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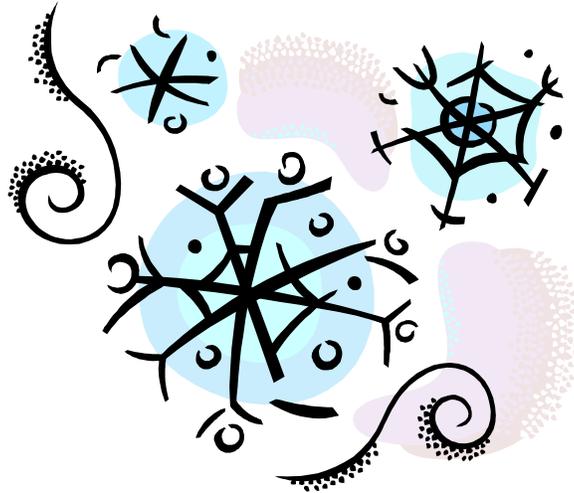
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For all my girls on Twitter who kept encouraging me,  
You know who are.

# *All I Want Is You*

By Marguerite Labbe



## Chapter One

“I CAN think of a hundred things wrong with this picture.” Eli gestured toward the windshield and the mist filled valley that dropped off to their right. The tall mountains were covered in a mix of evergreens and trees stripped bare for the winter, and the steep sides hugged the winding, narrow dell that peaked through the white-gray veil.

Ash tore his eyes from the fog wreathed trees and looked at Eli, a smile tugging on his lips at the look of disgust on his partner’s face. Eli didn’t fool him one bit. He lived for views like this. If they weren’t here to visit his family he’d be enjoying every minute of this trip. In fact, Ash would consider himself lucky if he managed to get Eli indoors at all.

“I think you’re exaggerating, Doc.” Ash sat up straighter and stretched, working the kinks out of cramped muscles. Breaking the road trip up into two days helped some, but he was ready for it to be over. Jabbers took the motion as an

invitation for loving and thrust his cold, damp nose against the side of Ash's neck and whuffed. Ash rubbed the beagle's head and Jabbers returned to his crack in the window to watch the scenery go by.

"I'm serious. If we were home we'd be having a white Christmas."

"Technically, we'll be back home on Christmas day. You'll have all the snow you could want." And then some. Ash should call Wayne before they left to head home and make sure that the road up to the Hermitage was clear.

"It's not the same if you're not with me to share it." Eli tried to temper the disgruntlement in his voice and failed. "I'm not mad at you. I know why you have to work. Just ignore me, because I'm working myself into a mood for no reason. What will be, will be."

Of course Eli neglected to say what was really bugging him and it had nothing to do with the lack of snow or the fact that Ash was going to be gone most of Christmas day. Ash lost his fight not to smile and nudged Eli's side, determined to tease Eli out of his brood. "It didn't seem to bother you when we spent last Christmas in Savannah and that wasn't a white Christmas either."

Eli glanced at him, his gray eyes softening, his auburn hair laying in a thick, loose tangle well past his shoulders. "That was different. I got to meet the rest of your family. That was more than worth not having any snow for the holidays."

And there lay the problem. This time they were visiting the rest of Eli's family. Ash hadn't gotten a chance to meet Eli's mom and dad yet. Somehow plans kept falling through, much to Eli's mom's disappointment. It was like Eli was stuck in the past, back at the confrontation with his dad when he'd been discovered with his first boyfriend. As far as Ash could tell, he didn't think Eli had ever brought a man home for his parents to meet since then.

This visit mattered, despite Eli not wanting to care what his parents thought. He wanted it to go smooth, for them to accept Ash as much as Ash's family had accepted Eli. He'd worked himself up to the point where Ash was wondering if he'd have to do an intervention before they got to Eli's parents' house.

"This will be worth it too," Ash assured him.

Eli didn't respond anymore than a humph under his breath and a skeptical glance. Well Ash could work with skepticism. And Eli couldn't say that most of

his family wouldn't be very happy to see them. His mom, Aunt Barbara and his cousin Gareth all said it numerous times.

All those reassurances did nothing to quell Ash's own nagging concerns. He had to remember that this visit mattered quite a bit to Eli. That had to be a good sign. Ash knew that Eli loved him. He told Ash so often and showed it in a hundred other ways. And God knew he was crazy, head-over-heels in love with Eli. So what kept holding Ash back from asking Eli to marry him?

Ash rubbed the hard lump in his coat pocket and quelled the stupid surge of nerves. He couldn't very well ask Eli if he hadn't met his parents. Of course that was his excuse this week. He'd been carrying around the ring for months. At first he told himself to wait till Thanksgiving when they went down to Savannah again, so that Ash's whole family could celebrate.

Yeah right, he'd ditched that idea the moment they'd hit Savannah. He'd told himself that he should ask in private, in their home when they got back. That hadn't happened either.

He could stand his ground during an insurgent attack in Iraq, but when it came to nailing down his headstrong, free spirited lover, his nerve left him. Eli was independent. He loved to go his own way. As far as Ash could tell, Eli didn't see a point in getting married when people seemed to get along fine just living together. Of course he hadn't questioned Eli that closely on his beliefs either so he could be blowing his worries out of proportion.

This time though, he was asking, no more excuses.

"Something on your mind? You've gone awfully quiet."

The sound of Eli's voice broke Ash out of his circling thoughts. He reached over and took Eli's hand and smiled as those long fingers clasped around his. A little over a year ago he never would've believed that one man could tie him up in such knots. Eli still managed to do it with ease and Ash couldn't be happier. Okay, yes he could be. He was sure that if they were engaged he would fall on the other side of the much happier line. "I'm wracking my brain to think of something to distract you from your worries."

"Can't be done." Eli fished his cell phone out of his pocket. "You don't know my family."

“Wanna bet on it?”

Eli chuckled and flashed Ash a glance, amusement breaking through the irritability in his eyes. “No thank you, last time I lost a bet I found myself naked and helpless for two days.”

“Good times,” Ash grinned and propped his foot up on the dashboard. “Very good times. You know the bet doesn’t have to be sex based.”

“You aren’t fooling me for one second. Either you’ll find a way to turn it to sex or you’ll try to wiggle out of paying the consequences for your last bet. Not going to happen. I’m enjoying the fact that I won that one.” Eli handed him the cell phone. “Do me a favor and call Gareth. See if any of the cabins have opened up.”

“It’s better to tackle the enemy then to keep circumventing them for years,” Ash said and pulled up the contact list. “Even if he has the space eventually you’ll have to face your parents, why not get it over with?”

“I’m not hiding, I’m planning my strategy,” Eli insisted, some of the irritation bubbling back to the surface in the tone of his voice. Ash rubbed his thumb over the back of Eli’s hand in silent apology for his pushiness. It was a fault of his. He saw a problem and wanted to fix it. “This way we all get breathing room from each other. We can go to our separate corners if it gets tense, which it will.”

Eli glanced at him with a glint in his eyes that Ash knew very well. Was it bad of him to get such enjoyment out of Eli’s temper? Because he really couldn’t help himself. He knew just how hot Eli ran when he simmered. “Besides, I want to be alone with you at nights,” Eli added.

“Well then, that’s all you needed to say.” Alone time. The jump in his pulse made his nerves known again. If Gareth managed to drum up a cabin for them then he should take that as a sign and ask tonight. He could lay out Eli in front of fire, make sure the mood was just right. A proposal should distract Eli from angsting over his parents’ reaction to bringing home a boyfriend. Or it could make it worse. Why add more pressure onto an already tense situation?

“Yeah, I thought that might grab your attention,” Eli said with an amused shake of his head.

They shared a grin, then Ash brought up Gareth’s number and rolled his eyes at the ultra country ringback tone. “Your cousin has bad taste in music.”

“Gareth likes just about every genre of music there is. There are bound to be a few bad ones in there, leave him alone.”

“You’ve got amazing timing, cuz, I was just getting ready to holler at you,” Gareth answered with a laugh. It seemed like every time Ash had a chance to talk to Eli’s cousin and closest friend, he had laughter in his voice. Ash was looking forward to getting to know him more.

“Actually, this is his other half,” Ash said.

“The sexier half.” The laugh deepened. “How’s it hanging?”

“A little to the left, low and lazy. You know how it goes.” Ash grinned at the sound of Eli’s snicker. It still didn’t take much to make Eli smile, even when he was brooding.

“That I do. Need to let those suckers breathe. So I take it Eli is hanging all of his hopes on me finding a cabin and wants an update of my mojo and prowess?”

Ash glanced at his partner and fought another smile at the way Eli kept giving him hopeful, stolen glances. “Oh you know it. He looks like Jabbers with the promise of a treat hanging over his head.” At the sound of his name Jabbers thrust his head into the front seat again with a happy bark for attention and licked Ash from chin to hairline.

“Jabbers.” The beagle knew that tone in Eli’s voice and he dropped back with a little rumble of discontent. “I know, we’re almost there.”

“Well you can ease his mind. We had a last minute cancellation and Ma said you and Eli could have it on the condition that you come to dinner at her place tonight.”

“I have no doubt that he’ll agree to those terms.” Ash gave Eli a thumbs up.

“Yes! Hot damn.” Eli pounded his fist on the steering wheel. “Gareth, you’re the man.”

Gareth laughed. “Tell him I said, I know and to get his skinny ass over here. It’ll just be me and Ma and you two hooligans. After dinner, I’ll show you to your place. Aunt Anita and Uncle David aren’t expecting you tonight are they?”

“No. I was planning on finding a place in town to calm Eli down some before we all got together tomorrow morning.”

“He’s reached that stage already, hmmm? Well, I have faith you can restore his Zen. The cabin should be perfect for you two. See ya soon.” Ash disconnected the call and looked up to see that the road had gotten narrower and more winding.

“Calm me down?” Eli asked.

Ash took Eli’s hand and rubbed his thumb over his ring finger. “Well you have to admit you could probably use a bit of down time. This drive has given you too much opportunity to think, brood and worry.”

“And just how do you plan on calming me down?”

Ash smiled and lifted Eli’s hand to his lips. “I have my methods.”

“As I said, can’t be done, not this time.” Eli said, pulling his hand away to navigate the road. Night was descending fast and the thick trees on either side of the road crossed over in places with low, bare limbs, deepening the shadows. It was impossible too see around the close curves of the road.

“Wanna bet?” Ash asked with a laugh.

“Anyone ever tell you that you have a serious gambling problem?” Eli laughed, the sparkle returning to his eyes. “There are places where you can get help for that you know.”

TWENTY minutes later Eli pulled into the driveway of Aunt Barbara’s rambler and Jabbers started barking and whining, pacing from one window to another when he recognized the place. The front door opened and Eli found it impossible to think of gloom and doom at the sight of his cousin stepping out onto the porch.

Eli stopped the truck, tossed off his seatbelt and was out of the truck in a flash, Jabbers right behind him with happy cries for attention. Eli caught Gareth in a rough bear hug. Seeing him again was like all the intervening months between visits fell away. Gareth hadn’t changed one bit from the battered boots, worn jeans to the scruff on his cheeks. There might be a new tattoo or piercing, but the blue eyes, and the heartfelt welcome in them, remained the same.

Gareth gave him another hard squeeze, then stepped back to take Ash’s offered hand and pulled him into a hug. “This is who I really wanted to get my

hands on. Shame on you Eli for sequestering him in the Great White North and depriving the rest of us red blooded American gay men from the opportunity to appreciate his sexiness.”

“You can appreciate all you want, Gareth, he’s still coming home with me.”

“Yeah,” Ash agreed. “First Eli seduced me and then Amwich did. Next thing I knew this poor Southern boy was settled down in New England.”

Jabbers sat on his haunches, pawed at Gareth leg and let out a bay that set off other dogs down the road. Gareth crouched down and rubbed Jabbers sides as the beagle wiggled and danced and tried to lick all at once. “I see you haven’t taught him any manners yet.”

“Yeah well, for some reason he seems to like your ugly face and wants your attention.”

“You’ve missed this ugly face.” Gareth grinned up at him. “I wish we could get together more often.”

“It’s been a crazy year, between graduation, and Kurtis coming up with his family for a little recuperation, then training and starting a new job. We’re making plans for next year.” Ash cast Eli one of those puzzling, quick looks that he’d been doing for what seemed like weeks now. “I’m excited to see what the New Year will bring.”

“Eli told me that you were involved with the Wounded Warrior Project,” Gareth said, straightening and running a hand through his unruly hair.

“I help when I can, when we’re up at camp. One of the retreats is not far from there.”

Gareth clutched a hand over his heart. “You are too good to be true. So when are you going to realize that New Hampshire is the back end of nowhere and come on down to a real state?”

“Stop trying to steal Ash. It’ll never work between you two.” Eli shouldered him to the side and got a light shove in return. Gareth didn’t change at all and that was one of the things that Eli loved about him. He could count on his cousin’s affection and friendship as a constant in his life. Not that he didn’t love Lu, but she was more like a mother and sister rolled into one instead of a cousin. Gareth was... well Gareth.

“And why the hell not?” Gareth demanded. “I’m an amazing kisser, you said so yourself.”

Eli’s face flooded with heat as Ash gave him a look of pure, astonished speculation. He was going to kill Gareth for bringing that up. “Gareth doesn’t like baseball. He’s into college football. He thinks baseball is dead boring.”

Gareth rolled his eyes and grabbed Eli’s arm, tugging him toward the house. “You would bring that up.”

“Jackass, I’m not the one with the big mouth.” Eli could not believe that Gareth had mentioned that incident from when they were kids.

“I’m sorry, but not liking baseball is a deal breaker for me.” Ash took his head as they walked toward the house. He didn’t ask about Gareth’s kissing comment, but Eli knew that didn’t mean he was off the hook. Ash would just wait till they were alone to bring it up. He whistled for Jabbers who came bounding up, then raced to the porch when Aunt Barbara opened the door.

“We were only eleven,” he said in an undertone to Ash. “And trying to figure out what was different about us from our friends. Gareth has never let me live it down since.”

Gareth slung an arm around his waist for a quick hug and a laugh. “I can’t help it. The look on your face gets me every time.”

Ash watched Gareth bound up the steps and swing his mother around in a hug. She squawked and swatted his arm. “Put me down, buffoon. You’re not the one I want to see.”

“Eli, we have to come up with another plan. I can’t believe I agreed to let that man tattoo me. Are you sure he can sit still long enough to do it?”

“Sometimes he may act like a squirrel who OD’d on sugar, but he can focus when he wants to. His tattoos are amazing.” Eli grinned at him. “Sorry, Georgia, you’re not wiggling out of your bet so easily. Don’t worry, the Red Sox logo is going to look fabulous on your arm.”

“You’re evil, just freaking evil.”

