Mm-hm. Yes. And there's -- okay. It's a combination. Five, oh, six, nine, eight, nine. Okay. I'll make sure she knows. Yeah." His voice softened. "You can go. Go on; it'll be okay."

There was quiet for a minute, the breeze changing direction slightly. Then Nick drew a shaky breath; John could see him trembling.

"Hi, Dad."

It was what John had hoped would happen; that Nick would get what he'd been given, a chance to say goodbye, but this was different. John and his father had been close, with nothing between them but love and respect. Nick couldn't really have either of those for a man he barely knew, who'd turned his back on him.

But he was still blood. Still family. John, who could, if needed, list his ancestors going back a couple of centuries without even trying, because they'd all been born, lived, and died on that small scrap of rock and sand in the western sea, couldn't overlook the importance of that.

His hand relaxed on the pencil he held. No need for notes here. He just wished, with a fierce, sharp pang of regret, that Nick didn't have to do this under the eyes of strangers.

Alicia gave a choked gasp and took a single step forward, halted by Greg's hand on her arm.

Nick looked toward Alicia a bit wildly. "Don't," he said, swaying on his feet. John took a step toward him, unsure if his intention was to support him or just reassure, but Nick took a deep breath and steadied himself. "It's okay."

"Sit if you need to, lad." John stayed where he was.

"I will. I'm okay." Nick turned his attention back toward his father's ghost, and after a moment he smiled sadly. "Yeah, I know. Good intentions." For all the world he sounded like a man who'd been close to his father, who'd considered him a friend. "Alicia? Did you want to talk to him? He's right here."

Alicia was trembling now, the affectations stripped from her face, leaving only the careful makeup to give it any color. Her hands rose slowly to her mouth, jamming against it, smearing the vivid red lipstick. She stood like that for a moment and then her hands dropped. "I can't see him." Her voice was flat, desolate. "I wanted to see him."

John felt a sympathy he hadn't thought possible. "It doesn't work like that, love," he said. "But he can hear you and he can probably see you. Hurry; you don't have long. If there's anything --"

"Brian?" Alicia sounded shrill. "I need to know where the money is. I know you would have wanted me to have it..."

Nick was unmoving as a statue, his head tilted a bit to one side, listening. "Some of it was on the plane with him," he said, and Alicia gave a choked moan of despair. "But the rest of it's at his apartment. Under the kitchen sink. He says you know where."

Nodding, Alicia wiped at her eyes. "He kept money under there sometimes. In one of those fake spray cans." John had no idea what she was talking about, but it didn't matter. Greg was recording everything intently. "All of it?"

"He says yes," Nick reported after a moment. "Everything he didn't have with him. He says the landlord will let you in, but not to wait too long or they'll clean the place out."

Alicia took a step backward, as if she was about to start running to get it, but then paused. "You...he said you'd want Josh to have some. I -- I guess that's fair. I'll do that, Brian. I promise." Her face crumpled, the middle-aged woman showing through the façade of youth. "I miss you, Brian. Miss you so much, sweetheart."

"He's..." Nick's voice broke, but he recovered and went on. "He misses you, too. He says...he thought you two were going to get old together. That you -- you were the only person he ever met he thought he might be able to stand for more than a couple of years." The words came fast and furious, like they usually did when Nick was trying to echo what someone else was saying. He was looking a bit pale, John thought.

"Oh, God." Alicia started sobbing; Greg stepped closer and grasped her elbow in support, but didn't stop filming. "I really loved...I really love you, Brian. I do. I didn't think I could, but..."

"He says to have a good life. Have fun." Nick's lips twisted in something that bore little resemblance to a smile. "Find someone else, if you can."

"I will. I'll try. And I'll send some of the money to Josh, I will." Alicia sounded sincere enough, although she looked terrible, eye makeup running down her face.

Nick nodded, his attention turning inward, his voice dropping to a conversational tone John could hear, but he doubted the other two onlookers could. Alicia was too busy searching through her purse for Kleenex to care, her crying getting stormy now, her shoulders heaving, but Greg frowned and began to move forward.

John put himself between Nick and Greg, blocking the man's view. "You'll let him say goodbye to his father in peace."

"I just want to --"

"You heard me." John was prepared to take the camera from him if he had to, and he didn't care what he had to do to get it, but Greg bit his lip, nodded reluctantly, and stepped back again.

John turned and saw a smile, regretful but not unhappy, pass over Nick's face.

"I know. And I will. Or I'll try, at least." Nick's eyes met his and his smile turned loving. "I've got a pretty good shot at being happy, Dad."

John smiled back and watched Nick's head sink forward, his body bowed as if some strength had left him. "Nick? Are you --?"

"I'm fine." Nick's voice was husky with tears but he managed a reassuring look. He glanced over, directing his words to Alicia. "He's gone."

"You mean..." Alicia sounded bereft, but after another moment or two she nodded and sniffled and turned to go. None of them made a move to stop her. She'd gone ten steps or so before she turned back and said to Nick, "Thank you. I wouldn't have had..." She wiped her eyes again. "Thanks."

Nick didn't say anything; there were beads of sweat gathering around his hairline, and he was already starting to look strained, but he took a deep breath and made contact with the next ghost, inviting it into the circle. Off to the side, Greg was still taping with a look of intent fascination.

John took notes as Nick talked with the remaining spirits one by one. By the time Nick said, "This is the last one," another half hour or so had passed. Nick's words were halting, the pauses between communications longer, but even so it was an incredible improvement from the night before.

"Okay," Nick said finally, rubbing his face. "I think that's it."

"Thank God," John said, feeling as exhausted as Nick looked, although with far less cause. Watching Nick work didn't require anything like the physical exertion of hauling in net after net of mackerel, silvery and squirming, but he was starting to think that he did more than watch and record; as if Nick drew something from him.

He didn't mind that. In fact, he liked the idea, because he wanted to help Nick all he could, but God, he was having trouble focusing on the words he'd scrawled down. He tucked the paper and pen away and gave Nick a wavering smile.

“So can we just blow out the--” Greg began.

A rush of wind drove through the clearing, carrying a shriek within it, bitter and savage. Nick flinched and John instinctively brought his hands to his ears. Greg looked puzzled and slightly uneasy. “Guys?”

The small, bright flames of the candles popped out neatly, one by one, the circle of light extinguished.

“Nick? What the hell’s going on?” John had to raise his voice; the wind was a howl now, and the trees nearby were bending, limbs lashing, leaves scattering.

Nick’s face was pale, his hair unusually dark, and for a moment John could have sworn that the man’s eyes were glowing. “It’s Grant,” Nick shouted. “Get him out of here!” He gestured at Greg, and John shook his head.

“I’m not leaving you. He can bloody well get out of here on his own!”

Greg had moved closer -- the wind was so strong, swirling like a tornado, that John understood the natural instinct to be near others. “Are you kidding? I’m not leaving!” He was still holding that damned video camera, and it was still recording if the little glowing red light was any indication.

