

CROWN OF ROSES

Lost & Found

Uncle Bounce



---

# CROWN OF ROSES

---

Lost and Found



## **Crown of Roses:**

## **Lost & Found**

© 2017 Uncle Bounce

**All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from the author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. For permissions and inquiries contact:**

**Uncle Bounce  
P.O. Box 902  
Funkstown, Maryland 21734-0902  
[unclebounce@outlook.com](mailto:unclebounce@outlook.com)**

**Not currently available for print. Digital copies may be requested by the author or viewed at his Patreon page: <https://www.patreon.com/UncleBounce>**

**Cover stock art by [FreeDigitalPhotos.net](http://FreeDigitalPhotos.net) / Wagging Dog Media Limited**

### **NOTE TO READERS**

**This story is entirely fictional. Characters that exhibit similarities to other individuals, living, historical, or fantastical, are merely the result of coincidence.**

**This mature story depicts graphic sexual scenes, many of which are violent, some of which might include fetishistic, unconventional, or illegal activities. Acts of general violence, immorality, and cruelty also should be expected.**

**The author does not encourage any illegal behavior. Illegal activities that occur in this story are a byproduct of the nature of the fictitious characters and are not a reflection of the author's personal opinions.**

**With these warnings being declared, I, the author, thank my audience for supporting my work and hope you enjoy the following story.**

## Table of Contents

Prologue .....	1
Chapter One.....	6
Chapter Two.....	14
Chapter Three .....	26
Chapter Four .....	44
Chapter Five .....	59

## Prologue

“Hey, 'scuse me. Have yeh seen this boy, miss?” asked the peach festival security guard. A half-dozen swaths of sweat streaked down his chubby, whiskered face. Around him, hundreds of people meandered across a freshly cut field, bouncing back and forth between gaming booths adorned with too many colored lights.

Briasis sympathized with the security guard. It was early June in Georgia, and the crowd of people made the humid evening hot. Actually, the temperature was not too bad compared to the previous few summers, but it was enough to leave her sweaty and weakened. She was not a local, and Illyrian women handled heat worse than overweight men in long-sleeve uniforms.

She almost did not bother to look at the picture, for she was in the middle of her own very important search, a search that had been ongoing for quite a long time. However, with a passing glance, the corner of her eye caught just enough of the image to realize that the young boy in the picture was the same person whom she had sought for several years. Briasis snatched the photograph from the exhausted man's hand with a swipe that was too swift to be humanly natural, but the security guard was too tired to notice the abnormality.

It *was* him, the young Arch Prince of Illyria, who had been lost nearly five years ago. He was a newborn then, when she last saw him, but the mark was unmistakable. The infant five years ago and the child in the picture, both bore the House of O birth-mark in the bow of their upper lip, a small and subtle pigment discoloration in the shape of an “O,” which signified his relation to the greatest family in the galaxy. She knew that mark intimately, for it matched the one in the bow of her lip, too.

“Yes!” blurted Briasis without thinking. The excitement of finally finding the prince, after studying millions of children's faces in search of that tiny birthmark, was too much to suppress. “What is his name—his full name!”

The man stepped closer toward her to allow a group of women with baby strollers to squeeze behind him. It was the first night of the Georgia Peach Festival, and the event was packed. He smiled sheepishly when he realized how close he had moved his chest to Briasis’. “Uhm... his name? X... Xa... a'min.” The man fumbled in his shirt pocket as he spoke. “So where did yeh see him, miss?”

Briasis rubbed her thumb across the face of the boy in the picture, a subtle gesture wrought by her concern for him. She then handed back the photograph and melted her exuberance into a gentle smile. “Not here, I am sorry. Although, he is familiar to me, so I am certain I have met him or his family before. Do you know the rest of his name? Has something happened to him?” She held her breath while she waited for the answer.

The guard removed a small notepad from his breast pocket, flipped it open, and read the boy's name from inside. “Yeh, it's Xavier. Xavier Alexander Steele—a big name for a little fella, ain't it? They said he accidentally knocked over a food stand then runned off when his dad started yellin' at him. We got'ta find him; we don't want'a see this turn into an Adam situation er anythin'. There's a lot of people here, and he's been without his folks for about twenty—nah—thirty minutes now.”

Briasis thought, *‘Yes, he has been without his family for far too long.’* The human man had no idea how the child was in grave danger. She *had* to find him before Malosa.

She disengaged from the conversation quickly but promised to notify the security staff if she spotted the child. As soon as the man turned his attention away, she slipped through the

throng of people and ran as fast as could still be considered humanly possible.

Young Xavier Steele watched the grand festival from his perch up in a mimosa tree. Even though he had run away nearly two hours ago, his heart had only recently stopped racing. Now that he felt safe in the tree, he was determined to not leave it. The sun had finished setting a few minutes earlier, and the fairgrounds had become dark and scary in the absence of the sunlight. Plenty of people were around, but most were far away in the fairways; he was in the field where everyone parked their cars.

He knew he should return, but, at that point, he did not know where to go or with whom to speak. Besides, he still did not want to get in trouble for knocking over the table. His father hated whenever he misbehaved in front of others, especially when he did things that other boys could not do. His father was no doubt furious with him, now, so the tree was the safest place for him to be. Besides, it was fun sitting above everyone and watching them at a distance.

Several people straggled in and out of the nearby parking area, but the masses roamed a couple hundred yards away, sauntering about like herds of cattle in corrals made of rainbow lights. He saw everything from his perch, everything but his mother. Until he spotted her, he decided to remain in the tree and watch the lights and grazing herds of people.

“Lisa!” A man shouted from a truck parked five rows to the side of Xavier’s tree. “It’s gonna be closed. Piss there. C’mon!” The woman at whom the man yelled was meandering toward one of the portable toilets that had been placed around the festival. She stopped, grabbed her belly and groaned, and then turned away from the toilet and trotted to her caller.

Xavier sat still as a statue while the man and woman started their vehicle and drove out of the field-turned-parking-lot. They were not the only ones nearby. On the other side of him, far away but close enough for him to hear, two adults sat in their car’s rear seat and hugged and kissed. They had been clinging to each other for a long time and did not look like they would stop anytime soon. Passed the two huggers, a man and wife were leaving with their two children, but they were too distant to possibly notice him. And then there was the lost, pretty lady....

Nearly a hundred yards away from Xavier, in the direction of the festival, a pretty woman walked up and down the rows of cars. Something about her seemed special to him; she seemed familiar. He could have sworn he had dreamed about her not too long ago. Was she the same woman who frequented his imagination, or did she only look similar to her? The boy was not sure, but he knew he liked her, even from a distance.

While Xavier debated the possibility that she might have something to do with the pretty lady in his dreams, he watched her stride purposefully up and down the aisles of vehicles and gradually work her way near to him. She was searching for something and seemed to be confused about which direction may lead to it. When she reached the point of only a dozen or so yards away, he slowed his breaths and stilled, so he would not be discovered.

His efforts did not help him.

Xavier had not moved a muscle or even blinked, but the woman spun abruptly and looked up at him, as if she were following an invisible string straight to his location. The woman's eyes broadened, and her lips curved into a giant smile. She stepped closer and raised her voice to cover the distance.

“You like the view.”

Her statement did not sound like a question, but Xavier assumed it was. He nodded and pointed toward the distant congregation of people. “Yeh. It's like cows in the field. I count

them. I look for features that—uh—makes them different and—uh—and remember them. I watch for them to reappear again.”

“Oh? That is a lot to remember, and those are large words for a boy your age—spoken well. I am impressed.” The woman stepped close to the base of the tree and stared upward. Her eyes did not leave him, not even for a second. It took all her well-trained discipline to not scream in joy and immediately snatch him into her arms.

Xavier should have been nervous to have a strange adult so interested in him, but he was not. With typical childhood trust, he immediately liked her and assumed she must be a good person because she possessed a warm smile. When she held her arms out, he climbed down and let her pull him off the lowest branch. She held him close and turned toward the faire, finally peering toward where he had pointed.

She had huge boobs, which felt comforting next to him, and a huger smile, which felt even more comforting. Her familiarity continued to puzzle him. Her face matched the face of the woman in his dreams, especially her broad smile. She smelled familiar, too. He liked how ladies smelled, especially this one.

The dark-haired woman exuded a relaxed sigh and said, “Xavier Steele, I am *immensely* glad to finally have found you.”

“I’ve been hiding a long time. Hours.”

“Hours? Oh, much longer than hours. Xavier? You could not fathom how many people have been searching for you... or for how long.”

He was confused by what she said. He knew he had run away only a couple hours ago, so how could people have been looking for him longer than that? Before he could ask her about the people searching for him, she kissed his forehead and began walking back toward the faire.

She carried him all the way to his parents. His father was irate, but he could not show too much of his temper in front of her and the security. Through her conversation with his parents, Xavier learned her name: Briasis.

He said only one other thing to her that night. “I like your name.” He had wanted to say something, anything, to catch her attention before she left, and it worked.

Briasis squatted down to where he stood between his parents and gave him one last kiss on the cheek. She smelled so good that it made him feel bad inside to leave her, but, eventually, he was forced away by his parents and taken home. He dreamed about her that night, just like he had several times before. He missed her without understanding why.

Later that night, Briasis stood in the middle of a COM ring, which maintained a connection to the Illyrian Empire’s capital on the adjacent side of the galaxy: her home. The ring in which she stood was embedded into the floor and routed through a Ralta-5 Stargazer system—the technology was small and outdated by House O standards—but it functioned well enough for what she needed. She was grateful to have even found one of the old Illyrian watchtowers that her people routinely hid on various planets. If it were not for her people’s foresight in that regard, she would have been completely isolated since her crash.

“I found your son, my divine lord. He is alive and well. He has been adopted by a pair of coupled humans who are raising him as one of their children.”

A mighty male voice responded from a neighboring COM circle two feet away. Both circles, the one she now stood in and the one nearby, were inlaid identically into the ground, each with a three-yard diameter. Inside the adjacent ring, a holographic caricature of the Divine Overlord stood with weary eyes and crossed arms. Though busy and burdened with many



stressful responsibilities, the Illyrian emperor's stern face warmed with a smile, something Briasis had not seen on him in five years, not since his son became lost.

The Overlord asked her dozens of questions about his son, and she answered each of them as fully and honestly as possible. She then asked for instructions on how she should extract him and return home. He pondered her request for several minutes in absolute silence; she did not dare interrupt his thoughts. Finally, the Overlord's hologram clapped its incorporeal hands together, parroting the actions of the real man far away. The loud crack refreshed Briasis' attention.

"Currently," began the emperor with a steady, low-toned pace, "We lack the resources and ability to safely retrieve the two of you. Certain information has been withheld since you first contacted us, for the knowledge served you no benefit. Circumstances have changed, so now, you should know: the Strygian uprising continues."

Briasis swallowed a gasp and did not interrupt.

"Information we have recently collected suggests they have invested heavily in assassins and mercenaries to find and kill my son.

"We cannot risk bringing him across the galaxy on ship, not without a full entourage; none of the boundaries are reliably safe. Too many traitors have been discovered inside the empire. Unfortunately, our exsolar COM relays are sabotaged too frequently to establish layer-three netting with anywhere beyond the near systems. Your watchtower is far too old to be trusted in these conditions; we are fortunate to have achieved this poor layer-two braid.

"Therefore, until recovering him is safe, our options are limited, and discretion becomes our highest priority. You shall report only to me and mine. With unknown traitors in our midst, no one else can be trusted. You will establish an alias and insert yourself into his human life *without* disclosing the truth to anyone, not even the Arch Prince. Stay close and guard him. You may interact with him and take part in his natural routine, but you should not affect, interfere, or draw unnecessary attention to his life... unless there is a present *and* immediate threat to his survival. The humans, the couple who adopted him, may provide the best protection for him at the moment: obscurity. Human-Four is populated with billions of humans, correct? Thus, finding him will be difficult. Until we purge the rest of our hidden traitors, he may even be safer there than here.

"I shall send another to assist you with warding him—someone I can be certain is loyal—as soon as I can secret her away without detection. I wish I could see him... but I know I cannot.

"Briasis, it is imperative that his disguise is not ruined before we are prepared for immediate recovery. If others, or the humans, or even he happen to discover his true identity and ruin his cloak of obscurity, we shall have no means of properly ensuring his safety. Restrain yourself at all times. Passive observation and ineffectual interactions only.

"The Confederation depends on your success, so does our house. So do I. I know you will not fail."

Briasis hid her concern behind the unflinching mask of a soldier's obligation. She wanted to return home. She did not want to be the only one responsible for keeping safe the heir to the House of O and the Illyrian Empire. She wanted to argue the risks of staying versus traveling, but her wants were irrelevant. The Overlord possessed more information and better advisors than she, so if he felt it safer letting his son live a false life as a human rather than his real one, his decision must be best. The Eternal Emperor was no fool.

"Understood, Magnate. Do not worry. I shall do as you direct and keep safe our dynast until the house is ready to receive him."

Briasis hesitated momentarily then let her domestic self slip out from behind her military façade. “Father... I miss everyone.”

The emperor terminated the COM link just before her parting words had been received. The Overlord was a busy man.

Briasis took the brisk dismissal in stride and immediately set to work developing her alias.

## Chapter One

“Okay X, we're ready. Xavier? Xavier!”

Xavier started with a jump, shoved off the banister on which he had been leaning, and straightened to his full seventy-three-inch height. He had grown into a tough adolescent with ear-length medium-brown hair and dazzling eyes bluer than the Mediterranean Sea. Olivia stood beside him with her arm outstretched. While her right hand waited in the air for his, her left found its way to the side of her barely curved hips. Her left pinkie-finger tapped impatiently against the waistband of her pleated tartan skirt. She was still dressed in her private school attire, which consisted of a white button-up blouse, a tan and dark-golden-brown plaid skirt, a pair of knee high socks, and a brown single-breasted vest.

Xavier had grown into a remarkably handsome and kind young man, but, despite his many good qualities, Olivia was his only friend. He was never allowed time for socialization, and he remained distant from the boys and girls at his school for... numerous reasons. Olivia, on the other hand, was not only a classmate, she was also a neighbor. She won his friendship through relentless, around-the-clock perseverance. Even Xavier's father, who forbade his son any social interaction with anyone outside the home, could not prevent a relationship with the headstrong Olivia Kelly.

Olivia lived in the two-story farmhouse where he now stood, which sat off to the east side of the property that was officially called the Kelly Equestrian Center and Greenhouse. The Equestrian Center was owned by the Kelly family: Brittany Kelly, the eldest of two sisters and owner of the farm; and Olivia Kelly, the blue-green eyed, gold-blonde haired girl who followed him around more doggedly than his own little sister. Brittany had bought the farm when he was six years old, and her equestrian center had become a sanctuary for him whenever he wanted an escape from his miserable life of unyielding drudgery.

Liv, as he knew Olivia, and he had been near-constant companions for eight years. She moved in to live with her older sister in the last quarter of the year 2002, when he was seven, which could not have been a better timed arrival for him. His seventh year was a particularly dark time in his life, for that was the year his mother passed away. Olivia's companionship had been the only thing that saved him from a much grimmer fate.

He liked her since the first day they met. Initially, when they met, she was so shy and intimidated that she did nothing but stand behind her sister and stare at him as if farm-boys were something she had never before seen. She remained that way for a week or so, but then, one day, she finally relaxed enough to speak. Soon thereafter, they became fast friends. They attended the same private school, and each day since that first awkward week, the two walked together to and from the Augusta Academy of Excellence. They were close as any neighbors could become. They had even been caught playing “doctor” a few times through the years. However, all those interactions mostly happened at the Kelly farm, at school, or somewhere secluded in the woods and fields between those places. He tried to keep her away from his household as often as was possible. He never explained why he did not want her at his home, and she kept secret her suspicions.

“Hmm? Where are we going?” Xavier put his hand into hers, content to let himself be drug away to whatever she had planned. Today was an especially bad day for him. It was his birthday—specifically, his sixteenth birthday—and birthdays, for him, always were a misery to endure. Unfortunately, so were most of his other days, too. Xavier was not a fortunate child.

Liv glanced over the banister of her porch toward where he had been leering. She tracked his gaze to the indoor riding ring, where the open doors gave a clear view of the people inside. She found what she suspected: Rachel Gambetta, the light beige-blond haired, rich, and spoiled cheerleader from their school. Her family was active members of the dressage and jumping communities, too.

Most of the students at their school were rich, but Rachel was especially proud of her economic status and never hesitated to flaunt her wealth at her less fortunate peers, like Xavier. She was the most desired girl in her grade and one of the top five of the entire school, but she only rocketed up through the ranks of popularity because she happened to develop early and well. Compared to the adolescent girls at the academy, she was voluptuously unrivaled by all but a select few other female student “stars.” Olivia, who was small-chested and only barely curved in any way, despised Rachel and the rest of the well-off female students. Xavier, however, had been infatuated with Rachel since fourth grade, since long before her pubescent growth, which only made Olivia hate her all the more.

Olivia scoffed when she spotted Rachel and shook her head. “Why’d I even bother looking? Nothing else would put you in a trance. You need help, X.”

Xavier shrugged away her subtle barb and nodded toward the house, reminding her that she was supposed to lead him someplace. After being prompted, Olivia spun away from Rachel’s direction and led him inside.

The front door opened to a set of stairs paralleled by a hallway that stretched from the front to the back of the house. A pair of open doorways sandwiched each side of the bottom of the stairs; the right doorway led to the kitchen, and the left led into the living room. Olivia took him into the kitchen, through it, then back outside by way of another exterior door, and finally onto a different side of the porch. The greenhouse stood on this side of the farmhouse.

The two walked into the greenhouse and waited as Brittany finished with a customer. The place was a small, fifty- by thirty-foot insulated building with a rounded glass ceiling. Rows of flowering plants and herbs of all sorts filled the place to the brim, leaving only narrow aisles in which to walk.

All the scents flooded Xavier’s nostrils at once, filling him with a delightful stew of floral fragrances. The aromatic assault was unlike anything a human could imagine. He possessed a keen sense of smell—well, all his senses were unusually keen. In fact, his olfactory ability was his most limited of senses. Nonetheless, he could smell some blooms fifty feet away despite being separated by hundreds of other, closer, stronger-scented flowers. If he focused, he could have also seen with crystalline clarity the individual droplets of moisture on its leaves, but his supernatural sight was instead preoccupied with a search for the panty-lines of the Kelly sisters. He was an adolescent man, after all.

His abnormal senses were just a few of the monstrosities that he kept secret from the world. He had never been normal, but a lifetime of forced acting made him great at appearing as if he were. Even Liv did not know about his unnatural capabilities; he was not certain how, but, somehow, she remained oblivious despite several accidents occurring right in front of her. Of course, he worked hard to cover up those accidents and keep secret his nature.

Hiding his abnormalities was not easy for him, for every one of his actions had to be consciously restrained when around others, which was why he was a loner by nature. He was unnaturally strong, fast, intelligent, and blessed—cursed?—with amazing senses. He also possessed some physical... abnormalities. Those physical differences were subtle but, sometimes, the most difficult to keep secret. He always needed to be extra careful when around

others. Slip-ups and miscalculations could result in being found out or, worse yet, with injury to one of the humans. He would never forget the day when, as a child, he hugged a puppy too tightly.... The endless self-monitoring was exhausting but necessary.

After the greenhouse customer left with a tray of herbs, Brittany turned her big, delightful smile onto him. Her smile always affected him in some way, even on his darkest days. Usually it coaxed his lips into smiling, too, but, at the least, it made his heart beat faster. She appeared to be in her early twenties, and she always dressed in synergistic ensembles that looked especially good as a package. She did not dress fancifully all the time like Rachel or the other elitist girls at the academy, but she always looked composed and elegant, yet sexy and alluring as hell, a casually glamorous style the girls his age had not yet mastered. His female peers only knew how to don the latest trends and showcase the most expensive, flamboyant, or slutty designer products, and they did not know how to arrange the pieces together into a composite ensemble capable of myriad expressions. Brittany did, and, every day, no matter the price of what she wore, her attire aligned with her natural serenity and created a unique, greatly appealing presentation. Of course, the fact that she carried a massive set of G-cup breasts on her chest, and was not afraid to show cleavage with her daily ware, had made her even more attractive to him, especially in the recent years. However, her sexuality, which often was far more revealing than what the other rural women thought was appropriate, was tempered by her undeniable gentility, as if she were born with an innate, exotic grace that none of the other local women possessed.

“Xavier,” greeted Brittany with open arms. He took advantage of the opportunity to hug her—what guy would not? She squeezed him tight and kissed his cheek. “Happy birthday.” After releasing him, she fetched two packages from below the counter.

The packages were wrapped in birthday paper. One was a large rectangular cuboid that occupied the majority of the counter, but the other was not much larger than a shoe-box. She nudged the large one toward Olivia then offered Xavier the small one. He groaned a bit but could not resist smiling while in her presence.

The Kelly sisters did the same thing every holiday; each gave him a gift, usually very nice gifts. They were the only gifts he ever expected to receive from anyone, which made them bittersweet. On one hand, he loved receiving their presents, but on the other, they felt like pity-gifts and reminded him how his unfortunate circumstances were obvious. He hated thinking that others knew he suffered more than he hated the things that actually made him suffer.

“Thanks, Brie.”

He tore open the wrapping and opened the box. Four weapons were inside: two pairs of twenty-two-inch sais. The first pair was a black-coated steel set with blue handles and broad tips, and the second was a natural-looking high-carbon-and-steel alloy set of superb quality with blue handles and deadly, pointed tips. A set of maintenance supplies lay in the very bottom of the box.

It was a thoughtful gift, as usual, and no doubt expensive; the second set was handmade. He liked martial arts, and the sai was an unrivaled favorite of his, seconded by nunchakus and “thirded” by the bo. He had been self-teaching each of them for several years.

*‘Liv must have spotted me practicing with my cheapo aluminum set and told Brie,’* thought Xavier. It was normal for them to be so interested in him; though, he never understood why. No one else in the world cared, so why should neighbors from a mile away? Whatever their reasons, he would never refuse their kind considerations.

Xavier handled the sais a bit and thanked Brittany again. She offered another hug, and he accepted.

Liv's large present came next. It turned out to be a modern tipi-style conical tent set, another gift well-suited to his interests. However, this interest was known to all who spent even a fleeting amount of time near him. He loved the outdoors and general survival culture: camping, climbing, trekking, hunting, scavenging and foraging, and, especially, the American Indian culture. He often disappeared into the nearby woods and spent the night with just blankets and, if he felt luxurious, string to support blanket-made shelters.

The generosity of the Kelly sisters moved him in a way he dared not show. Instead, he smiled, laughed, and lavished them with praise for their kindness. "I'm going to sleep in the woods tonight—test this thing out—want to come, Liv? Can she?" The last question was directed toward Brittany. Even though Brittany was only Olivia's sister, she had raised her like a parent. Their parents died years ago, leaving a younger Olivia dependent on a young Brittany. Xavier had never pressed them for details, for he knew how painful such details could be.

Liv and Brittany both nodded. Brie began collecting the shredded wrapping paper. "Of course, Xavier—it *is* your birthday—just try not to venture too far away... or get into trouble with your father."

His father, Jacob, was an abusive man who hated Xavier for being abnormal...among other reasons. When Xavier was a young child, he merely annoyed his father. Shortly prior to his mother's death, which happened when he was seven, his father's annoyance had turned into alcoholism and pure hatred. Only because he and Xavier lived on a farm in the middle of nowhere did the abusive environment go undetected and unabashed. Even there, some of the neighbors and groups within the small localized community had suspicions, and a few, like the Kelly sisters, shared an unspoken, sympathetic acknowledgment of his unpleasant state. No one knew the true extent of the situation, though. Most believed his father was merely hateful and unloving, verbally but not physically abusive—they hoped. Xavier worked extra hard to keep the truth from them; he did not like showing weakness, especially not to girls he wished to impress.

"Okay. I have to bring the cows in and feed and milk them, and I have to rotate the bulls into the other pens, and I have to feed and milk and migrate the sheep and goats—oh!—and I have to un-kennel the dogs and feed the chickens...and—uh—make sure Wendy has something to eat... *then* I'll be done for the evening and we can go."

The three chuckled, for his schedule was normally full with too much work.

The Steelemour Ranch, his home, raised cows, sheep, and goats primarily for milk, meat, and byproducts, though they supplemented the work with chickens and pedigree breeding of Rough Collies and German Shepherds. They also farmed their flat fields in careful spring-summer and fall-winter rotations to produce alfalfa and oats, as well as high quality mixed-seed cover grazing. His mother was the one who started the dog-breeding venture, and, despite his father's disinterest in it, Xavier refused to let her business fail. Indeed, he refused to let any of the farming business fail. If it were not for Xavier, the Steele farm would have likely fallen bankrupt years ago, especially since Jacob had descended deeper into alcohol addiction. Instead, Xavier, and his inhuman advantages, provided immense labor without any cost, allowing the farm to flourish when it should not.