Eli picked up his aunt and swung her around as she came forward to greet them. She was even shorter than Gareth and she’d cut her gray hair into a low

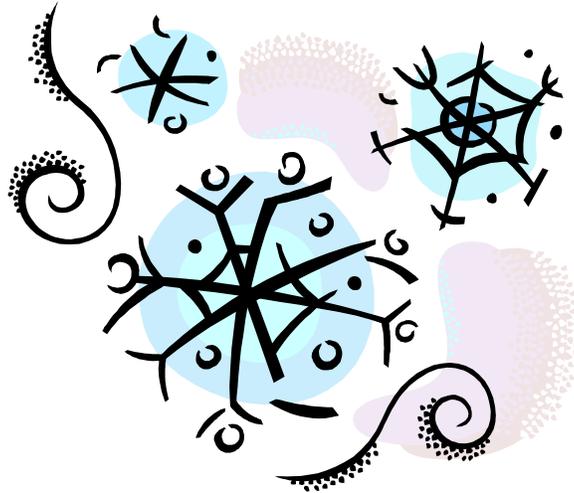
maintenance bob since the last time he'd seen her. "Elijah Michael! Put me down! What is it with you two? I swear you're the worst together."

Eli set her down and gave her a hug. "I know, but I had to. You haven't gotten any taller Aunt Barbara."

She grabbed him by his ears and hauled him down for a kiss on his cheek. "You're not too old for me to separate the two of you." She turned to Ash and gave him a hug as well. "And you must be Ash. It's so good to finally meet you. Come on in. I've got some catfish and skillet corn bread just waiting for ya'll. I even have something for that mutt of yours."

Eli patted his growling stomach with a groan. "Words that I've been waiting all day to hear."

"I do know your love for a home cooked meal." Aunt Barbara opened the door and the scent of hot, fresh dinner rolled out. "You have to catch me up on everything, you two. After dessert, Gareth can take you on up to the cabin."



## Chapter Two

ELI followed his cousin up the stone walkway to the cabin hefting a cooler. The cabin was a beautiful A-frame, already lit up and welcoming. It sat in a clearing, halfway up the side of a mountain, with a few pine trees on each side for shade. And the wide porch that wrapped around the length invited quiet contemplation. This was his kind of place.

“Nice cabin,” Ash said following them with their duffle bags. “Are you sure we’re not causing you any trouble taking this place?”

“Not at all. The place had already been fixed up when we got the cancellation. I just added a few extra for you.” Gareth shifted Jabbers’ dog bed to under his arm and unlocked the front door. “Welcome to your love nest.”

*Oh boy.* Eli lifted a brow and peeked in. Gareth had warned they were coming and wanted their own place. He could’ve done anything to the cabin. To his relief there weren’t rose petals strewn all over the floor and candles lining

every surface. There was a fireplace all set with logs ready to go and a bottle of wine in a bucket, but no other romantic gesture past that.

He set the cooler on the counter as Gareth placed Jabbers' bed near the fireplace and knelt down to a fire started. "You've got that?" Eli asked Ash as he came in with the bags. "Anything left in the truck?"

"Just Jabbers' bowls and food, though he's still destroying that bone your aunt gave him. He's sprawled out on the porch chomping down."

When Eli returned from grabbing the last of Jabbers' belongings from the truck, the fire was starting to burn on the hearth and Ash stood in the living room with Gareth. Eli's cousin was showing off some of his tattoos, no doubt trying to sell Ash on the idea of getting a full sleeve instead of just the one he'd lost the bet on. Jabbers slipped in behind Eli and began sniffing around the room as if he smelled something interesting. "I brought you something, Gareth," Eli said as he returned to the cooler. "A gift from Lu."

Gareth came over, hands already stretched out. "Is it what I think it is? Please tell me it is and I'll love you forever."

Eli pulled out a box, taped down on all sides, and handed it to Gareth. "Not one, but two of her tourtières."

"Yes! I love her meat pies. Everybody down here thinks I'm crazy, but they haven't tried them." He gave Eli a hopeful look. "She wouldn't have happened to have given you some of her relish for me?"

Eli pulled out a good sized jar decorated with a ribbon around the mouth. The yellow green contents looked a mess, but the sweet tartness of the relish complimented the meaty spice of the pie. "One for you and one for my parents. That should last you till next year unless you pig out on it."

"The pies will be gone by New Year's, but I'll drag out the relish." Gareth lifted the jar with a grin. "Wow, I think she doubled the amount this year. Tell her I said she's awesome and thanks."

"I told her that you ran out mid summer last year and she was horrified that you were going without. You know how Lu is, a shortage of food is grounds for a crisis." Eli put the pies meant for his parents in the fridge with the relish and set the cooler out of the way.

“I can’t help it. I put it on everything, brats, junk sandwiches. I goes with almost anything.”

“What’s a junk sandwich?” Ash asked coming into the kitchen. He snagged a beer from the pack that they’d bought after dinner and popped the top.

“Don’t ask, you don’t want to know,” Eli said, handing Gareth a beer of his own before searching for a bottle opener for the wine.

“It’s whatever I have left in the fridge, slapped between two pieces of bread, some butter pickles, the relish, cheese if I’ve got it all heated up on my little counter grill.”

“Heated up?” Ash made a face. “That’s slightly horrifying.”

Jabbers began barking and Eli’s head jerked around. He recognized that bark. That was the same bark that Jabbers reserved for fisher cats and porcupines and anything else that he found curious that had nailed him before. Jabbers’ whole body was tense with excitement, his hindquarters up and front legs braced as he continued to warn everybody that danger was imminent.

“Uh oh,” Gareth said.

Eli shot his cousin an exasperated look as he went to grab Jabbers’ collar. “Tell me you didn’t bring *her*.” His statement was answered with an angry hiss as the ugliest cat in existence peeked out from behind the curtain. Her ears bent at the tips, her face was squished and the almost non-existent down that covered her body did nothing to hide the folds of her skin.

“Bring who?” Ash asked coming into the living room. He stopped and his brows jumped up at another angry hiss as the hairless cat fixed her gaze on him. “What the hell is that?”

Gareth gave Ash an injured look and went to scoop up his spoiled rotten diva. “This is Lady Godiva. She came with me earlier when I set up the place. I didn’t want her to get lonely if I was gone all day. I didn’t think it would be a problem since her and Jabbers already know each other.” The cat submitted to being petted all while staring at Jabbers with regal disdain from the safety of Gareth’s arms.

“She’s an evil mutant who got Jabbers on the nose pretty good when he was a puppy.” Eli crouched down and rubbed Jabbers’ side. “Sit, Jabbers. If you behave, she’ll leave you alone.”

“In her defense, he did chase her.” Gareth rubbed his cheek against the top of Lady Godiva’s head. “I thought they got along rather well once they established that she’s the boss.”

Eli shook his head at the memory. “He refused to come back through the door until she gave her permission.” He sat there and whined as she stood in the doorway and didn’t move inside until she walked away.

Gareth grinned. “Like I said. She’s the boss.”

Ash went over and let the cat sniff his hand. She rubbed her cheek against his fingers, her eyes half closing. “She’s not that bad. I can see how she’d grow on you. Kind of like daddies with babies. Have you ever seen a newborn? They’re scary ugly, but you can’t help loving them anyway.”

“She’s got a face that only Gareth would love,” Eli retorted and patted Jabbers’ head as he let out a soft, mournful cry of betrayal. “Oh stop that, Jabbers. You’re being silly.”

Gareth set Lady Godiva on the floor as Eli continued to pet the beagle. His tail began to thump and his body tensed a bit, but he laid his head on Eli’s knee as he watched his nemesis’ progress toward him. Eli was sure they’d be okay once they got acclimated to each other again. “I’m sorry; I could run her back down the road if you want.”

“Don’t worry about it. They were bound to run into each other at Christmas dinner. We can get the drama out of the way now.” Eli continued to pet Jabbers as Lady Godiva stopped in front of him and gave him her most intimidating, yellow-eyed stare. From a regular cat it was bad enough, from Gareth’s cat it was demonic. Jabbers whined and broke eye contact to look up at Eli.

“Ya big baby,” Ash laughed. “She’s got your number.”

“Keep it up and he’ll sulk,” Eli warned. Ash couldn’t talk; Jabbers knew just how to get to his partner. First he’d sulk and mope around in dejection while Ash tried to apologize and give him some loving that Jabbers would refuse. Sometimes, if Jabbers was feeling particularly abused and Eli wasn’t around to nip it in the

bud, there would be baying until the beagle decided he was a lap dog and insisted on draping himself over Ash until he'd been coddled back into his usual sunny mood. Ash fell for it every time.

"I'm sorry, buddy," Ash said and bent down to scratch the top of Jabber's head.

The three of them watched as Lady Godiva proceeded to rub herself along Jabbers' body before starting to purr with a loud rumble. Jabbers let out a sigh of surrender and relaxed when he came to the conclusion that she wasn't going to pounce anytime soon.

"See, they're friends," Gareth said and claimed one of the recliners to sprawl in.

"Yeah, until your cat is feeling playful and decides to stalk Jabbers or she tries to steal his bed again. She's a terrorist." Eli rose, watching to see what Jabbers and Lady Godiva would do. Jabbers lifted his head with a 'don't leave me look' as the cat curled up in a ball right up next to him.

Gareth shrugged and took a sip of his beer. "She's a cat, what do you want. The two act like mortal enemies at first and best friends when they part. You'd think they'd remember their history and skip the opening drama."

"Skip it?" Ash laughed and took a seat at the couch, then slipped his arm around Eli when he joined him. "Jabbers lives for being on the center stage, taking out the drama would destroy his fun."

"So how are thing going for you, Gareth?" Eli asked, stretching his legs in front of him. It felt good to know he wouldn't have to get back into that cramped truck tomorrow. They could hike to his parents place in morning and get some fresh air and exercise. "Are you still songwriting?"

An expression of wariness crossed Gareth's face. "Please, Eli, not you too."

"You write music? That's cool," Ash said. "What kind of music?"

"Still getting pressure from the family?" Eli asked and Garth shrugged. Eli gave him smile of sympathy. "Don't worry, I won't tell you to grab your guitar and head for Nashville." Gareth loved music and he'd been fiddling with a guitar all of their lives, though for a long time he only sang for Eli and his mom. As outgoing

as Gareth was, he had terrible stage fright. He wasn't interested at all in making records and going on tours, he just wanted to play and write in his own time.

"Oh, all kinds of music," Gareth said, answering Ash. "A little country, a little bluegrass, mostly rock and metal. Whatever the mood strikes me at the time."

"Have you ever thought about trying to sell some of your songs? They're good. I think if you market them right you might surprise yourself." Eli got up to examine the wine that he'd abandoned and then poured himself a glass. "You'd get the pleasure of having them out and people hearing them, all without having to get in front of a crowd."

The fire was crackling and snapping, sending out a steady warmth and Jabbers decided to investigate his bed, sniffing around to make sure nothing had changed since the night before. Lady Godiva watched him through slitted eyes though she opted not to move from the comfortable spot she'd found.

"I hadn't ever considered it, but it's a thought," Gareth said, turning the beer bottle in his hands. "I certainly have enough of them stacked about."

"Or maybe you can find some up and coming band who's looking for material," Ash offered. "Like a cross promotion of some kind."

"That's a possibility too." Gareth drained the rest of his beer then got up. "Well, I'll leave you two for the night. What do you say I come rescue you from your parents' after dinner tomorrow? We can head down into Gatlinburg and raise a ruckus."

Eli was a little ashamed of how relieved that offer made him. And from the look Ash cast him he knew that relief was apparent. He needed to just drop this whole wary mindset or he'd be going to his parents' house tomorrow and end up sabotaging the holiday before he started. He knew he was half to blame for the tension between him and his dad.

"We also have to set up some time for you to tattoo Ash here before his nerves get the best of him," Eli said, anticipating Ash's response. "It's his first and he's trying to wiggle his way out of it."

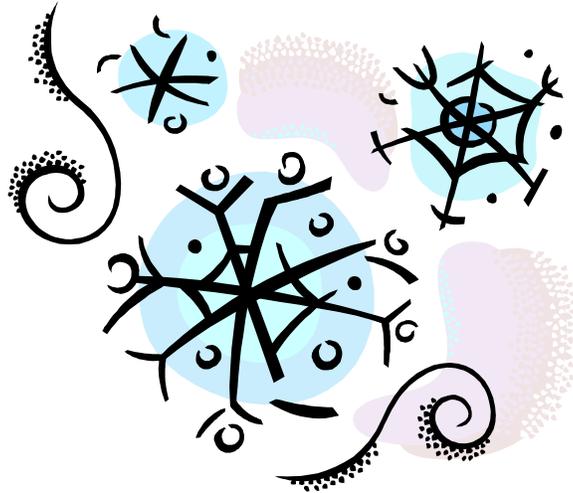
A sudden grin crossed Gareth face. "A virgin, huh? I can't wait."

Ash winced and finished his own beer. “I don’t suppose I could talk you into changing the design, or maybe you could also get the Braves tattooed on your arm, Eli. We could go in it together. Get both of our cherries popped.”

Eli chuckled and shook his head. He hadn’t gotten this much enjoyment out of making Ash squirm since they’d sat across from each other in the classroom. Ash wasn’t normally a squirming kind of guy.

“Good luck, I’ve been trying to get ink on Eli since I first started tattooing. I understood him saying no when I was an apprentice, but he continued to say no when I was done.” Gareth tossed his empty beer into the trash, then scooped up Lady Godiva. “I don’t think he’s been tempted once.”

“You’re right about that.” Eli grimaced. The tattoos and piercings looked good on Gareth, they would look outlandish on him. “There’s no such thing as permanency, so I can’t think of any one design I’d want on my body for the rest of my life.”



## Chapter Three

ASH knelt in front of the fire, stoked it and then added another log. It wasn't that cold, but he wanted to keep the cozy feel and tending to the fire reminded him of home. Eli was still outside talking with Gareth and Jabbers had gone limp and drowsy once the cat had left the vicinity.

This was the moment he'd been waiting for. Ash rubbed the hard lump in his jeans' pocket. He'd removed the ring from his coat earlier in preparation for tonight. Gareth had even left a romantic basket of goodies next to the heart shaped Jacuzzi tub. Ash had waited to investigate the contents so he could be with Eli when they did.

He sat back on his heels and frowned, replaying the earlier conversation in his head. Eli didn't believe in anything being permanent. What the hell was that supposed to mean? Ash kept trying to tell himself that he was reading too much into that one statement, but it wasn't really working. He knew that deep down Eli

felt abandoned by his parents and that had never really been addressed as far as he could tell, so maybe that's where the comment came from.

It wasn't like Eli wasn't surrounded by happy couples making a go at it. His parents were still married. Neil and Lu had been acting like a married couple since Eli was a teenager, even if they'd only started living together in the last year. They were as solid as granite. And they also had zero intentions of getting married and had said so often. And they, not Eli's parents, were Eli's barometer.

"What's going through your mind, Georgia?"

Ash looked over his shoulder at Eli as he shut the cabin door. He was so lean and tall, especially compared to his cousin who was shorter than Ash. The firelight caught the highlights in his hair and Ash was struck by how long it had grown in the last year. Mostly because Ash had raised a protest whenever Eli tried to do more than trim it. He loved the wild, bohemian look about him. He loved that Eli lived his own life, did his own thing and ignored society's opinion on what he should be doing. Sometimes Ash wished he could ignore it as much. Those were just a few of the qualities that he loved about Eli even if they could be damned frustrating at times.