Hesitating, Nick’s face made it clear how torn he was. Step out of the circle, where he’d be less protected, or stay in the hopes of capturing Grant there?

“Stay there!” John yelled. “You’re the only one who can control him.”

“Who? Who is it?”

Greg seemed fascinated rather than scared, which was good in a way; John didn’t want to deal with someone panicking. He spared a fleeting thought for Alicia, hoping that she was well clear, and then focused his attention on Nick. “It’ll be you he’s after; you need all the protection you can get. Just stay in there.” Greg’s hand closed around his arm and John shook him off, saying briefly, “It’s one of the victims. He’s...different. Angry. Pissed as hell. Won’t let Nick help --”

Something -- something invisible but that managed to distort the air at the same time -- rushed past them. John stumbled and Greg caught at his sleeve, kept him upright. It came at them again, the howling of the wind becoming a shriek, then it circled away.

“Did you see that?” Greg shouted. “What the hell was that?”

The wind died down, the place where they were standing getting quiet again. “That,” Nick said flatly, “was a ghost. And he’s not very happy about it. He thinks I had something to do with how he got that way, so he’s...”

A thinly white form in the vague shape of a person winked into existence immediately in front of Nick, hovering just outside the circle.

“Just listen to me,” Nick told it urgently. He reached out a hand that shook. “Come in and we’ll talk. We can --”

Before Nick could finish, the spirit was inside the circle with him. Nick stumbled backward and John saw, through the mostly transparent form of the ghost, his shirt move as Grant touched him. For a brief instant, Nick’s eyes met John’s, and that was enough to communicate how utterly, utterly fucked they were.

Everything happened very fast after that. The howling wind was back, blowing leaves across the grass, and the ghost inside the circle shoved Nick, making him take another step backward. Grant made a sound, something between a scream and a laugh and did it again, harder this time -- Nick fell, and when he did, his hand broke the line of salt on the ground.

*Fuck.* Even if it hadn’t been doing much of anything, the loss of that fragile, shimmering barrier left John feeling a sick lurch of dismay. Grant was strong; stronger than any of the spirits John had heard about from Nick. Manifesting, physically affecting his surroundings -- that was all off the scale. He had to wonder what Grant had been when he was living to have this much presence and belief in himself after death. It was a twisted sort of power, backed by a blindness to reality, but that didn’t weaken it any.

Nick’s cry of pain as he fell, landing awkwardly, shattered John’s moment of frozen panic and he lunged forward, trying to put himself between Nick and Grant in the hope that he could slow him down. With Nick lying behind him, he turned his head, looking through the flying debris, thicker, concentrated here in the broken circle, for that flicker of white.

“John!” Nick sounded desperate, but John knew it wasn’t himself he was worried for. “He’s too strong. I can’t --”

The manifestation rushed at John, striking him in the chest and knocking him off his feet. He had a second or two, flat on his back, to blink up at the sky, and then the ghost, faceless but for two black holes like eyes, was staring down at him. There was a tremendous pressure in his chest, like a giant hand squeezing. John tried to cry out to

Nick, to get up, but his struggle was for nothing; he couldn't breathe, and he could feel his body slowing as his supply of oxygen dwindled.

It was like being underwater, he decided, his mind rushing back through the years to the first time he'd fallen overboard, reaching for a treasured spinner, his fingers closing around air, his body learning about centers of gravity the hard way. The water had cocooned him for a second, deceptively gentle, then the cold wet had seeped through his clothes in a swift invasion and the sea had dragged him down, the light above him dimming. He'd sunk, luckily too terrified to scream, his mouth clamped close, and then his father's hand had closed on him as he'd bobbed back up to the surface courtesy of the trapped air in his lungs and a few frantic kicks. He'd been hauled back into the boat, cuffed for being an idiot, and wrapped in his dad's Aran sweater, its thick and oily wool keeping out the brisk breeze.

And now it was Nick saving him.

Nick tossing salt at Grant, making the awful pressure on John's chest ease, just a little, followed by what was left of the tea, a lukewarm splatter of translucent, aromatic liquid. What it did, John wasn't sure, but he felt the challenge rise in Nick's voice as he screamed at Grant, overpowering the uncertainty of a moment earlier.

"He's mine! Leave him alone!"

*Yours*, John thought, his vision graying. *Always*.

Everything got strangely peaceful then. His eyes closed -- it was too much effort to hold them open -- and sounds became muffled, distant. The pain in his chest increased again, taking the world away with it, even Nick, who was the last person John wanted to leave. He thought, briefly, of his mother, and of Michael, and then the ground tilted beneath him and he lifted away.

John opened his eyes. Or maybe they'd never been properly shut in the first place. Either way, he was floating just above his body, looking down at Nick and himself and Greg bloody Duncan, and for a moment it seemed that dying wasn't as bad as he'd always imagined.

There was some sort of a scuffle, Nick grabbing the rest of the box of salt and throwing it at Grant, and then a spectacular explosion of lights like fairy dust, glittering and shining. When John turned his attention back to Nick, the man was kneeling beside him -- him, his body. Nick bent and breathed into his mouth, laced hands over his chest and pushed down. There were tears on Nick's cheeks, and John felt a savage stubbornness flood through him; he *would not* leave Nick, not like this, not now, not ever if he had anything to say about it. And just like that, with an audible snap, he did a sickening flip down into his body.

The ground underneath him was hard and uncomfortable, and his chest hurt almost unbearably, but the only thing John cared about was Nick, who was repeating his name in a broken, desolate voice.

"M here," he whispered, forcing the words out of a mouth that felt bruised and stiff. His tongue explored his lips carefully, finding nothing but a residual warmth from Nick's attempts to resuscitate him. "Nick?"

It wasn't working. Nick was still lost in sorrow and he didn't have to be because --

"He's still breathing." Duncan's voice. "I saw -- he tried to say something. Back off. Give him some space, Nick, will you?"

Nick didn't ever have to go away, but when John tried to tell Greg that, all that emerged was a muffled groan, and he realized his earlier attempt to speak had been no better, no matter how clear the words had been in his head. He licked at dry lips again and took the deepest breath his aching chest could hold, using it to shape a single lie. "Fine."

The sound Nick made hurt John's chest as much as what had happened; warm hands touched John's face gently. "John?"

"Zz 'e gone?" he managed.

"I think so. Yes." Nick's voice was incredibly beautiful to John just then. "God. John. I thought you were -- you were --"

"Think I was." The memory of floating, looking down, was hazing over. John focused in on what mattered. "Here now. Not going 'way."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Nick said fervently, and leaned his forehead down to rest against John's shoulder. In the background, John could hear the sound of a siren growing steadily closer.

## Chapter Sixteen

Nick sat up half the night at John's bedside in the hospital. The guards at the crash site had known something was wrong, even if they hadn't been able to say exactly what, and had called 9-1-1. Despite John's assurances that he was fine, he'd been bundled into the ambulance and taken to the nearest hospital, where he'd been pronounced bruised but otherwise all right and admitted overnight for observation. The nurses had been surprisingly cooperative about letting Nick stay -- not that either he or John would have accepted anything else -- and had brought in a chair that unfolded into a fairly uncomfortable bed for him. But he'd spent the first three hours after John fell asleep sitting beside the bed, holding John's hand.