Olivia avoided Xavier whenever it was butcher time at the Steele farm, but she loved helping him with the dogs, especially the puppies. "Where are the boys?" She was asking about Xavier's favored dogs, who usually followed him everywhere. "Oh, hey!—has Gambit's litter opened their eyes yet?"

"No, not yet, should be soon. Haven't been home since school, so Gambit and Valiant are

probably waiting and wondering where I'm at. Kismet's breeding in the run; I have to let him out." All three of his personal canine companions were male. Kismet was his premiere German Shepherd stud, and Valiant, a fourteen-month old adolescent, was one of Kismet's get. Gambit was the premiere Rough Collie stud and the eldest of the trio. Xavier needed to find him a suitable successor; he hoped one of the dogs in the recent litter would stand out for the job.

Xavier spoke with the Kelly sisters a bit longer then led Olivia back onto the front porch, where they chatted more while he shot discreet glances toward Rachel. She patiently waited through his distractions and did not say any of the nasty thoughts that stewed inside her. After another thirty minutes or so, he bid farewell and carried his presents home.

While Xavier's residential address was the Steelemour Ranch, his actual home was restricted to the loft of the Steelemour's "utility barn," where they stored tools and sometimes performed maintenance on vehicles. In fact, he was not allowed in the house except for toilet access, laundering, and eating, and those concessions were permitted only because he was expected to feed and care for Wendy, his younger sister, in the process. His banishment would sound horrible to most other people, but, for Xavier, such expectations were normal. He had become accustomed to the arrangement and grown to believe his segregation was for everyone's best.

His "room," the fore-bay of the second floor, was fairly spacious, but that was one of its few luxuries. It contained a large set of double doors that served as a full-length viewing window overlooking the farmhouse and western fields, an extended single bed, a desk, a full-length standing mirror, a standing wardrobe cabinet, a chest at the foot of the bed, and several repurposed chairs recycled from wooden crates, buckets, and barrels. The bay window was the room's most prized feature, for it allowed him to gaze—gaze at the house, the fields, the animals, or the stars—a favorite evening pastime of his, whenever he was not working or off in the woods.

He did not own a computer, cellular phone, or television, so his free time was spent gazing, studying, reading, practicing martial arts, playing chess, or peering at the stars with his telescope. His fourteen-year old sister used to visit frequently and follow him around, but, lately, her visits had become scarcer and only when she needed something. That and a lot of work comprised the whole of his private life. His public life consisted only of school, where he had no friends, and visits to the Kelly farm. He was not allowed to participate in extra-curricular activities, visit friends, go to town unless it was for business, or even go to the doctor. Hell—he was not even supposed to visit the Kelly's or sneak off into the forest, and he was punished when caught doing so.

Part of him understood the need for isolation. He knew he was not normal, so did his father and sister. He was not human, and his father knew he was dangerous. Although the issue was never discussed openly with Wendy, his sister had witnessed too many inexplicable, inhuman feats to remain devoid of suspicion. She did not know the truth, but she knew an unusual truth existed. No human teenager could run as fast as a major league fastball or dead-lift a six-hundred pound tractor wheel off the ground and carry it across a field. Xavier could. Of course, his parents had always been aware of his more apparent abnormalities since he was a small child, but he hoped Wendy remained ignorant of them.

His inhuman capabilities were obvious even as a child but, as the years passed, the gap between human and Xavier widened farther. Such advantages might have seemed dreamy to many, but, to Xavier, they were just causes for misery. The above-human capabilities were why he had grown up isolated from everyone. They were why he accidentally killed or broke things.

They were why he was relegated to being the sole worker of the family ranch. They were why he could not have friends, play sports with others, or do anything that provided enjoyment. They were why his father hated him. Thus, for all those reasons and more, it was best for everyone, including himself, if he remained isolated and segregated, or so he believed. The less time he spent with others, the less he, or his father or sister, had to think about how he was different. So, he kept to himself in his loft in the barn, separate from his own family.

Xavier hid the new sais under his bed, where he kept his nunchakus, bo staff, and adult magazines, and tossed the satchel containing his tent against the wall. He changed out of his school uniform, which consisted of a pair of formal tan slacks, a white button-up shirt, a tan and dark-golden-brown tie, and a brown jacket. He replaced his school clothes with his best pair of ragged jeans and tank-top. Except for his school attire, Xavier's clothing was always bought second-hand and usually frayed in more than one spot. They were sufficient for ranch work, though.

He set to doing the chores that had to be completed every evening on the farm, which would have taken a normal man several hours. He also checked the recently bore litter of Collie puppies and released his three canine companions: Gambit, Kismet, and Valiant. The dogs followed him everywhere as he worked; indeed, they even helped him work, for he had trained them to be superb work animals. However, they shared a bond that went beyond mere labor.

Xavier tried not to rush through the chores, but he was anxious to retreat into the woods and set up his new tent. The dogs seemed excited, too, as if they somehow knew they would be spending the night in the wilderness.

An hour after sunset, Xavier met Olivia at the Kelly farm. Gambit, Kismet, and Valiant accompanied him. She had changed into a pair of fuchsia-pink denim jeans, black sneakers, and a black cotton camisole. She brought her own bundle of sleepwear, which included a sleeping bag, a small pillow, and a sheet. Xavier carried the tipi, a jug of iced sweet tea, and a rolled blanket for himself.

The two trekked out through the fields, passed Catfish Cross, the large pond in his family's Northwest Meadow, and north into the near forest. He knew those woods as he knew his farm. They were where he went to exercise, relax, and be himself without others watching. He gave Olivia a flashlight, so she would not trip on any fallen debris. He used a flashlight, too, but only so she would not suspect anything strange about him. He could see perfectly fine by faint starlight.

They set up camp deep in the forest, over a mile from either family's farms, in a clearing where the trees were far enough apart that the canopy opened and made visible the sky. The place was his second favorite refuge in which to relax whenever he needed to escape the unpleasantness of his routines. At least one or two nights per month were spent at his secret clearing in the northern forest, sometimes many more, and Olivia frequently joined him, when she was invited. The area had been cleared, cleaned, and claimed by Xavier, so it was clearly his and not theirs. However, she was always welcomed by him and had invested many hours there alongside her neighbor. It was their private hangout. Not long ago, they built a permanent stone circle with a homemade cooking tripod and rotisserie pole. Now, his new tipi would become another permanent feature of the clearing.

Xavier put up the tent, which took longer than he expected but only because it was the first time doing so. Olivia did not hesitate to help. She was never afraid to jump right in and help with physical tasks if he asked, like a typical farm girl. However, unlike a stereotypical



farm girl, she was quite lazy and loved watching television. The only time she agreed to work was when he needed help; she did not help Brittany as much as Xavier thought she should, not even close.

She took a bucket to the nearby river and filled it with water, and he gathered wood and started a fire. While she was away, he moved at speeds beyond human potential, so the fire was fully ablaze and crackling merrily by the time she returned with the bucket.

Once finished preparing the area, the two sat side-by-side next to the campfire and shared the jug of tea. Over the rest of the evening, each kept the other company, and the dogs played about them as they spoke.

Valiant was a great source of amusement. The older pup seemed to enjoy being their source of amusement, too. He was, by far, the least trained of the canine trio, and he still liked to challenge Xavier's authority whenever Olivia was around to praise him. She loved the Steele's many dogs, especially their puppies, but she was not a responsible animal handler. She could not resist spoiling the animals at every opportunity, and Valiant enjoyed performing for her attention.

After the fire burned itself low several times, Xavier laid a hefty log into the center of the embers, and the pair then retired into the tent. Inside, they took turns singing to, and with, each other and inventing ghost stories. Eventually, they fell asleep snuggled close together.

The Ralta Stargazer COM system vibrated with unstable life, filling the vacant interior of the underground watchtower with an abnormally loud hum. Briasis stood in the center of the local communication ring; the opposite ring lay still and lifeless. In the ten years since she first reported Xavier's discovery from the same circle and watchtower, the place had been ruined by a fierce battle between her and Malosa. For the majority of the previous decade, she had been operating without any guidance from her home.

"I am not sure if these reports are reaching the house, but this will be the last message, at least for a time. For years now, we have been left here without contact and guidance, and I have done all I can to rectify the problem. The quantum whip seems to be functioning properly, but for some unknown reason, I have not yet been able to initiate a transpositional chain. Most of the field-projectors remain broken from the battle with the *pyxian*, so I can only receive audio output from the Ralta control system. Everything else has been repaired to the best of my ability. I was never mechanically inclined... which you know. The remaining repairs are beyond me; I have done all I am able to do to reach you.

"As for my patrician, I have been watching Xavier closely, and I have tried to discern the cause of his pervasive misery. Jacob Steele is obviously a poor substitute for real family. From what I have heard, Jacob is rude, mean, and sometimes degrading to Xavier. However, I do not feel that alone is enough to justify Xavier's melancholy. Something else must be behind his sour moods.

"He *is* demonstrating strong attractions to females, so he *has* entered the age of manifestation. However, he has not exhibited any signs of growing pains. Either he is suffering them behind an unflinching facade, or he will not finish manifesting for many more months, which will push back his manifestation point near to seventeen. ...I suppose we are fortunate he is developing late considering our separation from home.

"When the manifestation process does finally begin, continuing this arrangement will be all but impossible. I remember and obey your last orders, Magnate, but continuing them may not be feasible in the near future. I fear how he will react when the truth is revealed. He has been kept in the dark far too long—ahm—not that it is my place to question your decisions! He is

your son, of course.

“I shall not send another report without significant cause, but I shall keep the COM receivers open and frequently check for inbound messages. I hope to hear from someone, soon.”

## Chapter Two

Xavier strummed his fingers on the desk and stared at the clock as its arm crept toward dismissal. It was the last day of school for the year, and it felt like it was never going to end.

He had a headache, and his groin ached as if he had pulled a muscle, even though he had not. His episodes of inexplicable pain, which had been happening occasionally for nearly three months now, were becoming unbearable. He also suffered a semi-erection that refused to go away, which did not help the time pass any more easily.

He blamed the erection on Sister Anna, the youngest, hottest teacher of the entire academy, and, since the building's air conditioner had stopped working earlier in the day, she had removed her veil and scapular. That left her in a sleeveless dress, which normally was long-sleeved. The order of ladies working with the academy did not normally wear a traditional dress with habit, but they did maintain a modified traditional dress code when performing school-related functions. They dressed casually in their off time, but it was rare to see one of the nuns in casual clothing while inside the academy classrooms, which is why she was especially distracting for the boys.

Everyone in class could see the outline of Sister Anna's bra through her damp dress, and Xavier saw much more than they. In fact, several brief moments passed when he swore he could see the outline of her nipples—and more! Of course, he was letting his imagination run wild to pass the time, so maybe what he saw had more to do with wishful thinking than clothing. His eyes had not left her chest for nearly five straight minutes.

“And, Mr. Steele, do you like them?” asked the twenty-four-year old nun.

Xavier tensed like a cat on the edge of a bathtub. He had no idea what the class had been discussing, but he was fairly certain it was not her nipples. Her face gave no helpful clues, either. Actually, her ornery smirk and raised eyebrow suggested she *might* have been referring to her chest, if she were not a nun. ‘*Perhaps, she caught me leering and is making a point?*’ Looking around, Xavier noted how the other students did not seem especially amused, so his staring could not have been too obvious. ‘*What a relief!*’

“Uhhh,” stalled Xavier. He was about to apologize and confess that he had been daydreaming, when a strange feeling enveloped him. It was a wave of pure confidence, flowing up from the sickly parts of his lower belly. Suddenly, he was not intimidated by the nun, the school, social pressures, or any system of authority. The next thing he knew, he was grinning and saying what, normally, he would have only thought, “Yeh, I do. They're lovely, Sister.”

“Can you tell me what we're talking about?”

At that point, a couple of the other students realized he had been caught unaware and began snickering. Sister Anna readjusted her eyeglasses and, while doing so, wiggled them a few times.

Xavier smirked and thought, ‘*Yes, Sister, I know. I should be looking up there. You caught me... thanks for the public shaming.*’

“I'm not sure what the class was talking about, but I was referring to your pretty eyes.”

Anna paused, slightly taken aback by his sudden boldness. Xavier had always been a meek and exemplary student, not a back-talker. Brash behavior was the last thing any teacher would expect from the quiet, obedient boy named Xavier. He had never been afraid to speak; he was just too busy concealing his true nature to ever worry about expressing himself in any way but the bare minimum that was required of him.

The young nun shook her head. “No, but that was a close guess... and thank you.”

Michael, the school's second best lacrosse player and self-proclaimed “sexiest high-schooler alive,” rocked back onto the hind legs of his chair and laughed loudly. “That's God's girl, X, no flirting allowed.” Such unnecessarily loud comments were common for him.

Anna shook her head and sighed. “And God doesn't need you to be the guardian of 'his girls,' Michael.” The teacher then returned her attention to Xavier. “We were discussing my new glasses, Mr. Steele, but thank you for the compliment.”

Xavier shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest. He definitely felt more cocksure than normal. *‘Was she being nice wiggling her glasses, giving me a hint? She wasn't being a bitch about me looking at her chest? She had to have seen where I was looking. Maybe she liked me looking at her....’* He chuckled and shook his head. Xavier would have slapped himself if others were not watching. He had to clench his jaw to keep from spouting off with cockier statements. Something was wrong with him.

After school ended, Xavier waited for Wendy at their usual meeting point, and, as usual, she did not show up until twenty minutes after dismissal. She was frequently delayed by her clique of friends. Megan, her best friend and a long-haired ash-blonde girl, followed by her side. Wendy's friends often visited the farm, but none did so often as Megan.

On the way out of the school-zone, Xavier spotted Olivia in the parking lot with Patrick Blackshear, another lacrosse player and, since the year's end, a former junior student. Despite his popularity at school, Xavier knew him as a personal acquaintance, too. Actually, he was an adversary. Patrick's father was one of the largest crop farmers in the state and owned a massive amount of acreage, including a large lot neighboring the Steelemour Ranch. His family's lands were productive, but it was more like a corporation than a farm and, lately, they had taken up an interest in “sport” farming, where they raised wild game and leased private hunting rights. Unfortunately, corporate operations and hunting-farms were two common trends in modern Georgian agriculture.

Xavier's grudge against Patrick was less severe than with his father, but from the few times they crossed paths outside of school, he found him to be arrogant and condescending to lesser agribusinesses. Plus, his father was a direct threat to the prosperity of the Steelemour Ranch. Patrick's father had once tried to forcibly acquire land from Jacob by engineering economic pressures for the ranch's associates. Patrick was involved to some degree with everything his father did, so Xavier had plenty of reason to despise him, too.

Olivia was leaning backwards against Patrick's car, a 2012 limited edition Shelby Mustang GT500, with his body tight against hers. From his current angle, Xavier could not tell if they were talking or kissing, but they were so close they could have been doing either. Patrick was an average-built Caucasoid man with short light-brown hair. Seeing Olivia with Patrick instantly bothered Xavier, and he turned on a heel and detoured straight for them.

The young farmer's head throbbed angrily, and his lower belly and groin still radiated with a nauseating ache. It was not the best time to take on more stress, but he was not about to walk away. For some reason that he could not explain, he was furious.

He heard their conversation before he took a single step in their direction; hell, he could have heard it, if he focused hard enough, from a dozen steps in the opposite direction. Patrick said he liked her blue blouse, then said she had beautiful eyes, and then asked if he could give her a ride. While Patrick's last statement caused Xavier's teeth to grind, it was Olivia's response that perturbed him most. She giggled, not a laugh like what was natural for her but a warm,

feminine, receptive giggle. She thanked him and agreed!

When he rounded to their side, he found Patrick's hand on her shoulder; his thumb stroked back and forth along her blouse's folded collar. Xavier huffed hotheadedly despite his best efforts to appear cool. "Liv!"

Olivia jumped as if she had just been caught stealing something from him. "Xavier!"

"What's up, X?" asked Patrick in a mockingly friendly voice. He slid his arm around Olivia's neck and pulled her close, a clear signal intended for Xavier more than her. Xavier did not miss it; neither did Olivia. She was clearly uncomfortable in the suddenly complex situation.

Patrick fist-bumped Xavier's arm and laughed. "That was bold, man, putting the moves on Sister Anna in front of the entire class. I like your style." When no one said anything, Patrick continued. "Well, I was just getting ready to give O a ride to her farm. Did—uh—you need something, er what's up?"

Olivia said nothing. She simply stared at Xavier like a nervous rabbit being look down on by a predator. Was he the predator?

A violent impulse erupted from inside of Xavier, coming from a dark place that he had not felt for many years. He wanted to break Patrick's neck. He wanted to backhand Olivia. He wanted to tear off her clothes, drag her across the campus by her hair, and humiliate her in front of all her friends and fellow students. He wanted... nothing. The urge passed before it had time to manifest in any fashion. Nonetheless, its brief appearance unsettled the young rancher. Xavier smiled, albeit weakly, and offered Olivia a cool nod.

"O, huh? Cute nickname. No, Patrick, just wanted to tell you that I liked your new ride. I think you'll have a lot of fun with her this summer."

"You bet I will. Thanks! And did you notice the car? Yeh, I put a twin-charged induction kit on it. Can't wait until I get to the strip where I can really open her up."

Xavier chuckled half-heartedly, wished him good luck, and turned away. With his pounding headache and worsening cramps, he strode back to Megan and his sister and continued with his normal routine.

As he did every school-day, he walked with Wendy and her friend the nine miles back to their farm, listening to their silly, girly chatter along the way. He was not sure what they ever learned in class because all their conversations revolved around the stupidest, pointless crap he could ever conceive. Their discussions rarely deviated from fashion, social politicking, or celebrity gossip.

When they reached the farm, the girls went into the house, and he went into the barn. He changed into dirty jeans and a shirt and began the evening chores.

After an hour's worth of work, he disappeared with his three canine companions to Catfish Cross. The pond was positioned roughly halfway between the Kelly and Steele farmhouses, in the center of the Northwest Meadow. Technically, Catfish Cross was a lake, for multiple waterways poured into and out of the single body of water, but everyone called it a pond. The Ashfield River entered and exited the pond on its left side, the Greenstone Stream entered on its Northeast edge, and Crawfish Creek emptied from its Southeast corner. At one time, the four waterways entered in and exited out at near-perpendicular positions, which resembled a cross and earned its name, but erosion on the river's side had caused the lake to widen into the shape of a long oval that was broader on the western rim. Catfish Cross was his third favorite place for safety, peace, and relaxation; he kept in his mind an ordered list of places to where he could escape when life became too bad to bear.

He sat near the shore and skipped a few stones across its placid surface. Gambit lay at his side while Kismet and Valiant chased each other. The wind blew across the tall grass and carried with it the vibrant scents of both summer fields and forests. The moment should have been blissful, but it was not.

As he tossed stones, he mumbled to himself. "Take her to the strip where he can open her up. Bastard."

When it became obvious to him that the lake was not going to bring him his usual tranquility, he stopped lingering. He still had work to do and wanted to check in with Olivia, at least long enough to apologize. He did not want her to think she could not be herself around him. In fact, that was what had angered him so much at school: her change in personality. Did she always act differently around others than she did with him? If so, which version of her was real? The deception felt similar to a mild betrayal. She needed to be honest with him, no matter what. He needed to tell her that. She was his best friend—his only friend—and he needed her to be honest with him, nothing more.

Xavier dusted the back of his pants and ran the rest of the way to the Kelly farm. He let his body "open up" a bit; he felt a lot like Patrick's car, a powerful machine limited by the posted signs of the public roadways. The young man zoomed across the field at a trot that would make most four-legged animals jealous. Every couple seconds, he paused to let his dogs catch up. Valiant loved the chase; the young fellow was head-down and leg-long with his gait. Gambit was the last to reach Xavier, but that was not the first time Gambit had to play catch-up with his "turbo-charged" owner. Gambit knew he would eventually reach Xavier whether he ran at full speed or half speed, so he paced himself.

When they reached the Kelly farm, young Valiant was panting like an old basset hound. Gambit and Kismet were panting, too, but calmer. Xavier hugged the trio then let the animals trot away for the nearest source of water, a trough on the barn-side of the house. Xavier went to the greenhouse.

As expected, Brittany was inside. She was working her way down through the aisles of flowers with a hose, watering the plants. Her long, chocolate-brown hair was pulled back into a braided ponytail, and, in the sunlight, light-brown highlights glimmered along the curves of her large, natural waves. She wore a simple, light-cyan jumper dress with a glimmering, teal-colored ivy pattern printed down each side and across a low-cut sweetheart collar. The blue-on-blue ensemble was form-fitting around the extent of her bust but, otherwise, hung loose and straight around the rest of her curvy frame. Her feet carried a pair of thick-soled, rustic sandals made from some sort of cork material, which gave her an extra two inches of height.

She greeted him with that big, broad, genuine smile to which he had become addicted. "Xavier! How was your last day?" She turned off the hose and hugged him.

"I thought I'd never get out of there." Xavier poked one of the nearby lily's blooms. "Are there riding classes or anything this evening?"

"Yes," answered Brittany as she continued watering the flowers. Her smile turned into a playful grin. "But *Rachel* will not be attending. I am instructing an introductory class for children. Would you like to help? Children have always responded well to you."

"Uh—not tonight. I still have a lot of work to do."

Xavier followed behind as she progressed in half-steps along the tables of plants. She did the same routine twice a day, every day, just like him; he was used to following her trail of water. As they walked, he focused intently on her backside, just to see if, by miraculous luck, he could glimpse some deeper definition of her ass as she moved forward. Unfortunately, the dress was a

master of concealment. Life was cruel at times.

He stared at her that way across two rows of tables before finally getting to the reason of his visit. "Is Liv in watching TV?"

Brittany stopped and turned to face him. She looked confused by the question. "Actually... no. She has not returned from school. Have you seen her?"

Xavier stammered. It had not occurred to him that Olivia might not come straight home. After all, he came straight home every day—he was required to.

"Uh—yeh. A friend was giving her a ride home. I guess they stopped to—uh—at a diner in town... or maybe they went to the mall."

Brittany studied him for a few seconds then shrugged and returned her smile. Apparently, based on her reaction, Olivia's behavior was not new, which irked Xavier a bit.

"Did you need her? You can use the phone to call her."

Xavier tried his best to appear cavalier. "Nah, that's okay. Jacob'll be going to his weekly lodge meeting tonight, so I was going to ask her if she wanted to come over and help bathe the dogs and puppies.... Don't care; I just know she has fun doing it." He rubbed his hands together and put on a fake smile, attempting horribly to match her amazing real one. "Anyway... I wanted to ask you something—uh—anyway. I was wondering if you needed any work done around the place. Something more than the normal stuff."

"Are you kidding? There is always work, you know that!" Brittany laughed and set down the hose. "But you already do more for us than is fair."

"No, I know. I meant... is there anything I could do... for pay? I need some money to—uh—buy some things."

"Oh! Well, what if I paid you for work you have already done or, at least, part of it? You have done so much for us, I owe you quite a—"

"No no, I did that because I wanted to help you and Liv. I don't want anything for the little things I do, never. Just thought that—I don't know—you might have something more I could do for a little cash on the side. If not, that's okay, too, but, if so, I'd have the spare time during summer."

Brittany ran a hand down her ponytail and twirled the end while pondering the possible jobs.

"Hmm.... Yes, I know several things you could do for us. First, I really need a watering system in here. It would free up much of my time if you could run pipes across the beams and set up sprinklers that could be turned on and off from one place."

Xavier eagerly agreed. He did need money, badly. All his clothes had holes save his school outfits, and the school outfits were starting to wear in places, too. He would have to purchase two new sets by fall, and they were not cheap, at least not by his standards.

Brittany fetched her purse and retrieved several hundred-dollar bills, which she gave to him so he could purchase the initial supplies. However, she intentionally added, "Purchase whatever you need... and a receipt is not necessary." She hoped her intentions were not too apparent. She wanted him to have a wide-open opportunity to buy personal things with her cash, though, deep down, she knew he would not cheat her even if he thought he would get away with it. Xavier had his flaws, but he was honest. Nonetheless, she hoped he would indulge himself, just once.

Xavier stayed for the next hour to design and measure an initial plan for her watering system. Through the years, he had helped her do every type of work a greenhouse needed to thrive. He knew what she did every day and which features would be most effective for her

routine. Each sprinkler had to be able to have its flow and spray-range adjusted, so, when she needed to migrate the inventory, she could optimize each area's moisture. The water had to be diffused into a fine mist, so her delicate flowers were not injured by heavy down-pressure; however, the mist had to be controlled, so the air currents from the large fans did not douse the customers as they shopped. To solve that problem, he planned to hang diagonal splash-guards above the edges of each table, midway between the plants and the sprinklers, which would collect droplets spread too far and funnel them back toward the center of the tables. Using trigonometry, he calculated in his head the trajectories, angles, and necessary heights for every component, taking into consideration the placement of the fans, too. He did not need to write down any of the measurements or calculations, but he carried a pen and paper around anyway. That way, others would not believe him strange.