A little voice inside him nagged him that he should just talk to Eli. They'd never much had a problem talking or butting heads for that matter. He was having a hard time bringing up marriage though. What if Eli said no? He didn't think that proposing would make Eli run in the other direction. He didn't think a no would end their relationship.

Ash set the fireplace poker back in its rack and shut the fireplace screen. "I was thinking about Neil and Lu and their outright refusal to consider marriage."

Eli shrugged and poured himself another glass of wine. "It's not for everybody. They're happy, that's all that matters. Though, I know Dad isn't too happy about them shacking up at their age like their teenagers."

"Your dad could stand to lighten up some. That's Lu and Neil's business." Ash stood up, shoved his hand in his pocket and curled his fingers around the box. "I guess some people grow up hoping that they will get married some day and some others don't care."

“I’d never given it much thought.” Eli seemed distracted, with a tiny furrow between his brows as he sipped his wine. “I just wanted to find somebody that I loved and who loved me back. I was beginning to think it would never happen.” His face softened as he glanced at Ash. “You proved me wrong.”

Ash wasn’t sure if he should take that as a good sign or just further proof that Eli was more than content with the status quo. He started to pull out the ring when Eli spoke up again. “Right now, I don’t want to think past tomorrow. I just want to get this visit over with, get back home and enjoy the rest of the semester break. I need to catch up on my reading.”

*Dammit, it just wasn’t the time.* Ash pushed the ring further back into his pocket. The last thing Eli needed right was more pressure from him and he didn’t need to get all worked up either. Tomorrow was a huge day for Eli and Ash hoped that this was just Eli’s nerves talking and that the day with his parents wouldn’t be as bad as Eli feared.

“Stop thinking about it.” Ash walked over to him and slipped his arm around Eli’s waist. “What happens tomorrow isn’t going to change a thing between us. Even if it’s the worst case scenario and your dad tries to make an issue of us and your mom allows it with her silence. You’ve still got Gareth and your Aunt Barbara here and they both are happy for us. We don’t need much else.”

“That’s true.” Eli turned his face into Ash’s neck, then brushed his lips over the skin, stirring anticipation. “I know I’ve been a pain the entire drive down.”

“I bet I could get your mind off of them.” Ash took Eli’s glass and set it on the counter. “What do you say we wager on it?”

“That’s a sucker’s bet, Georgia. I’m not falling for it,” Eli said, and slipped his fingers through Ash’s belt loops to pull him closer. “But keeping talking like that, you’ve got my full attention.”

Ash steered Eli down the hallway toward the bedroom and Eli’s scent woke up all of his senses. He always smelled of fresh air and books. It was an elemental and exciting combination.

“I bet I could make you come without touching you,” Ash said next to his ear and smiled when Eli shivered. “How’s that for a more challenging bet?”

“You get more wicked every day. I’m still not biting. I have first hand experience just what you can do to me without touching.” Eli hesitated outside the doorway to the bedroom and stopped Ash from opening it. “Warn me first, Gareth didn’t do anything outrageous did he?”

Ash shook his head and opened the door. “Not that I could tell. What do you mean by outrageous?”

“It could be anything. Like short-sheeting the bed or covering the floor in small cups of water or tossing a box full of condoms everywhere. Those are just some of the things. Or he could have gone with the more romantic route and have rose petals and candles. You just never know with him.” Eli peered into the room. “Looks safe enough.”

“Well he did leave us a package in the bathroom.” Ash thought large Jacuzzi tub and grinned in anticipation. “And I think he might’ve arranged for this cabin on purpose despite what he said about a last minute cancellation.”

“What do you mean?” Eli asked with a wary glance around the room.

Ash gestured toward the master bathroom. “Why don’t you take a look for yourself?”

The Jacuzzi sat on a little columned dais with a stack of fluffy towels off to the side on the steps. Sheer fabric swathed the columns. Ash figured it could probably be undone and drawn around the red heart-shaped bath for the illusion of more privacy. Short, fat, white candles marched along the counter in front of the mirror. He hadn’t noticed those when he’d peeked in here before.

Maybe tonight wasn’t the night to propose, but with a room like this, already set up for wooing, Ash would be a fool not to take advantage of it while they were there. And Ash was no damn fool.

Eli stood in the doorway and laid his hands on his hips with a shake of his head. “He’s an incurable romantic. He really needs someone of his own to expend all this effort on.”

Ash went over to the Jacuzzi, sat on the edge and leaned down to plug it up. “Nothing wrong with a little romance. He left us a basket too.”

“I’m a little afraid.” Eli picked up the basket with a wary expression. He’d kicked off his boots and socks at some point, and Ash found the sight of those

long, bare toes to be sexy. He loved getting his hands on Eli's feet, but for some reason Eli tried to keep them away from him.

"Now my curiosity is definitely up." Ash started the water with a laugh as Eli undid the bow on the basket. This is what they both needed, a nice quiet evening to relax and enjoy each other. First a long, sensual bath, followed by naked Eli in the bed. Life was good.

"Well there are actually a few useful things." Eli held up a ribbon of condoms and tossed Ash a small bottle of flavored lube, peach. Nice. "There's even a snack if we get hungry." He showed Ash the pair of chocolate dicks.

"And what's not useful?" Ash got up and came over to investigate the remainder of the basket with Eli. "Oh yeah, we can add to our kink drawer. I'm going to enjoy using these." He pulled out the box of anal beads with a grin.

Eli dangled a pair of cuffs off his finger. "I suppose we could always use another pair." He set them down on the counter. "I think I'll save these for later. As for the rest, I'm killing him."

"Your cousin is a wild boy. Ooooh, what about these?" Ash showed Eli the beaded nipple clamps. "I think they would look—"

"There is no way in hell those are getting anywhere near my nipples." Eli gave him a quelling glance, the same kind of glance that he would sometimes give the students in his class, the same kind of look that he used to give Ash often when they were alone in his office. It never failed to turn him on. A lick of pure heat went through him and Eli must've noticed it in his expression because his look became even more stern. "Ash."

Ash's cock woke up at the warning in Eli's voice. "Say my name again, just like that."

He slid his hands under Eli's shirt and grinned as Eli squawked and tried to twist away. He slid his hands higher, found what he was searching for and tweaked Eli's nipples. They tightened under his fingers, ready to be played with. "I think you'd like it. You're pretty sensitive and the clamps are adjustable. They don't have to be on hard enough to hurt."

"No way, not ever. Not unless you want me to use Gareth's last little gift to us on you." Eli pulled Ash's shirt off, then skimmed his fingers along bare ribs.

Ash glanced down at the riding crop. “You aren’t using that on my backside. I’m so damn white those marks would show for weeks.”

“We can’t have that, can we?” Eli pressed closer to him and slid his hands down Ash’s back to cup his ass. “Gareth likes to instigate. Forget the toys. I don’t want to be clamped and you don’t want to play the naughty schoolboy. We don’t need them.”

Naughty schoolboy... that wasn’t nearly as interesting as the naughty professor. And Ash did love to have Eli wear things just for him. He arched his throat as Eli began to nibble on it. Oh yeah, he loved Eli’s mouth too. It drove him crazy. He tweaked Eli’s nipples again just to feel him shiver in his arms and when Ash shifted and pressed his thigh against Eli’s cock he felt it throb with Eli’s excitement. His pulse jumped. They were wearing far too many clothes. He needed to fix that.

“Yeah, but there’s just one problem with your scenario,” Ash murmured as he unbuttoned Eli’s shirt. Eli mumbled something that sounded like a question against his throat. “You have no interest in using the crop while I would love to see those clamps on you.”

“You talk too much. You should be kissing me instead.”

Ash chuckled at Eli’s attempt to change the subject and stripped Eli’s shirt from his shoulders. Those taut nipples called to him and he leaned down to tongue one. Eli groaned and shifted restlessly against him and Ash grinned sensing that his partner’s surrender wouldn’t be far away. Eli may hem and haw and squirm at the thought of wearing the clamps, but he would enjoy every minute of Ash’s reaction if he did.

Eli hummed in the back of his throat and undid Ash’s belt. Ash decided to press his advantage and slid his hands into Eli’s hair. It was thick and heavy, the strands twining around his fingers. His breath caught as Eli’s hand slid into his jeans to cup his cock. Ash tugged Eli’s head back as he snaked his tongue up to Eli’s throat. “Say yes.”

“The water.”

“Huh?” Ash pulled back to look at him then missed the warmth of Eli’s hand when he drew it out of his jeans. Eli gave him a shove and slipped away from the counter.

“The water’s too high.” Eli leaned over the Jacuzzi and shut it off, then looked over his shoulder at Ash with speculation in his eyes. “If it’ll make you happy, I’ll wear the clamps.”

“Yes!” Ash’s cock jumped in anticipation. He grinned, visions of Eli riding him, with the beads on the clamps jumping and the tiny chain trembling, filled his head.

“But I’m pitching.”

Before Eli, Ash hadn’t bottomed that often. It used to make him feel uncomfortably vulnerable, but with Eli he’d found himself offering more and as he did the vulnerability had led to greater intimacy that he enjoyed. The thought of Eli penetrating him, made Ash a little weak kneed.

“Now that sounds like a plan.” Ash scooped up the lube, condoms and nipple clamps, then shoved them back in the basket. “Sex now, bath later.”

“I like the way you think.” Eli took his hand and pulled him toward the bedroom.

They undressed as they went, leaving a trail of clothes from the bathroom. Eli tugged Ash to him for a kiss and Ash tossed the basket of goodies onto the bed in favor of being able to wrap his arms around Eli. He loved Eli’s long, lankiness, the way his broad shoulders tapered down to a lean waist. His fingers trailed a path down the elegant length of Eli’s spine to stroke the sensitive skin at the small of his back.

Eli moaned and their progress toward the bed stopped as the kiss deepened. The familiar, sensual demand of Eli’s mouth soon had Ash’s heart racing. He smiled as the kiss broke and then leaned down to turn on the bedside lamp. “You and that light,” Eli teased. “You’re a voyeur at heart.”

“I never get enough of looking at you naked.” Ash’s gaze slid down Eli’s body, from the dip in his collarbone, to the thin trail of hair down his stomach, to the rigid cock that jumped when he looked at it.

Eli stretched out on the bed and picked up the nipple clamps. “You do realize that I’m going to look ridiculous wearing these, right?”

“Not at all.” Ash joined him on the bed and plucked the clamps away from him. “You’re going to look hot and I’m going to think back on this night with a smile for a long time to come.”

Eli tucked his hands under his head and kept silent as Ash screwed one clamp on, then the other. “That’s not too tight is it?” Ash asked and Eli shook his head. Ash knelt back on his knees to stare at him. If someone had told Ash a year and a half ago that he’d fall hard for his college professor and settle down in a small town in New Hampshire he would’ve called them a liar. Look at him now. It didn’t get much deeper than this.

Ash tugged on the chain between Eli’s nipples and saw his gray eyes darken and his lips part on a silent sigh. Ash trailed his finger down Eli’s chest, watching him at the same time. He loved seeing the desire and excitement flicker across Eli’s expressive face. Oh yes, these were going to be fun to play with.

“So what is it with you decorating me?” Eli asked. “First it was the cuffs and the dog tags, then you tried talking me into a tattoo and now this.”

Ash thought about the ring abandoned in the pocket of jeans somewhere between here and the bathroom. If he had his way Eli would be wearing something far more permanent. “What can I say, I like leaving my mark on you.”

Eli laughed and reached to pull him down for another kiss. “You’re so territorial and damn it gets to me.” Eli’s lips moved, first kissing the freckle by Ash’s mouth, before moving on to another one. “I love you.”

Ash straddled Eli’s body and his heart quickened as Eli’s hands roamed over his body. They stroked down his spine, brushed over the scar on his side with a tenderness that had caught him unawares many times. That was one demon that Eli had helped him to put to rest. He hoped that tomorrow he’d be able to help Eli start to let go of his own lingering painful memories. But tonight, it was all about making each other feel good.

Ash heard the cap on the lube pop open and unconsciously tensed before he forced himself to relax. He kissed the side of Eli’s neck, then kissed lower across his chest when Eli stroked a slick finger down the cleft of his ass. He shivered, his

breath coming a little faster as all of the nerve endings below seemed to become hypersensitive. Eli kissed the top of his head his other hand kneading Ash's ass while his fingertip teased a path deeper. And when it circled against his entrance Ash bit back a groan.

"You know, I shouldn't be the only one with a toy," Eli said in a teasing voice and then wiggled his way out from underneath Ash.

The contents of the basket flashed through Ash's mind and he caught Eli's ankle just as he reached the edge of the bed and leaned over to rummage. "That's okay, Doc. I don't need anything."

Eli twisted like a cat when Ash tried to haul him back, then turned in a flash and pushed Ash back on the bed. His bendiness never ceased to amaze Ash, hiking alone shouldn't make Eli this agile. Eli's eyes gleamed as he held up the anal beads that he'd managed to hold onto. "Oh, but I insist. It wouldn't be fair to you."

"Ummm." Ash's body tensed at the thought of the invasion. That was something they hadn't done yet. Well no, he'd played with Eli that way, not the other way around and he wasn't entirely sure...

Eli slid down Ash's body and his lips closed around Ash's cock which made thinking next to impossible. His hips rose, seeking more of the wet, sucking heat. Eli's mouth was dangerous in more ways than one. Hands slid between his thighs, easing them apart and anticipation jumped. He wouldn't really... Eli was just teasing.

Then Eli's mouth was gone, leaving Ash's cock aching, and his hair tickled Ash's legs as he moved lower. A finger slid into him and Ash relaxed at the familiar sensation. Warm lips nuzzled and teased his shaft, promising more and Ash's concentrated on Eli's mouth. So when something hard and smooth pressed against him and he felt the stretch as it pushed in Ash was ready for the more intense sensation.

"Sneaky bastard." Ash squirmed as Eli chuckled. It didn't feel bad, a bit strange, but nothing like what he'd built up in his head.

"I have my moments." Eli dragged his tongue along the length of Ash's cock. "Now, hush, lay back and enjoy."

Eli took his time, toying with the beads, tormenting Ash's cock with his lips and tongue. He seemed to be very fond of pushing the third one in and out, teasing Ash with a slow stretch and making him squeeze around the ones already there. Ash fast lost any inhibitions he had with them.

By the time Eli managed to get all the beads inside of him he was aching for the feel of Eli's cock inside of him instead. "No more foreplay." Ash pulled Eli up and planted a hungry kiss on his lips. He shifted restlessly and the beads rubbed against his prostate, sending sparks of pleasure through him.

"I love it when you get all demanding," Eli said against his lips. Ash groaned and twisted against the sheets as the beads slid out of him, leaving him feeling empty and aching. *Note to self, those are a keeper.* He slid his hand down and squeezed Eli's cock in a silent demand. "So impatient."

"Damn right, I'm impatient." Ash twisted them around and once again straddled Eli's body. Eli's cock, nudged against the cleft of his ass and the hot, urgent need for more stirred Ash to action. He reached back to wrap his hand around Eli's cock to guide him his gaze fixed on his partner. Eli stared back up at him, his hair in a tangled cloud on the pillow, and his hands tightened on Ash's hips as he sank back to the sound of their mutual groans.