He'd never worried before that his abilities might endanger John. Now everything had come crashing down around him; and yet, strangely, Nick felt more secure rather than less. Things had gone terribly, terribly wrong, but he'd handled it. They'd come through it okay.

Eventually, as much as he needed to gaze at John's beloved face, he fell asleep sitting right there, slouched down in the chair with his head on his shoulder. He slept heavily and didn't wake until sunshine was streaming into the room, a nurse adjusting the blinds and then moving over to the bed to take John's pulse.

"How is he?" Nick asked. He was a little disorientated and sleepy but for all that he was conscious of a lightness of spirit. It made him wonder just how much Grant had been affecting him since they'd first made contact with each other, and he shuddered, the vivid picture of a leech stuck to his flesh coming into his head. Well, salt dealt with them, too, he supposed.

"He's fine," John replied, his eyes opening and his gaze finding Nick at once. A smile, slow and happy, spread over his face. "Good morning, love."

"No talking," the nurse said reprovably, but she gave John's hand a pat as she released it. "And, yes, you are. Doctor Carter will want to see you this morning, but if I were you, I wouldn't bother picking what you want for lunch when they come around with the menus later."

She gave Nick a sympathetic smile. "Rough night trying to sleep in that chair? If you want some breakfast, there's a cafeteria on the ground floor. The coffee's not bad, but I'd steer clear of the donuts this early; they'll be yesterday's leftovers."

"Thanks." Nick waited until she'd made a few marks on John's chart and left the room before he sat up and leaned forward, reaching out to touch John's arm, which was reassuringly warm. "How are you feeling?"

"Well, I've felt better," John said cautiously. Nick watched John wriggle his toes and generally test that everything was working. "But to be honest, there's nothing much wrong with me, barring the fact that I'm starving." He reached out and captured Nick's hand, his fingers curling around it with a comforting pressure. "How about you? You were the one doing all the hard work last night, after all."

"I'm fine," Nick said. He was. The night before had been unbearably taxing, but other than a slight crick in his neck from sleeping in a chair, he felt rested. And, as John had said, hungry. "I'll have to call Melissa and tell her what happened." He stroked the back of John's hand with his free one. "I'm just glad you're okay. That's all that matters, really. When I thought you were -- you really were, weren't you." He couldn't quite bring himself to say the word "dead" out loud.

"Dead?" John asked with a certain relish. "Aye, I was, or as close as I want to get for another fifty or sixty years, anyway." Nick's expression must have told John how much he didn't want to hear that, because John's face twisted and he gave Nick a contrite smile. "Right here," he said gently, squeezing Nick's hand hard for a moment. "See?"

"I know." Still, Nick had to lean in and kiss John's hand, press his forehead to it, and John rested his other hand on the back of Nick's head, comforting him. "But we can't put you in a position like that again. We have to find a way to prevent it." Melissa's tea had worked wonders -- there had to be something else, something stronger that would work against more powerful ghosts.

"It's not likely to happen again." John paused. "Is it? Because you've managed just fine up to now and, hell, you won last night, didn't you?" His hand slid up to the back of Nick's neck, possessive and comforting. "I knew you would. Never a doubt about it." His thumb found the perfect place to rub against and his voice was rich with

pride and satisfaction. "You kicked his arse, lad."

"I think it was more like I tripped him and got lucky and he hit his head," Nick said, even though that was a poor analogy at best. His voice was muffled against the thin cotton blanket draped over John, so he rolled his head to the side. "But I have no idea how I did it. I want to know. I've been going along on instinct for too long, thinking it would be okay -- and you're right, it has been, mostly -- but now I need to know what works, and why."

"It's not like you can send off for an instruction manual," John pointed out. "And you said once that those of you who can do it aren't even all that connected with each other." He frowned. "You don't have a webpage, or anything?"

The idea was enough to make Nick grin. "No. No webpage."

"No one you've heard of who's like the top man or woman? Someone who could give you a few pointers?" John persisted. "What you do, it's a skill. A talent. But you're not the only one, and like my dad used to say, cream rises; if there's someone out there who's really good at this, it stands to reason you'd find him if you looked." He made a face but there was no real heat in it. "You could always ask Greg. Assuming he didn't take off after last night."

"He was here," Nick said, surprised. "Don't you remember?" He thought back, but the night was kind of a blur of doctors and nurses and moving from the emergency room up to the room they were in now. "I guess you were a little busy with the six thousand medical professionals who had their hands all over you. He followed the ambulance in his car and hung around until after they brought you up here. I'm supposed to call him today, actually; let him know how you are." Glancing at the clock showed that it was still too early to call. "He wouldn't know, anyway. There are some people I can check in with; people I know, like Isabel. We'll figure it out."

John nodded. "Aye, we will." He yawned, knuckling the sleep out of his eyes, and Nick was hit with a surge of homesickness for Traighshee, where he could wake up beside John in their bed, with the clear air, salted and clean, blowing through the window John kept open unless it was actually snowing or Nick protested enough. John's lips would be warm and sleepy as they kissed, missing each other's mouths because their eyes were still shut and not caring, his hands finding Nick under the covers, pulling him closer because they usually woke up at opposite ends of the bed, no matter how tangled up they'd been when they'd fallen asleep. "But maybe not today."

"No," Nick agreed, standing up and leaning to kiss John's forehead. "Now, I'm going to go down to the cafeteria and get you something to eat. Knowing hospitals, it'll be a couple of hours until they get around to delivering breakfast, and I think you'd feel better if you had something before then."

"I knew there was a reason I loved you," John told him, lying back and closing his eyes. "You could maybe ask for waffles?"

"Anything you want," Nick said, and went to get food.

## Chapter Seventeen

“Did I mention I’m nervous?” Nick wrung his hands; he’d been doing it for the past half hour, to the point where his knuckles were starting to ache.

“Aye,” John said, putting the car in park and shutting it off. “A dozen times or so.”

“Only that many?” Nick caught John’s hand before he could get out. “It felt more like a hundred.” Then he asked the real question. “What if he doesn’t like us?”

John was silent, the reassuring answer Nick had expected not coming immediately. “I’d like to say it doesn’t matter,” John said finally, his thumb moving in a deliberate caress over the back of Nick’s hand. “That a week ago you didn’t know he existed, so what difference does it make if this doesn’t go well?” His hand tightened. “But we both know it does matter.” His face broke into a slow smile. “And I know there’s no one who doesn’t like you once you turn on the charm, so…”

“Apart from the minister,” Nick said a little shakily, because John’s belief in him was so absolute it sometimes felt impossible to live up to.

“Well, he liked you before he found out you were hell-bent on seducing me,” John pointed out. “And I think he’d have forgiven you in time, if you’d picked someone else, mind. We’ve never got on. Englishman,” he added as an explanatory afterthought. “What can you expect?”