When he was finished and saying goodbye to Brittany, the unmistakable sound of a revving vehicle came into earshot. Earshot, for Xavier, was several hundred meters up the dirt lane. He recognized the pitch of the engine: Patrick's mustang. He tried to leave before the car reached the farm, but he could not break away from Brittany in time. Patrick and Olivia pulled up in front of the greenhouse at the same moment Brittany and he exited.

"Hey O," quipped Xavier with heavy sarcasm, but he then silently yelled at himself for letting his emotions get the better of him, again. *'Damn it. Quit being a dick!'*

Olivia did not smile, smirk, or pout. Her otiose demeanor offered him no insight whatsoever.

Brittany raised a brow and withdrew her welcoming smile. "O?" Xavier saw, in that instant, an unfamiliar look in Brie's eyes, which were centered squarely on her younger sister. "What does he mean, Olivia?"

Patrick sprung out of the car and spun in a flourish before pushing shut his door. "It's just a nick I gave yer sis. Look, I want to apologize for not bringing her straight home from school. It's all my fault." Patrick walked around the front of his car and met Olivia a couple yards in front of the others. He thought he sounded smooth, but, to Xavier, his words stank of faux sincerity. "The next time we go out, I promise yeh, I'll be on time, big sis."

Xavier barely resisted gritting his teeth. The pain in his head returned, but it was mild and barely noticeable. *'How can she stand his manipulations? Can't she see he said that just so it would be more difficult for her to say no to another date? An indirectly implied assumption so he can avoid a direct request! Stay calm.... Why do you care if he manipulates them into another date?'*

Olivia did not seem to notice the sly maneuver. However, Brittany was not convinced by his cool charm. Without missing a beat, the older sister smoothly replied, "No time had been set, but, next time, when one is set, I trust you shall keep your promise. *Although*, we are presuming she chooses to accompany you again, which she may not." The words sounded completely inoffensive. Brittany was no novice to the social arena, and her grace was well practiced.

Xavier started to breathe a sigh of relief, grateful for Brittany's slick disarming of Patrick's implied commitment, but he sucked all that air back inside when he heard Olivia's quick retort.

"I do!" Olivia snipped quickly and glowered at her sister, but when her eyes shifted to Xavier, her defiance softened slightly into guilt. Pain was visible on his face, which was the first time he had ever exhibited any sign of jealousy or possessiveness, at least regarding her. She was surprised to find it so clearly expressed; he usually buried his feelings behind a stony exterior and forced her to dig for every crumb of emotion.



Patrick laughed and gathered Olivia into his arms. Without the slightest bit of consideration for Xavier or Brittany, he pulled her into a tight embrace and kissed her deeply. He then spun around in another flourish and slid back to his car door. “X, yeh definitely should come check out our new harvesters. The things are beasts; they have Wi-Fi extenders and a built-in deck for laptop integration. It can stream vids and upload production data all from the field—awesome, huh?”

Xavier nodded. “Yeh, guess so—that way you can pay your workers to watch porn, right?”

Patrick chuckled. “Exactly! Come by sometime and yeh can see how a farming enterprise works. Oh hey—did yeh know the sole is coming off yer left boot, there? That’s not good for a shepherd. Need to grab a new pair or yeh’ll never keep up with yer goats. I’m sure one of the two girls here would loan yeh the cash for some kicks but, if not, let me know. Always willing to help out a friend; could use another tax write-off. Okay, take it easy, and it’s nice meeting yeh, big sis. I’ll call yeh later, O. ‘Til then, stay sexy, baby.”

As soon as the mustang pulled away, Olivia attempted to ease the uncomfortable situation by softly murmuring, “X. I... I don’t think he meant anything with the boots comment. He’s used to being wealthy and just doesn’t understand. I’ll talk to him about it.” Her attempt to soften the insult only worsened the situation.

Xavier did not answer her. What could he say? He was poor and wore clothes that the Salvation Army would not sell. Everyone at school knew he was the hillbilly of Augusta Academy. Wendy was poor, too, but she was afforded money by Jacob for new clothes and fad luxuries. Xavier performed handy-man services for neighbors just to scrape up enough money to purchase second-hand clothing. When it came to romantic partnerships, he had nothing to offer any of the females at his school, including Olivia. Instead of arguing with Olivia, he thanked Brittany for the extra work, promised to start right away, summoned his dogs with a whistle, and left.

A few days after July Fourth, Xavier’s workload increased further when his Uncle Winston brought down two stallions and six mares from their farm in Tennessee. His mother’s brother owned a huge horse breeding and training farm, and once or twice per year, they paid Jacob to assist their operations in some way. Usually, that meant either training young colts and fillies, or stabling, breeding, and birthing a surplus of their horses. The recent load was for breeding and care-taking, and whenever Jacob made arrangements, Xavier had to fulfill the obligations. Six horses was not a light load of extra duties, especially when they had to be carefully separated, monitored, and controlled during the entirety of the reproduction process. Since some of the horses were owned by third parties and sent to Uncle Winston to be fertilized, a strict record had to be kept for everything from daily feedings and waterings, to exercise and sleep schedules, to medical check-ups. The paperwork alone added an hour to each day.

In addition to Uncle Winston’s added duties, Xavier also had to make time to build the irrigation system for the Kelly Nursery. He worked on it by lamplight every other night from eight to ten in the evening, but by the time he set up and closed down, he only managed forty-five minutes of actual work per night.

The rest of his time was spent on keeping the Steele-mour Ranch operational. The only time reserved for himself was on the weekends and limited to between dusk and dawn, excluding the nights when a close vigilance on pregnant animals monopolized his attention. A true shepherd at heart, Xavier kept a close watch on his flocks, especially his pregnant females and

newborn babes.

On one such “free” night near the middle of July, Xavier disappeared into the northern woods and retreated to his secret forest refuge. His three canine companions accompanied him, as usual, and he brought plenty of campfire treats for them. He ran with them through the woods, rolled with them in the ravines, and lay with them beside the fire and stared at the stars.

He could be himself with his dogs, which is why he loved them almost as much as a human. They did not care if he was abnormal. They did not love him any less for being a freak of nature. Sometimes, he thought they were jealous that he could run faster than they, but, if they were, they never changed how they treated him. If they could have responded to his conversations, they would have been the perfect friends.

The four companions had lain still for an hour and were nearing sleep when a distant feminine scream broke the peace of the night. The shriek rose abruptly but was clipped off at the end, as if something happened to silence the unknown girl.

Xavier jumped to his feet. A human scream in the woods at night was enough to startle the most jaded of survivalists. His temperature rose several degrees, and his heart raced toward two-hundred beats per minute.

A second unknown, feminine voice disrupted the silent woods. She was panicked but not as shrill as the first. “Don't let go! Don't move! Help!”

The gorgeous collie was a credit to the legacy of Lassie. Gambit glanced at his owner then turned and dashed toward the distressed voices. The dog did not understand human words, but he knew the pitch of desperation and could recognize emergencies.

Xavier chased after Gambit, and Kismet and Valiant followed behind. As the screams continued, his effort multiplied. The supernatural man soon passed Gambit and, within six seconds from leaving his camp, had surpassed the canines' range of sight. He dashed west almost a half mile, where he met the edge of the Ashfield River, then followed it north to Hudson Dam. The voices originated there. He slowed to human speeds when his keen eyes spotted one of the two other people.

He first saw the clothed ass of a seventeen-year old girl, which stared straight at him and the forest. The girl was on her hands and knees at the edge of the dam and shouting down at someone in the water. As he neared her side, he recognized her as Patricia Hudson, the eldest daughter of the Hudson Mills family, who owned Hudson Dam and nearly a mile of the Ashfield River. They were considered neighbors by rural standards; their home was only a mile and a half up Ashfield Road, and they were one of the nearby agricultural families that struggled to survive in a corporate world.

“Patty!” shouted Xavier when he reached her side.

“Xavier!” The girl pushed up onto her knees and grabbed at the side of his jeans' waistband. She used him to help pull herself to her feet. “Amber fell!”

He leaned over the edge and looked down the twenty-foot drop to the bottom of the roaring dam. It was no small waterfall. The mist of the falling waters gave the air a thick, humid aroma. Hudson Dam ran nearly forty feet wide and flowed onto a frothy, rocky bed. Eight feet below where he stood, Amber hung upside down against the vertical embankment. The fourteen-year old's ankle had become wedged between two outcroppings, and that was the only thing keeping her from tumbling the rest of the way into the churning water below. It looked painful, but it was saving her life.

“Amber. Don't move, okay!?”

“I'm slipping!”

“She's falling!”

The dogs arrived around that time. Xavier waved them away from the edge of the river and ordered them to stay. He then kicked off his work boots and dropped onto his butt at the edge of the river. “Just don't move, Amber! I'm coming for you!” He had to shout to be heard over the roar of the waterfall.

He was not sure if he could scale the side of the falls or not. The terrain was a mix of clay, stone, and exposed roots, and the surface looked mostly smooth with only a few protrusions. Nevertheless, without considering the risk to himself, he turned around to face the earth and dangled his legs over the edge.

“Please save her!” cried her frantic older sister. “Hold on!”

Xavier clutched the precipice with only his hands and lowered to the full extension of his arms. From there, he reached with one hand for the only stone formation that looked possibly sturdy enough to support his weight. Even though he was a teenage male in fit, physical condition, he weighed four times a human of equal size, so he had to be extra cautious when selecting a supportive handhold.

After testing the stone, he gripped it firmly with one hand and let go the stable ledge. He lowered himself another full arm's length and hung by a single limb like an orangutan. Amber immediately grabbed hold of his calves and squeezed with all her might. She wore thin cotton shorts and tank top, neither of which was strong enough to carry her weight; therefore, he could not drag her up by her clothing.

“Amber, hold on tight to me. I'm going to unhook you from the crack and—.”

“No please no I'll fall!”

“No, you won't. Listen! I'm going to lift you up as far as I can. I need you to grab hold of my belt with both hands and hold on to me. As soon as you can. Okay? Hold on tight.”

“O-o-okay.”

He gripped the back of the girl's knee with his one free hand, squeezed as tight as he thought she could withstand, then hoisted her upward with just one arm. He lifted gently until Amber's ankle slipped free from its stony trap. Once it had, he stretched his arm skyward and lifted her head to his hips. She hugged his waist with both arms and tucked half of her hands inside his waistband.

Following that, he instructed her to lock her ankles around his head and to hold tight with all four of her limbs. Once she had, he released his hold on her and used both arms to scale back up the side of the river. The rest was easy. Patricia grabbed them when they were in reach and helped both up onto level ground.

Amber and Patricia hugged each other and cried for nearly a minute. Xavier stood off to the side and let them have their moment. While they sobbed, he squatted by his dogs and rubbed their ears. His heart raced at speeds no human could survive, and he hoped its loud pounding could not be heard outside of his chest.

After their panic passed, the two girls stood and hugged him. “Thank you!”

He counted the seconds while they clung to him then smiled sheepishly. “No big deal.”

Patricia kissed him on the cheek, which dampened him with her moist, teary face. “Oh—yeh it was! If yeh hadn't helped.... I didn't know what to do. I couldn't leave her like that to get help, but we needed help. You saved her.”

“Yeh... how's your ankle, Amber? Is it hurt?”

The younger sister favored the leg that had been caught. She leaned on Patricia and nodded. “Yeh, hurts to stand on it, but I don't care. I-I thought I was going to die. I almost

died.”

“Well... you're safe now.” He sat on the ground and slid on his boots. “What were you doing out here this late? I mean... it's your property and all... just curious.”

Patricia held her sister tightly as she answered. “We were just.... It's hard to explain.”

“Okay. Don't have to tell me anything.”

Amber interjected quickly, “Daddy used to take us camping every year on his birthday. It's his birthday today.”

Alan Hudson, their father, had died a year-and-a-half ago from cardiac arrest. The Hudson family had been struggling ever since, which was no secret. They did not have any other family of which Xavier was aware, except for one elderly grandmother who lived elsewhere. The Hudson Mills' family consisted of them, their mother, several big, old stone buildings, and a river. He had helped them once or twice since Alan's death, when he felt it safe to do so without having news of it reach back to Jacob, plus two times prior to it. Alan was a good guy, and Xavier missed him. Most of all, he felt badly for their plight.

“Oh.... Hey, that's what I'm doing—camping. I've a campsite set up not far from here—have some hotdogs and iced tea, too. If you want, you're welcome to camp with me. The tent's already set up, and fire already started. It'll be a tight squeeze, but there's room enough for the three of us, if you want.”

Why was he asking them to join him when he always avoided unnecessary socialization with outsiders? He was not sure. The words had come out of him before he took the time to consider why, which was not normal for him. Normally, he never said or did anything without first evaluating the possible effects. He assumed his carelessness was caused by his returned headache. It had started the second after he spotted Patricia kneeling at the edge of the river.

Both girls agreed to accompany him back to his campsite, so Xavier swept Amber up into his arms and carried her back to his fire. She held his neck and smiled every step of the way. Once there, he set her on his blanket and added a log to the fire. Patricia sat beside her sister, and he squatted a respectable distance away, beside his dogs.

“This's your place?” asked Patricia.

He stuck his last two hot dogs onto two separate oak branches and handed one to each, so they could cook them over the fire. “Valiant, sit!” snapped he at the puppy when he crept too close to Amber's hotdog. “Yeh, I love this little clearing.”

“That's awesome. Is that an actual tipi?”

“Yeh, sort of. It uses modern materials and is a little smaller. It's just metal poles and canvas, but—uh—the design is authentic. It's put together and broken down the same way, with a lashing pole and rope and smoke flaps and inner lining. I'm working on collecting the materials to build a tipi from raw materials. See those two long branches over there wrapped up? Once I get a few more, I'm going to try to put together a full-sized lodge.”

“Wow.” Amber leaned to try to peer inside through his tent opening. “Isn't it cold, though?”

“What?” He chuckled. “No way. These types of structures are used all the way up into arctic regions. The cone-shape keeps out rain and is naturally wind resistant. There's an inner lining that blocks off outside air and moisture along the bottom and creates a layer of insulation up the side of the wall just like a lot of modern windows. Best of all: the smoke flaps. I can have a fire inside the tent, not outside. Keeps fires from getting blown out or put out by rain.”

“That's cool. Have you had a fire inside of it, yet?”

“Yeh. When we're ready for bed, I'll carry some embers in and start one. I promise it'll

keep us toasty all night long. It'll be a good test, too, because I think we're going to get hit by that rainstorm." The newspaper had predicted a cooling heavy shower throughout the night, which was one of the reasons Xavier had chosen to camp out that night. He enjoyed sleeping outside during rainstorms. "It'll be a tight fit for us and a fire, but we can work it out."

The sisters laughed, and Patricia teased, "Wait? Ready for bed? We're sleeping here, now?"

"Uhh.... I thought you were—uh—camping out, tonight? Not really camping if you don't spend the night. Don't have to, though. I can walk you home, if—uh—if you're not comfortable or whatever."

The sisters laughed some more then smiled and agreed. They watched with interest as he erected a quick lean-to rain shelter for his dogs using two strings of para-cord, a canvas sheet, and a dozen fist-sized rocks. He then transferred the campfire inside the tipi and doused the embers that remained outside. Afterward, he carried Amber inside and positioned her on a tarp covering pine needles and leaves, which served as his primary mattress. Patty lay down on the far side of the tipi, with her head near her sisters.

While they rested and ate their hot dogs, Xavier departed to collect ingredients to mend Amber's swollen and obviously sprained ankle. He left his dogs behind to guard the Hudson sisters, which also allowed him to move at his maximum speed without pausing intermittently for his canine friends. The young farmer dashed across the woods and collected an assortment of plants, several strips of bark off of trees, and several handfuls of mud from the bed of the stream. He carried the items back to his camp and into his tipi.

"What's all of that?" asked Patricia after he seated himself on the left side of the tent.

Xavier set the largest patch of tree bark on the floor, which was filled with liquid mud. "You said you were worried about her being able to walk tomorrow morning, right? These will help. This," explained he as he picked up a large handful of bushy yellow flowers. "Is St. John's Wort. This's Sage. This one is Rosemary. These pieces of bark are from White Pine and Willow trees, and you two probably know these are cattails from near the stream, where I got the mud that's in that large strip of bark. I also grabbed a small piece of chokecherry bark, leaves, and berries."

Patricia eyed him suspiciously, but Amber laughed, pushed up onto her elbow, and smiled. "You know about medicine?"

Xavier brought in two rocks, one large and one smaller, and set them up to be used as a mortar and pestle. While speaking, he began removing the seed-filled heads of the St. John's Wort. When a small collection had been gathered, he ground them into a paste then repeated the process. "Well, this's more first aid than medicine. I used to work with my mother all day every day, and she was a licensed vet. Her grandmother was a Muskogee Creek Indian, and I read a lot of her personal writings, too, which discussed natural remedies. Plus, I study this stuff... just as a personal hobby.

"These are just topical remedies, in case you're worried about me poisoning you."

"Topical?"

"External, on the surface. I'm making two poultices. Trust me, they'll help. First one's with St. John's Wort, Sage, Rosemary, and Cattails, all of which can help with swelling and inflammation. Going to grind them to release their oils then mix them into the creek mud and wrap it around your ankle." He finished with the St. John's Wort and started grinding up the others. "The mud's cool. It'll cool down the area and help reduce the swelling.

"Later in the night, I'll put on the other poultice, which'll just be heated Willow and Pine

bark, more St. John's Wort, and the Chokecherry parts. That should promote blood flow, healing, and reduce muscle pain. The cherries'll stain your ankle, but they're worth it." Xavier chuckled. "Trust me?"

Amber nodded. "Sure. You really remember all of that stuff from your mom and great-grandmother?"

Xavier scraped his recent load of herb paste into the mud mixture then turned his attention to the cattails. He worked fast, for he wanted the mud to still be cool when he applied it. "Yeh. I remember spending time with my great-grandmother, too, while she was alive. She was great. Mom got a lot of her greatness from her."

"How old were you when she died?"

"Almost four."

Patricia laughed. "Three!? And you remember her?"

Amber added, "Yeh, I was wondering that. You were young when your Mom passed, too, right? You remember the stuff they taught you?"

Xavier cleared his throat and wondered how much he should admit. He was not sure if it would be too suspiciously unnatural if he admitted the whole truth or not. Some humans possessed good memories—so he had heard—but his was nearly flawless. He remembered nearly every minute of time since he was first rescued from Catfish Cross by his mother when he was two years old. Not only did he remember all those moments, he had, at the time, understood most of what happened around him, which provided some adult-like insights for his childhood experiences. Even at the age of three, he was able to converse about complex topics and comprehend the work, skills, and knowledges his mother demonstrated. He figured that was unnatural as the rest of his deformities, so he limited the explanation to what he thought would be considered acceptably normal. "Uh—yeh, I remember some of it. I have a pretty good memory, which is usually a good thing. They had a lot to teach.

"Anyway... this's ready. I'm going to wrap the mud and bark around your ankle then tie it. It'll keep it from moving in your sleep and keep it cool. Don't worry, I'll tie it loose so it doesn't squeeze if you swell more. It'll feel weird at first, okay?"

Xavier was gentle when he affixed the poultice to Amber's ankle. In fact, he was so careful she did not wince once, even though the area was sensitive. Once her ankle was set, he handed each of them a blanket then prepared the second poultice. He had to scrape the inside of the different types of bark to collect the necessary pulp. He then mixed everything together with the chokecherry components and poured the concoction into the second largest shell of tree bark. Later, he would roast it over the embers and place it warm on her leg.

The three of them chatted for a while longer then, just as the rainstorm began to pelt a rhythm onto the exterior of the tent, fell asleep. The tipi kept them warm, dry, and comfortable. When Xavier woke several hours later to begin his farm chores, he warmed the second poultice and discreetly swapped it with the one on Amber's ankle. She murmured thanks then fell back to sleep. The Hudson sisters enjoyed a long, pleasant rest inside his home-away-from-home, and Xavier went to work.

## Chapter Three

Xavier woke with a headache again. He had been suffering them off and on throughout the summer, and, near the end of his academic break, they had become almost a daily occurrence. He hoped he would not have one on that particular morning since it was the first day back to school. Unfortunately, not only had he a headache, but also the headache was worse than the previous several.

He rose, spent almost two hours performing his morning farm duties, then went into the house and roused his sister for school, as usual. Xavier had inherited most of his mother's parental duties, and, as a brother and someone with no actual authority, the work could be twice as difficult.

"Come on Wendy, it's time to get up. I started the shower warming for you."

Wendy kicked angrily and rolled from one side of her queen-sized bed to the other. "*Erh!* Let me know when it's warm." Her head buried deeper into her pillow.

Xavier roamed around her bed as he spoke, picking up random articles of clothing. He tried not to pay anymore heed to her undergarments than the rest, but he was a mid-pubescent young man. Even if he could not smell her feminine odor on the clothing, he still had eyes and fingers. The fabric was soft and alluring. His sense of smell made the problem much worse. While he tried to push his mind onto other topics to avoid acknowledging the truth, each article of clothing that he collected told him if she accidentally dribbled before or after peeing, how thoroughly she wiped, how aroused she had become while wearing them, and, worst of all, whether she masturbated while wearing them. The truths came unbidden to him through his nose, regardless of where he averted his eyes. He quickly hid the sex-infused ones under the bottom of his arm-load and pretended the scents meant nothing.

After taking the clothes downstairs and immediately putting the strongest-smelling ones into the washing machine, he returned to her bedroom for a second attempt.

"Wiggles."

Wendy threw a pillow at him.

He turned on the light switch, which was beside her door, not her bed. If she wanted the lights off, she would have to get out of bed to turn them off. She hated when he did that, but it was the most effective method for prying her head from the pillow. It worked that morning, just as it had many others.

After calling him a half-dozen dirty names, Wendy stumbled out of bed and into the shower. In the meantime, he went downstairs to make breakfast. He decided to make *heuvos rancheros* since Wendy had some salsa and a tortilla left over from a previous dinner. He slathered a thin layer of butter on the top of the tortilla then tossed the dry side onto the flat griddle next to three eggs. As the tortilla fried on the bottom, the butter on top would seep inside and make the topside soft and flavorful. Xavier did not have any special interest in cooking, but after several years of fixing daily meals, he had learned how to make some food taste delicious, especially fast-cooked food.

Jacob passed through the kitchen long enough to grab a banana and mug of coffee. Xavier steered clear of his father as best he could, but, at one point, the two crossed paths. When that finally happened, Jacob glanced briefly around the room to make sure Wendy was not nearby then gave Xavier a sharp shove.

"Out of my way!"

The words were nothing but pure hatred. Xavier could remember a time when his father was not hateful, but those days were so long gone that they felt like a dream. “You’re dawdling, *Thing*. I’m seeing yeh too many mornings. Get ‘er ready then get gone.”

The shove was not significant in any way, but Xavier stumbled to the far side of the kitchen. He wanted to keep as far a distance as possible, for he never knew when his father would carry....

A sour, smoky smell burnt the young man's nose hairs and caused the inside lining of his throat to smolder. The odor heralded that which he always tried to avoid: the devil sticks. That was what his mother and he called them. They were thin, brittle, black, powdery rods, ranging between six and twelve inches long, that his family discovered floating along the edge of Catfish Cross. His first encounter with the sticks had nearly been fatal. He was extremely allergic to them, and being near them made him ill within a span of seconds.

The smell of the devil sticks not only burnt Xavier's nose and inner linings, but they also caused him near-instant muscle cramps, difficulty breathing, blurred vision, rashes, and, if directly touched by them, seeping ulcerations on his flesh.

To Xavier, they were devil sticks. To Jacob, they were the key to keeping his monstrous son in line. He kept some in his bedroom, one in his truck, and sometimes carried one in his pockets. That was why Xavier had stumbled away from his father after the shove. That was why it was a gamble anytime he neared his father. Sometimes he carried a devil stick, sometimes he did not. The devil sticks kept Xavier at bay, and they also debilitated him whenever Jacob felt the boy needed another throttling. Xavier dreaded the smell of those evil, black sticks.

By the time Xavier reclaimed his footing, his father was gone. Jacob never stayed near him for more than a brief moment, at least not while sober, which was a kindness. However, when he was drunk, he never seemed able to stay away. Those encounters were why Xavier would run off to one of his three favorite sanctuaries or visit with Olivia. Unfortunately, Olivia had been preoccupied through most of the summer, which left Xavier with fewer places to run and the victim of a few more beatings than average.

If he had been a normal human child, he probably would have died years ago and become one of those grim statistics seen on billboards. His special resilience let him live longer to suffer more. Then again, if he had been human, everything would have been different....

If it were not for Wendy, Xavier would have run away for good and not returned home—he had planned to a thousand times—but she was dependent on him. He cooked, cleaned, and watched over her. Without him, Jacob would not bother to see her to school, to doctors, or to dinner. Worse yet, he feared she might become Jacob's new victim if he could not batter Xavier. Jacob would not likely harm Wendy—he loved her, in his own way—his nastiness was reserved for one person. Still, there was that slim possibility that he might degenerate further and spread his hate onto his daughter. Thus, whenever Xavier escaped a beating and made it to one of his hidden refuges, he always returned the following morning to gamble his life on another day in a hostile world that did not welcome him.