Ash tugged on one of the bauble dangling from Eli's nipple and was rewarded with a gasp and a buck that rocked his cock deeper inside. Ooohh, now that raised interesting possibilities. He tugged a little harder on the other one and Eli thrust into him this time. "It's like playing an instrument," Ash said with a soft laugh.

Eli's eyes flashed darker and he rolled with Ash, pinning him to the bed. "And you are a red headed devil." He kissed the corner of Ash's mouth as they began to move together. Every time Ash toyed with the clamp or the chain connecting them, Eli would snap his hips. Fuck that felt so good... so good and not enough at the same time. Ash wanted more.

Eli's hair fell in a curtain around them and Ash abandoned his play in favor of digging his hands into it and dragging Eli's mouth down for even more kisses. If Eli said yes and agreed to marry him, he wanted his hair down for the ceremony. Though, he might have to talk him into that. He was truly besotted, because Ash

couldn't seem to touch Eli without thinking about how much he wanted to be with him forever.

"You make me crazy. I love you," Ash groaned, tightening his legs around Eli's waist. "Come on, Doc... so fucking close."

"Keep talking like that, Ash." Eli ground his hips and those hot flashes of pleasure came hard and fast now. Ash held on, the excitement building to a fever pitch that made it difficult to catch his breath. And after the hot, sweet rush of their climax they continued to hold each other while their bodies cooled. Eli curled into him and laid his head on Ash's chest to listen to his heartbeat slow as Ash stroked his hand over Eli's hair and down his back.

Wow. Okay, that definitely called for a round two. Just as soon as Ash could think clearly again. To his surprise, Eli didn't immediately remove the clamps and chain, and when Ash finally did it for him he let out a soft moan. "I think we're adding these to the kink drawer," Ash said.

"That's not the only things we'll be adding." Eli kissed the side of his neck and moved to the bathroom.

Ash stretched out on the bed, feeling a pleasurable ache left over from the sex. He was one lucky man and he hoped he showed Eli that. Eli had seen him at his worst and he'd stuck by him, becoming the steady anchor that Ash had been searching for. He'd understood why Ash felt ambivalent about opting out of the Reserves when his time came and he'd helped him find his faith again. When Ash had decided to stay in for another stint Eli hadn't complained.

This last year had been crazy and Ash expected more crazy years. He knew that being a cop's significant other was as difficult as being a soldier's one. And Ash was going to wear both hats. Eli could handle it though, that and everything else Ash threw at him. He smiled at the thought of more years of muddling through together.

The sound of the Jacuzzi jets coming to life broke through Ash's thoughts, and when Eli didn't return, he got up to investigate. The candles burned steady along the counter. And the mirror reflected back the glow making it strong enough to illuminate the whole room.

"Feeling romantic?" Ash asked, leaning against the door frame.

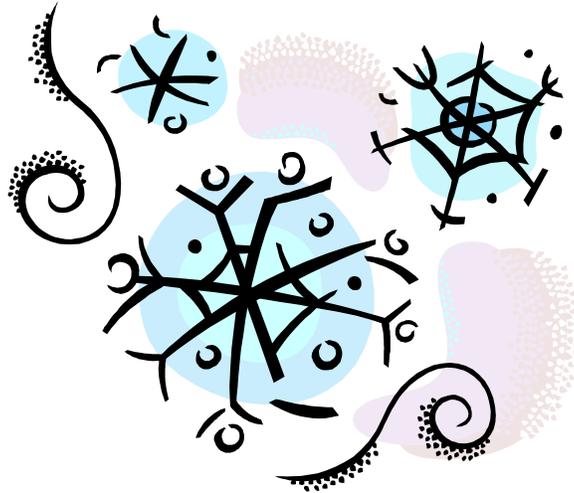
Eli smiled and set the lighter aside. “Maybe a little.” He tested the water with his hand, then climbed in. “Water’s still hot. Want to join me?”

Ash slipped in front of Eli and relaxed back against him. Eli began rubbing his shoulders and the back of his neck as the water frothed around them, filling the air with steam. This was nice, maybe next summer they could look into building a room in the back and putting a Jacuzzi there.

“It feels a little weird to not have a tree set up in the living room,” Eli said and kissed Ash’s shoulder. “No tree, no snow.”

“I’m sure your parents will have one at their place and we have ours waiting for us at home,” Ash reached back and crooked his arm around Eli’s neck.

“True, I suppose it doesn’t matter what day we celebrate our own Christmas.” Eli murmured in Ash’s ear. “As long as I have you, I have everything I need.”



## Chapter Four

THE air held a definite chilly nip when they set out the next morning, but it was a beautiful day for a hike. Jabbers ranged about Eli and Ash, exploring the underbrush with a wagging tail then loping ahead a bit to investigate. After being cooped up in a truck for two days getting out and hiking felt good for all of them. Talking with Gareth last night and being with Ash helped to put things back in perspective for Eli. If his parents couldn't see what an amazing guy Ash was and how good they were together then that was their loss. They would be just fine up in New Hampshire without them.

“Nervous?” Ash asked, stepping in time with Eli, his gaze focused ahead on the trail. Though he wasn't looking at him, Eli knew that Ash didn't miss much. His partner could read him much more easily than Eli could Ash. He knew there was something on Ash's mind, but he had no idea what it was. He'd hinted at it a couple of times in the hopes that Ash was talk about it, but Ash hadn't bitten. All Eli could do was be patient, because eventually, Ash always spilled his guts.

“Not as much as yesterday,” Eli admitted.

A slow smile crossed Ash’s lips and his green eyes gleamed. “So the nipple clamps worked.”

“Nobody ever warned me that a redhead causes so much trouble.” Eli glanced at the bright red-gold of Ash’s hair and then the freckles that begged for kisses.

Ash picked up the end of Eli’s braid and pretended to study the highlights which stood out in the light of the winter sun. “Looks like you have plenty of red yourself there, Doc.”

“Well, I never claimed to be a saint.”

“Thank the lord for that.” Ash shoved his hand in his pocket and glanced up at the canopy of trees over them as they hit another shaded spot. “It’s pretty here, not quite like home, but still nice.”

“It has its own charm.” Eli left it at that, sensing that Ash was fumbling toward something. He’d been hovering more and more on the words that Eli was sure Ash wanted to say and if Eli hadn’t been so distracted the last few weeks then he might’ve coaxed Ash to talk.

“Do you think we could convince Wayne to make a rocking chair for Melanie?” Ash took his hand out of his pocket and shaded his eyes to look down the trail. “A baby should always have the chance to get rocked to sleep don’t you think?”

Eli stopped and turned toward Ash with a frown. That was not what Ash had been about to say. He was sure of it. He took Ash’s hand and whistled for Jabbers when it looked like the beagle planned on continuing on without them. “Okay, spit it out, Ash. Whatever it is, it can’t be as bad as all that.”

“Spit what out?” Ash asked with a puzzled expression. And Eli began to wonder if he was jumping at things that weren’t actually there just for a few minutes of delay. That was just sad. He did have plenty of good memories with his parents. There was no need for all of this procrastination.

“Whatever it is that’s been on your mind for the last couple of months,” Eli said with exasperation. “I know there’s something and I’ve tried being patient. So come on, talk to me.”

Understanding dawned and color flooded Ash's cheeks much to Eli's surprise. He actually shifted from foot to foot. What the hell was going on?

"Oh that."

Eli's brows lifted and his mind ran down a list of possibilities. Ash's unit was being activated and he was going back to the Mideast. No, that wouldn't have him so out of countenance. It was something he was embarrassed about, or maybe uncertain was the word, which was unusual for him. Eli could count on Ash knowing exactly what he wanted.

"Yes that."

"That's a surprise so you're going to have to wait. Now's not the time." Ash gestured toward the trail. "Come on, Hollister, time's a wastin'."

"You're serious? You're really not going to tell me?" Eli watched, incredulous as Ash started walking again. "How long am I supposed to wait?"

"Until I'm ready." Ash looked over his shoulder at him, solemn at first until he grinned. "Thank God, I've found me a patient man."

Eli gave up trying to get some information out of Ash and caught up to him. "As long as it's nothing I should worry about."

"It's not. So don't get all bothered over it."

They continued the hike in silence and as they got nearer to his parents Eli found himself playing with the D-rings on his cuffs. After the bet was over last year he hadn't worn them as much, but he found that he often tended to put them on whenever he felt uncertain. And the dog tags around his neck reminded him that the best thing that happened in his life wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. What was it about coming to his parents' place that made him feel like a teenager again?

His parents' house sat in a little hollow not too far from town. He saw the wreath of smoke rising from the chimney before the trees opened up enough to let him see the house itself. His parents had bought the place after his Dad had realized that the Hermitage was never going to be his. And Eli had been relieved to know that they were going to settle with his mom's family instead of his dad's.

Amwich was *his* haven. And that was really the wrong attitude to have. Eli paused at the top of the rise, but Jabbers didn't wait for anyone and tore down the

hill, barking his fool head off. Ash took his hand and Eli found himself moving again. “Come on, Doc. It’s too late for a strategic withdrawal. Jabbers has already alerted everyone in the near vicinity of our arrival.”

“You only talk all sexy soldier like that when you want to distract me.”

“Guilty as charged.”

The kitchen door opened and his mother stepped outside, searching first the driveway and then the surrounding tree line for them. Eli’s heart squeezed and a nervous flutter went through his stomach. This was it, the first moment of reckoning.

Jabbers ran circles around her, his tail wagging then bounded off to join Eli and Ash again as if to say hurry up. Perversely, it just made Eli want to drag his feet more. A breeze rustled through the trees, stirring the bare limbs and rattling round the dried leaves and undergrowth. It underscored the flutters in his stomach and the jumpiness of his pulse.

“Hey, Mom.” Eli said with a lightness he didn’t feel and waved at her.

“Eli!” She waved back as she headed toward them a smile breaking out over her face.

That familiar mix of old regrets and love hit him, tempered by resentments that he couldn’t quite let go of no matter how hard he tried. And that brought inward squirming for holding onto them after all those years. This was the first time he’d seen her since the summer he met Ash and at he was already uncomfortable. The crazy thing about it all, his mom was the parent that he got along with. This was going to be a long couple of days.

“For godssake, Elijah where’s your car?” She hugged him close, holding on like she didn’t intend on letting go. Then she pulled back to peer up into his face as if measuring all the changes in him since she last saw him. She must’ve seemed satisfied with what she found because she hugged him again before turning toward Ash.

Eli’s heart jumped and he slipped his arm around Ash’s shoulder. *Oh please, God, let this go well.* “Ash this is my mom, Anita Hollister.” She didn’t even give Eli a chance to finish his introduction as she seized Ash’s hand in both of hers. Some of the painful tightness around his heart eased.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ash. I haven’t heard nearly as much about you as I’d like. Somebody needs to call more.” She cast Eli an admonishing glance. “I’m so glad he brought you to meet us.”

“The pleasure’s mine, ma’am,” Ash said, stuffing his baseball cap in his back pocket. He gave her that smile of his, all southern charm, the smile that Eli had seen him use to get past any manner of obstacles. And damned if it didn’t work for him.

“And so polite too.” His mom smiled and linked her arm through Eli’s before letting loose of a barrage of questions. “Have you eaten yet? Your dad is washing up the breakfast dishes, but I could heat up something for you. Where are you staying? We would’ve made up a spot for you at our house.”

His dad was doing dishes. Since when? David Hollister had very firm ideas on what was men’s work and what was women’s. Eli had heard it often enough growing up and he’d never understood the need to label everything. After all, when his dad was in boot camp, Eli was sure that his dad had done plenty of ‘women’s work.’

“We’re staying at one of Aunt Barbara’s cabins,” Eli said as they neared the house. “It’s not far, only a couple of miles if you take the trail.”

“Well, I suppose one of us can take you back up there after dark.” She looked up at Eli anxiously. Sometimes she seemed to look at Eli as if she was afraid that he wasn’t real or that he might disappear at any time. “You are staying for dinner right?”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Eli assured her and was rewarded with her beaming smile and another hug around his waist. After all this time, she still looked the same, still petite and slender. Gray didn’t dare touch her hair; she went after it with militant zeal and wore her hair in a sleek chestnut sweep of hair. The part that made him warm inside was seeing that the tendency to give spontaneous hugs and fluttering touches of her hands was still there as well.

“I wish you could stay all the way through Christmas,” she said as they reached the kitchen door. “Are you sure you have to leave early? You haven’t been home for Christmas since I don’t know when.”

“That’s my fault, ma’am,” Ash said, holding the door open for them. “I don’t have the clout yet to ask for holidays off.”

“That’s right; Eli said that you’d passed your exams. State police right?” At Ash’s nod, she patted his arm. “Congratulations. I’m sure it was a relief.”

They entered the kitchen and sure enough there was Eli’s dad at the sink, arms up to his elbows in soapy water and an array of clean dishes lined up with military precision in the drainer. He straightened as he heard them come in, his shoulders becoming tense. Deliberately, he rinsed off the last dish before turning toward them, drying his hands on a towel.

The silver had thickened in his hair so he had far more salt than pepper, but the fierce look was still in his eyes, the proud carriage of his body remained. He had always reminded Eli of an eagle, unfathomable and unreachable. Eli tried to ease the ache in his throat enough to greet him.

David Hollister gave Eli a long measuring look and then nodded in hello. “Eli.”

“Dad.” Before that horrible, awkward feeling had a chance to sink into his guts Eli touched his hand to Ash’s back as he came forward to stand beside him. “This is my partner, Ash.” He almost stumbled on the introduction. Ash was more than his boyfriend, more than his live-in-lover. In Eli’s mind, Ash was *the* one and he fully planned on being a part of the rest of Ash’s his life.

“Sir.” Ash held out his hand, not at all intimidated by the other man’s appraising stare. If Ash was nervous it didn’t show through pleasant mien that he had in place. Eli had always found that impassive resolve to be ridiculously attractive even when it had driven him nuts. He could never manage that same kind of reserve, not even at times when he needed it. At least with Ash, he knew what lay beneath the mask.

“Come on, sit, don’t just stand there hovering.” His mom gestured to the table and pulled out a chair. “I’ll make us some more coffee and we can catch up. There’s not too much new going on here, I’m just enjoying retirement, doing some shopping and a little redecorating.”

Eli’s mom chattered on, filling the silence as they sat and she busied herself getting the coffee maker going. “How’d the semester go?”

“This semester was great. I had a good group of kids and the new department head is pretty laid back.”

“Are you going to get tenure soon?” Eli’s dad sat at the other end of the table, staring down at his clasped hands. He didn’t even look up with the question, but at least he didn’t say anything about Eli antagonizing the new department head.

“The nomination is with the committee. I’m optimistic about my chances.” Some sticklers had frowned when his relationship with Ash had come out and there had been a bit of blowback, but most of that had died down.

His dad nodded and tightened his hands then stared off to the side. Before Eli could question his odd behavior, his mom returned to the table with sugar and creamer. “How about you, Ash? Eli said that the trials and tests for the State Police were pretty intense. Seems like you made it through okay.”

“It was no worse than any of the training I went through with the Marines,” Ash said reaching for a mug. David’s head came up long enough for him to glance at Ash before he clasped his hands together again and looked away. “Some of the guys tried to convince me that new recruits had to climb Mt. Washington in the winter with a pack of gear.”