“Josh isn’t.” Nick sighed and slouched down in his seat, giving himself permission to postpone the meeting for another minute or two. “He’s American, and so am I. That has to count for something.” He shook his head, grateful for the touch of John’s hand. “Who am I kidding? He’s just a kid. He wouldn’t care if we were from Timbuktu as long as we brought him candy and toys.”

“Like the ones you insisted we shop for, you mean?” John reached into the back and dragged the shopping bag forward between the seats.

Nick grinned ruefully. “Yeah, well…hopefully they won’t hurt.” He looked at the house -- it was bigger than he’d expected, with a well-cared-for lawn and two fairly new cars in the driveway.

“She sounded nice, did she? His mum?” John asked tentatively. “Not like Alicia?”

“Much better than Alicia,” Nick confirmed. He thought about it a little bit more. “Sort of between my mom and Alicia, actually. Not that I talked to her that long, but…yeah. She sounded nice.”

“Well, that’s…good.” John sighed and shook his head. “Get out of the car, will you, Nick? Because there’s someone watching us from behind a curtain and I’m thinking you’re not the only nervous one. He’s meeting a brother he never thought to see, as well, you know.”

Startled, Nick looked toward the house again just in time to see the curtain closing. “Oh geez. Yeah, you’re right. Sorry.”

They got out of the car, John holding the bag of toys and things, and walked up to the front door. Nick knocked, his heart pounding in his chest, echoing the sound of his knuckles against the solid wooden door.

A moment later, the door opened, and he was presented with the sight of a wide-eyed boy with sharp green eyes and a tousle of brown hair streaked with blond. “You’re my brother,” Josh said. He wasn’t smiling; John was right, he looked almost as nervous as Nick felt.

“I’m Nick. And you’re Josh.” Nick hesitated, then held out his hand as Josh’s mother appeared behind him. Josh shook Nick’s hand solemnly. “Hi,” he said to Josh’s mother, shaking her hand, too. “I’m Nick Kelley.”

She nodded, smiling, opening her mouth to say something Nick guessed would have been a conventional greeting, and then her face crumpled. “Oh, God. God, this is --”

John cleared his throat. “Awkward? Aye, it is. And I’m John, by the way. John McIntyre. Pleased to meet you both.” He was so matter-of-fact about it that Nick felt a bubble of amusement, inappropriate, unexpected, and welcome, rise up. John clearly didn’t want to have to deal with another of Brian’s girlfriends becoming hysterical.

She blinked, what might have been a sob catching in her throat. “I’m Stacy. And, yes. Yes, it is.” She swallowed hard and took a step toward Nick, hugging him. “You look so much like him,” she murmured into his shoulder. The light, floral scent she wore surrounded him and he realized as his arms came up automatically to hold

her that she was shaking. “Your eyes...”

He wasn't sure if she was talking about Josh or Brian, but it probably didn't matter. Nick let go as soon as she started to pull away. “I know you probably never expected to hear from me,” he said awkwardly. “And you probably wouldn't have, if...” He glanced at Josh, who still looked solemn.

“Our father died,” Josh said. “In a plane crash. I cried. Did you?”

“No.” Nick wanted to be honest. “But I'm sad. I never really knew him. Maybe I would have gotten to know him, later, if he was still alive.”

“Why didn't you know him?” Josh stared at him, wide-eyed. “I didn't think anyone couldn't know their daddy.”

He glanced at his mother for support and she tousled his hair. “You ask too many questions,” she murmured. She gave Nick and John a smile that seemed more relaxed now, as if Nick's own nervousness had been reassuring. “Please; both of you, come in, sit down --”

She ushered them, not into a formal room, visible through an archway, all white and pale green, but the kitchen at the back of the house, sunny and welcoming, with a refrigerator serving as a memo board and gallery for Josh's artwork.

“Coffee? Or iced tea?” Stacy asked, hovering between the coffee pot on the countertop and the fridge.

“Iced tea sounds great,” Nick said. Stacy opened the fridge and took out a tall glass pitcher and a small lidded glass container that proved to have sliced lemons in it.

Josh was watching from the doorway. “I got to stay home from school today,” he offered.

“I guess you did.” Nick hadn't realized until then that it was mid-week; he'd lost all track of time, really. “Do you like school?”

“Sometimes.” Josh shrugged, fingers worrying at the bottom hem of his T-shirt, which had a cartoon drawing of a skateboarder on it. “I like math. But not reading.” He brightened. “I like recess best.”

Stacy gestured at Nick and John to sit at the table and set their glasses of tea down. John looked at Nick and widened his eyes slightly, jostling the bag he was still holding into Nick's thigh until Nick took it.

“We brought you some things,” he said, glancing at Stacy for permission.

“Oh, you shouldn't have,” she said automatically, her eyes softening. “He has so much --”

“Mom!” Josh came forward eagerly but hesitated, good manners preventing him from grabbing. Nick smiled and handed him the bag, Josh's smile blinding.

“Oh, cool.” He began to stack his loot on the table. “Mom! It's that new Gameboy game; the limited edition racing one! And, look, a whole set of Pokemon cards and...” He investigated the bottom of the bag and pulled out the soccer ball John had tossed in. “*Neat.*”

“It felt wrong not to bring something,” Nick said to Stacy, apologizing.

“It was very nice of you,” Stacy said. Josh brought out a handful of candy that'd been for sale in the cash register aisle of the toy store -- mostly sour and in vividly bright artificial colors. “Josh?”

“Thank you,” Josh said, glancing up at Nick and then John. “A lot. This is so cool. I'm gonna get my Gameboy.” He darted out of the room, and Nick could hear the sound of his footsteps as he pounded up the stairs.

“That isn't all we brought,” Nick said, slightly distracted by John at his side, who had taken a polite sip of his iced tea and was now manfully swallowing it without grimacing. He'd forgotten John's views on tea that was cold and milkless and far too sweet.

He took the envelope out of his pocket and placed it on the table. “Brian won some money before he died. Some of it he had with him when he -- when the plane crashed, but most of it was back at his apartment.” He could see the questioning look on Stacy's face and he hurried on, wanting to get this over with. “His, uh, his girlfriend collected it and, well -- this is Josh's half.” He placed his fingers on the envelope and pushed it closer to her. “I know this is probably one of those things where everything should be done through legal channels, but John and I just -- we want to go home. I gave my share to Alicia and --”

“You did what?” Stacy rolled her eyes, her Southern accent deepening. It seemed clear she knew Alicia well enough to dislike her. Which could mean they'd met once in passing; Alicia tended to have an impact. “Now, I'm guessing that was *her* idea, right?”

“Aye, but it's what Nick wanted,” John put in. “And it's what Brian would have wanted, too.”

“How do you know that?” Stacy's eyes were wary now, fixed on Nick. “I thought you hadn't spoken to him for years. What's going on here?”

Nick listened for the sound of Josh returning. "You don't have to believe me -- you probably won't, and I'm not sure I blame you -- but...I can talk to people. After they've died."