His sister came downstairs not long after he recovered. Wendy ate and texted her friends, and Xavier gathered up her wet towel and wash cloth. He would have liked to shower, too, but he was not allowed to do so and risked severe punishment if caught. It was never worth the gamble, for the bathroom had no escape routes. He usually bathed outside with the hose, in Crawfish Creek, or, when feeling luxurious, in the shower at either the Kelly Farm or the academy’s locker-room.



After starting a new load of clothes in the washing machine, he hooked the wet batch on the clothes line and ran fresh water into the dogs' water dishes. Then, a few minutes before having to walk out the door, he slipped out behind the barn and hosed himself clean, dressed, cleaned the dishes, and stole one of "Jacob's" apples to eat on the way to school.

As they walked passed the driveway to Mr. Baker's house, which was just a short distance south of Hudson Mills, Wendy looked away from her phone and announced, "Breakfast was good."

"Thanks, Wiggles." A faint chemical fragrance of wet paint floated through the still air. It was not strong enough for anyone but Xavier to notice. *'Mr. Baker must be working on his model cars, again.'*

"Jenny said she loves eggs ranchos. She's super-jealous right now. She had to eat McDonald's for breakfast, and they just messed up her order." Wendy laughed then parroted what she typed back to her friend. "Sorry, I never had a McDonald's breakfast. Mine are always cooked fresh. Don't hate." After sending the message, she wrapped an arm around her brother's waist and smiled. "Thanks, by the way. For cooking the breakfast."

He returned the hug and smiled. "Don't mention it. Always happy to cook for my lil' sis... when she gets out of bed without throwing knives at me."

The two laughed together then stepped off to the side of the road to let a large truck drive by. Ahead of them, a car exited the Hudson driveway. Vicki Hudson was driving her two daughters to school. Patricia and Amber waved at the Steeles as they pulled out and drove away.

An image of Patricia appeared in Xavier's head. The image was a memory of how Patricia looked when he found her in the woods that one night, bent over the edge of the river. The edge of her cotton underwear had been peeking out around the crotch of her shorts. The memory left as easily as it came. It was only one of the many that slipped into a young man's mind throughout any given day.

To distract himself, he grabbed Wendy's phone and pulled it out of her hands.

"Hey! Give it back! Damn it!"

"Relax. Talk to me a minute. I want to talk to you about your new classes."

He spoke with Wendy all the way to Augusta Academy, telling her about what she should expect from the ninth grade and its teachers. Despite her blasé attitude, Xavier could tell she was nervous about no longer being the oldest class in her building, like she had been last year. Now, she was a freshman and the youngest in a new building. She had taken extra effort to set her light-golden-brown hair and had not stopped chewing the inside of her lip since they left the farmhouse. She was a pretty girl with a heart-shaped face, just like her mother, and she was thick enough to *almost* be called chubby, though certainly not so much as to be called fat.

Megan met them at the edge of the Academy campus and gave each a hug; she hugged Xavier a little longer and tighter than what most people would do, but it was normal for her. For the past year or so, she had developed a crush on him. It started mildly, but, lately, it had become more difficult to ignore. Megan positioned herself between Wendy and him, and she walked close enough to repeatedly "accidentally" bump his hands. Lately, Wendy had noticed Megan's behavior regarding her brother; it bothered her, but she had yet not confronted her.

Xavier might have commented about the hand-bumping if his head was not hurting so badly or if he had not spotted Olivia, whom he had not seen in nearly ten days. His best and only friend had arrived in Patrick's mustang and, when he first noticed her, was sneaking a kiss from Patrick while none of the faculty were within sight. Seeing that made his head hurt worse. Although she had been hanging out with Patrick throughout summer, Xavier still had not been

able to accept them as a couple. Still, he was determined to keep his discomfort internalized and not let it push Olivia away. He had missed her quite a lot the previous several months.

Keeping his jealousy under control was not going to be easy, though. He realized that difficulty the first minute he was on campus. Even though it was extremely risky to misbehave on campus, Patrick's hand snuck up the inside of her shirt. Few people could have seen what he was doing through the windshield, but Xavier could. The silhouette of her small breasts was replaced with an outline of his knuckles, and seeing that turned the young farmer's stomach. He hoped no one else could see what they were doing. The academy made harsh examples of those they caught dallying romantically. Most students were local residents and under constant scrutiny; only a few were allowed to live off-campus, and those that did felt privileged compared to the rest. If Sister Abigail caught them, though, they would be in just as much hot water as any other student.

Xavier stopped at the large marble fountain that separated the campus' three main front-facing buildings and hugged Wendy. "Okay, Wiggles." Wiggles was his nickname for her, earned because she could rarely sit still and used to bounce around whenever he tried to hold her. "Have a good first day, and if anyone gives you any trouble, come get me and I'll crack their heads. Oh, and don't forget to sit in the first row of Mrs. Fischer's class—she rewards those who choose to sit up front on the first day."

Wendy wished him good luck, kissed his cheek, and ran with Megan toward her other friends. She had three or four friends, which was good. Xavier liked watching her have fun with them, even if their conversations were dangerous to brain cells. Having friends was healthy.

In case his day had not already started with enough discomfort, fate arranged it so that his first class' teacher was Sister Anna. Watching her gave him a full-blown erection within the first thirty minutes of the first day and, unlike everyone else, he had to be very careful or his erection could be easily seen. He was freakishly super-human in more ways than one, which was just one more secret he had to safeguard, especially while in the locker-rooms. For the three hours following her class, he walked with his book satchel held in front of his waist.

He skipped lunch and, instead, spent that time in the bathroom splashing handfuls of cold water over his face. The pain in his skull throbbed in rhythm to his heartbeat, which naturally beat 150 times per minute at a resting rate. Usually he could suffer through the bouts of sickness when they came, but the current episode was getting the better of his tolerance. For a moment, he considered going to the nurse's office, but he could never actually do that. If she took his pulse or temperature, which normally rested at 105 degrees, she would know he was abnormal. As always, he resolved to persevere alone.

Xavier dried his hands and left the restroom. On his way back to class, he passed a couple of students hidden in a recess in the wall by the drinking fountain. The two were entwined in each other's arms and seemingly stealing kisses out of the nuns' sight. It was a good hiding place, and most people would not have spotted them if their noses were not keen enough to smell their presence. Unfortunately for them, the female's coconut body lotion was strong enough to lure Xavier from a building away. Trying to get away with such behavior inside the lecture halls went beyond bold and well into the realm of stupid. He could barely believe someone was actually doing that. Augusta Academy was not like public schools. Obedience was expected else students were punished fiercely or were permanently expelled... or both. Prestigious academies did not fear parents or students—the exorbitant tuition was non-refundable for cases of expulsion. *'Is there something in the water? Fuck!'*

Xavier walked several steps passed the secret lovers but, then, he heard a female gasp and

whisper, “Stop! Someone's right there.”

In response, her male counterpart replied, “Shush—stop worrying over everything—geez! It's just Huckleberry Finn.”

“Who?”

“The shepherd kid, Xavier. Fuck him. If he says anything, I'll break one of his fingers.”

The “shepherd kid” was grateful the voices did not belong to Patrick and Olivia. That would have been more than he could have handled in his current stressed state. Even still, his temperament was a bit off, and a large part of him did not want to let the insult stand, like he often had. Normally, Xavier would have ignored such comments. That was far from the first time he heard a boy spouting bullshit to impress a girl, especially with his ears. It was far from the first time he overheard people insulting or making fun of him in hushed tones, too. However, on that day, the words peaked his anger, for reasons he could not understand. Whatever the reason, he decided in an instant to make an issue out of the hollow threat.

Xavier spun on a dime and strode straight for the huddled couple. The male's posterior faced outward; the female was hidden between him and the wall. Xavier grabbed the fellow's shoulder with one hand and squeezed with enough pressure to cause him to yelp aloud. It was too easy.

The boy was Michael, the loudmouthed lacrosse star and commissioner's son who had heckled him on the last day of school in the previous grade, as well as on several other occasions. He was tall, thin but not negatively so, and wiry. He sported a thick mane of highly conditioned, shiny, shoulder-length, dark-chocolate hair, over which all the girls seemed to swoon. The hair paired well with the athlete's smooth, wheat-colored complexion.

Michael immediately spun away from the source of the pain and fell back into the watering machines. “*Ahh*—son of a bitch! What the fuck, Xavier!?” After gaining his composure, he then added in a more aggressive tone, “Are yeh suicidal? I should *kill* yeh for that!”

Elise Blake was the girl nestled in the recessed part of the wall. Her button-up blouse was unbuttoned down to the top of her sternum. Even though it was difficult to imagine anyone doing what they were doing inside the halls, she was the last girl Xavier expected to find. Elise was one of the most famous girls on campus, across all grades, but her fame was not for the usual reasons.

Female fame in middle- and high-school usually increased proportionally with the sizes of a girl's cosmetics collection, clothing bills, and, most especially, bust. Yes, Elise was gorgeous with hyper-feminine, sweet-girl-next-door features and long, straight, dark-dirty-blond hair, but she was flatter-chested than Olivia, short, and petite. Xavier did not mind those traits, but they tended to lend little respect in the female popularity contests. Worse yet, vicious rumors claimed she was as naive and gullible as third graders, which, supposedly, was caused by how her family kept her secluded from everyone except clergy and women—boys were expressly off limits. Her and Michael's families were religious; Michael's family was pro-actively so, though he never seemed to exemplify the spirit when there was no audience. She never cursed or said anything negative, ever, or so the stories claimed. In fact, for all those reasons, she had acquired several nicknames over the years: Miss Innocent, Liss the Priss, Ms. Timid, Chastity, and, the most common, Madonna.

Despite the constant slander, Elise Blake still was afforded unrivaled respect and prestige solely because of one very well-known truth: she was, by far, the richest person on the campus of rich students. Her family was old money, and they had a *lot* of old money; they had a lot of

new money, too. During her first year at the academy, four privately funded security guards were kept on campus at all times just for her, and a limousine escorted her to and from school every day. She was also one of the few non-resident students like him, Olivia, Wendy, and Patrick, which meant she lived nearby. If the stories about her family were true, they were big-wheels in the international tobacco and alcohol industries, and they owned a massive mansion on the river that long ago used to be a plantation.

Xavier had never said even a single word to her before; their normal paths never neared because of their distinctly juxtaposed financial- and social-castes. In fact, he had never been able to look her over enough to fairly rate her attractiveness. However, now that he stood extremely close and could scan her from head to toe, he realized some of the rumors were misplaced, likely the result of jealous peers. Xavier was attracted to tiny girls—after all, Rachel was only sixty-four inches tall, an inch taller than Elise—so, in his opinion, the fact that Elise was tiny only added points. Also, while he could see why people said she had a little girl's body, he was pleased to see that rumor was inaccurate, too. While Elise's torso was straight and mostly flat, she did have hips, not a lot but more than enough to be called feminine. The truest rumors were her sweet-girl-next-door face, which included two small dimples and large, playful eyes, and her wealth, evidenced by the sparkling jewelry in her ears and on her wrists. Augusta Academy strictly regulated attire, but some jewelry was allowed for females.

Elise looked visibly distraught and thoroughly embarrassed. Her face flushed red as she frantically scrambled to button up her shirt. “Oh, we're sorry,” started her plea, “Please don't tell on us? We—we were just being silly.”

They were being more than silly. At the academy, males and females did not touch except to shake hands, at least not without risking serious reprimand. A few of the boldest juniors and seniors, like Patrick and Michael, made a few disruptive comments and possibly stole a light grope in secret, but they, the *most* “wild” of Augusta Academy, were no worse than the average student in a public school. Most academy students towed the line and dared not risk the ire of Sister Abigail. What Elise, Madonna of the Academy, had been doing was not silly. It was stupid.

Michael scoffed, obviously not embarrassed by making out with the super-rich daddy's girl. He checked over his shoulder to make sure no teachers were around then let loose. “Quiet, Elise. We don't have to explain anything to this shit-kicker.” Michael stepped up against Xavier's chest and smirked. “Right, Shepherd? We know you're a poor farm boy that should be disgracing the public school systems.”

Elise put a hand on Michael's arm and nudged him. “Stop. Don't be mean!”

Michael did not acknowledge her or stop his attacks. He was not the type of guy to relent, not when a girl was around to watch his bravado. “We also know the only reason you're in this school is because of your dead mom. They say she paid for you and your sister's entire tuition in her will, but I think I know the truth.”

Xavier's anger multiplied by the second. His mother was an extremely touchy subject for him. Most students knew that Rebecca Steele's last will had paid for Xavier and Wendy to attend Augusta Academy, but most were respectful enough to not mention such a cruel subject, not even the ones who normally murmured hateful comments behind his back. The pain inside his head pounded against the back of his eyes. His heartrate skyrocketed as adrenaline coursed through his body and caused his fingers to tremble. However, even though his temperature was rising fast, his voice remained rock steady and eerily cool. “Oh, yeh? And what's the truth, Mikey?”

“Come on, stop,” came another intervention attempt from Elise. She tried to insert herself between them, but both pushed her aside. “Please, don’t fight. No one needs to get hurt.”

“The truth is, the only reason you and your dim-witted sister are in this school is because your mother blew the Headmaster, *twice*.”

Michael chuckled and blinked, and Xavier's hands were on him before his eyes reopened. Xavier only shoved, but it was hard enough to lift the boy off his feet and send him two meters backwards and onto his ass. The pain and anger inside Xavier mixed together and became intoxicating. He felt confident, cocksure, and fearless. He felt exhilarated by the thought of violence. He also felt... horny? The feeling was more than a mood. It was... overwhelming.

Xavier spun on Elise, stepped forward, and pinned her backward into the recess again. She shrunk inward and held up her hands, but she did not touch him. She was extra careful to not strike or even graze his chest.

*‘Wow, she is a timid little thing.’* He liked that. He liked timid little rabbits. He grabbed both sides of her face and held her still as he forced his lips onto hers.

She gasped against his mouth. Her feet nervously pranced in place, and her fingers trembled. However, she did not try to stop him; she did not touch him once, which only emboldened him further. Her body warmed and dampened despite her shock.

He shoved his tongue into her mouth and plunged it as deep as it would go, causing her tongue to work against his. She also moaned, but it was faint and possibly not audible to anyone but him. He heard her heart beating; it was rapid, albeit not near as fast as his. He could smell her, too, not just her tropical body wash but, also, a faint concoction of natural odors. Her sweat, hair, breath, heat, and moistening femininity—all the aromatic qualities that made her unique, all that she foolishly tried to conceal with wax and chemicals—overwhelmed him. He wanted her: to breathe her, to taste her, to fuck her, to eat her, to devour her, to ravage her. An unexplainable tide of mixed urges rose inside him.

Xavier pressed harder into Elise's mouth and, for a moment, lost control of that constant psychological guard that monitored his every action. He let himself be taken over by instinct and the moment, and it was wonderful. That one moment, with his lips against hers, was truly blissful. Then the image of his childhood puppy, the one he had accidentally crushed by hugging too tightly, flashed like an alarm through his mind. Even bloodier memories followed in rapid succession.

He released Elise immediately and retreated halfway across the corridor. A part of him instantly felt badly about what he had done to her. He could tell, from the way she spoke and reacted to him, she truly was a gentle soul. Xavier had always been a good judge of character, and he knew she was as sincere as any person could be. The only reason she had not tried to stop him was because she was wholly stunned by his move. Her shock went beyond mere surprise. Xavier doubted she had ever been hugged or kissed much earlier than then, not in a romantic or sexual way, which made him wonder how genuinely willing she had been to Michael's aggressive and extremely risky ministrations. She seemed shocked beyond surprise by what he had done.

“I’m—uh—sorry, Elise.”

Xavier left at the end of the apology without waiting for her answer.

Michael shouted several additional insults at him as he walked away, but he ignored them. He was in no way finished with Michael, but he was finished with the moment.

Oddly, the kiss seemed to ease his headache, but how could that be?

He attended the rest of his classes without further incident and without any pains whatsoever.

After school, he met Wendy with a hug at the fountain. He held his book satchel between them when they embraced. “How was your first day?”

“Great! You were right about Mrs. Fischer—what a tool. How was yours?”

Olivia pushed up next to Xavier and nudged him with her shoulder. “Hey, stranger! I looked for you all recess. I heard you made Elise cry.”

Wendy’s mouth dropped open. “Xavier made a girl cry? No fuckin’ way!”

Olivia grinned and fluffed Wendy’s bangs. “Yes *fuckin’* way. You better be careful speaking that way. So, what happened, X? I’ve been dying all day to find out.”

*‘I made Elise cry?’* Xavier was taken aback by the news. Elise did not seem upset when he left, just dazed out of her wits. Hearing that he had upset her to the point of tears made him wonder if he had misjudged her reaction entirely. He scanned the throngs of students in the parking lot, hoping to spot Elise before she left. He did not find her. “Uh—nothing happened.”

Wendy grinned mischievously. “Sure, nothing happened. Elise is, like, the richest girl in the United States! And my brother made her cry? Nah. No fuckin’ way. He makes no one cry. He’s a big, soft, be—.”

A firm, uninvited voice interrupted their conversation. “Xavier Steele!”

The voice belonged to Sister Abigail, Headmistress of Campus Compliance. In other words, she was the disciplinarian for both students *and* faculty, and she suited well the job. No student enjoyed being anywhere near her. She was the only faculty member invested by students’ admission contracts with the authority to “lay on hands,” which meant implement physical punishments, and she did not shy away from flexing that authority when necessary. She could also levy behavioral fines on student’s financial accounts, apply academic penalties to student grades, suspend enrollment, or petition for expulsion without a return of tuition. She possessed similar powers over the staff, too, which made her feared all around by just about everyone but the Headmaster and board of trustees.

Contrary to what stereotypes might have suggested, Sister Abigail was not a grizzled crone, though her predecessor fit that description. In stark contrast to what every new student expected, Abigail was thirty years old, pretty, and quite shapely, especially her lower half. However, she did always dress in more traditional nun attire than all the other sisters—rarely was she seen in casual clothing, if ever.

The students who lived on the academy grounds, which was every enrollee whose residence was farther away than thirty miles, were especially wary not to trespass onto Sister Abigail’s bad side since they could never escape her reach. Even the faculty who lived on campus tended to be especially polite and deferential to her. The younger children were downright terrified of her reputation, and more than a few had burst into tears just from hearing their name on her lips. Xavier had once told a second grader that Abigail had been investigated for murder when two of the students in detention disappeared and were never seen again. Xavier was only in fifth grade at the time, and the story was a complete fabrication; nonetheless, he still felt bad for starting the rumor and making some of the children cry.

The Headmistress folded her arms across her chest. “You will come with me to the Hall of Detention, now.”

Wendy and Olivia both gasped wide-eyed and made way for the Headmistress. Wendy lost a bit of her color, and she quickly crossed herself and prayed that Sister Abigail had not heard her cursing.

Once out of the Headmistress' way, Olivia smirked and muttered toward Xavier, "Nothing happened, huh?"

"I can't, Sister. I have to walk my sis—."

"Yes, you will, Steele. You should have thought of her *before* you assaulted another student. Now, follow me."

"I'll walk her home," offered Olivia from the side.

"Thanks."

The Hall of Detention was a small one-story stone building set alone nearly two-hundred meters behind the campus' three primary structures. A row of old evergreens framed the building on three sides and enhanced the place's foreboding sense of isolation. The large, heavy, iron-studded wooden entrance opened to a single hallway that ran down the middle of the building. The hall ended at a door that entered into Sister Abigail's office and private quarters. Along the way, each side of the corridor offered two additional doors from which to choose. All four led into separate rooms: the first two were detention rooms, the last two were detainment rooms. Detention rooms were just like tiny classrooms and had chairs enough for four students. The detainment rooms were for overnight or long-term isolation with accommodations for only one poor soul. No one wanted detainment; no one wanted to spend their days *and* nights under Sister Abigail's close scrutiny. Xavier had never seen inside the detainment rooms but heard they were furnished with only a desk and cot. The building also contained an attic and bathroom, but they were only accessible from inside Abigail's office.

Sister Abigail led him passed the first four doors and straight to the nicer one at the far end. Her name was engraved on the plate affixed to it. She directed him inside and to a specific location between two chairs placed in front of a simple table-like desk. He was not offered a seat, and he was smart enough to not sit unless invited to do so. The nun shut the door and seated herself in the wingback leather chair on the opposite side of the table.

"Xavier. Do you know why you're here?"

He nodded.

"Speak, do not gesture, and look me in the eyes."

"Yes, Sister."

"Headmistress."

He bristled a bit but was too uneasy to be overly defiant. "Yes, Headmistress."

Her office was sparsely decorated and possessed a door in the center of each wall, one of which was the entrance. A few plain wooden end-tables and bookshelves populated the walls. A two-person cloth-and-wood futon had been set beside the door behind her, on the wall opposite the entrance. Her table-desk held a phone, paper trays, and a flat-screen computer system. The majority of its surface was bare, just like the room's walls. The room smelled like old stone and humid wood. After a second sniff, he also detected a subtle but abundant hint of feminine odor and sweat. He enjoyed imagining the scents came from nervous school girls being drilled by Sister Abigail, but he knew it was more likely from Abigail herself and too many hours sitting in one room and one chair.

The Headmistress typed a few words onto her keyboard before leaning back and interlocking her fingers. "Your grade point average has fallen every year for the past five. The first few drops were each only a couple percentage points, but, in 2008 your G.P.A. fell six percentage points and, last year, your G.P.A. fell another eight. Do you have an explanation for this?"

“No, Headmistress.”

“Until the decline, your G.P.A. was distinguished. If the trend continues, you will fail this year. Do you want to fail?”

“No, Headmistress.”

“Are you trying to get attention from others? If so, you have mine, now, and you should speak to me while you do. I might be able to help you.”

“No, Headmistress.”

“How many hours would you guess you sleep each night—an average?”

Xavier sighed. He was already becoming annoyed with the interview. “I don't know... Headmistress. Two-to-five hours?”

Abigail sat forward and punched a few of her keys. “You should try to sleep longer. Only five hours of sleep is hazardous to your social and emotional health, and two hours is dangerous to your physical health.

“What do you do for fun?”

It took a moment to construct a suitable answer to that question. “I play chess.”

The Headmistress smiled and reclined again. “Good. Chess is a great game, especially for your mind. I enjoy chess, too. It is one of the strongly encouraged, greatly rewarded activities here at Augusta Academy, though you have not taken advantage of any of those opportunities.” Her voice stiffened abruptly as she unleashed an unexpected question. “Are you virginal?”

“Uh—what?”

“I asked if you are you a virgin.”

“Yes... Headmistress.”

“Does your father abuse you?”

Xavier's eyes dropped to the desk, but he rose them again quickly. “No, Headmistress.”

He was not sure if she believed him or not, but it bothered him that she even asked the question. Why would she ask? Was it obvious to bystanders? Had someone said something to one of the teachers? That single question set his mind spiraling with dozens more.

She stared at him silently for several seconds then leaned forward and punched a few more keys.

“Alright, Xavier. Tell me what happened today. Do not leave out any details that I might consider important or your position will worsen severely.”

Xavier crossed his arms over his belly, took a deep breath, and began recounting the details of what happened. He did not mention his headaches, but he was honest about everything else.

Sister Abigail did not interrupt his narrative. She listened from beginning to end, but, once he finished, she sat straight in her chair and leaned onto her elbows. “I didn't know Elise Blake was involved with this. Thank you.”

Xavier could not believe it. *‘She didn't know about Elise?!’* In that case, it could not have been Elise who snitched on him.... *‘That son of a bitch!’*

“Well, you know you misbehaved, so I think we can forego the usual lectures. I do have one more question, though.” The Headmistress' lips curled up at the corners into a grin, and her eyes narrowed. “According to the hall's surveillance, your single shove tossed Michael more than five feet through the air. His chest developed large deep-tissue bruises where you rammed him... with the flats of your palms. Can you explain how that is possible from a simple push from a shy, teenage boy?”



Xavier swallowed hard. He was not expecting that twist.

Xavier did not go home when Sister Abigail released him. He was too pissed, and his headache had returned by then, which only pissed off him more. No, he was determined to settle the unfinished business between Michael and him, so, instead, he pretended to leave then doubled-back and slipped into the Magnolia House, the premiere “executive” high-schoolers' dormitory for boys. Each residence provided luxurious four-room accommodations for either single or double occupants.

He asked one of the students where Michael stayed then walked straight to it without any problems. Of course, he had to use his student ID card at every access point and level, but, otherwise, it was easy finding and reaching him. He walked up to the door and listened. No one was inside. With no effort at all, he sprained the lock using sheer force and slipped into his rooms.