“That’s insane,” Eli’s mom stared at him aghast, then looked at Eli for confirmation. “They didn’t really make you do that did they?”

Ash laughed as he doctored up his coffee. “No, they were a bit disappointed when I didn’t fall for it.”

“Then Ash told them some of what he had to do during his winter training with the Reserves and that ended it real quick,” Eli said and studied his dad with a small frown when he didn’t comment. Weird.

His mom plied them with more questions throughout the morning while his dad remained strangely silent. Eli cut him another glance, his stomach starting to sour. Granted, his dad had the tendency of starting conversations that led to arguments in the past. So Eli should be grateful that he hadn’t brought up DADT or mentioned the circumstances around how Eli and Ash had met. He hadn’t even questioned the length of Eli’s hair.

“So do you have any brothers and sisters, Ash?” Eli’s mom asked as she refilled his coffee mug. At least that was one good thing to come out of this

morning. If his mom hadn't liked Ash she would've been formal and distant, not sitting next to him with a comfortable familiarity and a smile in her eyes.

"No brothers much to my eternal disappointment, but I have two sisters, one older and one younger."

Eli's dad glanced up as if he were about to say something and then looked away again as if he was trying to work through a vexing problem. Eli clenched his jaw, before forcing it to relax. His dad couldn't even give them the courtesy of engaging in a conversation with them. He should've known better than to expect more.

"Sisters are a joy, I'm lucky to have mine in town with me. I sometimes help Barb with the cabins. I think retiring might've been a mistake, there's just so much time to fill. So we keep ourselves busy and talk about having grandkids one day."

Ash laughed and reached over to take Eli's hand. His mom's gaze dropped to their hands and a faint smile touched her lips. His dad looked too with a blank expression that got Eli all hot inside. "My mom is expecting her first and she won't stop talking about babies."

"Siblings would've been nice, then you'd probably get some grandkids." For the life of him, Eli couldn't see himself with children. "But Gareth was like a brother, at least you and Aunt Barbara had us close together."

"One kid was more than enough." Eli's head jerked around to meet his dad's gaze. The other man's eyes tightened, emphasizing the white-knuckled clasp of his hands and before Eli could offer an acid comment in return his dad continued. "I was away on TDYs so much when you were younger, sometimes for months at a time, more kids would've been a burden on your mom."

"Don't be absurd," his mom scoffed and carried the coffee mugs to the sink. "I may have been homesick, but it wasn't that bad. And it's too late for what ifs."

"My best friend's wife had twins while he was stationed overseas," Ash said with a glance at Eli and a squeeze of his hand. "It can be tough at times."

His dad made a sound in the back of his throat, Eli wasn't sure if it was an agreement or not, and went back to ignoring the rest of the table. Eli pressed his lips together and tried to tamp down his simmering temper. Ash and Eli's mom continued to talk about children for a bit as Eli only half listened.

He stilled his fingers before they began drumming on the table and Jabbers whined, sticking his head on Eli's lap. His dog wouldn't be seeking reassurance if he hadn't caught onto his mood and Eli began to pet him to calm them both down. Getting mad would solve nothing, only make things worse. He'd say something he would absolutely regret later. Ash looked over at him with a question in his eyes and Eli shook his head. It was a mistake coming home. He should've known that his dad would never get over that blockage in his brain and accept him for who he was.

The frustrated anger boiled up again. Ash didn't deserve to be treated like he wasn't there. And before Eli could open his mouth to say so Ash stood up. "Excuse me; I need to let Jabbers out for a bit. Mr. Hollister, may I have a moment of your time?"

The entire table looked at Ash in astonishment, but then Eli's dad rose as well. "Sure thing."

Eli tugged hard on cuff ring and thought about protesting. He didn't think the two of them being alone together was a good idea. Maybe he should join them. Ash looked right at Eli and winked, asking him without words to trust him and Eli nodded before he could second guess himself.

"Come on, Jabbers." Ash whistled and the beagle went toward him after one last long look at Eli. It was silly to feel abandoned, but Eli couldn't help that a little of that wormed its way through him before he firmly squashed it down. He needed to get over it. At least the emotion served to puncture a hole in his anger.

Eli turned and looked at his mom in bewilderment. "What has gotten into Dad? He's not acting like himself."

Exasperation crossed her face and she got up and began putting away the breakfast dishes. "You two are so much alike, I swear. And the biggest tragedy is that neither of you can see it at all."

Alike? There couldn't be two people more different than him and his dad. Eli played with the D-rings on his cuff and bit back all the things that he wanted to say. After a moment he crossed over to the counter to help her. "Okay, you've got me. How are we alike?" She rose on her tiptoes to try to put a bowl away on the top shelf and Eli held out his hand for it. "Let me."

“What I wouldn’t give to not need a step stool around this place.” She gathered the silverware and began sorting them into their respective slots. “You’re both pig headed stubborn and so sure that you’re in the right that you can’t see each other’s side. It can be exhausting.”

Eli set the bowl away and thought about what she said. He did have to admit that he was pretty stubborn and he might even slide into the area of being pig headed at times. And he could absolutely agree that his dad was the same way, though he wasn’t sure what that had to do about how his dad was acting this morning. “Okay, I’ll admit to being stubborn.”

His mom sighed and looked at him from the corner of her eye. “You don’t really have a choice in the matter, Elijah. If you deny it you’d need to be committed for delusions.” She handed him a stack of plates. “And you and your dad both expect the worst out of each other.”

Eli started to deny it and then made himself think about that statement too. “Not without reason.” Speaking of thinking the worst, right now he was dying to know what his dad and Ash were talking about out there. He moved over to the window and watched his dad and Ash for a minute before he turned away. If Ash caught him peeking he’d never hear the end of it.

“I won’t deny that, on both sides.” She wiped down the sink, then turned to him and crossed her arms. “You came here expecting the worst and are determined to see the worst. There isn’t any room for anything else. And he,” she turned and stabbed her finger toward the door, “is all ready to get prickly and defensive the moment you get prickly and defensive.”

“If I didn’t want things to be different I never would’ve come and brought Ash with me. I don’t want to fight over the holidays.” Eli leaned against the counter as what was left of the angry energy drained from him, leaving him bone deep tired. There had to be a better way. He refused to be upset for the rest of the visit. “Okay, if you don’t want me to jump to conclusions, show it to me from his perspective. Do you know why he won’t even look at us today or barely said a word? Will you explain that, because I can’t?”

“Oh, Eli.” There was a wealth of emotion in those two words that Eli couldn’t decipher. “He’s nervous.”

“What?”

She shook her head at his incredulous tone. “He really wants this to go well and he’s so afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing, afraid that he’s going to drive you away for good that he’s second guessing everything that he does want to say.”

It was an absolutely ludicrous idea. Eli had never once seen his dad nervous over anything. And yet... nerves might explain the completely abnormal behavior. He slid a finger through his cuff ring and toyed with it as he thought it over. “I’ve never known Dad to be anxious over anything.”

“That’s just because you can’t see it. He has nerves same as anybody else. He just doesn’t hide it as well anymore.” She craned her neck to look up at him and Eli hated seeing the sad slump of her shoulders and the worry lines around her eyes. That was partly his fault.

“I don’t understand why you two are so ready to fight all the time. And it’s not just you and your dad. I feel like I lost you years ago and I don’t know how to get you back. You’ve been distant with me since you were a teenager. And I find myself getting mad too, like when you mention Lu. I feel like I’ve been replaced, like I’m some kind of distant relation instead of your mother. I don’t know how it started and I want to know how to fix it.”

“Mom...” For a moment Eli stared at her, stunned by the outpouring and not sure how to answer without causing more grief. His mind reeled back from the awful hurt. It had been an experience that had defined him and it didn’t occur to her that it might be a reason for him wanting to keep his heart safe, to stay away. Had it meant that little to her?

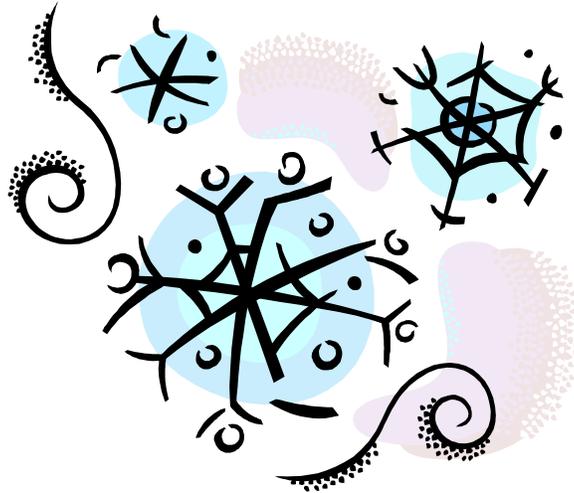
“Mom, you sent me away from home. I was upset and scared and I needed you and your support and you sent me to Grumpy and Grandma’s for the summer and for every summer after that. All because I was caught with another boy and Dad didn’t know how to deal. How did you expect I would feel about that?”

His mom’s eyes went wide and her hand came to her mouth. “Eli, I...”

*Shit!* This was not what he wanted to do over the holidays. Now he’d hurt her. He’d known that his contentious relationship with his dad had bothered her. He hadn’t realized that there had been a personal issue as well.

“No don’t. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up. I know that you did what you thought was best.” Eli shut the cabinet door and searched for an escape. Ash had taken Jabbers so he couldn’t even use him as an excuse for what Ash would call a strategic emergency walk. He didn’t want her feeling guilty for something that didn’t matter anymore. After all, being exiled to New Hampshire had led to his close relationship with his grandparents, Lu and Neil.

“So, Mom, knowing you, you’re planning on something fancy for lunch. Do you need help getting set up?”



## Chapter Five

ASH knew that he had a tendency to be a little overprotective of Eli. He also knew that it irked the shit out of Eli. He had to admit that maybe he could be a tad bit overbearing, like in the situation with Wayne. In his defense, for as intelligent as Eli was, once he decided that a person was either in the friend column or the other column it was hard to change his mind. And that blindness sometimes drove Ash batshit.

Jabbers snuffled around the bushes and trees as Ash stood with Eli's dad and let the silence stretch out. He wasn't in anymore of a hurry to fill it than David Hollister was and it gave him time to gather thoughts on how he wanted to approach this. Eli was going to be furious with him for interfering, but that was better than watching this self-fulfilling prophecy play out. He did not want to see Eli miserable for the next few days.

“So Gareth tells me that you went to the Mideast for a couple of tours,” David finally said, clasping his hands together as he shot Ash a quick, guarded look. Ash turned to study him in return. He now knew where Eli got his height, but the expressive face and gray eyes came from his mom. David didn’t come across as stern, like Ash expected, more as taciturn. He didn’t wear his emotions as Eli did, for everyone to see, he kept them close and safe. At least that’s the impression Ash got.

“A few, Iraq and Afghanistan, then back to Iraq again when my Reserve unit was called up.” David continued to give him a measuring stare that Ash knew very well. He’d been on the receiving end of it many times, usually with older soldiers. It was as if they were trying to reconcile what their image of a gay man was with the man that stood before them.

It always irritated Ash. A man was a man, didn’t matter their color, their orientation, there were all kinds. And all those labels did nothing to define who a man really was, their deeds decided that. “Eli he told me that you served in Vietnam and Desert Storm.”

“I did, was drafted into the Army. Scared out of my wits at the time, but it opened my eyes to possibilities outside my home. And I loved flying. When I got out of the Army and went to college I was determined to be a pilot.”

Well if David wanted to talk solidier talk, Ash would give it to him. Hopefully, when they got back inside, the tension would’ve lessened. He was pretty sure that Eli had been about to say something that he would probably really regret later on. He’d seen it in the mutinous line of his jaw, the hard set of his lips and the way he kept playing with his cuffs. All of them were danger signs.

Ash picked up a stick and played a few rounds of fetch with Jabbers so he’d wear himself out. The dog had as much energy as Kurtis’s twins in one black, tan and white package and Jabbers threw himself into the game with joyful abandon. Ash and David talked about the situations in the Middle East and North Africa, cautiously talked around the dubious area of politics, and discussed the latest news back home in Amwich. As they talked, David’s taciturn behavior eased and his hands unclasped as he seemed to relax more.

“Gareth also said that you’d been wounded on one of your tours.”

Ash flexed his hand, conscious again of the scar tissue along his side. The memories didn't haunt him as much as they used to though. He had Eli to thank for that. However, he was beginning to wonder if Eli had told his dad anything about him. All of his information seemed to come from Gareth. "Yes, sir. Got caught in a bombing, but the doctors did a good job of patching me back up."

"And you went back." David gave him a penetrating look and it was impossible to tell what he was thinking, whether he considered it to be foolish or brave. Ash didn't think he was either, he had just been doing his duty.

Ash picked up the stick that Jabbers brought to him and patted his head before tossing it again. "You've got your facts right."

David nodded as if he'd come to some kind of internal decision. "I had a cousin who was a Marine, you guys are tough bastards. You'll need that to handle my son."

"With respect, sir, Eli doesn't need to be handled." Ash didn't even want to think how Eli would react if he thought someone was trying to 'handle' him. And if that was the approach David had been taking all these years no wonder him and Eli butted heads so often. He hoped Eli didn't kill him for what he was about to say. "He just wants your approval."

David snorted and his expression cracked enough for him to give Ash an incredulous look. "Clearly, you don't know Eli. He's never needed anyone's approval. He makes sure to fling that in everyone's face. He goes his own way. He always has and has never sought anyone's opinion."

That cankered. Ash could see it in the other man's eyes before David turned away and began gathering firewood from a stack by the shed. He equated Eli's free-spiritedness to not just a lack of respect... Ash suspected that David believed that it meant that Eli didn't care about anything but himself and that hurt his dad.

Ash frowned, what a messed up tangle that had been years in the making. "You're right about one thing." David paused, his arms half-full and his face turned just enough so he could see Ash out of the corner of his eye. "Eli doesn't give a flying fuck about the general public's opinion. He's pretty secure in who he is. It's one of things I love about him."

David nodded with a grim expression as if Ash had only verified what he'd suspected and Ash didn't give that opinion a chance to sink in. "But when it comes to people he loves, their opinion matters a quite a bit. That's why he puts on such a show of indifference or defiance. He cares too much."

He set Jabbers' stick aside and rubbed the beagle's ears when he jumped up and stretched his paws on Ash's thigh. "You want to see your Daddy?" Jabbers barked and raced to the back door. "I guess that answers that."

Ash started to reach for some firewood to help and David waved him off. "Go on and get back inside before Eli decides to rescue you." He paused and his brows drew together in a frown. "I'll stay out here a bit, think on things."

Well, maybe that was a good sign. Ash shoved his hand into his pocket and cupped the ring as he headed back toward the house. Gareth was taking them out later. Maybe that would put Eli in a receptive mood. He should ask tonight now that he'd met Anita and David. Eli wouldn't be stressing over the introduction anymore. Only one question kept niggling at Ash, other than telling his parents that he had a live-in boyfriend, had Eli discussed Ash at all with them?