Blinking, Stacy appeared to try to absorb that information. "You see dead people," she offered.

"Exactly." It wasn't the first time Nick had heard it put that way, not since that movie had come out. "But I don't just see them -- I talk to them. They tell me things; stuff they've left unfinished. And I try to pass that on to the people who knew them. Family, friends, whatever." Stacy was watching him a little bit blankly, like she wasn't sure what to believe. That was better, Nick thought, than her thinking automatically that he was some kind of crazy. "Josh should have this. Save it for when he's older -- for school, or for when he wants a car or something."

Stacy stared at the envelope, clearly pushing aside what Nick had told her as being irrelevant right then or too much to deal with. "That much?" She raked her fingers through soft brown curls, rumpling the careful styling. "God, poor Brian! He was always saying one day he'd hit the jackpot, and then when he does he dies before he has time to enjoy it. It's just -- it's just *him*, you know?" She blinked. "No, you don't know, do you? I can't -- I don't know why he didn't keep in touch with you. He was never all that good with kids, although Josh adored him because he always showed up with presents --" She smiled wryly. "Like you. But once you'd grown up..."

"I didn't know where he was, even if I'd wanted to find him," Nick said. "Which I didn't. The last time I saw him was when I was...I don't know, twelve or thirteen. Let's just say I wasn't impressed."

Slowly, Stacy's hand stole out and touched the envelope, her fingertips just brushing it like she was afraid it might bite. Then there was the sound of Josh's footsteps on the stairs, and she picked up the envelope and slipped it into her purse, which was sitting nearby. She gave Nick an apologetic look which he completely understood. "He had his charms," she said. "I'm sorry you never had a chance to know about them."

"Me, too."

Nick smiled at Josh as the boy came back into the kitchen holding something that seemed too small to be a video game player. "It needs batteries, Mom."

"They always do," John said. "You should have a charger, though, that came with it. Leave it plugged in overnight, and --"

Josh looked sheepish. "Yeah. I lost it when I took my Gameboy to the park, and Mom said --"

"You couldn't have a new one for six months," Stacy put in firmly, sounding, for all the magnolia in her accent, remarkably like Sheila. "And that the new batteries would have to come out of your allowance."

John screwed up his face in sympathy. "And do you have any allowance left, lad?"

Josh sighed. "Yeah, I do." He gave Nick a speculative look. "Want to walk to the store with me? I'm not allowed to go there alone and I *really* want to play my new game."

Nick hesitated, not sure how Stacy would react to that, but she smiled tolerantly. "Would you? It's only a few blocks away and he'll keep on and on about it until I'm ready to scream." She turned to John. "And maybe you'd like to keep me company? I'd love to hear about where you live. Scotland! So romantic. Castles and heather and kilts. Do you wear...?"

"No, I do not," John said with feeling. "And there's no castle on Traighshee, but, aye, we've plenty of heather."

Somehow, Nick found himself walking down the sidewalk with Josh bouncing along next to him. The boy was so full of energy it was almost astounding, he thought, trying to keep up with Josh's rambling conversation about video games and the X-Box and something called, almost disturbingly, "butt bounces."

"My mom wasn't sure if you'd be nice," Josh said suddenly.

"She wasn't?"

"Uh-uh." Josh turned around and walked backwards, watching Nick's face. "She didn't say so, but I knew she thought it."

Perceptive.

"Moms have to watch out for their kids."

"I know. She's a good mom. She used to be sad about my father -- um, our father. But now she's happy. My new dad makes her happy."

"Being happy is really important," Nick said. "Probably the most important thing."

"You're happy." Josh sounded very definite about it. "On top there's all this stuff...but you're happy, right? Deep down happy?"

It was a strange way of putting it. On top? On top of what? Nick settled for nodding and giving a fairly bland reply. "Yes, I am. I live in a beautiful, peaceful place with someone I love. I'm happy."

He let the memory of the island rise, his next breath of humidity drawn into his lungs almost a shock when he'd been remembering the cool, sharp taste of salt, sea air. For the first time in a while, he thought about how they'd left the island and what had happened just before. Michael was probably wondering how he and John were doing; if they'd managed to put what had happened behind them...

Josh kicked a small stone out of his way, the rattle of it against the sidewalk lost in the roar of a bike going by. It took Nick a moment to realize that he'd been asked a question. He turned his head and smiled down at his brother. "Sorry, Josh. What was that?"

"I said --" Josh shook his head, his eyes distant for a moment. "Never mind. I know." He grinned, his face lighting up. "When we get to the store, I'll buy you a popsicle if you want."

"Does that mean you want me to buy you one?" Nick had never known much about kids before meeting John but he'd learned fast on the island, where there seemed to be a dozen children who called John "uncle", although he was only related to some of them very distantly.

"You *are* a grown-up," Josh pointed out.

Nick smiled. "And that means..."

"Duh, you've got more money than me." A dog stuck its head unexpectedly through a gap in the hedge to their right and Josh stumbled; Nick caught his arm to keep him from falling, but the boy got his feet under him again and darted forward, hand outstretched, before Nick could do anything to stop him. "Good boy, Gizmo. Good boy. Good dog." The fluffy brown dog's tongue licked at Josh's hand -- they obviously knew each other. "Mom says I can't have a dog until I'm ten," Josh explained, patting it on the head one last time before he started walking again.

"She doesn't want to have to be the one taking care of it," Nick guessed.

Josh nodded. "I would, though. I wouldn't want the dog to be sad because it thought I didn't love it enough to take care of it."

"I guess," Nick said, trying to keep up. "Do you have any pets?"

"A goldfish." Josh pulled a face. "It just swims. It doesn't care about anything but that."

"It's a simple life," Nick agreed. "But boring."

"Big time." Josh shrugged, dismissing the subject. "What do you do? My dad -- my new dad -- he's a doctor. He helps people, sick people. He makes them better." There was another sidelong glance from eyes that gave Nick a little jolt of surprise because, yeah, they really were like his. "Do you help people?"

"Sometimes." Nick thought about how to be honest without telling the whole truth. "I try to. I write things, sometimes. Articles for magazines. Now I'm trying to write a book."

"Will it help people?" They paused outside the drugstore, standing far back enough that they didn't trigger the automatic doors.

"I hope so."

"Not just people who are alive?" Josh asked.

Nick was so shocked that he didn't move, not even when Josh went into the store, leaving him standing there on the sidewalk. By the time he'd recovered enough to follow into the cool air-conditioned building, Josh was already standing in front of the battery display, hands on his hips as he looked for the right ones.

"How did you know that?" Nick asked quietly.

Josh unhooked a pack of batteries from the display and handed them to Nick as he dug through his pockets for some change. Nick let him; he wasn't going to interfere with Stacy's rules by paying for them himself, and he was too focused on what Josh's answer was going to be, anyway.

"I..." Josh screwed up his mouth. "I was on the stairs," he said slowly, carefully, as if he was testing the words. "I heard you and Mom talking. About what you can do." He took the batteries out of Nick's hand and began to walk toward the counter. "Pretty cool," he threw back over his shoulder.