The place looked clean and ordered. He searched the various rooms, just to be sure no one was inside, even though his sharp ears would have heard so little as casual breathing. After confirming what he already knew, Xavier settled in and waited for his inevitable meeting. Thankfully, he saw signs of only one occupant; the other bedroom had been turned into a study.

To pass the time, he flipped open Michael's laptop and rifled through his files. At first, he found only typical boring items, such as games, schoolwork, and music. Xavier then opened the browser, which automatically started with him logged into Michael's G-mail account. He clicked into the e-mail and read through the letters. As with the laptop, everything initially appeared blasé. However, that changed when he expanded an e-mail folder titled “Saved.” Three other folders appeared under the Saved directory: Elise, Michelle, and Vivianne. He checked Vivianne's and was shocked by the contents of the first letter within.

The first e-mail in the Vivianne folder was filled with several dozen pictures of Vivianne Gambetta, Rachel Gambetta's older sister; she had graduated earlier that summer. The pictures were all pornographic. The first few were basic nude pics, but he then found many soft-core pictures of her masturbating either on, or with, various objects. The last few were hardcore and involved another man's dick. Several of them depicted cumshots, too. Vivianne was a slightly overweight blonde girl but, in all other aspects, was as hot as her younger sister. The Gambetta women had amazing asses and legs, including their mother. The pictures definitely aroused him. He especially liked the picture of her struggling to push a one-liter Coca Cola bottle inside her vagina; the plastic bottle was equally wide as his penis, so he could easily imagine himself in its place. Another e-mail contained video attachments. A third e-mail contained a few audio attachments. The remaining several dozen e-mails were all text-based conversations, some of which were erotic. The folder was a treasure trove of material, any one of which could earn him expulsion!

Xavier's mind began to churn with new plans for vengeance....

He rushed to click Elise's folder next. The contents followed the same format: three e-mails with attachments followed by many text communications. He was surprised again to discover that Elise Blake's material, Miss Innocent, was almost as lurid as Vivianne's! In fact, only three of the pictures were semi-nude, and the rest were full, blatant nudity and hardcore shots with semen covering various places of her body. Two long videos revealed similar content: one was a man ejaculating on her mildly hairy and tight vagina, and the other was the same man ejaculating on her face. He would not believe it if he had not seen it himself. Behaviors only a fraction as lurid as what these pictures and videos depicted did not even seem conceivable for

her, so he felt like he had utterly misjudged her. Normally, he was a great judge of character, often eerily so. How could he have been so wrong with Elise and Michael?

He did not listen to any of the dozens of audio clips or what seemed like hundreds of text logs, for something dire occurred to him partway through viewing the second video, which interrupted the remaining investigation. The revelation was so criminal, literally, that he went through every one of her pictures and videos again before allowing himself to believe it possible. What started out as a doubtful suspicion quickly became a likely explanation, and, sadly, it also was reasonable. Many things could be easily explained to satisfy convenience, but reason—true reason—was not subjective. Elise's eyes were open in only three pictures and no videos, and those three pictures were mild and clothed with only a single partially-visible nipple in one of them. *All* the rest, all the material that seemed utterly unbelievable for her, showed her lying still and, whenever her face was visible, with closed eyes. He reviewed the videos carefully and searched for any contradiction in the pattern. Not once, not for a second, did she stir or move in those videos. She was asleep for all of them! That made sense. Elise Blake, of all the girls at Augusta Academy, would *not* have casual sex with semi-committed boyfriends, let alone film it. Her giving him a shy nipple flash? That seemed appropriately naughty for the innocent Christian girl. His lingering doubt gave way when he noticed one last revelation, a subtle truth that was easy to overlook but absolutely convincing: her crotch had not been styled in any of the media that showed her pussy. Elise dressed in designer clothing and probably enjoyed a staff of cosmetologists to see to her every cosmetic need. She *always* looked good and well-tended, just like Brittany. It made no sense that a girl would maintain every inch of her body for every routine school day of the entire year, but she would not bother to touch up the edges of her pubic hair—her pussy was beautiful and trimmed short in the middle but also had uneven regrowth that went all the way to the ends of her pubic region—when she was planning to have a filmed sex session with her boyfriend. She may have taken those three clothed pictures willingly, but as for the rest? No. She was not aware any of those things had happened; he felt certain.

The same obviously was not true for Vivianne because she was interactive and vocal in nearly every single scene, but the pattern with Elise was too apparent to dismiss, especially considering her hyper-shy personality.

Xavier's mind turned....

If Xavier thought he could not be any more shocked in a single hour, he was proven wrong the instant he clicked on the folder named Michelle. Like the others, there were three e-mails in this directory: one had photos, one had videos, and one contained a list of hyperlinks. The picture and video e-mails were both packed with well over a hundred files of each type. The unbelievably surprising part was the individual in the material. It was Michael! Actually, it was Michael in drag... and he looked good!

He sifted through the material slowly and maintained a perpetual smile. Not only was Michael—Michelle—a sexy woman, but it provided astounding insight into the hidden side of his adversary. Everyone had a secret side; only a few were dumb enough to document it thoroughly. Michelle's e-mails possessed more pictures than most crime scenes, and, collectively, they told a story—his story.

The cross-dressing was not a one-time event; it could not have been. Not only were there simply too many different files and scenes, but he also exhibited a wide assortment of clothes, shoes, makeup, mannerisms, and even varying silicone breast inserts to fill out his bras. The hyperlinks connected to various transvestite, sissy, and lady-boy pornographic websites, most of which showed guys being forced into female roles and submissive sexual service to both men

and women. Some links sent him directly to posts made by someone named MichelleTheMattress; the posts contained stories about Michelle being forced to sell herself on the street to pay rent or sate big black gang-members. Numerous videos showed Michael—Michelle—dressed up and sucking on just about every phallic shaped object in his apartment, but nothing real. Xavier doubted he actually ever had sex with a man. This was his secret fetish, and one that took time to develop into the myriad ensembles that represented various characters. The fantasy clearly intensified over time. The older material was milder and shier. The most recent was much better, much sexier, and much sluttier. No, it was impossible for so much media to be the result of a short experiment of perverted lust. Michael, the rising star of the Augusta Academy of Excellence's champion lacrosse team, was an established lipstick-wearing, hip-wiggling sissy!

Xavier could not restrain his smile, not even a millimeter. He could not have wished for a better discovery of an enemy, especially an enemy whose family was public, actively religious, and pro-actively anti-homosexual. This gave him leverage against every aspect of Michael's life: private, public, friends, family, school, social, sports, academic, career, criminal, et cetera. Every ounce of him could be owned by whomever possessed these e-mails.

*'This is the end of Michael Warren.'*

He quickly forwarded all the letters for all three "girls" to his own e-mail address and closed the laptop. Ambition, anger, and arousal coursed through his body in rhythm with his aching head, which caused him to pace across the floor. So many things could be done with that information, if he were so inclined. Unfortunately for Michael, he *was* so inclined. He could do just about anything to him, now. The only question that needed answering was, *'What shall I do to him first?'*

A brief search of Michael's bedroom closet also turned up five plastic crates filled with female clothes, apparel, jewelry, wigs, and makeup, but finding them was just coloring on Xavier's well-iced cake.

He put everything back the way Michael stored it then returned to his laptop and created a new e-mail account. From there, he wrote Michael the following: "I found your collection, Michelle. It's quite a portfolio for a republican commissioner's son. Tomorrow, during lunch, come home and dress up like the picture below and wait for me. If you don't, I forward everything to Sister Abigail, the lacrosse team, and your father, and your photos of Elise will go to the state police. --Your New Boss." He attached a photo of Michelle in one of her full costumes, with clothing, shoes, jewelry, lingerie, and makeup. In the picture, she even carried a purse and wore lacy gloves. He did not hesitate a second before pressing send.

Xavier logged out of his new account and left.

Late in the night, long after he returned home and completed his evening chores, shortly after practicing his martial arts and staring up at the nighttime sky with his telescope, Xavier went to bed. However, he did not sleep, not yet, for, only a few minutes after turning out the light that hung from the rafters above, someone entered the barn.

Whoever entered tried to be quiet, but Xavier heard their first footfall and was sitting upright before the second foot fell. He knew it could not be his father, since his father never visited unless he was drunk, and the intruder was far too coordinated to be inebriated. By the time the intruder crept up the ladder and crested the bay floor, Xavier was standing in boxers and a plain T-shirt and wielding his pair of pointed sais. He did not expect to see Olivia's pretty face.

"Liv! What're you doing?" He quickly grabbed his nearby robe and pulled it on. He did

not want her to see his many scars.

She pulled up onto her feet and dusted her hands. She wore a blue silk pajama top and shorts, and her feet were bare. “Brie and I were worried about you. Why didn't you stop by and tell us what happened?” Olivia approached him and smirked. “I thought Abigail maybe killed you or something. She does that sometimes, you know.”

They both laughed and sat side-by-side on the edge of the bed.

“Nah, she didn't kill me but give her time. She's taken an interest in me now, so who knows.”

“What? Why? What happened?”

He explained what happened in the headmistress' office, but he left out most of the details regarding the super-human shove. For that part, he explained the events as if Abigail had simply caught him on film and was now curious about him and his life.

When Olivia became contented with the news update, he sneaked into Jacob's kitchen and brought back a partial half-gallon of cream, two bowls, a knife, and a quarter peck of peaches—his favorite snack. He kept a small pouch of vanilla bean pods and confectionery sugar under his bed just for the occasion.

The two lay on their sides for nearly two hours and ate peaches in sweetened vanilla cream. She told him how she wanted to take up photography and had signed up for a class in it that year. In return, he told her what he discovered about Michael and how he had sent him an e-mail directing him to meet tomorrow during the day. Olivia did not believe him at first, but he then logged into his e-mail account using her cellular phone and showed her some of the pictures of Michelle. After seeing them, she could not stop grinning like an ornery otter.

She set the bowl on the floor then flopped onto her back, giggling all the way. After a minute of laughs, she fell abruptly silent, turned her head aside to look at him, and stared with wild curiosity running rampant through her mind.

“So... what're you going to do to him tomorrow?”

Xavier propped himself up further with his elbow and shrugged. “Not sure. Maybe I'll have him do my nails.”

He laughed, but she did not. Instead, she bit her lip unconsciously and grinned larger. “No, come on, seriously. Be honest with me... what're you thinking?” Her eyes sparkled with excitement. In fact, Xavier thought he saw an actual spark in her eye, like those that sometimes appeared when plugging in a live appliance. He assumed it was a trick of the barn's shabby lighting. What else could it be?

“Seriously, I don't know.”

“Yeh you do... I know you, Xavier. You always think five moves ahead. When you wake up in the morning, you already have the entire day and the next laid out. Tell me! Please. Please! I won't judge, I promise.”

Xavier would not have even considered admitting his true plans, if she were not so strangely titillated by the situation. Her curiosity about him and Michael peaked his curiosity about her. Was she thinking like him, or was this going to be one of those times where their gender differences resulted in a serious misunderstanding? He did not feel comfortable gambling on their synchronicity.

“I'll you what... you tell me what you'd do to him if you were in my shoes—no, how about this?—tell me what you'd like me to do to him, and I will, and I'll take a picture for proof. Then, I'll tell you my plans.”

She stewed on that offer for a while. She lay flat on her back, stared at the ceiling, and

considered what it was she wanted Xavier to do to the cocky athlete who once told her that he would be willing to go out with her but only if she padded her bra. Pondering the possibilities was as delightful as the peaches and cream.

Xavier noticed her complexion had paled. He had noticed it earlier but dismissed it on account of the poor lighting. She had returned to normal a moment later, but now she seemed pale again. With this second change, though, he was certain it was not his imagination.

Olivia turned her head, so she faced toward the bay window and away from him. Apparently, she was too embarrassed to look at him while speaking. "I want you to.... I want you to... not get into any trouble."

"Hah!" barked Xavier. "Chicken! You're lying because you're too afraid to tell me what you really want."

"You'll do what I want to him?"

"That's what I said."

"Fine—I want you to make him ki—kiss your... your... to—to-f-feet." She started the sentence with a huge mass of courage but, by the last word, had lost it all.

*'How cute!'* Xavier almost burst aloud with laughter.

He reached over and gently touched the side of her cheek. She felt cool. Of course, to him, everyone felt cool, but her temperature seemed abnormally low. Perhaps his temperature had peaked with the recent topic of vengeance and Michael's demise, but she still looked awfully pale. "Are you feeling okay?"

She pulled away slightly and nodded rapidly. "Yeh, I'm fine. Now... now tell me your plans."

"Nah."

"Wha—you promised!"

He chuckled then inhaled deeply, pulling in her scents and swallowing them. Her feminine aroma was slightly stronger than before, which suggested she was becoming aroused. He wished he could smell it closer; the whiffs through clothing diluted the true fragrance. Normally, he did not pay attention to such common, subtle changes in women, but, tonight, his curiosity had him especially alert. Plus, he tended to be more alert with the women he cared about, so he was noticing each of her slightest changes. *'Interesting. She likes the idea of Michael kissing my feet.'*

He leaned closer to her and studied her eyes. With his amazing sight, he could infer much from just carefully monitoring a person's face. Their subtle expressions sometimes explained more than their words. People underestimated the amount of information contained in a person's face. Her face revealed an undeniable lust.

The young farmer shrugged suddenly and grinned. "Okay, a deal's a deal. First, I'm going to make him kiss my foot, just for you, but then... I'll make him kiss my dick."

A normal human would have noticed no difference in her, save for a momentary tensing in her neck. He saw much more. Her pupils dilated wider, and her breathing paused for an entire second. She again seemed to become slightly paler, but the shades of white were so subtle that he could not be sure. One thing was undeniable, though: her feminine scent strengthened. She liked—loved—what he said.

Thoroughly enticed by her scent, Xavier decided to seize the moment. He counted fractions of seconds until her eyes involuntarily blinked; then, he mashed his lips to hers before her sight returned. Half of his body rolled atop hers, and, when it did, he gained a greater understanding of how much cooler she was than him. The difference was black and white, but

he still was not sure if she was abnormally cold or if he was abnormally hot. She felt much cooler than what he remembered his mother and sister being, which were his best two human references. He made a point of avoiding most other human contact.

Olivia almost moaned—he heard it deep in her throat—but she then flipped out from under him and rammed his shoulders with her palms. Two static shocks simultaneously leaped from her body and bit him, one on the lip and one on the shoulder.

Xavier withdrew immediately; her frantic change in disposition was severe enough to startle him. However fast he might have retreated, she was not satisfied. Olivia swiftly rolled onto her feet and backed several steps away. She stumbled slightly when her left knee buckled for no apparent reason.

“I—I have to—uhm—I have to go. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She moved, almost dashed, for the ladder down.

“Wait. Stop. Stop!”

She paused at the edge of the bay and slowly turned to face him. Her lips, fingers, and knees trembled. *‘Is she scared of me? For a single kiss!? Maybe she felt how hot I am?’* He wondered but could not reasonably suspect anything so dramatic, not even if she realized he was abnormally warm. His mind was swift and powerful, but he could find nothing that seemed reasonable to him. He could not understand the truth. *‘Why’s she so pale?’*

He stood but did not move after her. “What’s wrong?”

She hugged herself and glanced at the floor. “I don’t know if I... I don’t what I should do. I have to talk to Bri—Brittany.”

Xavier started to laugh but quickly swallowed instead. “Livia...! That’s okay! I don’t know, either. There’s nothing to know, anyway. We’re just kissing; we’ve kissed before.”

“No.” She grunted with frustration and slung her head to the side. “It’s not that—I mean... it was different then, those other times.... We were just playing around. Besides! I’m with Patrick, now.”

Her last statement killed all hope for Xavier’s amorous mood. His hands curled into fists at the mere mention of Patrick’s name. Without filtering his thoughts, he blurted as a reflex to hearing the other guy’s name, “Stop seeing him!”

Olivia’s head lifted defiantly until her sparkling—or sparking?—eyes met his.

The words were a genuine mistake, and he tried to correct them by adding a simple, belated, “Please?”

Most girls would have used his misspoken command as an excuse to chastise him and gain verbal advantage through guilt-and-pity manipulation, but Olivia’s expression softened into something that seemed almost... servile? The expression was one that fit Elise’s face, not Olivia’s. Her voice softened but also flattened to a near-monotone.

“Is that a request or a command, Xavier?”

“It’s a re—.” He stopped mid-word and cocked an eyebrow. Her question was suspicious. A strong part of him wanted to answer command, just to see her response. “Does it matter? I mean... why’d you ask that? Are you testing me or something? Do you really think I’m so dense as to just stumble right into that obvious trap and say ‘Oh yes, I am commanding you to never see him again. Obey me’? Then you can go off on a feminazi rant and derail the conversation altogether.”

Olivia did not answer. She simply watched and waited.

Xavier interpreted her silence as another socially passive-aggressive tactic intended to unsettle or force him to infer guilt, and thinking she would do that to him, her supposed friend,

irked him. He waited several slow seconds for her to respond, and, when she did not, he bristled and grunted. “Fine. Obviously, you're looking for some big dramatic showdown, so let's have one. Yeh, I'm commanding you to stay the fuck away from Patrick. Wait... why should I feel guilty at all? You're supposed to be my friend and all summer you've been slutting it up with the guy whose family is trying to ruin mine. You're smiling at me and sleeping with my enemy! I have every right to be pissed! You know what? Fuck you! How about that, Palmolive!?”

Olivia's normal color had returned by the end of his tirade, and so had her defiant expression. She narrowed her eyes and smirked at him. “Anything else, Shepherd?”

“Shepherd!?” He resisted the urge to slap her. He hated being called a shepherd. That is what the rich kids at school called him when they wanted to be somewhat polite with their degradations. Patrick especially loved using that nickname. “Yeh! Uh—I told you not to come here without telling me first, so... so get the hell out!”

She offered him no reply. She did not even give him a final sarcastic remark or rude gesture. Olivia lowered to her knees, slid over the lip of the bay, climbed down the ladder, and left.

When she was gone, Xavier growled, threw himself onto his bed, and buried his head under the pillows. He wished he could turn off his senses. He still heard her walking away. He still smelled her. Her scent would linger for hours and drive him crazy, and it was already late with only a couple hours left to sleep before he had to rise and begin a new day of work.

*‘What's s wrong with me? I'm becoming emotional over everything. Go apologize to her; she's my friend. No! She betrayed me. She's mine, not his! What am I thinking? Come on—fuck—get control of yourself! So what if she betrayed me? Don't lose her! I need her. She doesn't need me. Without her, I'll have no one. No! That doesn't mean I should allow her to betray me. Fuck!’*

He retrieved earmuffs from the chest at the foot of the bed, put them on, and stuffed his head back under the pillows. The earmuffs were high-quality covers built to dampen sound. His mother had bought them for him when he was a child; back then, his senses often overwhelmed him and led to terrible tantrums and bouts of tears. The earmuffs, a sleeping blindfold, and a lot of lullabies, had been her solution. It worked then, and it still did. As soon as the muffs were in place and his head was buried, the outside world faded away and left him alone, floating in a universe of darkness where only his mother's croons could be heard. Unfortunately, he had picked one of the worst possible times to dig out the old soothing headpiece from his past.

When Xavier teetered at the verge of sleep, a pair of hands ripped the pillow and sheet off of him. A thick blanket of tobacco and alcohol enveloped his senses and was accompanied by the smoky, acrid, undeniable, smell of the devil sticks. Xavier's lungs started burning the instant his head was lifted away from the mattress. His faculties withered, and his senses swirled with vertigo.

“Ah warned yew, yew bashtard, do-don't be having no—no onesh over visitising and don't make naaa-no noise!”

Jacob drug his son out of bed by his hair and slung him to the bay floor. He already had his belt off and folded in his hands just the way he liked: the buckle on the striking side of the straps.

Olivia heard Xavier's screams all the way to Catfish Cross. She could not understand why Xavier was so irate with her. He obviously had pent-up stress that needed to be released, but she was hurt that he targeted her. Even though she was angry at him for calling her a slut,

she was mostly concerned with how violent his tantrum sounded. She hoped he did not damage the barn too much while thrashing around his room, and, most of all, she hoped he did not wake his father.



## Chapter Four

“Come on! We have to go, or we'll never make it!” Wendy stamped her feet and flapped her arms in the center of their backyard.

Xavier was herding cattle out of the milking pen. He was way behind schedule and, though it was time to leave for school, was not finished the morning work. He still needed to make breakfast, wash and brush his teeth, gather his books, and change into his uniform, and Wendy was not happy about the prospect of being late to her second day of school.

“*Come oooooon!!!* Just let the pen hang open and move. It's not like they can get out of the field! *Dad!* Xavier's going to make me late!”

“Fine!” belted her brother as he lashed open the gate. “I'm coming.”

He walked into the barn then, at super-human speed, quickly gathered his clothes, bathroom kit, and books into two bags: one his book satchel and the other his “gym” bag. A minute later, he jogged out to meet Wendy.

The two walked briskly the entire way to school, but, despite their pace, they reached the grounds as Last Summons rang, which was the last warning bell that sounded exactly sixty seconds before the start of the first class.

Wendy squealed and raced away toward the high-schoolers' building. Xavier jogged to the Athletic Center and sneaked into the boy's locker room. He quickly showered, dressed, and brushed his teeth, at times bordering the limit of natural human speeds. The horrendous lacerations, welts, and bruises on his back burned with each drop of water and, on one occasion, threatened to force a loud groan from his lips, but he suppressed it with an iron will and focused only on reaching class on time. His clothes looked horrible; they were wrinkled from being balled up and stuffed into his gym bag, but it had been unavoidable. He finished by combing his hair with his fingers then ran toward his first class. He could not move at a full run because his injuries were too painful to make long strides—it hurt to move at all!—but he rushed as fast as possible in spite of the pain.

He did not encounter Olivia until his third class, which they shared. He passed her on the way in. She stood near the classroom door with Patrick close to her side. He appeared angry, and he was speaking with tight lips and an intense, muffled voice.

“Where the fuck do yeh get off dumping me? Are yeh serious?”

Olivia's eyes briefly met Xavier's then turned downward. “Yeh, yeh, yeh. Look, just go get one of the cheerleaders or dancers or jumpers—you could have any you want.”

“Damn right I could! I was doing yeh a favor, yeh beak-nosed, flat-chested cunt! I can't believe I wasted an entire summer on some whore who can't even give head right, not even after all those shitty attempts.”

She rolled her eyes then let them settle back toward the floor. “Whatever, so leave me alone.”

Xavier stopped in the doorway and turned, debating whether or not he should intervene. He wanted to, but Olivia halted him with a stern glance. Plus, Sister Abigail was walking up the hall behind them, and he could not risk another incident so soon. With any luck, Patrick would continue cursing until the headmistress moved within earshot. He wished Olivia would fight back; it sickened him to see her standing silent and subdued. That was *not* natural for her; she was not one who shied away from an argument. It reminded him of how she weathered his rant the night before then slipped away in silence.

He waited on the other side of the door until Olivia entered and Patrick left. When she passed by, he muttered, "I'm sorry."

She looked upset, and seeing that started to upset him. However, to his surprise, she flashed him a soft smile and, in return, mouthed, "Me too." He smiled weakly.

By lunch time, Xavier's back felt like it was on fire, and his head ached. His temper had flared out of control again, but, this time, the flash-pan fury was completely unprovoked. He had been urinating in a bathroom stall, completely alone, when the urge to hurt something took him. Since then, the mood dwindled and left him feeling only mildly irritated. He was tired, sore, pained, hungry, and feeling like anything but going across campus to the Magnolia house. Nonetheless, he went, and the part of him that hungered for confrontation was pleased that he did.

Michael did not answer the door when Xavier first knocked. Xavier heard him inside, though. He paced back and forth only a few feet on the other side of the door. The soft taps of his heels were unmistakable. Xavier knocked again, harder than before.

The door opened slowly.

Michael looked really good, better than the original picture. However, he also looked like he might throw up at any minute. When he spotted Xavier, his eyes widened, mouth parted, and the small red purse in his hands slipped onto the floor.

"You've got to be kidding me...." It was strange hearing a pretty woman, who appeared mostly natural, speak with a man's voice. He looked exactly as Xavier expected. He wore a ripple-stitched, ruddy-colored, long-sleeved A-line dress with a keyhole collar and a black patent-leather belt. The dress flared around him down almost to his knees, where black stockings covered him the rest of the way to his open-toed, kitten-heeled two-inch pumps. The red purse, red lipstick, onyx earrings, and black lace gloves finished the ensemble. He looked like a very professional and pretty woman, albeit one with definite slut in her strut.

Xavier's anger instantly rekindled, billowing inside of him and filling him with urges to attack, dominate, and conquer. That mysterious mood bubbled under his surface and confused him, but he tried to control it. He stepped into Michael, knocked him backward, and closed the door with a shove. His voice took on a seriously sharp edge that even he did not know he possessed. "Go sit down on your couch. We're going to talk."

Michael did as Xavier commanded. The lacrosse star's face was a mix of fear and fury.