ASH sat with Eli and Gareth at one of the back tables at the dimly lit bar. The music provided a nice backdrop without it being so loud that it prevented them from talking. Not that Eli was saying too much. He wasn't in a temper. A temper Ash could deal with. He was in a mood, brooding and poking at something. And until Ash could get him alone he wouldn't get it out of him either.

"So how did it go today at your folks' place?" Gareth asked as he signaled one of the servers. "You all were in the room when I arrived, that's a good sign."

Eli shrugged and the corner of his mouth tipped up in a strange smile. "The worst case scenario didn't happen. I think we'll all manage to muddle through the visit. So I count it as a win."

Eli counted that as a win? Between the awkward silences, the occasional thick tension that would rear up, and the glances exchanged full of unspoken, pent up frustration, Ash had thought he would lose it. He couldn't imagine his family ever being like the Hollisters. Melanie would've burst a blood vessel before she

managed to hold back anything that was on her mind. When he'd returned to the kitchen he'd found Eli cooking with his mom, for godssake. Eli never cooked, not unless it was absolutely necessary.

Ash was very glad that Gareth had managed to secure them another place to stay. Eli's parents weren't cruel, or thoughtless, or all the other things that Ash had wondered about. He'd thought that they'd both tried to make him feel welcome, but the tension would've had him going out of his skin in no time. Maybe that's why Eli dreaded these visits so much.

"Considering how nervous you were about coming down here at all, I think muddling through sounds like it went pretty damn good." Gareth twisted around in his chair and tried to signal the server again. "I mean they didn't try to kick the two of you out or convince you that you needed to go in a different direction with your life. That's good."

Gareth didn't see the expression that crossed Eli's face, but Ash did. A sort of resigned grimace that made him wonder what Eli had talked about with his mom that had gotten him worked up. He'd gone from being pissed to... Ash didn't know what kind of mood when he'd come back into the kitchen, pensive maybe.

"No they didn't do that. Though Dad did have to bring up the whole dating my student thing," Eli said as Gareth made one more attempt to wave at the server who was standing at another table, in the middle of a laughing conversation.

"I swear, Kelly hasn't said one word to me since I broke up with her brother," Gareth muttered as he turned back to them. "Well, Uncle David is old school and a teacher-student relationship definitely made him twitch a bit. But he got over the worst of it after Ash graduated."

"He dropped that the moment I told him I instigated it. I think I shocked him." Ash guessed Eli's dad never had a thing for one of his teacher's in his life. Ash was of the opinion that nobody should blame him for his behavior considering the amount of temptation that he'd been under. "If he knew the whole story is hair would go white."

"You're probably right." Eli stood up and nudged the chair back in with his foot. "Gareth, you're not going to get her attention. I remember Kelly and her brother. You're dead to her for life. I'll grab us some beers from the bar."

As soon as Eli got far enough away to not overhear, Gareth leaned closer. “Okay, what happened?”

Ash shrugged, uncomfortable with the idea of gossiping about Eli. “I’m not sure. I’m hoping to get it out of him tonight. I don’t think it went all that bad, but since I’ve never been with Eli and his parents before I can’t really judge. They’re very different from my family.” What he had with them was more like what Gareth had with his mother, loud and warm and friendly. Eli’s parents were more reserved; they talked around the important things.

“There’s a lot of history there, but they all keep trying,” Gareth said. “I think they’ll eventually get where they want to be.”

Ash looked at Eli who leaned against the bar. His braided hair fell in a long, graceful line down his back and his face in profile showed the strong jaw and the elegant line of his nose. Ash wished he could make it easier for him, the way that Eli stood by him when Ash needed him.

“Aw man, you’ve got it bad.” Ash jerked his eyes back to Gareth who was watching him with a smile. “That’s good, I like knowing that Eli’s happy. You two seem to mesh well. Though I have to say, with everything that he’s been through with his dad, I’m surprised that he fell for a Marine.”

“Yeah, I do have it bad.” He stole another quick glance at Eli who seemed to be busy chatting with the bartender. “So you’ve been friends with Eli forever not just cousins.”

“Ooohh boy, that sounds like an interesting lead in.” Gareth folded his arms on the table and leaned closer. “What’s on your mind, Ashley?”

Ash’s head fell back with a groan. “God, he told you? I’m going to get him so good for that.”

“There’s not many secrets between us. So what’s on your mind?”

Ash shifted in his chair as he tried to figure out how to ask about Eli’s views on marriage without giving it away. He hadn’t even told Kurtis that he planned on proposing. “How do you think Eli feels about settling down?”

Gareth’s brows lifted and he regarded Ash with a fierce frown. “You two seem pretty settled to me. You’re not getting restless are you?”

“Oh hell no.”

Gareth’s face relaxed and he grabbed a handful of the peanuts on the table. “So if you’re not thinking of wandering then you’re thinking of something more permanent?”

This time it was Ash’s turn to frown as he watched Gareth crack the nuts out of their shell. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. Your face said it all. Then there are the glances you keep shooting at my cousin, so what’s the problem?”

Ash looked at Eli again as he tucked his credit card back into his wallet. He didn’t know the answer to Gareth’s question. Was it just nerves or something deeper nagging at him?

“You know what I think?” Gareth said, breaking into his thoughts as Eli laid a tip on the bar counter.

Ash turned his attention back to Gareth and tried to calm the butterflies in his stomach. “What?”

“You’re over thinking things. Go with your gut. I get the feeling that you do that often anyways, has it ever lead you wrong?”

Ash thought of dark eyes in a veiled face, but the memory didn’t have the power it once had. Maybe his mistake then had been not going with his gut and letting his heart run things. He smiled as Eli headed toward them, loaded down with beer bottles. And some things were worth the risk. Tonight he’d get whatever was bothering Eli out of him and then he’d ask. He was tired of waiting.

“Here you go.” Eli handed the beers around and Gareth caught his arm.

“Wait just one minute.” Gareth stuck his finger through the D-ring of Eli’s cuff, his expression incredulous. Then he cut Ash a narrow-eyed look as if he was replaying back their conversation and jumping to conclusions. “Is there something you need to tell me? Have you been holding out on the good stuff?”

“Get your mind out of the gutter.” Eli pulled his hand free and sat down. “Ash gave me these when I lost a bet. They’re supposed to be a reminder to behave myself or there would be consequences. I thought that it was a good thing to keep in mind when we went over to Mom and Dad’s house.”

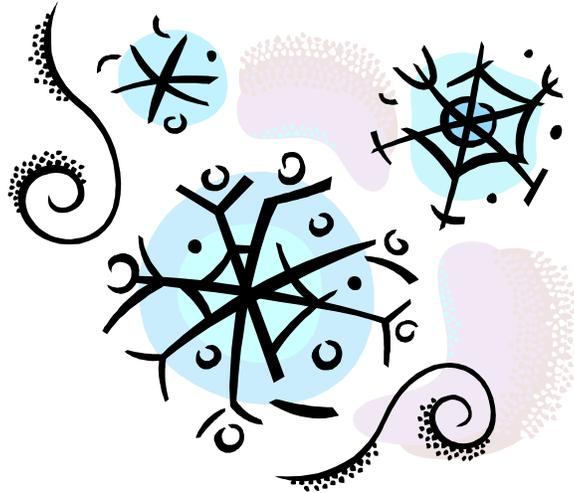
“Speaking of a bet...” Gareth eyed Ash and then his face broke out into a catlike grin. “When are you coming over to my shop so I can have my wicked way with your body?”

“My arm, you only get my arm. I’m not letting you anywhere else with your needles.” Ash gave Eli a mournful glance, trying to do his best to imitate Jabbers. “You’re really dead set on tattooing me aren’t you? There’s no way I can talk you out of it.”

“What’s that you say? A bet’s a bet?” This time Eli grinned, the first real smile he’d had in hours and Ash couldn’t stop himself from grinning back. “You don’t have a chance of talking me out of this, Georgia. I already have the design in mind.”

Ash shook his head. He was doomed to have the Boston Red Sox stuck on his body for the rest of his life. “You’re lucky I love you.”

“My shop, 10 a.m. tomorrow.” Gareth tipped the beer bottle toward Ash in a salute. “You’ll be my first victim of the day.”



## Chapter Six

WHAT a crazy day. Eli dropped down on the couch and stretched out his legs. He craved some peace and quiet and time to think. He hoped he could get in a long hike tomorrow morning before Ash stirred. His partner was not a natural early riser and once he got up the day would be hectic. As much as Eli loved his hikes with Ash, he sometimes needed to go on a solitary one and just let himself be.

Jabbers nosed his way past the front door that Eli had left ajar and went to his bed sniffing at it before making a search just in case Lady Godiva or some other four legged critter had invaded his space while he'd been gone. Eli watched him and listened to the soothing murmur of Ash's voice on the porch as he talked on his cell phone.

Ash had a surprise for him. That wouldn't normally bother Eli in the slightest, but in this case Eli knew that Ash had been brooding over this surprise. Ash wasn't the type to brood. Ash took action and it concerned him that whatever

this was it was enough to keep Ash from behaving like himself. The last time Ash had brooded he'd gotten dead drunk. Not that he seemed like he was about to go off and drink himself into a stupor. So it couldn't be that bad... still Eli was at a loss. He couldn't figure out what kind of surprise could be good and make Ash fuss at the same time.

Maybe they wanted to transfer him to a police station that wouldn't be convenient to Amwich. Eli frowned and drummed his fingers on his stomach. No... Ash would talk about it with him. That's what it really came do. Ash wasn't talking to him and that bothered him. What if he wasn't enough for Ash anymore? What if Ash was still searching for something that Eli hadn't been able to give him?

Jabbers came over and laid his head on Eli's chest with a little whine. Eli looked into those sad eyes, scratching his ears. "Hey there, handsome." Jabbers rumbled a questioning sound back at him and then licked Eli's cheek. "It's okay," Eli said, stroking Jabbers' back. "I'm just thinking. It's been a long day." Jabbers' tail thumped against the couch as he clambered up to join Eli with more of those little rumbles that he'd been named for, punctuated by a couple of barks. "I know," Eli agreed, "chasing rabbits is a lot more fun. Want to chase rabbits in the morning with me?"

"You two are uncanny, you know that?" Ash said as he came in and shut the door. "You hold actual conversations. I've never seen a man and a dog so in tune with each other."

"What can I say, Jabbers is pretty special." Eli draped his arm over the beagle who had stretched out on top of him like some kind of lap blanket. "How's Kurtis?"

"Good. He's stuck in the garage putting the twin's trikes together for Christmas. He says stuck, but he sounded very excited about seeing Brandon and Danielle's face when they find them under the tree."

Ash trailed off and stood there looking down at Eli. There was a strange expression on Ash's face, an expression he'd had often lately, and the same expression that he wore when he brooded. Eli put it all together with a sudden blaze of panicked insight. Ash wanted kids of his own now that he had settled down. *Kids.*

It all made sense, all those cryptic questions from Ash and considering looks. Eli tried to remember every reference to children that Ash had brought up in the last couple of months. Ash was out of school now. He had a permanent home and a secure job. Eli had seen Ash with his god kids, knew how excited he was at having a niece or a nephew. He wanted kids and wasn't sure how to bring it up to Eli.

Jabbers sat up, his paws digging into Eli's chest when he sensed Eli's sudden agitation. His head fell back as he bayed and for half a hysterical second Eli felt like joining him. "Jabbers, bed," Eli ordered with a snap of his fingers and a point in that direction. "I'm okay, you can stop."

"What was that all about?" Ash asked with a mystified expression as he watched Jabbers go over to his bed and curl up with a sigh and a sulk.

"It's been an upsetting day for him. First there was the mood at my parents. He never knows what to make of me there. Then we abandoned him with Gareth's cat who treats him like he's a cross between a kneading post and a comfy bed. He doesn't know if she's an enemy or a friend."

Jabbers laid his head on his paws and watched them intently, his ears twitching at the sound of their voices and his tail thumping whenever they glanced at him. "It's hellahard being a beagle." Ash picked up Eli's legs, sat down on the couch and set them in his lap. "He got to play fetch with me, got a rawhide from Gareth, and he got cuddles with you. He's spoiled rotten and I'm even worse about spoiling him than you." He shook his finger at Jabbers who looked away and pretended not to notice.

"So what did you talk about with my dad when you decided to rescue me this morning?"

"Rescue you?" Ash snorted and unlaced Eli's boots. "I saw the look in your eyes. I was recuing him."

Eli tried picturing a baby in Ash's arms and found that he could way too easily. He had a harder time picturing himself. This was madness. They'd only been together a year. Granted, Eli didn't want to be with anyone else. He knew he wanted to spend his life with Ash, but they should have a few years alone together before thinking of adding to the mix. He forced his mind away from the panic

inducing thought of children and concentrated on the immediate problem, how to get through the rest of this visit with his sanity.

“Mom said something about Dad today that struck me as odd.” Eli lifted up his foot so Ash could tug the first boot off. “I wanted to get your take on it.”

“Okay, shoot.” Ash tossed the boot and sock and the floor and then started on the other one.

“She said he was nervous.” The idea still struck him as ludicrous, but Eli really wanted to believe that it was true.

“That was my impression. He got more relaxed after he grilled me.”

“Grilled you!” Eli pushed himself up, his mouth falling open in indignation. “What gave him—”

“Sorry, poor choice of words. Chill out.” Ash dropped the second boot and pushed Eli back down. “And you complain about me being overprotective. I can handle your dad. Besides, I kind of get where he’s coming from. He’s your dad and we’ve been living together for a year and he’d never met me. Of course he’d be curious.” He gave Eli a frown. “Especially since it seems like he’s gotten all his information about me from Gareth, not you.”

“I’ve talked about you every time I’ve called.” Eli nudged Ash in the chest with his big toe. “So don’t get all hurt on me. I’ll admit that I could’ve called more, and that my conversations with my dad tend to be short and to the point, but I haven’t not talked about you.”

“Good.” Ash captured his foot and moved to crack his toe knuckles before Eli jerked his foot back. “Because we discussed you a bit.”

“Uh huh...” Eli eyed Ash’s sudden bland expression with suspicion. “And what was said?”

“I told him I loved you.”

Eli didn’t trust the innocent way that Ash said that anymore than he trusted Ash’s expression. Still it didn’t stop the flush of warmth that he got upon hearing that. “And what else?”

A pained expression crossed Ash’s face. “Do you really want to know?”

Eli gave that question some thought and Ash took the opportunity to pop his big toe knuckle. “Sadist.” Eli snatched his foot back again and poked Ash in the side. He wasn’t sure if he did want to know, not if it was going to irritate him. He’d spent enough of the day being out of sorts. “Do I need to know?”

Ash reached for his foot and Eli moved it out of reach. “Most of it no, I don’t think you do, but I did tell him that usually you don’t give a flying fuck about anybody’s opinion unless it’s somebody who matters to you.”

Eli couldn’t deny that it was true and he wasn’t sure how he felt about that. He’d like to not care about what his dad thought, but he did. Dammit, he really did. It filled him with such a confused jumble of emotions, the same way that his conversation with his mom had. He wanted their relationships to be better and he didn’t know how to make them better. He wanted all those old resentments and hurts on all sides to just disappear so they could start over. He loved his parents, knew they loved him, yet it didn’t seem to be quite enough.