"You think?" Nick asked. "Hey, wait. You still want a popsicle?" What looked like a freezer case was over to the left.

"Oh! Yeah." The boy lit up, suddenly appearing his age again instead of being so serious. "Do you want one? They have bomb pops. Hey, cool! Tongue splasers!" The vivid wrapper led Nick to guess this was one bright with artificial colors.

"I don't want one of those," he said. "How about that snow cone?"

Josh grabbed it. "They aren't as good as the ones at the fair, but the bottoms get really syrupy." He handed it over and they went to pay, Nick giving the cashier several dollars to cover the popsicles and letting Josh keep the

change. "So can you?" he asked, as they stepped outside. "Really?"

"Yes." Nick said. It was hard not to be stunned at the rate at which the conversation could turn. "Really."

"When did you know you could do it?"

Nick shrugged. "I never couldn't. I thought everyone could see them but they just didn't talk about it. Like it was good manners, or something." He smiled, remembering how confused he'd been about that. "Then one day my mom found out and she was, well, she thought it was cool, too."

Too cool. He'd almost have preferred it if she'd freaked. She'd been so eager to share, so insistent that he tell her, describe it, so disappointed that no matter how much she tried, she couldn't see them...

Nick cleared his throat, suspicions solidifying. "Uh...you can't see them, can you?"

Josh gave a hoot of laughter at the idea and skipped high in the air, a drizzle of melting popsicle trickling down his hand. "Me? No way!" He glanced around them, sobering abruptly. "Are there any here now?"

"Here?" Nick looked around automatically. "No. None here now."

"Whew." Wiping his brow, Josh left a bright red stripe across his skin without realizing it. "My mom wouldn't think something like that was cool. She'd totally wig."

Nick could guess what that meant. "She didn't when I told her."

"That's different. You're not her kid." Josh slurped his popsicle again. "You're nice, though. You should move here."

"Um..." Taking a lick of his own melting snow cone to give himself a few seconds, Nick thought quickly. "We like it where we are. The house we live in is where my grandparents lived, and where my mom lived when she was a little girl."

"Oh." Josh obviously didn't find that a compelling reason to live somewhere, but he nodded politely. "Does your mom like you living there?"

"She's dead," Nick told him, his loss old enough that he felt no more than a small pang of sorrow. "She died before I went there, so I don't really know how she'd feel."

Which wasn't strictly true; his mother would have hated the thought of him returning to the island she'd viewed as a prison, but he didn't see any need to share that with Josh.

He got a speculative, slightly disappointed look as if Josh had been expecting another answer. "You don't talk to her?"

"No," Nick said. "She's gone. She went...wherever ghosts go, when they don't stay here. Not that many of them stick around after they die."

"There wouldn't be room," Josh agreed.

Nick thought about walking through a world peopled with everyone who'd ever lived and shuddered, his breath catching, a momentary feeling of suffocation overwhelming him. A hand, sticky and warm, slipped into his, and he glanced down at Josh, fighting to keep his face from showing his feelings.

"It's okay," Josh said. "There's only a few of them, remember?"

"I know." Nick took a slow breath and squeezed his brother's hand, ignoring the fact that they might be stuck together in a moment or two more. "I'm glad we came to see you."

"Me, too. And not just because of the presents." Josh grinned. "I know about the other thing, too. Mom told me."

Nick looked at him, confused. "The other thing?"

"About you being gay," Josh confided, lowering his voice because, if nothing else, he'd already learned that some people didn't approve. "With John. Mom says it's part of nature. Some boys like boys, and other boys like girls."

It was more accepting than Nick would have anticipated, even though he'd known that Stacy hadn't seemed to have a problem with it. "I think," he said carefully, "that the most important thing is that you find people who understand you."

"And he does?"

"Always." It was a simple answer, but that was how it was with John. Their fight had been because, yes, for once the always hadn't been correct; John hadn't been able to figure out what was wrong with Nick, and Nick was beginning to appreciate fully just how frustrating that must have been for John.

"And you live together? In that house?"

“Yes.”

“Tell me about the island,” Josh commanded, releasing Nick’s hand and returning most of his attention to his popsicle, which was starting to disintegrate into slush in the sun. “Is it big? Could I walk across it in a day?”

“Not very big and I don’t know. I don’t know how far you can walk.”

“A long way,” Josh bragged, his tongue capturing a fragment of ice. “Miles and miles.”

They were almost at the house. Nick gave Josh’s stained T-shirt a horrified look but decided that trying to wipe it would just make it worse. “Uh...your mom doesn’t get mad when you get messy, does she? Because you can blame me, if you want to.”

“She won’t get mad.” Josh said it with confidence, but looked down at his shirt and frowned. “She’ll make me change, though. And wash my hands.” He licked around his lips, which just made things worse from what Nick could tell. “And my face. She likes stuff clean. But she doesn’t get mad at me for getting dirty. Even when she wants to.” He took off at a run. “Race you!”

The boy was already inside by the time Nick had jogged up the front steps, the door left ajar. He went back into the kitchen, where John’s glass of tea had, he noted, been replaced with ice water. Josh was throwing his popsicle stick into the trash and nodding at his mother.

“I know,” Josh said. “I told Nick you’d say that.” He turned and went past Nick and up the stairs, presumably to change his shirt.

“I hope it’s okay,” Nick said.

“Oh, it’s fine. As long as he stays in one piece, I’m happy.” Stacy eyed Nick’s soggy paper cone dubiously. “Can I take that?”

“I think it’s beyond saving,” Nick agreed, but he moved to the sink and poured the sticky, syrupy ice down the drain before throwing the cone away. “Did John regale you with romantic tales of his homeland?”

“I told her nothing but the truth,” John said, the corners of his mouth twitching just enough to rouse Nick’s suspicions. “And she still didn’t believe me about the water kelpies.”

Stacy gave John an indulgent smile very similar to the one Josh had received. “I didn’t, but it still sounds wonderful. Maybe some day William will take us over there and we’ll be able to see your island for ourselves. He goes to London on business sometimes -- medical conferences -- and if it was in summer vacation Josh and I could go with him and take a day trip to see you.” She gave them a puzzled look as they grinned and then rolled her eyes. “Okay, did I just say something silly?”

“No,” John said gently. “It’s just a wee bit farther than you think from London to Traighshee, but you and yours would always be welcome, I can promise you that.”

Her eyes softened. “You’re both so nice.” Then she looked at Nick shrewdly. “Did he behave himself?”

“Absolutely,” Nick said. He wondered whether he should tell Stacy that Josh knew about his abilities, but decided that was between them. “He’s a great kid. You must be really proud.”

“I am.” Stacy smiled as they heard Josh thundering down the stairs again; a moment later he flew into the kitchen, wearing a clean T-shirt and with a package of batteries in hand.

“I can’t open them,” Josh said, brow furrowed.

“I never can, either,” John confessed.

Nick opened his mouth to tell Josh that he’d do it but Josh was already whirling around, holding them out. “Thanks!”