Xavier sat in an adjacent chair but remained forward. His back was too sore to put any pressure on it. He took a deep breath, rubbed his tired eyes, and began. "Okay, let's try to make this simple. I own you. Here's the rules, nice and clear: Each time you argue with me, I divulge your secret to one other person of my choosing. Disobey me, and I'll beat you bloody. Defy me, and I'll make public all the material I have on you. Obey, submit, and serve, and I'll keep your secret."

Michael started to object then closed his mouth and glowered. He looked nauseous, again. "Look, Xavier. I understand your mad. I'd be mad, too. I was wrong. I'm sorry."

"I'm sure you are."

"A-and...! And I want to take back everything I said."

"Too late."

"Come on, man! We can work this out. You beat me; I admit it. Look, I've got a good bit of money in my savings. I can give it to you."

"What's wrong? Reality not living up to fantasy?" Xavier cracked his knuckles and

glowered. "If I own you, I already own that money. Michael, it's very simple, so let's try to be logical about this and stop acting like an emotional girl. You have a secret that, if divulged, can ruin your entire life, ostracize you from all of your communities, take from you all of your inheritance, and, in the end, put your shapely ass in jail for multiple counts of rape. That's your *first* mistake. Mistake two was letting someone who dislikes you learn your secret. Now, it's too late. You can try to frame me for blackmail or have me arrested for extortion, but that's nothing compared to the consequences you'll face for doing so.

"It's impossible for you to shield yourself from this or mitigate it in any significant way. You might think to yourself, 'If I do what he wants, he'll just keep asking for more and more and more.' Yeh, okay, that's true but irrational. Why? Because I own you, wholly, fully, entirely, completely. I can't ask for more of something I already possess in its entirety.

"There's no good solution for you now—that ship's sailed. You have to choose between two evils, so you need to ask yourself, 'Is being owned, exploited, and used by one person worse or better than being ostracized, stigmatized, and brutalized by the rest of the world?' Hmm, I guess the only other option is for you to kill me, but, so you know, I have all of your documents stored on a disk and sealed with a note to make everything public, in the event of my death."

Michael dropped his head into his hands and sighed. Xavier's manner of speech was intimidating without being overtly coarse. To the contrary, he spoke calmly and at a perfect tempo, like a robot or some life-long con artist who was reciting a phrase for the thousandth time. The lacrosse star squeezed his hands into fists and tried to summon the anger that usually carried him through all other confrontations. This time, though, his fear dominated, for, deep down, he knew he was in serious trouble. This was not a game or an online fantasy. "Please! Can't we just forget all of this and pretend the argument never happened?"

"Yeh we can, but I won't. The best thing you can do, honestly, is accept the situation. If you fight or challenge or argue, you'll end up worse than if you didn't. Oh, and in case you forgot the rules I already explained, all of this arguing will result in one other person being brought in on our secret arrangement."

Michael's head snapped upright, and he leaned so far forward that he might as well have dropped onto his knees. "No! Don't! I'm not arguing. I'm just... talking... okay?"

"Too late, the rules were clear. Keep it up, and it'll be two people. By the way, from now on, speak like a girl. Hearing your real voice when you look like that is... fucking weird."

Michael threw himself back into the couch and punched the cushions over and over in a very unladylike tantrum. Xavier watched bemusedly and relished the satisfying feeling of dominance over another. After nearly a minute of his physical antics, Michael calmed and straightened. When he spoke, he changed to an exaggerated, soft, airy, young-girl tone that sounded nearly identical to Jennifer Tilly at her most bimbo.

"Fine, Xavier. What do I have to do?"

"Get down on your knees. Sit on your ankles and keep your knees together."

Michael hesitated for a moment, as if debating one last time if he should fight before surrendering unconditionally. In the end, he surrendered and lowered onto the floor.

"Today, you're being punished for all of your wrong-doings. First, you need punished for arguing with me today. Second, you need punished for the unkind things you said to me yesterday. Hopefully, after this afternoon, you'll be a little more careful with your mouth."

He asked Michael for his cell-phone and, after fetching it, turned on the camera. "Lick and kiss my shoes. Do it like the pretty fag you are; don't slobber on them."

Michael moved slowly, but he did as commanded. He lowered his head to the floor,

sighed, then gingerly kissed and licked the top and sides of Xavier's leather school shoes. Xavier caught several pictures. Michael nearly objected the first time the camera's snapshot activated, but he quickly fell silent when Xavier reminded him the price of arguing a second time.

After several photos were taken, Xavier told him to sit upright and handed him the phone. “So you can see I mean what I say, I want you to send all four of those pictures I took to a friend of mine. That's your punishment for arguing today. I want you to also take a selfie of you blowing the camera a kiss—make it look good—and send it, too. Tell her this exactly: 'X wants to know if you think I'm pretty enough to be his bitch.' Hurry up!”

Michael did, but he started to cry after sending the first picture!

For some reason that he could not explain, Xavier, who normally considered himself a very compassionate person who did not like to see anyone suffer, was aroused by Michael's crying. His heart beat faster, his skin felt hotter, and the ambient temperature of the room felt cooler.

When Michael finished sending the last picture, Xavier reclaimed his phone and reclined backward, very gently, into his chair. The flesh on his back burned as if it were on fire. He grimaced and squeezed the handles of the chair. “*Grrah!*—Okay, the argument punishment's over, now punishment for yesterday. You said something about my mother and blowjobs? Not nice. Blow me.”

Michael swallowed and stared at him. “Wha—what do you mean?”

“Don't act like you don't know what I mean, sissy. I saw your porn collection. Put my dick in your mouth and milk it with your lips until I say stop.” Michael swallowed again and nodded sullenly. He reached up and, with trembling fingers, unfastened Xavier's fly. When he started to reach inside, Xavier grabbed his wrist and held it firmly still. “Listen... I'm....” He cleared and hardened his throat. “I'm abnormal... down there, like... *deformed* abnormal, not just different abnormal. I'm big, but that's not the abnormal part. I have....” He stopped at that point and debated whether he should continue on with everything or not. Divulging this secret was one of his biggest fears, which is why he never considered pursuing relationships with girls. He knew they eventually, at some point, would escalate to sex, and his partners would discover his unnatural deformities and abuse-scars. So why was he doing this, now? Xavier was so out of control that, this time, he did not even realize he had lost control, but the actions and words still felt alien. An inescapable force drove him recklessly onward. He swallowed twice before continuing. “I have a band that wraps around it about two-thirds of the way down that looks like extra skin, like... extra foreskin skin. I'm letting you know that I'm sensitive about it. If you make comments or faces, I'll bust your pretty lips. Understand?”

Michael's eyebrows cocked up slightly, but he otherwise remained unchanged except for a small nod. Xavier released his wrist and let him reach inside. The expression that crossed his face when he felt Xavier's girth was priceless. No one on earth would not be similarly shocked. Xavier's penis was like another limb. When fully erect, it measured over eleven inches long, averaged three-and-a-half inches in diameter across the middle, over four inches in diameter across the head, and over *six* inches in diameter across the lower band but only when it swelled—it did swell, too, like a balloon, whenever he started orgasming.

Other unexplained features of his penis were freakishly inhuman, too. He possessed three large testicles, and his climaxes were unlike anything a human experienced. Xavier's orgasms routinely lasted between fifteen and forty seconds and produced many spasms of high-volume, high-velocity ejaculate. He measured the output once, since he routinely did so anyway with the animals when he tested their fertility or artificially inseminated them. He produced ten

ounces of semen on the trial run, and he had been only thirteen at the time. The semen also had a density of over fifty-million sperm per milliliter and a motility greater than eighty-five percent, which was also outside the boundaries of normalcy for human males. Unfortunately, as with most of his abnormalities, the high production of semen made his life more difficult. Unlike most teen boys, he could not relieve erections easily, not with his volume of messy results, which is why he hated becoming aroused in school. For him, there was no such thing as “rubbing one out” in the bathroom then going back to class. It was torturous. Life was torturous.

He probably should have warned Michael about the abnormalities that would occur when he orgasmed, but the new, domineering, sadistic streak roiling in his stomach wanted to let Michael discover them on his own.

Michael grimaced when he first put the tip of the head of Xavier's penis into his mouth. He suckled gently, like a shy lamb at its mother's teat, and seemed content to remain that way the entire time. He did not try to take any more into his mouth until Xavier put a hand on the back of his head and pushed down. He gasped, gagged, and coughed from just the head alone.

“Ah cand,” muttered the sissy around a mouthful of cock. He struggled to get the widest portion of the head passed his teeth. With Xavier's forceful encouragement, the rim finally slipped in, along with a few additional inches. His jaw stretched to its maximum and felt like it might dislodge if spread any farther. Teeth scraped Xavier's cock, but he did not care.

Xavier gripped a fistful of the sissy's shiny brunette hair and maneuvered him up and down. With each stroke, he moved a little faster and a little deeper into Michael's throat. This was the first blowjob Xavier had ever received, but the responses seemed to instinctively come to him.

Michael whimpered like a little girl while Xavier manhandled his mouth. It did not take long until Xavier's fleshy band—his knot—swelled, which signaled the approach of climax. The tissue ballooned against Michael's chin and squashed his lips. The first explosion of semen rocketed out of him with such power that half of it automatically blasted passed Michael's gag reflex and traveled down his gullet. Each spasm delivered several times more than a human man's *total* volume, and he spasmed a dozen times before releasing his grip on the back of Michael's head. By that point, semen leaked in streams from Michael's nose and mouth, and some even leaked from the inside corners of his eyes. Because of the angle of their positions, as much of it went up into his sinuses as went down into his stomach or onto his chest. Indeed, Xavier was a one-man bukkake show.

The instant Xavier let go, Michael reeled away and fell onto the floor. He wretched, cried, gasped, snorted, and coughed. Disgust was not an issue; the finale had been a terrifying experience. For the last twelve seconds, he felt certain he was going to drown. Indeed, he technically was, for some of the liquid forced its way into his lungs, too. He hacked and coughed for five minutes while Xavier watched, but he eventually calmed and propped himself upright with his hands.

Xavier pulled himself upright, too, but grimaced in pain when he did. The feverish sensations and headache left after the orgasm, but the burning in his back remained; the sadistically domineering urgings inside his chest remained, too. “Michael, I want to ask you something serious, man-to-man... or, man-to-sissy. I know you've had sex with girls. I've seen the pictures. This was my first time doing... anything... with anyone.” Xavier stuffed his penis into his pants and made sure it was tucked down and positioned comfortably in his right pants leg. He zipped his fly up then continued with his question as if they were two close friends having a casual conversation. “I—uh—have been avoiding it because of my... my deformities.

That's why I avoided girlfriends, too. Do you think it's possible for me to have a normal relationship... a normal sexual relationship?"

Michael, a complete mess from eyes to waist, inhaled deeply and shook his head. It felt strange to him to calmly converse with his blackmailer after being, more or less, raped, but he eventually answered in a blasé manner common to people still in shock from recent events. He continued speaking in his feminine voice, too. "I... Honestly? I don't know. I don't see how any girl could take you inside them, at least not without blood and tears. I don't think most could even blow you; I feel like I sprained my jaw. God. Did you know your cum was hot? Seriously, it felt like drinking hot coffee... and the amount—Christ! Is that normal for you?"

Xavier shrugged and stood. "Yeh, that's what I figured. What can I say? I'm a freak.

"Okay, now listen: Later, you might think about trying to challenge me or getting out of this or avoiding future incidents or snitching or even trying to get revenge. If you play your part, life will be better. Remember that, and remember that, with me, you continue your life of luxury and prestige and family money. I'll want some from you, sure, but you'll still be enjoying the majority of it. Consider that, and consider the alternative lifestyle of being financially cut off and in prison, when you start thinking about how cruel or unfair it is under my yoke.

"This's a warning, Michael... do *not* make things worse for yourself. If you fuck with me or break the rules, you *will* suffer for it, and don't think for a second that I'm afraid or too soft to go through with my threats. For example...."

Without warning, Xavier lifted his foot and stamped it, heel first, straight down onto Michel's right hand. He was careful to not exert more than human force, but he applied enough force to do damage. The stomp caught Michael's pinkie and ring finger, which was exactly where Xavier was aiming. The result was a cringe-worthy cascade of bony crackles followed by the howling of one crying man.

While Michael cradled his wounded hand and rocked back and forth on the floor, Xavier continued his farewell address. He had to speak slightly louder, though, to ensure he was heard over Michael's sobs. A heady wave of exhilaration washed over him as he exerted his dominance in a violent manner. He did not notice the effect it had over his mind, or how it deepened his voice and gave it a round, solid, lethal tone.

"That's the last of yesterday's punishment, a punishment for when you said you'd break my fingers. I keep my promises, and I deliver my threats. Don't fuck with me... and don't fuck with Elise anymore, either. She's off limits to you.

"Now, I suggest you shower and dress and get to the nurse. I think you were hurt when the car door shut on your hand."

Without another word, and without waiting for acknowledgment, Xavier departed as calmly as he had entered. The cool viciousness, which had manifested from an unknown source inside, accompanied him out the door. Michael remained behind on the floor and cried.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, and Xavier appreciated that. He was so sore by bedtime, after school and several hours of farm work, that he could barely move anything above his waist. He collapsed into bed without even bothering to eat dinner, even though he had not eaten a breakfast or lunch.

A large part of him wished Olivia would appear to keep him company and distract him from his agonized state, but he knew that would not happen, not after he had chastised her for visiting. The craze that had filled him with aggressive tendencies had dwindled away an hour before falling into bed and, for the first time all day, he felt truly calm and at peace.

Xavier's wounds did not stop continually hurting until the weekend. Until then, he made a concerted effort to keep each day as calm and uneventful as possible. No matter how much he may have enjoyed his first blowjob, the act aggravated his backside and left him feeling twice as horrible the following day.

He had visited Michael once more before the weekend, though. After school on Thursday, he had stopped by and demanded Michael let him use his credit and debit cards to make numerous online purchases, several of which were quite pricey. However, after Xavier saw the six digits in Michael's personal checking account, he did not feel so bad. The total bill was nearly thirty-thousand dollars, but Xavier kindly assured Michael that he would not ask for such a large amount of money again for a "long time" and that he would also not ask for *anything* else for a week or so. Michael seemed contented giving up the cash rather than performing oral sex on a daily basis. Xavier paid for air delivery on most of the items, for he was too excited to actually be buying new things to wait a week for delivery. Of course, the live deliveries had their own transport process.

The air-shipped items arrived Saturday not long after he finished his morning work routine. He rinsed himself off with the chilly hose water and dressed in his brand new blue jeans and "burned"-gold V-neck T-shirt. Both items hugged him snug enough to show his muscles' definition. He also wore his new Chippewa twelve-inch, handmade, slip-on western work boots, which were something he had been wanting for quite a long time. He set the rest of his and Wendy's presents under his bed, wrapped Olivia's and Brittany's presents, and set off toward the Kelly farm with his three best friends in tow.

He stopped for a brief respite at Catfish Cross and skipped a few stones in tribute to his normal routine. The dogs enjoyed playing in the tall grass around the pond, especially in Autumn when the blooms were drier and capable of tickling their faces. Valiant was his usual silly self and made Xavier chuckle a few times with his craziness.

Upon reaching the Kelly farm, he found Brittany atop a horse and working with three young-adolescent girls and one adolescent boy. She frequently taught dressage and English riding classes, either individually or in groups. Of course, any club member could seek her advice while working their horses; she tried to be easily approachable and readily accessible to all. He moved to the side of the pen and watched them practice. He kept a close eye on Valiant to make sure the ornery pooch did not decide to heckle the students, which had happened on a previous, embarrassing situation.

"Patricia, well done. You are looking good but, remember, your heels should not be touching the stirrups. Much better.

"Now, Harold. Let me see how she canters. Turn her toward me. Oh, you have been working quite a bit, I can tell. She is leading with the correct leg, now. Nicely done."

After that class, she had another one of her Basics courses. She asked Xavier if he wanted to help her, since children loved him so, and he agreed but only after rolling his eyes.

While he waited for them to arrive, he took his presents into the house and let Olivia know he was there. She was watching T.V. in the living room and stopped only long enough to wave and say hi. He was not surprised. She was a renowned couch potato on the weekends and was not about to turn off the device until she had something substantially better to do.

The introductory class had a good turn out, but it usually did. Brittany encouraged new riders and horse owners of all styles and ages to start with the two-month long study called Equine Basics, which, Xavier admitted, had become a comprehensive overview of horses. She touched a bit on every subject from husbandry, to vernacular, to history and culture, to handling

and grooming, to riding and exhibition sports. Her Basics course was so thorough, even other stables and clubs, the SPCA, and regional 4-H and Boy Scouts groups referred members to attend. A lot of her knowledge came from Xavier and his mother, which is why she always offered him a spot beside her in the class. That was her way of saying thank you. She also often showered him with verbal accolades, and that night was no different.

“And this man's name is Xavier Steele. He manages the Steelemour Ranch that you may have seen before you turned left onto the lane. If you had turned right at the crossroads, you would be visiting his impressive enterprise instead of mine.

“When it comes to ranching, farming, or homesteading, Xavier is the expert, a genuine agricultural renaissance man. For those of you who are 4-H, Boy Scouts, or interested in husbandry, pay close attention to this fellow. He is a real-life hands-on cowboy, shepherd, rancher, farmer, farrier, hunter, trapper, trainer, and general naturalist. Do not underestimate him because he is young or does not wear a cowboy hat and giant buckle—not usually—nor because he was raised east of the Mississippi. He is a master at riding western saddle and bareback, and I have not seen anything he has not been able to tame: land, animals, or women—ladies beware.”

The crowd laughed.

“He comes from a long line of ranchers and farmers. In fact, his extended family also currently: owns a huge horse farm in Tennessee that breeds, shows, and competes with both Quarter-horses and Andalusians; owns a three-hundred acre orchard not far outside Savannah; and—I am not joking—owns an old oyster farming and drudging empire in South Carolina. As for their cowboy-credibility: his mother's father was an NFR Saddle Bronc Riding World Champion, a three-time NFR Bareback Riding World Champion, and a *five-time* CMSA National Mounted Shooting Champion; and his mother's mother was a three-time regional Barrel Racing Champion. I know you already see the pattern, but there is more.

“Which brings us to his actual mother, Rebecca Steele, a local legend when it comes to anything equine.... she was a regional Bareback Riding and Barrel Racing Champion, a multiple regional Junior Grand Champion for Equitation—which judges the rider's riding ability and style—in Dressage, Saddle Seat, Hunter Seat, *and* Western riding styles—yes, Grand Champion in all four styles—and with Primera Contra la Línea, her prized Andalusian, became Grand Champion of the 1989 National Junior Jumper Championships *and* Silver-Medal winner in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics for Equestrian Jumping—yes, an Olympic Silver-Medalist. Anything else? Oh, yes!—she was also a doctor of veterinary medicine and mother of *five* beautiful children.

“I am sharing this information with such detail because I want you to realize how it is important to listen to his advice. All his family's knowledge and experience live on inside this man's head. He was involved with every aspect of his mother's life and learned from the best. Again, I warn you not to dismiss him because of his youth. He does not speak much but, when he does, he should be heard. He has learned from the best of the best in many different fields, and he has lived the life that most “authentic” Texas cowboys portray while line-dancing and shopping for fashion accessories. Most important of all, Xavier Steele is a kind and generous man with gorgeous blue eyes and a willingness to help anyone who asks—so do not be afraid to ask him.”

Brittany then, after unleashing the massive build-up onto the class of eighteen students, made a simple gesture toward Xavier, as if expecting him to follow with something equally poignant.

Xavier could not help but blush. He shot Brittany a playful glower then cleared his throat



and crossed his arms defensively. “What Brie was trying to say was: if you want to ask the trophy-less, ribbon-less, award-less, medal-less, and hat-less barn-rat a question, go right ahead.”

Everyone laughed.

In truth, Brittany had not embellished, especially not about his generous personality. He did enjoy working with the group. He was a helpful, genuine, sincere person who always encouraged others to learn and grow—a natural shepherd in the truest sense, even though he hated being called one. The children adored him; they always did.

Near the end of the class, the Augustan Equestrian Society arrived, a private English riding club built around the prestigious English Dressage Club and East Georgia Polo Club at the Augusta Academy. Current and former students filled out the society, but anyone was allowed to join, theoretically, if they passed a thorough dressage test and blackball vote. They fancied themselves the elite of horseback riders, though some of them were modest. The group often held exclusive gatherings and events at the Kelly farm, and the group was assigned their own stable, ring, and paddock for exclusive use.

Rachel Gambetta was a member of the Augustan Equestrian Society, so he was not surprised to see her arrive with her family. He tried to not become distracted by them, and he succeeded in remaining focused until Rachel approached the pen where the Basics class worked. Her short, curvy body was very tight and pleasantly developed, especially her lower half, but in a good way that obviously reflected both her breeding potential and long-refined athletic build. Xavier enjoyed every inch of her through her riding pants and form-fitting white shirt. He loved her strong, full thighs and how her calves flexed whenever she lifted onto the fronts of her feet to reach something that was just a little too tall for her short stature. Her C-cup breasts, her claim to fame since their appearance in seventh grade, were especially noticeable that night. The air was cool, and she had not yet put on the warm vest that hung folded in her hands, so her nipples pushed out stubbornly through both her bra and shirt. They rubbed against the cool steel rung of the pen's fence, which only made them firmer.

Xavier became so distracted with admiring her body, he did not realize the girth strap on the horse had accidentally twisted. He would not have noticed, either, if one of the nine-year old boys had not pointed it out.

“Isn't that buckle supposed to point down?”

Xavier felt like an idiot. Rachel laughed in the distance, too, which did not help him feel less foolish. He quickly corrected his mistake and congratulated the young boy for spotting it. About that time, Brittany approached and touched his arm.

“Xavier? I can finish the class. Why not speak to her while you have the opportunity?” Her magnificent smile warmed him. He thanked her, said goodbye to the boy at his side, and approached Rachel.

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously as she watched him approach. When he reached her side, she arched her brows and folded her arms.

“Nice job with the saddle.”

Xavier deflected with a short chuckle and propped one of his feet onto the fence. “Thanks. Did I impress you?”

“Sure did. Your name's... Xavier, right?”

She barely knew his name? Discovering that caused his cool demeanor to falter a bit, but he recovered in short order. “Yeh, Xavier Steele. We were friends in kindergarten and first grade, remember? My mother used to be a member of the equestrian society and dressage club, too. Is the society jumping tonight?”

She nodded and gestured over her shoulder. “Yeh, and I should go get ready.”

When she stepped back, Xavier leaned closer to the fence and laid his arms across the top bar. “Wait—uh—I wanted to ask if... if—uh—if you would like to... to go to the Autumn Dance?”

“With you!?”

Xavier stared, dumbfounded. The tone in her voice had given him the answer. Still, Rachel cleared her throat and stretched her head upward as if trying to loosen a tight neck muscle. She laughed softly then stepped up to the fence to put a comforting hand on his forearm.

“Xavier, of course I knew your name. Yes, I know you made it into the same school as me, and—yes—I remember being good friends with you in kindergarten... but.... Don't take this the wrong way, kay? We're from *way* different classes. I mean, my family are all doctors and surgeons. You—well—muck out the stalls of our horses. It's been too long, you know, and I don't think it would be a good idea if we confused that arrangement, kay? But, tell you what, you can stare at me as much and hard as you like, which I know you do, and I'll smile and maybe even parade a bit for you, because I know how much you love watching me. Just keep it at a distance, kay?”

Xavier was too shocked to answer. She patted his arm patronizingly then turned and walked back to her family's long trailer. Her swinging hips taunted him with every step.

After Rachel decimated his ego, Xavier retreated to the backyard and sat on the rear-porch's stairs. His dogs surrounded him, and Gambit, with his butterscotch nose and white paws, nuzzled Xavier's side. Kismet shouldered against his other side. The animals felt his pain and, for once, the pain was not physical. The three loyal companions kept him warm while he sat alone and listened to the commotions of the farm.

Eventually, everyone from the Basics class departed, and Brittany found him. She studied him from afar for a few seconds then smiled brightly and moved up next to him and his canines.

“You are probably wishing I would leave you alone.” She narrowed her eyes playfully and sat on the far side of Kismet. Valiant immediately rushed up to her side and tried to steal part of her attention from his sire. She took turns scratching each of their ears, and one of her hands slid over and cradled one of Xavier's. “But you know I cannot resist your eyes, right?”

As always, her gentle presence and glorious smile made him feel better. She winked at him playfully, and they both broke into laughter.

“Listen to me, Xavier: you are a special person. You are not lacking in any way and should never feel a need to earn or prove your worth to a girl. Girls should be proving their worthiness to stand by you, trust me. You are... a star, one of the brightest in the sky, you just have yet not realized you are. One day, the world of women will fawn at your feet just like they did over that English prince, William.”