“Hey, I didn’t tell you that to make you sad.” Ash rubbed Eli’s leg then reached for his hand.

Eli shook his head. “I’m not sad, I’m... at a loss.”

Ash nudged Eli until he shifted onto his side and then Ash stretched out on the couch to face him. “It seems to me that you’ve been at a loss for most of the day. What happened between you and your mom to get you so worked up?”

Eli couldn’t even think about it without his stomach souring over again. He had no right to make his mom feel guilty over something that happened so long ago. He’d have to apologize to her tomorrow night. “Part of it you know, about Dad being nervous. The rest...” Eli sighed. “I brought up things best left buried and said things that I shouldn’t have said.”

Ash tugged Eli’s braid over his shoulder and slipped off the tie on the end. “What did you bring up?”

Eli almost got up and told him that he didn’t want to talk about it, but Ash began unraveling the braid, finger combing his way through Eli’s hair and the action was so typical, so comforting and familiar that he found himself spilling his guts anyway. Ash’s fingers stilled as he watched Eli with those calm green eyes of

his and Eli held onto that gaze. “I shouldn’t have brought it up, I shouldn’t have thrown it in her face like that,” Eli said at the end. “It won’t solve anything.”

“Actually, I think you’re wrong. It did need to be said.” Ash cut off Eli’s protest with a raised brow. “Listen, you weren’t being cruel. What happened when you were a teenager, that really hurt you, and I don’t think it’s ever been acknowledged.”

“But—”

“Just hear me out.” Ash finished undoing Eli’s hair and cupped the nape of Eli’s neck, his strong fingers kneading the tense muscles there. “Sometimes when things aren’t said they fester. Not talking about it hasn’t helped it stop hurting, probably hasn’t helped them not feel guilty over it. So air it out. Maybe they thought they were doing their best by you, maybe they didn’t realize how much it had cut. Now they know. And it’s not inside you anymore. What happens now is up to them.”

Ash was right; there wasn’t anything else Eli could do about his mom and dad. He could understand their initial reaction. Nobody is really ready to find out that their teenager may be sexually active. And the uproar had made things very difficult for his dad on base. So it wasn’t the initial fight that had bothered him for so long. He couldn’t even remember what had been said. What had kept eating at him was remembering that fear, that terrible fear when he’d been sent away, and the feeling of not belonging when he returned. He’d kept waiting for them to decide that they didn’t want him anymore so he’d tried to make himself as much of a nuisance as possible on purpose so he didn’t have to wait in anxiety for it to happen again.

Eli hadn’t realized until now why he’d been so damned prickly and defiant. He’d been scared. And deep down, each time he’d come home, a little of that fear was still there. He’d still been waiting for them to decide that they were done with him and his drama. Looking at it now, it seemed over-the-top absurd. They wouldn’t do that.

He should tell them that. Tomorrow night when they went over for Christmas dinner would pull them aside and tell them. Like Ash said, air it all out. And see what happened then. He’d already done most of his healing. He’d found

the support he'd needed with Lu and Neil, Grumpy and Grandma. His parents had sent him to the place he needed to be at the time.

Eli smiled and leaned up to kiss the freckle at the corner of Ash's mouth. "Have I said I love you today?"

Ash nuzzled him back with a smile. "You could say it again. I don't mind."

"I love you." Eli wrapped his arms around Ash and held him closer. "You're wonderful. I don't know what I would do without you."

"I can think of a few things." Ash pulled back and rubbed his hand over his jeans. "About that surprise—"

Pure, unadulterated panic struck Eli and his heart jumped into his throat. Now? He wanted to talk about adopting kids now! His heart plummeted back down to his chest and began beating rapid fire.

"Not tonight," Eli held up his hand and felt bad about the little flash of hurt in Ash's eyes. "Tomorrow you can tell me about the surprise. I'm sorry; I just need a little thinking time tonight. Or maybe when we get back home, that would be a good time to discuss it." He gave Ash a pleading look as the panic crept in again. "Please?"

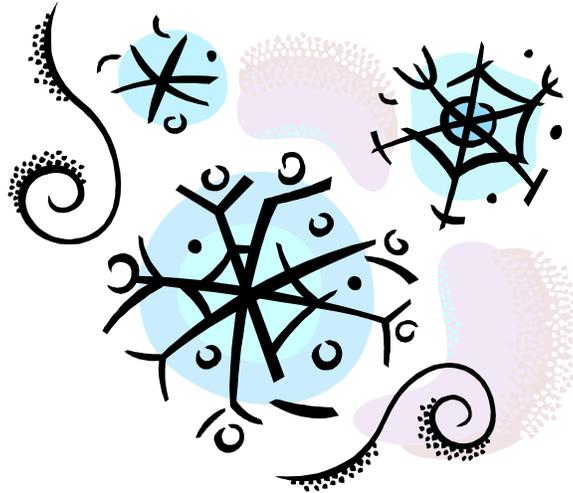
Ash seemed to deflate a bit. "Okay, we'll talk about it later."

That made Eli feel more than a little bad. He could tell this was important to Ash and his partner had just listened to him vent. He steeled himself. He could talk about this like a rational adult. Even if the word "kid" made him gibber in terror inside. It was ridiculous. A kid was a person. A very short, somewhat insane person, who had their own reasoning that made no sense to anyone else. But still a person.

He slid his arms around Ash and pulled him to him again. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have reacted like that. We can talk about it tonight."

"No, no. You're right. Tonight's not the time. It's been a long day." Ash smiled and got up from the couch before holding his hand out to Eli to help him up too. "Besides, I want it to be perfect when we talk about it and lying down on the couch just isn't the right setting. It's okay, we'll talk about it later."

Baffled Eli took his hand and walked with Ash back to the bedroom. Wasn't the right setting... What the hell did he mean by that? Did he plan on changing one of the guest bedrooms into a nursery as a surprise? The Hermitage had more than enough room for a family. Eli suppressed hysterical laugh that threatened to bubble up to the surface. Oh well, if Ash dragged him to a playground or made him hold Melanie's baby, he'd at least know what was coming. Until then he could use the time to get used to the idea.



## Chapter Seven

RESIGNING himself to his fate, Ash stepped through the door. There would be no talking Eli into another bet until this one had been settled. Evil man. He eyeballed Eli as he greeted his cousin with their usual exchange of hugs and hands slaps. At least Eli was in a much happier mood this morning. It was like he'd dropped off all the stress of this visit overnight. Ash was happy to see the light back in his eyes again.

Ash hadn't thought that he'd said anything all that profound to Eli last night. He just pointed out that Eli shouldn't feel guilty for telling his mom how he felt. It was out there now and could be dealt with. Even if his parents chose not to address it, now that Eli had let it out, he could face it and move on. Eli's biggest problem was that he was more concerned with other peoples' states of mind than his own.

"No need to hang back, Ash." Gareth waved him in. "I promise, I won't fuck up your arm."

“I am going to have the Boston Red Sox’s logo permanently inked on my bicep. I say that’s pretty fucked up.”

Eli turned sparkling gray eyes on him, grinning without any sign of shame. “It could be so much worse.”

Ash looked around the shop at all the artwork on display ranging from the beautiful to the grotesque. Though some of the pieces were amazing he couldn’t picture them on his body. At least the logo was simple, small and easy to hide. “Very true.” He’d been teasing before, only now he was started to have serious second thoughts. But he’d never reneged on a bet after he’d lost and he wasn’t about to now.

“Come on and we’ll get started.” Gareth led them to the back of the shop toward one of the cubicles. He drew aside the curtain around the second one and gestured them both in. There was enough room for the chair and two stools, the walls were covered in photographs of past clients, Lady Godiva and pinned up pieces that Ash assumed Gareth had drawn. He liked the clean lines, the realism in most of the art. Well Eli wouldn’t have suggested Gareth if he didn’t think he’d do a good job.

“Take of your shirt. Make yourself comfortable.” Gareth patted the chair. “Eli, come give me your opinion on the final piece.”

Ash shrugged out of his T-shirt and sat back in the chair, picking out tiny details around him to distract himself. Like how the seat covering was cold against his skin at first before it warmed up and the clutter of objects crowded on Gareth’s shelves in the cubicle. There was everything from art books and binders, to a laptop and several dozen CDs.

Eli and Gareth had their heads together over a folder and were whispering low enough that he couldn’t make out what they were saying. He leaned over to see what they were looking at and Eli shut the folder.

“Whoa, wait a minute. I don’t get to see what you’re putting on me?”

Eli grinned at him, his gray eyes all lit up with mischief. “Nope. Not one peek until it’s done. I want your promise.”

“That was not a part of the bet, Eli.”

Eli handed the folder back to Gareth. “It’s perfect.”

“When did you two have time to conspire over this?” Ash demanded as Eli came over to the other side of him and took a seat on the stool.

“Email is one hell of an innovation,” Gareth said, laying out his supplies.

“You are underhanded and sneaky.” Ash snatched his hand away as Eli tried to take it. “You can’t really make me promise not to look.”

“I’ll wear my hair down when we go to Mom and Dad’s tonight,” Eli cajoled.

Now that was a thought. Except for the drive down, Eli had been keeping it back in a tight braid. As much as Ash liked undoing it himself, he preferred to have it down altogether. “You’d do that, even if someone makes a comment?”

Eli smiled and captured Ash’s hand. “I’ll just tell them that it makes you happy.”

“Okay you win.” Arguing would just delay things and Ash wanted to get this over with.

Gareth snickered and pulled on a pair of gloves. “I didn’t realize a police officer could be bribed so easily. I’ll have to remember that about you.”

“It only works with one man.” Ash watched Gareth wipe down his arm and shave the area. Maybe he was just imagining things, but the spot seemed a little bit bigger than needed for the tattoo that he had in mind.

“While I have you here, I could pierce your nipples. It would be hot.” Gareth suggested as he set the razor aside.

Ash resisted the urge to cross his arms over his chest. “Nope, the nipple piercing will be for Eli.”

“Like hell it will.” Eli pointed his finger first at Ash, then at Gareth. “No one’s touching them with a needle, got it?”

Gareth shot his cousin an amused glance. “If I were you, I’d avoid any bets with this man in the near future or else you’re going to find yourself in my chair.”

“Aren’t you two amusing this morning?” Eli squeezed Ash’s hand and then stood up to rummage around on the shelf behind him. “Gareth, where’s that blindfold you told me you’d bring? I think we’re going to need it.”

“You aren’t serious.” Ash groaned, then shook his head as Gareth tossed Eli a black eye mask. “Okay, I guess you are.”

“It’s just to keep you from accidentally indulging in your natural nosiness.” Eli grinned, slipping the mask over Ash’s eyes. “I know you, you can’t help yourself.”

Ash settled back and tried to relax, which was a little difficult to do when he couldn’t see what was happening. He felt the paper being pressed against his arm and it confirmed his earlier suspicion that this tattoo was going to either be a really big version of the logo, or else it was going to involve something more. “So help me God, Elijah, you had better not be tattooing Wally on me. Do you hear me? There will be some serious consequences if I end up with that green muppet on my arm.”

He brought his hand up to his face to steal a peek and someone smacked his fingers. They weren’t gloved so it must’ve been Eli.

“Do I need to strap you down to my chair?” Gareth asked with laughter in his voice.

“No, that would only give Eli ideas.” Ash fidgeted in the chair and tried to relax. “How long is this going to take?”

“Behave yourself,” Eli said and took his hand. “Trust me, Georgia. I’m not going to give you something that you’ll hate.”

“Well when you put it like that...” Ash closed his eyes behind the mask and tried to relax. Between not being able to do anything and not being able to see he thought he would go out of his skin. Then Gareth began and Ash was too busy trying to follow the scratching of the needle to see if could figure out what was being inked on him. He thought that there might be some kind of lettering in there, but he wasn’t sure. As the scratchy burn spread to cover a good portion of his bicep Ash gave up trying to make sense of the pattern and listened to Gareth and Eli swap childhood memories instead.

After what seemed like hours the sound of the needle stopped. “How you doing, Ash, need a break?” Gareth asked.

“Nah, I’m good. Unless you plan on let me having a peek?”

“Not a chance,” Eli said and kissed Ash’s knuckles. “It’s looking good, by the way. I think you’re going to love it.”

“Just rub it in why don’t you?” Ash said. He couldn’t think of any way that he would love this tattoo. Unless somehow Gareth designed something that would incorporate both the Red Sox and the Braves together... no, that would only make him look confused.

The excitement in Eli’s voice was infectious, however. It was just so good to hear him relaxed and happy. Maybe that was Ash’s mistake this entire trip. He’d kept trying to bring up the proposal into a tense situation. No wonder Eli hadn’t wanted to talk last night, he must’ve sensed it wasn’t a normal kind of surprise. He had enough on his mind without worrying what Ash was up to. At this rate, if he wasn’t careful Eli would figure it out before he got down on one knee! He had to play this much cooler than he had been.

“Not too much longer now,” Gareth said as he started again. “Just need to do the shading. We’ll have that blindfold off in no time.”

The needles resumed their scratching to the buzzing hum of Gareth’s tattoo gun. It was almost hypnotic. His skin was more tender now, but it was bearable and after the first couple of passes it seemed to almost go numb again. Well at least the guys at the station would get a kick out his new ink. He’d have plenty of supporters for the Red Sox there.

After more endless minutes ticked by, the droning buzz stopped and wheels squeaked when Gareth shoved his chair back. “Come tell me what you think, Eli.”

Ash folded his hands together to keep from snatching off the blindfold as Eli got up. The suspense was killing him. “Oh wow,” Eli said in a stunned voice. “That’s perfect. It’s fucking perfect. Can he look now?”

The urge to see became almost unbearable. “Can I?” Ash demanded.

“Just a sec,” Gareth said and Ash muttered a curse under his breath. A moment later some more gunk was dabbed onto his skin and then an arm was helping him stand up. Ash reached to see who it was and felt Eli’s braid.

“If you take the blindfold off I can walk on my own you know,” Ash said as Eli maneuvered him around the close confines of the cubicle.

“I know, but I want you to see it all at once and I want to be able to see your face when you do.”

Was that a hint of uncertainty in Eli’s voice? What had he done? Ash was never going to challenge Eli over another bet again. This was it. Lord only knew what Eli would come up with as a counter bet if Ash suggested nipple piercing for Eli. Then they stopped moving and Eli let go of him. “Okay, you can take it off now.”

Ash ripped off the blindfold and stared at the tattoo in the mirror. It took a moment for what he was seeing to register. Instead of a circle and red socks with the distinctive, styled B there was the eagle, globe and anchor of the Marine Corps. Ash’s breath caught and he took a step closer to stare at the details, the individual feathers on the eagle, the grayscale shading in the globe, and the tips of the anchor looking sharp enough to stab somebody. Above were the initials U.S.M.C. and underneath in a banner was *Semper Fidelis*.

“Say something, Ash. What do you think? I know the bet was to get the winner’s team logo, but I thought that you shouldn’t have to get something permanent that you didn’t want.” Ash tore his eyes away from the tattoo to stare at Eli in the mirror. He looked so nervous, biting the corner of his lip and shifting from foot to foot. God, Ash loved him. And it all suddenly clicked and those stupid nagging worries that had kept him from speaking his mind fell away.