He took them from Josh, something clicking into place in his head, something just out of reach...

“This is gonna be so cool!” Josh was enthusing, opening the package with the Gameboy cartridge in it and plugging it into the player while Nick managed to tear the plastic packaging around the batteries open. He handed them over and watched, smiling, as Josh snapped the batteries in place, flipped the player over, and started to play the game immediately.

“You don’t need the instructions?” Nick asked.

“Uh-uh.” Josh was staring at the little screen intently, thumbs moving at a furious rate.

“Where’s the fun in that?” John put in, glancing over at Josh and smiling. “Dive in and find out how it works the hard way.”

“He’ll be playing that for hours,” Stacy said with a sigh. “Totally oblivious to everything else.” Nick started to apologize but she waved him quiet. “Trust me, long car trips are bliss!”

Nick grinned. "I bet." He looked over to John, catching his eye. "We should think about leaving. We're catching a flight home tonight and we have to check in at seven."

"You must be anxious to get back. It must be very peaceful there." Stacy sounded a bit wistful.

"It is." In more ways than she'd have been able to imagine, probably. "But thanks for letting us come by. We were so close; it seemed stupid not to take advantage of it."

Josh looked up. "You're leaving? You just got here." He looked upset.

"We have a plane to catch," Nick explained. "But you can call me. Any time you want. And your mom says maybe you'll come visit."

"Mom?" He looked at her and his eyebrows drew together in an accusing frown. "No, it won't be too long a trip! I'd *like* it!"

"I never said --" She gave Nick and John a helpless look. "Sometimes it's like he can just--"

"Read your mind," Nick said slowly.

Stacy laughed, missing the look he gave Josh, a fleeting exchange of glances that left Nick warned to silence. "Exactly! Kids. I suppose it's because we tend to say the same things and mostly it's 'no'." She ruffled Josh's hair. "We'll think about it. Seriously, okay? I mean that."

Josh studied her face and nodded grudgingly before giving Nick another look, this time appealing.

"Could I just say goodbye to Josh alone?" Nick asked. "Maybe in the yard? It'd be nice to have some fresh air before we're stuck in the terminal for hours."

"Of course," Stacy agreed. "I'll show John the front garden and you can meet us there."

Josh was reluctant to put down his Gameboy, but did so with a minimal amount of grumbling and went out into the backyard with Nick. "Yes," the boy said as soon as the door closed. "I can. You knew it before."

If there'd been any lingering doubt, that did away with it. Nick leaned against the wooden picnic table and watched Josh's face carefully as he thought about fireworks and cotton candy.

Rolling his eyes, Josh threw himself down onto the grass. "Fireworks," he said, bored. "Cotton candy. What's candy floss?"

Nick hadn't even realized he'd been thinking that. "It's what they call cotton candy in England."

"That's weird. And anyway, you should believe me because you can see ghosts, right?"

"Right." Nick blinked. "Wait -- you weren't really listening on the stairs, were you?"

"Duh." Josh picked a blade of grass and fitted it between his hands, blowing through them and making a plaintive screeching noise.

"I believe you." Nick looked at him. "And, yes, I'm still freaked by it, no matter what I can see. What you can do...Can you turn it off? Not look?"

"Sure." Josh nodded. "I have to want to and mostly...I don't. It gives me a headache, and you..." He hunched his shoulder, a flush deepening on his face. "Grown ups...they're *stupid*. Mushy stuff...who cares?"

Nick swallowed, trying not to think about what Josh might have picked up from his parents, flashing, despite his efforts, to John smiling up at him from a tangle of sheets, his eyes dreamy and sated.

"Yeah." Josh sighed. "That."

"Then stop it!" Nick's voice was sharper than he'd intended, but it had the effect he'd wanted; Josh visibly disconnected the link to his power, his face screwing tight with concentration, then smoothing out.

"Okay. I'm not listening anymore." Josh pouted. "I don't do it a lot."

"You shouldn't do it at all," Nick said helplessly. "It's...it's not polite."

"Like burping at the table?" Josh gave him a look too cynical for a child his age. "I don't think so."

"Okay, it's worse. Much worse." Nick groaned, the pressure of the limited time they had bearing down on him. "Is that all you can do?"

"I think so." Josh sounded uncertain. "What else is there?"

"I don't know...Can you talk to me? Telepathy? Put words into my head?"

"I don't know -- do you want me to try?" Josh's face lit up. "I don't have anyone I can play with, but you -- you get it. You know..."

"I don't know about this." Nick rubbed his hand over his face. "You haven't told anyone, have you?" Josh shook his head. "God. Look, I have to go, but...here." He grabbed a pen from his pocket and scribbled down his

email address on the back of the hotel bill. "You've got a computer?"

Josh frowned. "Everyone does."

"No, but since you do... We can email, okay? Talk about this..."

"Keep it a secret?"

Nick bit his lip. "I don't want that. Look, your mom was cool with what I could do --"

"This is different."

"Yes. You're her son. She loves you." Nick was sure about that, even if he was far from sure about how Stacy would react to Josh's news. "Tell her. You have to. And email me, okay? Let me know how it goes."

"You have to email me back," Josh said firmly. "And tell me about the ghosts. Did you..." He faltered, frowning. "You saw him. Our dad. Was he... did it hurt?" He suddenly seemed every inch the small boy that he was, afraid and in need of comfort.

"It didn't." Nick sat down beside him, wanting to make sure he knew from words shared and not just thoughts skimmed. The grass was hot, the sun warm across the back of his neck. "It happened really, really fast, and it didn't hurt. And he wasn't afraid, when I saw him. He was okay." He reached out tentatively, unsure if he'd be rebuffed, and ruffled Josh's hair. "Maybe we'll see him again."

"I'm *never* gonna die," Josh said, sitting up straighter, looking stubborn. His eyes dared Nick to tell him otherwise, and Nick knew better than to try.

Lightly, he said, "So, in this really long life of yours, will you come visit me some time? Even if it's when you're older. Without your mom. Deal?"

"Deal." John shook his hand solemnly, then, without warning, threw his arms around Nick in a quick, impulsive hug.

Nick felt it, the connection of blood, of family, and blinked away the wetness in his eyes before he pulled back, fairly certain Josh would label that as mushy, too. He stood, reaching down to pull Josh up, but the boy shook his head.

"I don't do goodbyes. They stink. I'll stay here." Green eyes blinked up at him. "See you around."

Nick nodded, took one last look at his brother, and walked around the side of the house to where John was waiting for him, leaning against a garden seat and telling Stacy about his vegetable patch on the island and the best way to kill slugs with beer.

John saw him and broke off, smiling at him. "There you are." He raised his eyebrows. "Ready to go home?"

"Yes," Nick said, heartfelt.

He was more than ready.

## Chapter Eighteen

John lay on his back in bed, warm under the pile of blankets, well-sated, and listened to the sounds of Nick downstairs in the kitchen below. They'd arrived home to Traighshee the day before and stopped just long enough on their way to the house to pick up a few things for breakfast that morning. Then, of course, they'd ended up sleeping half the day, their bodies so confused by the jet-lag that, when John had opened his eyes to find the sun streaming into the room, he'd barely been able to remember what day it was.