He smiled sadly. “I haven't heard anything like that in a while. My mother used to tell me—you know I'm adopted, right?” She nodded. “Yeh, well, my mother used to tell me that I was—*heh*—a prince, a son of some special royal family—typical crap you tell an orphan to try to make them feel better. I was sick a lot as a child and unhappy, so she concocted a magical world where I was the long-lost ruler. For a while, though, I actually believed it, and I think I did because she was so sincere about it. Sometimes, I think she actually believed it, too. Crazy, huh?”

“Oh, really? She—she said that?” Brittany's smile faded slightly, but her eyes never wavered. She waved several locks of hair from her face and tilted her head aside. “No.... No, I

see nothing crazy about it. In fact, I think she might have known something we do not. Did you see yourself out in that pen tonight? When you spoke, even a casual word, you commandeered their full attention. Some people are born to rule, even if they are not born ruling. You know, there is a reason why I chose *you* to help me build my farming empire.” Her face brightened with another friendly wink.

Xavier laughed again and, finally, let go of what had happened with Rachel. He stood and offered her a hand up. “I brought gifts for you and Olivia, and I also wanted to ask you about something. Do you have time to relax a bit, or do you have to man the greenhouse?”

“Of course I have time for you. Besides, Gambit will let me know if a customer arrives, right Gambit?” The thick-maned collie barked and wagged his tail. He looked a little jealous of the attention Kismet and Valiant were receiving from her, so she bent down and showered him with a dozen quick kisses. The pooches were little love mooches.

They moved into the living room. Olivia was still on the couch, but she had dozed off with half her body hanging onto the floor. The house was noticeably cool, far cooler than the Steelemour house, but that was common for the Kelly household. The doors and windows in their home always were left wide open, all except for on the most frigid days of winter. He knew to never come to their home during the cold seasons without a jacket. He never asked them why; it was just one of their unique quarks with which he had fallen in love, even if it made his inhumanely hot body shiver.

Brittany nudged Olivia awake with her knee and told her to fetch drinks. Olivia groaned when Brittany turned off the T.V., and she complained all the way into the kitchen and back again. Meanwhile, Brittany retrieved a small basin of honey-scented water and two hand-towels.

“Would you mind if I wash myself while we speak?”

That was not the first time she had asked him such a question, and every time she did, he could barely resist grinning like the Cheshire cat. It was not like she undressed in front of him—she only rinsed her limbs and face—but, for some reason, the act of washing in any fashion seemed extremely erotic to him. Luckily for him, the Kelly's were habitual self-groomers. They “freshened up” several times each day. Of course, he told her he did not mind.

She sat on the couch, unbuttoned the first two buttons of her blouse, and rolled up her sleeves. Olivia handed out glasses of sweet tea then sat next to her sister. Xavier brought in the presents and positioned himself on an adjacent, back-less, two-person “love-seat.” Valiant tried to follow him in, but he quickly sent him back out the door. Although Brittany welcomed the dogs, he taught them to stay outside unless he expressly invited them in. Valiant still tested his boundaries.

Xavier rubbed his hands together anxiously. “Okay, so presents or business first?”

“Presents,” exclaimed Olivia with a short laugh. “Always presents first.”

“Sounds good to me. There’s no special occasion for these, so... just consider them late birthday presents for all the times I gave you cheap crap like wildflowers.”

Brittany clicked her tongue and shook her head, showing an over-exaggerated disproving stare. “My birthdays were always brightened by your gifts, especially the wildflowers.”

He chuckled and set one, small, three-inch by three-inch gift aside then pushed the other five in front of Olivia. “For the lady, O. I recommend this one first.”

“Will you stop calling me that!?” Olivia snickered and anxiously tore open the one he suggested. The gift contained a digital camera, a Nikon D90, which was intended for advanced hobbyists and mid-tier professionals; it was not cheap, and the ladies knew it was not.

Olivia broke into a fit of near-tears. She ran over and jumped on him, squeezing him

with a tight embrace. "I can't believe it! You remembered I said I wanted one of these? I needed a camera for my new photography class, too. Thank you!"

Brittany offered him warm praise while she washed her neck with the honeyed water. They both were shocked that he could afford any gifts, let alone expensive gifts, but they expressed their surprise with respect and genuine appreciation. He felt like a prince handing out gifts to his adoring and loyal admirers, for that was how they treated him.

Olivia returned to her seat and opened the other four presents, all of which complemented the camera. One item was a five-foot tripod mount, and the other three were medium-grade lenses: a micro lens, a long-range lens, and a wide-angle lens. Liv could not stop thanking him. She rushed him again with another round of hugs after opening the last present. The camera would not leave her hands for the rest of the afternoon, not even for a second.

When it was her turn, Brittany set down the wash cloth and dried her hands. Her gift looked small and simple from the outside, and it was no different from the inside. She unwrapped the present and found an octagonal purple-and-black marbled ceramic tile. As graceful as ever, she smiled largely and thanked him with a grateful tone, though she obviously did not understand what it signified.

Xavier chuckled and leaned onto the arm of his seat. "You're a sweetheart, Brie. Not an ounce of disappointment in you, even though you got a rock and your sister received five gifts special to her."

Brittany glanced downward, finally exhibiting a sullen sign. She shrugged and said it was a beautiful rock. Xavier laughed again.

"It's more than a rock, Brie. You know all those left-over water pipes you have from me fixing up the greenhouse and stables?"

She nodded.

"And do you remember last year when you saw that advertisement for an in-ground jacuzzi pool? You said you wished you had one?"

Her face brightened with exhilaration, but she only nodded, serenely.

"I bought a palette of those tiles, along with bags of cement, pumps, sealant, and jet diffusers. Well, if you tell me where you'd like it, I'll build you one. I can't promise all the tiles will be perfectly aligned, but I promise it'll work and not leak."

"Oh, Xavier, I... I... you have touched my soul with this great, considerate gift. I do not know what else to say except I love and shall cherish it and thank you a dozen times over." She smiled wide as the horizon and let loose a small, excited squeal. "Ooo! I can hardly wait! Thank you." She hugged him tightly and kissed his forehead. "When do you think you will be able to install it? Before winter!?"

"Well, I'll start right away, but I'm not sure if I'll finish before then. I'll try."

Brittany jostled up and down in her seat a few times, revealing the childlike spirit nestled inside her graceful womanly body. It was a crucial component of her overall style.

After several more moments passed with them raving about their gifts, Brie finally calmed, resumed rinsing herself with the wet cloth, and asked Xavier about the business he had earlier mentioned.

He rubbed his hands together and then rubbed them on his knees. "Well, okay, I'm not sure where to begin."

"Start, and the beginning will come." Brie laughed, but a sad undercurrent could be heard under the laugh. "That was a lesson from my father, a wise man."

Xavier noted the subtle inflection in her tone for later discussion. Suddenly, "I'm starting

my own herds,” flew the words nearly all at once. He was quite excited. “I mean, I do so much work, I figured I might as well start investing into my future while I’m at it.”

“Definitely, X,” mumbled Olivia while she fumbled with batteries for her camera. “You do everything on that farm. They all should be yours.”

“Yeh... but they’re not, so I decided to change that. I came into a little cash, so I decided to get starters for my own herds. Plus, if a couple extra lambs miss getting put on the Steelebour books, no one would know. Technically, that’s stealing....”

Brittany shook her head. “Perhaps legally, but I think even that could be challenged if necessary. You are owed a large debt by your father and, if a few of the babies that you birth are misplaced while you are tending them for free, I would argue the thefts are actually reclaimed goods for unpaid services.”

Xavier nodded. “Right. Besides, he wouldn’t even know they’re missing, anyway. I’ve been thinking about this for a while now, and I’ve been watching the auctions and trades. I always liked Awassi sheep ever since I discovered them at the Ag fair in 2006, and....” He looked right at Brittany. “I always loved Andalusians.”

Her head tilted aside, and her voice lifted in tone. “You are going to raise horses?”

Xavier grinned. “Like you said, it’s in my blood. Well, it’s in my family’s blood. A homesteader in Montana is selling ten Awassi sheep, only recently purchased, after deciding he would rather have goats. I checked them out. They’re young, pure-blooded, registered, and from healthy parents. The one ram’s sire even won a few local 4-H shows as a lamb. Well, I bought them, and they’re on the way here.”

The women smiled.

“I know, it’s dangerous buying without seeing, but I’ll accept the risk. Since it’s a homesteader, the normal risk of shadiness due to ranching business shouldn’t be so high.

“As for the horses... Well, my uncle and cousin—the breeders on my mom’s side—always offered to help my parents get into horse-breeding, but Dad was never interested. He didn’t like Mom’s side much, probably because they were more successful. Anyway, I called Uncle Win the other day and asked him for advice, especially since Andalusians aren’t too common here in the U.S. Brie, he made me an *unbelievable* offer.”

He rubbed his hands together again but then stopped and looked at Olivia. “Liv, have you heard of Primera Contra?” She snapped a picture of Xavier then shook her head. “She was my mother’s horse when she was young, and she was a multi-grand-champion and won in the Olympics. She is one of the biggest names in U.S. Andalusian history and came from a long line of great Spanish horses; her lineage can be tracked back centuries.” He shifted his focus back to Brie, who would be more likely to appreciate the significance of what he was about to say. “Uncle Win said he’d give me Primera Contra’s remaining unsold descendants.”

“Oh, was he serious!?”

“Very! Apparently, he had been harvesting her eggs and transferring them to mares for breeding, which is allowed now by most registries, so long as they can be DNA verified, which they can be. He’s willing to give me two mares from her, a foal and three fillies from those two mares, and, best of all, a four-year old colt of Primera’s that’s already won several first place ribbons for Confirmation and Showmanship.

“On top of all that, he has a new prize mare, a young five-year old from a separate European champion bloodline, one he imported straight from Spain, that Tina, my cousin, rode in the Del Mar Annuals and won third in Jumping, second in Hunting, and first in Confirmation. Tina has registered to ride her again in the NEC competition this year instead of her own horse;

they're *that* impressed with her. Well, Win has agreed to transfer her eggs into a surrogate of my choosing once for free, after the NEC, and to give me a live-bred foal three-to-four years from now, to my colt. He said Tina and he plan on pushing her in the circuits pretty hard, so there's a good chance she'll make a name for herself by then. If they're investing that much into that mare, then she must have a lot worth investing in."

Olivia set the camera in her lap and shook her head. "Wait wait wait. A colt, two mares, three fillies, a foal—a total of six horses from an Olympic bloodline—and two breed-ins... for free?" She cocked an eyebrow and leered at Xavier. "I don't know ranching, but that sounds like a shit ton of lost money. Why would he do that?"

Brittany answered first. She knew exactly why. "Because he owes Xavier a lot more than that. Primera Contra, by all rights, was supposed to have been Xavier's—it was declared in Rebecca's will. Instead, Jacob shipped her out to Winston's ranch, where she became the headline of his Andalusian operation."

Xavier added, "Right. Plus... it wasn't completely free. I had to negotiate a bit for all of that. I promised to breed back twice in the far future from a descendant and at a time of his choosing, I promised to break and train two fous for him every six months for two years for basic trail riding and dressage, and I had to pay for transportation. It's still an amazing deal for me—the breeding rights to the champion bloodline from Spain is especially important since I have so many of the same lineage. Good, fresh blood is important for the next generation; the Primera line has been back-bred too many times through the past hundred years. Unfortunately, there's a problem, which is why I'm here."

Brittany nodded knowingly and patted his knee. She answered sympathetically, "Jacob."

"Exactly. If Jacob found my sheep or horses out in the pastures, I'm not sure what he'd do. He might just shoot them all to be spiteful. He rarely does much more than monitor the tanks and seed the fields, but it's risky. I was... hoping you and I could make an arrangement, something that would benefit both of us."

Brittany set down the cloth, reclined in the couch, and pulled her ankles up under her. "Now, I am even more curious than before. You know I have always appreciated your advice."

"Well, I hope you're not offended, but I was checking your boundaries to see exactly where they lie. You own sixty-seven acres, but you're only using forty or so since the top twenty-seven-ish are low-lying wild woods and prone to high water saturation.

"I would like to let professional loggers come in and clear it. If we give them half of it as lumber, it should offset the cost of clearing the floor and grinding the stumps plus leave a profit to reduce additional costs. Once clear, you'll have fertile, moist, barely hilly land.

"I suggest turning it into a small savanna orchard; a savanna is a forest where the trees are spread wide enough to allow sun through the canopy. Keeping the fruiting trees spread like a savanna will allow both sunlight and ground growth, and the combination should reduce water saturation to healthier—uh—more pleasant levels. You could use it as a pick-your-own orchard product to complement your greenhouse, or a landscaped ride-and-picnic trail-ride through a fruiting savanna countryside, or both.

"I'll design, plot, and plant the orchard, as well as manage the deforestation, and care for and fertilize, with the farm's waste, the new trees for free every year, if you'll let me fence the perimeter and use it as a permanent wood pasture for my herd, and let me use a stable and pen for my animals. I'll also seed the grounds with cover that is appealing to riders as well as healthy for grazing, to benefit us both. It could become a beautiful countryside trail-riding course with thick grass and roaming sheep."

Brittany narrowed her eyes while she considered the offer, but it did not take long for her to break into an enthusiastic expression. “I love the idea, Xavier. You are brilliant. I have wanted to try to appeal more to casual riders, but the farm has developed too much of a professional and elitist following. This would appeal to both bases but especially the casual trail riders, and it could complement the greenhouse business at the same time. It is the perfect solution.” Xavier breathed a sigh of relief, but she then added, “One problem, though. I cannot spare an entire habitat zone for your animals. I only have two zones, each with a sixteen-stall stable, a small feeding pen, and a lunging ring, not counting the indoor riding ring and outdoor tracks. My zones are mostly occupied—occupied or reserved.”

Xavier had to think about that problem for a minute. He even stood and paced back and forth a bit, which gave Olivia plenty of opportunities to photograph him from all angles with her new camera; she did. Finally, he sat down again and leaned onto his knees. “How much money do you have for investing into these renovations? As you said, the new orchard is going to attract more business, so you might want to consider building an extra habitat zone—maybe two. I think it’s a sound investment; having real hacking, riding, and jumping trails through an edible forest will bring in business from all over. Build two more zones, and I would need only half of one for both my herds. You could easily double, if not triple, your income and start holding local, maybe even regional, events here—become a centerpiece of the community. That’s what I recommend, but it depends on your available resources, though.”

Brittany said the farm was paid off, so, if she did not have enough in her savings, she could even loan against it. Xavier agreed, so long as her loan did not extend beyond her assets’ liquidation value. She added that she would also like an additional greenhouse built in addition to the two new habitat zones. She asked Xavier if he would oversee the implementations on her behalf, especially since he knew a lot of connections in the various local labor and agricultural markets. Xavier agreed.

“Xavier, I think I should pay you. You have been my farm adviser and, in many ways, manager for quite a while. Yes, I oversee the day to day operations, but the strategic analyses, planning, and management has all been you for several years now. Would you... would you accept the role of being my Stable Manager? I would not expect the job to detract from your current duties; they would be afforded priority over those here.”

“Well... of course! However, don’t pay me, not right now. Let my salary, at least for a while, be paid in the permanent grazing and stabling access for my herd, plus feed for them. That’s only fair; those things aren’t cheap. Agreed?”

Brittany nodded, and they sealed the deal with a tight hug. It was his favorite way to seal deals.

Xavier spent the remaining weekend on his newly purchased laptop and prepaid cellular phone, making initial inquiries and designs for the work. He also began conceptualizing a ranch name and brand for his new herds. Thanks to his homework, the Steelemour Ranch, the Kelly Equestrian Center, and his incoming herds, he had no time to do anything but work from well before sunrise to long after sunset. He did not mind the extra stress—to the contrary, it excited him—because, for the first time, the heavy workload was actually for himself.

## Chapter Five

Halloween was only a few days away when Xavier finished the jacuzzi-pool for Brittany. He had worked on it every weekend, plus several extra hours throughout the weekdays. Brittany and he decided to build it inside the new greenhouse they were also constructing, turning it into a lagoon-like bath. Since she planned for the second greenhouse to be a private growing area and not for customer traffic, the pool would not be a public hazard. However, in the days prior to Halloween, the eight-foot long by five-foot wide by four-foot deep square pool stood open in the east yard. Construction workers were just beginning to construct the second greenhouse around it.

The Kelly Equestrian Center was quite a busy site. A construction crew was building the new greenhouse, a second construction crew was building the two new habitat zones, and a timber company was harvesting and clearing the northern woods.

Xavier's new herds were temporarily crammed into six stalls, which meant extra attention and work had to be dedicated to ensuring healthy exercise and cleaning schedules. On top of that, a week earlier, his uncle had sent two young horses to be broken and trained, per their agreement, which occupied two more of Brittany's stalls. He had forgotten to consider where he would stable them, so he had been forced to overbook another stall, which required even more attention and work to safely manage. To make life even more stressful for him, fate had continued to plague him with headaches that steadily worsened and increased in frequency. He had also been suffering recurring fevers.

He showcased the jacuzzi to Brittany. She was impressed and praised him. However, his head was aching badly, so irritability blocked him from enjoying her kind words. He demonstrated how it worked then emptied and dried it. His insides felt frustrated, anxious, and hungry. The cravings teased him with images of Brittany naked and fantasies of throwing her in the pool to have his way with her. Those strange but powerful urges haunted him. He could not tolerate being around her, not in that condition, so he asked if he could take a shower in their house, just to have an excuse to leave. She agreed politely, as always.

Xavier turned on the shower and set it hot enough to steam up the room. He quickly stripped and stepped inside. The water felt good and partially soothed his aching head. He stood under the flow with his palms pressed to the wall and did not move for several long minutes. He wished he could stay there forever. The burden of running two farms while attending school was too much. The labor was not the problem. He could do eight hours of work in eighty minutes, so long as no bystanders were within sight to limit his use of super-human abilities. Most of his stress came from the thinking, analyzing, managing, and decision-making tasks. Worse still was how he had to constantly manage his time and schedule every minute far in advance to ensure two time-sensitive objectives did not conflict. Worst of all was his sickness and vicious mood swings, which made him perpetually pained, afraid of losing self-control, and rife with guilt for his inexplicable sadistic impulses.

He stepped out fresher but no less tense. He felt a need for something, but he did not know what was needed, which served as additional frustration.

He dressed and went to the downstairs living room to relax. He sat in the dark and closed his eyes, hoping to fall asleep and wake in a better mood. He had not been sitting for longer than two minutes when Olivia trounced into the living room and turned on the television. It was the weekend, after all, and she had a week's worth of missed programs to watch.



She wore a pair of denim shorts that were cut low on the waist yet high on the thighs, leaving a short rise and not much else. Her red cotton T-shirt was loose and hand-cropped to an inch above her belly button. She smelled like bananas, her favorite snack and lotion scent. He could also smell her natural scents, especially her feminine scent thanks to those shorts, which caused his heart to race madly. The headache intensified.

“Do you have to watch your shows right now?”

She propped her bare feet upon the coffee table and grinned. “Yup. You know the rules. I record the shows all week. I watch them all weekend. Accept it.”

He groaned and huffed. The advertisements on the television were obnoxious and stupid. Of course, so were the shows. The voices made his head ache worse. Finally, he could not take anymore. He sat forward and grunted.

“Turn it off!”

He was surprised when the T.V. fell silent. She turned it off without argument, which seemed really strange. He remembered several times when she and Brittany butted heads over her weekend T.V. watching habit; she never surrendered to her sister.

Olivia huffed, puffed, and groaned, obviously frustrated, but she did not turn on the television.

*‘Strange.’*

It immediately reminded him of the Patrick incident and how she asked him in an odd way if he was ordering or asking her to dump Patrick. She had dumped him, and now she had broken her fiercely guarded weekend ritual. That caused Xavier to think back over years of memories for other incidents where he made a clear demand, even a small, insignificant one like telling her to pass the table salt. No matter if large or small, she never once refused any direct request, at least not that he could recollect. While most of the past situations were trivial and would not likely have caused a confrontation anyway, one other incident clearly stuck out in his mind.

When they were ten years old and had been left alone for an hour while Brittany ran to the grocery store, Xavier had become curious from seeing a naked woman in a porn magazine and wanted to see Olivia naked. She had said she wanted to play house, but Xavier overrode her and demanded they play “hospital.” He had laid out the rules rather aggressively: she was the patient, and he was the doctor; he was allowed to move and speak, she was not; his eyes could be open, hers had to be closed, and so on. He had listed his expectations one by one as if they were rules written in an official instruction manual, and then he had used them to strip and touch her all over, even in places he knew she did not want him to see or touch. She had not defied a single expressly stated rule.

The pattern was consistent, but he did not believe it or understand why it would be true. No, if he was to believe it, he had to confirm it. The conflicting urges inside him, which scrapped for his attention, wanted very much to confirm the pattern. The rest of him was happy to agree.

Xavier stood slowly and walked to the doorway leading out of the living room. He paused and inhaled slowly, feeling a sudden rush of ambition. He hoped very much that her pattern, for whatever reason, turned out to be true, in spite of his disbelief. “Liv, come here.”

She slapped the remote controller against the sofa, huffed once more, and then went to where he stood.

He tried to suppress his rapidly expanding excitement. “Follow me.”

“Where? Why? I just want to watch my shows.”

He did not answer her. He simply turned, walked up the stairs, and entered her bedroom. When he turned around, he found her standing next to him. She was obeying him, just as he suspected. He could not help but grin, even though he knew those commands were not controversial enough to provide a real test.

“Okay, I’m here. What are we doing?”

*‘Time for the first real test.’* He had to concentrate to keep his excitement from changing his voice. “Liv, shut up... be silent. Do *not* say another word.”

Her eyes narrowed, and her gaze intensified. However, she did not yell, curse, or say anything. She crossed her arms and screamed with her eyes, but her mouth remained closed. He began to wonder if this was a dream world, for, if what seemed to be true continued being true, he could not begin to fathom why. Why would she do everything he commanded? It made no sense.

He shut the door and locked it. When he did, her eyes widened, and their intensity transformed instantly into panic. Nevertheless, she remained silent. He inhaled another deep breath and continued the test.

“Lie down on your bed, on your back.”

She stared at him for several slow seconds. The panic was already changing again. Next, it turned into pleading looks of desperation. Her jaw muscles flexed, but her lips did not part. She paled slightly and looked more than a little uncomfortable, but, eventually, she backed up and slid onto the bed as directed.

By then, Xavier was convinced. He was immensely elated yet, at the same time, insanely confused. He walked over to the bed and crawled in next to her, propping up onto his elbow.

“You will play a game with me. The game is: I am a boy playing alone in his room, and you are my blonde toy, my Barbie. You will not speak or make noise, and you will stay however I position you—you cannot move by your own will. If I touch your nose, you will say... you will say, ‘Oh, I like that, do it again.’ Otherwise, you say and do nothing.”

Olivia paled further, and her eyes shimmered with anxiety. However, she did not object or break the rules by gesturing. To ensure she was compliant, Xavier reached over and gently tapped her nose. Her lips tensed into a snarl as she took a sharp breath and hissed flatly, “Oh, I like that, do it again.” Although she was obedient, she clearly was not happy. He, on the other hand, was ecstatic and somewhat overwhelmed by all the possibilities the new discovery afforded him.

At that point, he no longer cared to hesitate or be tentative. It was time to see how far this peculiar obedience would go. He leaned down, pushed on her chin until her mouth fell open, and sealed his lips over hers. He felt a wave of trembles ripple through her body, but, otherwise, she remained still. He shoved his tongue into her mouth and explored it aggressively. She accepted it without reaction. He straightened after a minute and gently tapped her nose.

“Oh, I like that, do it again.”

He grabbed the collar of her shirt and tore it open as if it were merely a Kleenex. She gasped—a violation of the rules!—then quickly fell silent and still again. Her small, almost B-cup breasts shifted rapidly up and down in tandem with her quickening breaths. Her pale skin caused her pink nipples to stand out clearly; they were adorable, tiny nubs. He could smell her pussy much stronger now; she was aroused, and the shorts did little to obscure her humid aroma.

Xavier grabbed her breasts, one in each hand, and squeezed. The muscles in her neck tensed slightly, but the rest of her remained stoic. The flesh felt strangely cool and reminiscent of the night in his loft. Indeed, she was unusually cool everywhere. He fondled and caressed

every which way, already drunk on the power. When his hand touched her nipples, her entire body flinched then shuddered, as if struck by a powerful sensation. He did it again, and she responded similarly. Her nipples seemed especially sensitive. He pinched one of them between two fingers and gradually pulled harder and harder until she winced, forcing her to violate the rules again. It was a good method for testing the limits of her obedience; he had to pull fairly hard to cause her to break character. After finishing the experiment, he tapped the tip of her nose.

Olivia's voice was less resolute than before, but she complied. "Oh, I like that. Do it again."