Ash turned to face him. “Marry me.”

Eli blinked, his mouth dropping open. “What?”

“Okay, this is coming out wrong.” Ash couldn’t believe he’d blurted it out like that, in a tattoo shop of all places. This was nothing like any of the romantic moments that Ash had painstakingly plotted out in his head. Yet, deep down, he knew this was the right time and the right place. There was no way he was backing down now. Ash shoved a hand in his pocket and pulled out the box with the ring.

“Ash.” Eli stared at the box and then at Ash, his eyes huge. It was like he’d taken on all of Ash’s nerves as he stood there staring, not saying anything else.

Ash grinned and went down on one knee. “Are you going to make me say it again, Doc? I know you can be a bit of a rebel and maybe you say you don’t

believe in permanency, but I don't really believe that. After all you do choose to live in the Granite State, among those mountains that have endured for so long."

He took Eli's hand, felt the trembling that Eli tried to conceal, the coolness in his fingertips. Yesterday, the reaction would've worried Ash, made him think that he was pushing too fast, but today he could see Eli's heart in his eyes, that vulnerability he only let show on rare occasions. Ash smiled again and flipped open the box.

"Ash." Eli seemed incapable of saying anything else as Ash took the ring out.

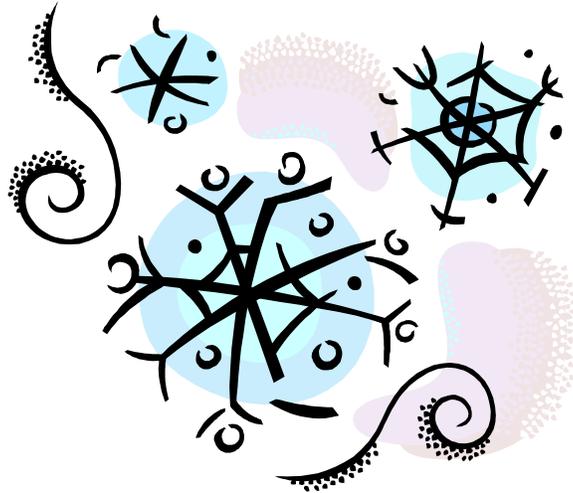
He slid the simple silver and black band on Eli's finger. It looked like it belonged there. It felt right. Eli's fingers tightened around Ash's hand. "Will you marry me, Eli?"

"This is your surprise?" Eli brought his other hand to his temple, still looking dazed. "I was convinced that you were thinking of adopting kids or something. I've been trying to think of a way to ask for more time if you brought it up."

"What?" Ash began laughing. No wonder Eli had looked so panicked last night. He should've recognized that expression. Eli got it often around kids, especially the twins who showed no hesitation in swarming all over him. "No, I'm not looking to do that anytime soon. I don't feel like sharing you yet."

A mixture of relief and happiness chased away the bewildered expression in Eli's eyes. "So what do you say?" Ash kissed Eli's fingers and shot him a look of appeal. "Are you going to leave me here down on my knee pining away for an answer?"

"Ash, there isn't a doubt in my mind." Eli smiled and bent down until his lips hovered over Ash's. "Yes. A thousand times yes."



## Chapter Eight

JABBERS leapt out of the truck cab and ran around it three times before coming to jump on both of Eli and Ash with excited barks. He'd picked up on the jubilant mood between them and was working hard on wearing himself out.

Eli looked down at his hand in the fading light and rubbed his thumb over the band. It was incredibly real. He still couldn't believe that Ash had surprised him that way. He'd never seen the proposal coming, though he had thought of marriage a couple of times. He was just still so happy that Ash had chosen to stay with him in New Hampshire instead of moving back south that he'd been content to have him there. Now that they were engaged, he knew he'd really wanted more. He wanted that final commitment as much as Ash did.

"That dog is going to be passed out before dinner time," Ash said, shutting the cab door as Jabbers tore off again.

“Not if Gareth brought his demon spawn.” Eli came around the side and took Ash’s hand. There was a little bit of flutters in his stomach over the idea of telling his parents, but not as many nerves as there would’ve been yesterday. It felt like tonight was a whole new start.

“Hey, that’s Lady Godiva to you,” Gareth said from the doorway and then braced himself as Jabbers barreled toward him. “It’ll be okay, they’ve sorta become friends.”

“Jabbers, down!” Eli said before the beagle could launch himself at Gareth. “Manners. Where are your manners? Down.”

Jabbers plopped his haunches down with a little whine of pure begging, excitement. “Hey there, buddy.” Gareth petted him. “Let me give you a word of advice, no chasing. If you knock Aunt Anita’s tree over she’ll banish you outside and it’s only going to make my girl lie in wait for you. She may be smaller, but she’ll win. And you’ll be sad if you’re missing all the fun.”

“Is Aunt Barbara here yet?” Eli asked as they joined Gareth.

“Yep, just got here. I wanted to make sure both of us were on hand for the announcement.”

“You didn’t say anything did you?” Ash asked with a quick glance at Eli. “We want it to be a surprise.”

“Hell no, though I suspect Ma knows something is up. I’m pretty transparent to her, but she won’t say anything. Hey, before we go in, I’ve got a present for you. I thought you should have something for the occasion.” Gareth went to his car and came back with a slim package that he handed Eli.

“You didn’t need to get us anything, Gareth.”

Ash nudged him with his elbow. “What are you waiting for? Open it.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Eli grinned. “Maybe we should put it under the tree and wait for Christmas. Anticipation and all that.”

“Fuck anticipation, Doc,” Ash said with an expression of pure exasperation. “I lost all patience with that last year.”

Eli laughed and tore off the plain wrapping. Inside was a framed photograph of Ash shirtless, on his knee at the tattoo shop and Eli leaning over to kiss him.

Eli's tongue froze as he stared. He hadn't even realized that Gareth had taken a picture. He'd captured the moment at just the right time.

"Oh wow, that's perfect." Ash leaned over to take a closer look and Eli handed him the picture. "No offense, but at the time I'd forgotten that you were in the room. Thanks, man, it's beautiful."

"Please no offense at all. Besides you two make a cute couple. I'm totally jealous."

Eli caught his cousin up in a fierce hug. He didn't say anything, with Gareth he never needed to. Gareth hugged him back and then gave him a light shove. "Come on, lovebirds, before they come out looking for us and think we're trying to avoid them."

The last thing Eli wanted tonight was anyone jumping to false assumptions. He'd been guilty of that too many times. If he kept an open mind instead of giving in to knee jerk reactions, he would at least feel more relaxed. Maybe that would rub off on his parents.

Ash set the picture in a safe spot inside the truck and they went inside hand and hand. The front hall was lit up with a warm glow from the lights scattered among the garland that arched over every doorway. The scent of roasting turkey and stuffing came from the kitchen and made Eli's stomach rumble. His mom came down the hallway as they came in and the anxiety in her eyes tightened her whole expression.

She approached and gave Ash and Gareth an apologetic little smile. "Do you two mind if I speak with Eli a moment?"

"No problem Aunt Anita." Gareth stuck Ash's coat in the closet and headed toward the living room. "Let's go lace the eggnog."

Ash paused long enough for Eli to give him a nod and then he called Jabbers to him and followed Gareth down the hall. Before Eli's mom could say anything he picked her up in a hug and spun her around. "I love you, Mom."

"Eli!" She clutched his shoulders, and as he set her back down, the anxiety eased from her expression. "You and Gareth spend too much time together."

"That's what Aunt Barbara said."

She reached up and framed his face in her hands. “Eli, I... We need to sit down and talk. Your dad wants to talk too. We both wanted to apologize.”

“It’s okay.” She looked so stricken that Eli hastened to reassure her. He took her hands and pressed them to his lips. “It’s okay, Mom. You’re right we do need to talk, all three of us and I think I’m ready. I’m not sure if I could’ve listened before and that’s not your fault. I am hard headed and I let Dad get to me as much as I get to him and it’s time it stopped.”

Her eyes lit up as she smiled. “Tonight then? After dinner when Gareth and Barb go home? We could talk then if that will work for you.”

“Yeah, I’d like that. You won’t mind if Ash joins us do you?” He wasn’t sure if Ash would, but since they were engaged, he wanted to ask.

“Well, I suppose, if you think you need the support, but I swear it’s not like we’re going to be coming down on you or anything.”

“It’s not that. I don’t want it to be an ‘us against you two’ kind of thing. He’s a part of me, so I want to give him the option of being included if he wants.” The more Eli thought about it though, the more he was sure that Ash would opt out and wait impatiently on the sidelines for an update. He wouldn’t want his presence to stop anyone from having their say. They’d already hindered themselves enough.

“I understand. I’m glad you brought Ash this year.” His mom smiled up at him. “I like him and I love how happy he makes you. I’ve been waiting a long time to see you this way with someone.”

“Anita, Eli, come on,” Aunt Barbara called down the hallway. “Gareth is breaking out the champagne early.”

“You tell him that’s for after dinner,” Eli’s mom called back. “If he drinks up all my champagne now he’s going to have to go to the store for me later.”

“Actually, let’s go have a glass. I feel like celebrating.” If Eli didn’t take his cousin’s not so subtle hint to make an announcement, Gareth would burst trying to hold onto the secret.

“Well it is Christmas. Our Christmas anyway, that’s more than enough reason to celebrate.”

When they reached the living room Eli found Jabbers sprawled out in front of the fireplace keeping a wary eye on Lady Godiva who had staked out territory beneath the tree. Ash was talking with Eli's dad as they picked through holiday CDs and Aunt Barbara was handing out the glasses of champagne that Gareth had poured.

His dad and Ash looked up as they came in and Ash winked at him. His dad looked at Eli's unbound hair and shook his head with a faint smile. "Gave up on the idea of scissors altogether?" He winced and a pained expression crossed his face as if he wished he could take the words back.

"What can I say; I'm afraid of what Ash would do if I dared cut it." Eli smiled at his dad and was warmed by his answering smile. It felt like they were taking tottering, uncertain baby steps, but still, steps forward just the same.

"That would be cruel thing to do, Doc. I love your hair the way it is." Ash came and took his hand. "Ready?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid if we don't say something soon Gareth will bounce through the ceiling." Eli took the glass of champagne that Gareth handed him and a flutter of excited anticipation had his blood racing. This was it. "Everybody, Ash and I have something we want to say. If we could have a moment of your time."

"You're doing it again," Ash said in a whisper and with a squeeze of his hand as Eli's family turned toward them. Aunt Barbara looked more than a little curious and she kept casting Gareth suspicious glances.

"Doing what?" Eli asked.

"Bouncing on your toes."

Eli planted his heels on the ground, battling a blush, and Ash chuckled. "What is it?" Eli's mom asked with a mystified look. "What has you both so worked up?"

"Well," Eli glanced at his fiancé and saw the same excitement in his green eyes that Eli felt himself. "Today Ash proposed and I accepted."

"And since I'm not one to be patient with the idea of a long engagement look for a wedding invite for this summer," Ash added. He lifted his glass to offer a toast when the room erupted in excited babbling and they were swarmed under by Eli's mom, Aunt Barbara and Gareth offering their congratulations. Jabbers

scrambled up, baying, and it took a bit before everyone calmed down enough to be heard.

Eli looked over at his dad who had remained by the CD player when everyone else had gathered around them. He wasn't looking at them and Eli couldn't read his expression. Eli's heart shrank into a tight ball. Not again. He didn't think it was asking too much, too soon to have his dad be a little happy for them. He tried to suppress the bitter emotion, not today, he wouldn't do this today. Despite his internal vow, he couldn't seem to stop himself from caring.

His dad stared down at the glass in his hand, then stepped forward and raised it. "I'd like to propose a toast," he said with a gruff voice, first meeting Eli's gaze, then Ash's as silence fell across the room. "To Eli and Ash, congratulations."

He paused and Eli held his breath, as hope sprang up, beautiful and terrible. His chest ached while he watched his dad struggle to find the words to say. He hadn't really believed his mom's excuse, that his dad had been nervous. He realized now that it had been the simple truth.

"I know we haven't agreed on just about everything, but this, this makes me happy. Ash, you've got yourself a good man. Eli, I'm proud of you. I always have been even if I haven't always showed it. And I see that you've found someone who fits you, just I'd found someone who fit me. You keep on taking care of each other."

Eli's eyes stung as he held out his own glass. His dad looked back at him, his gaze softer than Eli could remember and for a moment it was just the two of them in the room. A smile touched Eli's lips as he found his own voice. "Thank you, Dad."

"I think we can all drink to that," Ash said and took a sip of the champagne as the room erupted once again.

IT WAS late by the time they got back to the cabin, loaded down with presents, and still riding the high from the day. Ash swore that he'd lost some of his hearing when he'd called his sister Katie to give her the news. She'd shrieked loud enough

to break the sound barrier. He was half surprised that his mom and Melanie hadn't heard it all the way down in Georgia.

They set the packages on the table and Ash contemplated starting a fire as Jabbers came in to curl up on his bed. The beagle didn't waste any time. He laid his head on his paws and closed his eyes with a little sigh. Ash chuckled and rubbed his ears. "You wore yourself out, Jabbers my man."

"I need a few minutes to unwind." Eli poured himself a glass of wine and held up the bottle with a questioning glance at Ash. "Or else I'll never get to sleep."

Ash could use a little himself. It had been a good day, a long day and he wanted to ask Eli how his conversation had gone with his parents. "Yeah, I could use a glass."

Eli poured a second one and then headed out onto the porch. Ash swore the man must be half polar bear. The temperature had plunged over the course of the evening. Only Eli would find it relaxing to hang out on the porch on a night like this. Ash followed to where he stood by the railing and passed his hand down Eli's back over the fall of his hair.

"So, how'd it go?" He asked, accepting his wine glass and slipping an arm around Eli's shoulders.

"Good. It's a fresh start, something we've all needed. I think my parents and I have a new appreciation for each others' emotional state. And we've promised to keep working on it. It'll take time, and I'm sure we'll get prickly and defensive at times, as Mom would say, but I think we'll work through it." Eli took a sip of his wine. "This is very different from what I expected this visit to be like. I couldn't ask for anything more."

"Good." Ash moved his arm lower and slipped his hand into Eli's pocket for warmth. "So, what do you think of a small wedding, just family and our closest friends? We could have it behind the Hermitage." It was beautiful in the back yard, with its white birches and the view of the valley. "I don't really want anything fancy."

Eli leaned his head against Ash's. "Early summer before it gets too hot?"

“You’re not going to be able to talk me into having it any later.” Ash brushed his lips along Eli’s jaw as they looked out at the spill of blue light from the moon and the fanciful shadows it cast among the trees.

There was a cold crispness to the air and the scent of wood smoke reminded Ash of home. He couldn’t wait to get back to tell their friends and family in Amwich the news and to celebrate with them. He tipped his head back and drew in a deep breath. The sky was incredibly clear with a corona around the moon that looked like an icy halo.

“You know what would make this night perfect?” Ash asked, his breath steaming out. “A good snowfall. Then you’d sort of have snow for Christmas in Tennessee.”

“I think it’s perfect as it is.” Eli turned to him and kissed his lips. “I don’t need snow or anything else, all I want is you.”