A glance at the clock had told him, and then Nick, lying underneath him, John's head cushioned on his shoulder, had woken up, and they'd had a long, leisurely session of re-christening their bed. Just remembering the sight of Nick above him, fucking himself slowly on John's cock, was enough to make John's body stir again.

Nick's footsteps on the stairs -- he'd insisted on bringing tea up for John, as the house was cold in the mornings and he hadn't quite got over the bout of over-protectiveness he'd been in since John's near-death experience -- distracted him. "Guess what came in the mail?" Nick asked, coming into the room with a tea tray, a thick envelope split across the top balanced beside the mugs of tea.

"Can't. That would mean thinking and I'm not capable of that."

Nick put the tray on the bedside table and picked up the envelope, smacking the top of John's head with it lightly. "I didn't break you, did I?"

John stretched out, grinning. "Maybe. Get back in here and find out for yourself."

He didn't think he could really get hard again, not this soon, but Nick had a way of making his body forget that it was supposed to be basking in the afterglow and get eager, and it wasn't as if they had anything to do. Well, apart from a lot of laundry, but that could wait...He eyed Nick's thick sweater and jeans with disapproval, wishing Nick was bare under an easily removed robe instead. Although he couldn't blame Nick for getting dressed. After Florida, the island seemed colder than ever, wrapped in winter damp and drizzle. It didn't bother John, who was well used to it; but the previous afternoon, when they'd got back, Nick had shivered for hours until the central heating had finally raised the temperature to a bearable level.

To his pleasant surprise, Nick set down the tray on the edge of the bed, stripped off his clothes in a couple of easy movements, and crawled back under the covers, snuggling up close to John's warmth. "Mm," he murmured, lips against John's shoulder. "I think we should just spend all day here."

"Aye." John turned his head and kissed him. "There. What was it you wanted me to see?"

"I think you've seen it all," Nick joked, reaching across him to pick up the envelope again. He pulled the folded pages out and handed them to John. "It's the article Greg Duncan wrote."

"Already?" John saw that Greg had sent it by the fastest method possible, spending a considerable amount of dollars to do so, and sniffed disapprovingly, getting an elbow in the ribs from Nick who knew him too well. "Right, then. Let's see what the man has to say."

He spread the pages out, fingering a Post-it attached which read, "These are copies of the draft; I'll send you the magazine when it comes out. Or maybe hand-deliver it. Tell John that was a joke before he gets his claymore out. Best, Greg."

Taking a long sip of tea to fortify himself *and* his claymore, John began to read. It wasn't long before he was spluttering with laughter.

"His emerald eyes flashing darkly as he described an encounter with a vengeful spirit --'. What?" He peered at Nick, who was flushing and looking uncomfortable. "They're green, right enough, aye, but emeralds? Is the man mad?"

"He probably has to write like that," Nick said, and John couldn't help but feel a flash of jealousy that he was *defending* the man. "You know, to make it more interesting. If he just made it sound like I could be anyone, no one would care."

"More fool them," John grunted. He carried on reading, his eyes widening at the style, which, while not as sensational as he'd feared, verged on it at times. The only part he read without a twist of distaste shaping his lips came when Greg described the events of the final night at the crash site. The horror and genuine shock Greg must

have felt came over strongly and his words were simple, measured, and convincing.

John got to the part where Nick was bending over his “to my eyes, lifeless” body and set the article aside. “God.”

“Which bit?”

“You really thought I was dead?”

Nick tensed beside him. “Yes,” he said softly. “You knew that. I told you.”

“I know,” John said slowly. “I just...I hadn’t thought it through. How you’d have felt. If it’d been me, and you lying there...” He shuddered, the pages spilling from his hand to the bed and from there to the floor. “Come here, will you?”

He turned and pulled Nick into his arms, feeling the need to hold him and be held as strongly as he ever had in his life.

Pressing close, Nick held him just as tightly in return, one hand resting at the small of John’s back in the spot that was oddly comforting. “I was so scared,” Nick admitted. “I don’t know what I would have done.”

“I don’t know, either.” John nuzzled into the crook of Nick’s neck, less of a kiss than a way of getting the smell and taste of Nick’s skin inside him. He couldn’t get close enough to him. “I’ve not known you that long. Not even two years, yet, but you’re in my life now. If you left, I’d be missing you until the day I died and that’s the truth.”

“I’ll never leave,” Nick said. He pulled back far enough that John could see his face and how very serious he was. “That’s the truth, too. I need you too much. I want you too much.”

John could see the emotion, raw and desperate, on Nick’s face, and was sure his own expression matched it. He cleared his throat, trying to make his voice normal. “We’re getting awful serious considering we’ve both agreed we’re not going anywhere and we’re --” John brought his hand up to cup Nick’s face, his palm shaping to Nick’s jaw. “In love? Still? Always?” He brushed his lips against Nick’s, not letting him answer until he’d had that one kiss. “Tell me we are?”

“Yes,” Nick said, every bit of that desperate emotion clear in that one word. “Always. Nothing’s going to change that. Ever.”

“I don’t want that to change. Ever.” John let his hand move to the back of Nick’s neck, feeling the strong, taut muscles there relax and then tense again for a different reason. “So that’s all sorted, then.”

His mouth found Nick’s, the kiss taking the place of the words that never quite came out right, no matter how perfect they were in his head. There were other ways to show Nick he loved him; some he knew already, some he was sure he’d work out in time, but this...aye, this was a good way.

And as Nick kissed him back with every bit as much feeling, fingers tracing his spine, warm body pressed to John’s, he knew that in the long run the words weren’t that important.

That, in the long run, they’d be together. And that was all that mattered.

**THE END**

## **Jane Davitt**

I am English, married with two daughters, and I emigrated to Canada in 1997. I'm an inveterate reader who began writing in 2002 at the age of 38 and discovered that it's just as much fun being the one putting the words on paper as being the one reading them.

Writing is something that's become part of my life and I sometimes wonder just what I did with the hours I now spend tapping away at my computer. It can't have been important I suppose. I'm a fan of detective, fantasy and science fiction and collect vintage children's books too. Our house is filled with over 4,000 books and we all love to read. Apart from the cats.

I did have hobbies but now I write mostly. If I wasn't writing, I might be gardening, cross stitching or walking. I do still manage to volunteer at my daughter's school and at the local library.

Visit Jane on the Web at [www.janedavitt.com](http://www.janedavitt.com).

\* \* \* \* \*

## **Alexa Snow**

Alexa Snow is an emotional person who appreciates practicality in others. She's prone to crying at inconvenient times, drinking too much coffee, and staying up too late playing with words (either reading or writing.) A background of schooling she wasn't all that interested in resulted in a Bachelor's degree in Sociology and a vague sense of wasted time. Alexa lives in a tiny old house in New England with her husband, young son, more books than she has time to count, and a small but oft-changing collection of pets.

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