A sadistic grin bloomed across his face. Once again, the young man's normal self had unknowingly been usurped by a stronger power. He stretched her arms straight above her head and left them there. He then moved to her shorts, unbuckled their red belt, undid the button and zipper, and worked them inch-by-inch down her knees. Her pussy was covered by a thin, delicate, triangle of blondish hairs which darkened into a vertical, medium-golden-brown strip down the center. At the bottom-most part of her crotch, the tight area that sloped down toward her ass, a thin, semi-transparent, semi-white liquid seeped slowly but steadily from her vaginal crack. The amount leaking out of her was more than he expected from a woman, enough to see a visible, albeit small and slow, flow of feminine juices. Plenty of pornographic stories spoke of women pouring wetness out of themselves, but that usually required interacting with their pussy in some way, not merely removing their panties. The smell of her pussy bellowed up and enveloped him. His body reflexively inhaled through his nostrils, instinctively reveling and cataloging the uniquely identifiable fragrance. He intimately knew her raw scent, now. He would never forget it.

Xavier fondled and played with her pussy just like a real kid might play with a real toy doll. He was enthralled by the look, design, texture, and temperature. He expected her to be hot and humid down below, as was commonly ascribed to pussies in porn magazines. Instead, she was cool, cooler than the rest of her flesh. However, she was certainly wet; her tight clam never stopped trickling, and the mattress under her fast became damp and discolored in a small circle. The odor intoxicated him. He lowered his face until his nose nested in the crevice of her mound then inhaled deeply, pulling as much of her inside as possible.

The savage urgings inside roared to life and overwhelmed him. He wanted nothing but her: to smell her, to touch her, to drink her, to devour her, to fuck her, to ravage her, to tear her apart. He swallowed down a mouthful of her vaginal glaze and reveled in its flavor. He yearned to bury himself in her crotch. He nearly bit her; instead, Xavier unfastened his jeans and slid them down as fast as possible. Olivia's eyes widened into full circles when she glimpsed the size of his cock.

Xavier had lost all hope of control by then. The internal urges had wholly consumed him, and now, they possessed absolute control. They, unlike his true self, were not docile nor polite. He hoisted her legs into the air and pressed them up toward her head, folding her in half. Like a bull, he rammed into her with a single, powerful thrust. She was tighter than he ever imagined a pussy could be; her hole would have strained to accommodate a pencil. He felt her flesh stretch, split, and then tear around his monstrous size. The smell of blood mixed with her natural aroma and only made him more ravenous.

Olivia forgot the rules. She yelped at first then quickly smothered herself with a pillow. When he thrust a second time, her torso arched up until she rested on the back of her head, and she squeezed the pillow with two white-knuckle fists. Color and warmth returned to her body in

a matter of seconds, but Xavier's brain was too preoccupied to rationalize the odd biological transition. She clamored through the first two dozen lunges then fell into a fit of steady whimpers and grunts. Unseen tears poured from her face and soaked the edges of her pillow.

Xavier gripped her calves and pushed down until her ankles—not her toes—touched the mattress beside her ears. Her belly distended and swelled with each forward drive. The girl, seeming tiny and frail under him, jostled back and forth as he rammed the back wall of her canal. He felt great, and he loved that she did not.

Suddenly, the band of flesh that belted around the bottom portion of his shaft inflated inside of her, becoming, in a fraction of a second, nearly an inch larger and wider than a softball. She shrieked and tried to squirm, but the knot of flesh secured her in place and caused any attempts to retreat from his groin to hurt terribly. Jets of hot semen, far hotter than any normal human, splashed like waves into the back of her vagina and cascaded down her channel. The semen pained her, it was so hot, but she could do nothing but lie still as possible and pray for an end.

Xavier's entire body swelled and tightened into knots; every muscle expanded and tensed. He growled at first, but then the growl evolved into a primal, bestial roar that literally shook the walls. A roaring lion might not have rivaled him. His fingers dug into her calves with uncontrolled might; his nails pierced her flesh and drew up to the surface a series of tiny crescents of blood.

The orgasm did not end until forty-five seconds, fourteen high-pressure eruptions, and nearly two cups of semen later. The knot prevented all but several trickles of semen to escape. The rest of the fluids, his and hers, was securely trapped inside and expanded her already hyper-extended canal. Her abdomen felt extremely bloated and tight. In her mind, she imagined herself popping like a bottle of well-shook champagne the instant his knot relaxed. The last thing she expected was for him to pull away her pillow and tap the end of her nose, but he did.

Olivia's voice wavered when she spoke, and her lips trembled. She was afraid what he would do if she said it, and she was afraid of what he would do if she did not say it. When she took too long to answer, he tapped her nose again. His club-like penis remained buried knot-deep inside her body and ground in slow, wide circles. "O-ooh... I like that... Do—do it... again." She knew what would happen next, and it did.

Once again, Xavier plowed her as if she were one of his fields. Olivia did not believe her body could expand any further, not so full and distended as she felt, but, somehow, it did. During the second reaming, his knot let out only a fraction of the semen he had dumped into her. The rest churned and sloshed inside as he pounded her womb. She was so sore, she thought she might vomit each time he struck another blow. Nonetheless, like a tough farm girl, she endured.

His second orgasm's seed was not so hot as the first. For that, Olivia was very grateful. The first had felt like she had been filled to the brim with steaming liquid. The second was like water from a faucet, hot but bearable.

Immediately after the second orgasm, the strange wave of impulses that had consumed Xavier receded back into his depths, which left him with a new perspective on the situation. He saw his best and only friend pinned beneath his massive frame like a rabbit caught by a lion. Her legs were smeared red in places by blood, and a small portion of the mattress below her was stained crimson.

Surprised by the view, Xavier dropped her legs and recoiled from her ruined body with the intent to stand, possibly flee. Unfortunately, his knot had not yet released, so when he retreated backwards, the massive bulge lodged against her entrance and nearly, literally, split her

like an overgrown babe. She screeched louder than ever before and threw herself down toward his body just to try to relieve the pain. Her will for the rules had finally broke.

Frantically and desperately, she rapidly cried loudly, “Stop no-no-no, don't move! Oh god please wait.” Her hands dropped down, and her quivering fingers scratched at his thighs, trying to find a grip on his smooth, hard mass by which she could hold him in place. Her ankles locked behind him and squeezed.

Xavier froze like a deer in headlights. He wanted to run away but could not, at least not right away. The panic kept him from thinking like he should. Olivia stared up at him with teary eyes, and he could do nothing but remain on his knees and return the uncomfortable stare. She cried, moaned, and moved her hands to guard her mons; the pain lingered and did not go away. The unrelenting discomfort caused the young lady's fingers to tremble over top her crotch, and nothing could be done to alleviate her condition. After what felt like half an hour, his knot shrunk, and his erection withered.

He pulled from her right away, releasing a gush of white fluids. Once on his feet, he yanked up his pants and stumbled for the door. He put his hand on the handle then stopped.

“I'm sorry, Liv.”

He fled from her room and sped down the stairs. His headache had faded. His fever had disappeared. He felt better than ever before, but he felt worse than ever before, too. He could not understand what was happening inside, and it terrified him.

He found Brittany downstairs, in the kitchen, but did not stop when she called his name. He ran out the door and dashed home. Gambit, Kismet, and Valiant chased after him. Xavier felt horrible. He spent the rest of the day either panicking or hating himself.

No matter how badly he had felt the day before, the remorse and regret disappeared altogether when he encountered Olivia in the forest the following morning. He was retreating to his usual clearing inside the woods, when he found her standing, seemingly waiting for him.

He was surprised to see her dressed and walking. He expected her to be in bed, or a hospital, recovering—his mind had conjured all sorts of horrible scenarios throughout the previous evening. Her movements were slower and less flamboyant than usual, but, otherwise, she seemed fine. She did not become angry, fearful, or mad, although he did notice her tense upon first spotting him.

The two talked and walked casually through the woods for nearly twenty minutes. Within ten minutes after encountering her, the fever, headaches, and primal impulses surged through his body. After twenty minutes, he surrendered to his wants and, suddenly, without warning, spun on Olivia and pinned her against a nearby tree. She gasped and struggled at first. However, after a very brief contest of strengths, she submitted. She did not look shocked, offended, or angry, only afraid and a little irritated. Of course, amid the heat of the passion, those details did not matter to Xavier.

He forced her clothes off, and tore half of them in the process, then undid his pants and removed the post he would soon bury in her. His mind was already consumed by his body's need.

She saw the change in his eyes, but she also knew it was still him. She figured that she might reach him if she could just catch his attention. When he pinned her flat onto the ground and tried to hoist her legs, she palmed his chest so hard it actually hurt and lifted him partially off of her. He was impressed that a human possessed the strength to budge him, but it did not deter him.

“Xavier, stop! I'm still hurt and sore! Think!”

Her plan backfired. The mentioning of soreness only enticed the sadistic binge controlling her best friend.

Over the following two hours, she lost both her anal and oral virginity, and the sex craze did not leave him until he orgasmed for a third time in her vagina, despite her best efforts to appeal to his usual compassions.

During the two hour long sexual episode, Xavier could only minimally extrapolate what he perceived around him. Despite the limited perception, he noticed a peculiar behavior on Olivia's part, other than her mysteriously cool body. She repeatedly hugged his head with her hands, as if trying to make him surrender by squeezing his temples. At first, during the anal raping, he thought she was trying to hurt him then, near the end, believed she was actually caressing and cradling the sides of his face. However, after he finished molesting her mouth and started the third round with her pussy, she returned her hands to the side of his head and continued the odd behavior. By then, it did not seem like she was trying to attack or pet him but, rather, simply massage his temples. It was very strange, but, while in the middle of sex, he did not care enough to consider it.

After the third release, he returned to his normal senses, and the headache and fever, which had bothered him since waking that morning, rescinded rapidly. Suddenly, he was his old self again. He apologized profusely, but the words felt impotent and incapable of expressing how truly remorseful he felt. *'She doesn't believe me. How could she? Not for the second time!'*

Surprisingly, when Olivia had stopped weeping and recovered some strength, she accepted his apology and seemed understanding. The forgiveness was unbelievable, especially for Olivia. Brittany seemed the type of personality able to forgive anyone for anything; Olivia was a grudge-keeper, so why was she so willing to forgive in this case? It made no sense. Nothing seemed to make sense to him anymore.

He refused to believe her. *'No, she can't be sincere. It's impossible, not after doing this to her twice.'* Yet, in every way he could see, she seemed genuinely accepting of his attacks, albeit annoyed and slightly bitter. Whatever her reasoning, she obviously lacked the willingness to hold him accountable. Therefore, on her behalf, he silently resolved to punish himself and in no way accept his own behavior, even if she had. He had to punish himself for his own sanity, too. Despite how illogical that thought process sounded in his own head, he could not help but feel like he needed to punish his body because the body no longer seemed to be him. He felt split, as if his conscious and instincts had become mutually exclusive entities. The young farmer had rapidly developed a profound and kindred pity for Dr. Jekyll.

He kept her company despite how horrible it felt to be in her presence and to see the damage he had done to her. They talked for hours and she, like a saint of mercy, treated him as if he was still a close friend. She initiated conversations, and she cracked jokes and laughs. When he became despondent from overwhelming guilt, she slapped his shoulder and told him to quit being such a downer. Olivia behaved in every way as if she truly and completely believed him when he told her he could not control himself, but such reactions were not what society told him to expect in such situations. The feminist dogma and anti-rape lectures were as common, if not more so, than the anti-drug and anti-drunk-driving campaigns combined. The entire world did not accept any excuse for a single instance of such behavior, let alone two... so why did she?

He wondered if she might not be suffering from some sort of psychological breakdown or, possibly, a detachment from reality. After all, her lifelong friend had raped all three of her

orifices with a dick the size of a champagne bottle. Nothing made sense to him anymore....

*'Is this what it feels like to go insane? Am I going insane?'*

After several hours of sitting, shifting, wincing, laughing, and talking, she rose to her feet, looking very much like a newborn foal, and picked up her clothes. She asked if he would like to come and watch T.V. with her. Stunned with disbelief by her tolerance, he answered with only a shake of the head.

He helped her walk home then fled to his house. He found his father at the chicken coup, where he was busy collecting eggs from their Rhodes Island Reds. After inhaling a deep breath to calm his terror, he stepped closer to Jacob and waited. He did not need to do anything else. Jacob spotted him within a minute and barked a threat at him. For Olivia, since she did not have the heart to punish him for his wrongs, he turned toward, not away from, his father and said what he had thought for many, many, years.

"Go fuck yourself, you drunk piece of shit!"

By the end of the night, Xavier bled far more than had Olivia from both nights combined. He crawled to the center of the barn, to the bottom of the ladder leading up to his loft, and passed out.

*Bang bang bang! Bang bang bang bang bang!*

Brittany and Olivia woke to rapid, non-stop rattles on their door.

"Miss Kelly! Liv! Help!"

It was Wendy's voice. She sounded hysterical.

Brittany ran down the stairs as an unsettling feeling of déjà vu rippled up her spine. The last person to pound on their door in such a way had been Xavier. He was seven years old the last time it happened, and she had found him in a fit of tears with blood on his hands and knees. He was upset because his mother had fallen and would not wake up. The vivid details of that night raced through her mind while she rushed for the door.

The surreal sense of repetition worsened when she opened the door and found Xavier's fourteen-year old sister in a state near hysteria. She wore only a thin white night-shirt and baby-blue boxer-shorts, and her bare feet were stained greenish-brown from running through the meadow. Her hands and knees were painted dark red with a familiar, thick liquid, and her eyes and nose were swollen and pink.

Olivia stumbled down the stairs behind Brittany and gasped upon spotting Wendy's condition.

"Wendy? Wh—."

"Miss Kelly, I don't know what to do! Xavier's hurt bad and won't wake up!"

Brittany quailed. "Wh-what is wrong with him? What happened? How is he hurt!?"

"I found him in the barn on the floor. He's... he's—oh god, Dad!—I think so-someone killed him!"

"WHAT!?" barked Brittany. She slung Wendy aside and blasted forward in a full run toward her diesel, Volkswagen convertible. Wendy and Olivia chased after, but neither were as fast she. She cleared all five of the front-porch steps with a single stride. By the time they opened their car doors, the vehicle was already starting to move.

"Tell me what you saw, exactly."

Wendy cried and slapped the back of Brittany's seat. "I told you! I saw him on the ground! He was covered in blood and wouldn't wake up when I shook him."

"Was he breathing? Was he!?"

“I don't know! I think so. Yes! I saw dust moving in front of his face, so yeh. Oh god, Xavier!”

Olivia turned around in her seat and reached back toward Wendy. She petted her head with a reassuring hand. “It'll be okay, Wendy.”

Wendy bent forward and buried her hands between her knees. She screamed angrily then straightened and wailed, “No it won't! We can't go to the hospital or call 911, that's why I needed help. Xavier can't go to the doctors.”

The inside of the Volkswagen fell silent for a moment while Brittany and Olivia puzzled over a response. Finally, Olivia asked why.

Wendy cried some more and hugged her knees to her chest. “Because, he can't! He's never been to a doctor! He's not normal....”

Silence.

“Hold on,” warned Brittany a second before hitting the fifteen-foot long, one-car wide, old stone bridge spanning Ashfield River. The beetle popped into the air and flew several yards before returning hard to the gravel road. Once passed, Brittany shifted up the gears and pushed for the vehicle's maximum speed.

They came to a sliding stop that would have impressed Hollywood's boldest stunt drivers. Her heart paused when she stepped out of the car and found a bloody trail in the stony ground where Xavier had drug himself into the barn. Gambit met Brittany with worried barks at her car door and escorted her inside. Her heart did not beat again until she was kneeling beside his mangled body and saw, for certain, the movements of his lungs. She found him face-down at the bottom of the ladder to his loft.

Olivia stopped halfway into the barn, unable to move closer to the mess of flesh and blood that barely resembled her friend. “Holy shit! Is—is he...?”

Wendy sat on her knees at the doorway and bawled.

“He's alive.”

“How did he get all those leaves on him?” asked the younger Kelly sister.

His back was covered from neck to waist by a thick coat of curled, bloody leaves. Olivia could not see his flesh, only clumps of blood and twists of foliage that, together, looked like someone had plastered his backside with crimson mortar using a coarse sponge. The horrid truth did not occur to her until Brittany had already begun to answer.

“What? There are no leaves. That is his skin!” Brittany swirled around and faced down her sister with a withering glare. “Did you do this to him!?”

Olivia would have been offended if the accusation was not so shocking. “Of course not!” Tears welled in her eyes. “Brie, I told you I wasn't angry at all, and I meant it. I understand the manifestation process. ...I love him!”

Brittany's eyes began to moisten a bit, too. However, for the most part, she remained calm and commanding, a side of her that Xavier had not yet truly witnessed. She nodded and took several deep, steadying breaths. “I—I *think* he has been weakened by blight.” She lowered her face to his and inhaled through her nose. “I can smell the sour mucus in his lungs, but his lips are clean. I don't think it has saturated him.

“Wendy, I need clean towels, warm water, a sewing kit, and every bit of first aid supplies you own. If you have anything with an astringent, with witch hazel—nail polish remover or acne wipes—bring it, too. Olivia, help her... and *hurry*.”

Xavier dreamed he was floating on a wooden raft in the middle of Catfish Cross.



Brittany and Olivia accompanied him, and he lay reclined between them. The sun above was brighter than ever before. It hurt his eyes no matter where they turned, so he closed them and relaxed in the arms of his companions.

In the distance, a toddler cried and screamed, but he ignored it and, instead, focused on the subtle swaying of the raft. Olivia broke off small pieces of bananas and fed them to him. Brittany fed him whole peaches, and each time he bit them, a flood of juices ran down the sides of his face. However, the juices smelled repugnant, like soured alcohol. In fact, the odor was so powerful, it burnt his nose.

“Is something wrong, Xavier?”

Brittany smiled and brushed a hand through his hair. He coughed and twisted, trying to pull his head away from the potent liquid. He needed a drink. “Is there cream for the peaches?”

“Here, drink this. It will help you.”

Brittany pulled her blouse off over her head and unhooked her bra. Her massive breasts jostled free in front of his face. She lowered herself down and placed her nipple between his lips. Milk poured out of her and into his mouth, and it tasted like the thickest, sweetest cream he had ever sampled.

Olivia removed her top, too, baring her tiny breasts. They were swollen, though, and looking more like B-cups than her usual A-Cups. When he had drunk Brittany dry, Olivia bent down and pushed her breast into his mouth.

“Keep drinking, X. It’ll help you.”

Far away, the toddler continued bawling.

“I’m sorry, Mommy! Wake up, please!”

A voice whispered into his ear. It was his mother’s voice. “All is well sweet prince, so do not weep. Every boy’s mommy must go to sleep....”

The watchtower’s COM system hummed as loud as when Briasis left it, but she was ecstatic to also hear a repetitive beep, which sounded faintly every ten seconds. The beep signified the successful establishment of a transpositional chain. She was connected to home, again! More importantly, the welfare alert systems were now working like they should have been.

Briasis dashed to the control panel and pushed the appropriate buttons to accept the establishment of a Layer-One Tunnel. She then initiated the sequence to build a Layer-Two Tunnel. The system could not acknowledge the new process since the console projectors were broken, so she had to trust that everything was input correctly and had started as expected.

She stepped onto the transpositional platform and waited for a response from the other end of the galaxy. Finally, the projectors encircling the opposing transpositional platform brightened. No image would appear with a Layer-One Tunnel, which only conveyed audio, but the lights showed that a connection was active. Briasis smiled when she heard the Stargazer Orda model’s feminine, smooth, computerized voice.

“This is Illyria COM-Orda, two-seven-four-six-six-seven-eleven, House O, Stargazer Eight: We have successfully synchronized with your Watchtower COM-Ralta system. No response from House Controllers.

“Waiting for response from First Estate....

“Waiting for response from First Estate....

“Waiting for response from First Estate....

“Accepted by First Estate. L-One Tunnel established at eighty-one percent

synchronization, Rise: Point-Zero-Four-Five, Jitter: Two-Point-Five-Five-Seven, Fade: Point-Five-One-Eight. Connected.”

The voice changed to a real woman. “This is Mesra den Aion.”

“This is Dynista Briasis den Raion. Mesra, I must speak with Aion. It is urgent.”

Mesra acknowledged, asked Briasis to wait, and then vanished from the other end of the tunnel. Briasis waited silently. Her fingers trembled, but that was because she was both nervous and excited to at last, after years of silence, have guidance once again.

Ten minutes later, Overlord Aion's voice spoke.

“This is Overlord Aion. Briasis, you foolish girl, I should have you poled for your stupidity!”

Aion was normally short and gruff, but he was obviously furious. Briasis did not know what she might have done to deserve such hostility at the end of a long period of no communication, but she expected it was severe. Aion could be mean and quite stern, but he was not the type of person who unfairly treated others.

“Wha—I... I do not understand.”

“You broadcasted blindly how many messages over these past years? We only recovered parts of a couple, but anyone closer.... Your particle scrambler was not functioning!”

Her heart sank. The particle scrambler was a device for encrypting sub-particles and waves, so others could not eavesdrop. If the scrambler was not functioning, anyone could have received her broadcasts.

Aion made the gravity of her mistake clear. “You announced my son's location to everyone! Every enemy of the empire, or of the house, now knows how to hurt us most. Is he alive?”

“Y-yes Magnate, he is alive. I am sorry! I did not know the scrambler had been damaged.”

“Report!”

Briasis steadied herself with a breath before beginning. “He is *manifesting*. The process began two days ago. We have been partially successful with soothing his ascension, but it was difficult because of our distance from him.”

Aion interrupted. “How are you? Did he injure you badly?”

Briasis blushed slightly and shook her head, as if Aion could see her. “He chose Oralia for his first and, so far, has not sought elsewhere—I am sure he will, though, Overlord! Oralia is thoroughly sore and exhausted, but she endures as should any lady of O. You might be pleased to hear how he exhibited extreme dominance and virility, is... is well developed naturally and demonstrates proper full-body expansion, has masterfully locked and seeded Oralia at each encounter—though after her first lock I do not think she was so keen on the reality as she had been the fantasy—and, so far, has resisted all impulses for savagery.”

Aion's voice was undeniably proud. “Hmm, some good news, at last. Anything else?”

Briasis did not answer right away, so he asked again.

“Do you have anything else to report?”

Finally, she summoned enough courage to broach the most important of all the issues. “Yes, Magnate. He is currently severely injured. Someone attacked and brutalized him, and... I detected signs of possible rose blight, from an unknown type.”

“Then assassins have found him! He must be surveyed at *all* times.”

“I am not sure it was an assassin. Wendy, his human sister, will not admit the truth, but I believe Jacob, his human father, was the one who attacked him. Whoever attacked Xavier, they

chose one of the human family's chains as their weapon, a non-lethal selection.” Her voice grew grim and less official. “He was beaten horrendously, Father. Worse than even that, I discovered on his body... scars, hundreds of scars. I am sorry. I have failed to protect him! The scars are obviously the result of extreme or prolonged torture, and he would not have been able to conceal a single incident of such magnitude; they could only result from repetition. The traumas must have been cumulated over an extended period of time. I should have noticed.... He must have dedicated a tremendous amount of effort to keeping the truth concealed from everyone.

“Regardless of my failure, I can think of no one who would have had the opportunity to abuse Xavier—Raion—on a routine basis other than Jacob. Therefore, I have decided to remove him from the Steele home and reveal the truth to him.”

“No, you will not.”

They reached the topic Briasis most dreaded. She hated the plan to keep Xavier ignorant of his true heritage. “Fath—! Overlord, I mus—.”

“You will not, Briasis, not yet. Now that a chain has been re-established, we will return to the original plan. As soon as a Layer-Three Tunnel is constructed, he will be met by the family and escorted safely back across the transpositional chain. Until then, you will devise a schedule and set a routine to monitor him at all times of every day.”

“Overlord, that is more difficult than, I think, you realize. Xavier is very isolated and highly mobile. It is nearly impossible to steadily soothe his manifestation; it *is* impossible to monitor him at all times without exposi—.”

“You have your orders, valkyr. Is your report complete?”

Briasis hung her head, sighed very softly, and answered, “Yes, Overlord. That concludes my report. ... Is there any news of home?”

“Yes, we are suffering a full-scale invasion from the Atomites.” Briasis gasped and covered her mouth. The last she had heard, the Strygian Uprising had ended, and peace had been restored. “They are waging a campaign from four different sectors and have successfully displaced five of our governances.”

“Do they pose a threat to Illyrian Prime?”

“Not yet, most of our exsolar governances are holding, but the situation is severe enough to pose a mild threat to the Prime System. The house has suffered eight casualties, one male—Lelvon.” He also listed the names of the females. Briasis knew all them, of course. Her heart sank with each name he listed.

At the end, the Overlord paused for a moment, so she could absorb the grave news. The pause was brief, though.

“You should soon be receiving additional support.”

“Did you send Exarchs!? How long ago?”

“Yes, I dispatched an Exarch and two Sentinels a year ago in an Armored Carbod Striker, but I am not speaking of them. In that vessel, they will not reach Earth for... another two to three years.

“Your impudent sister, Kandris, is the one who should soon arrive. Six months ago, she stole an Uran Dazzler from the Valkyrs then disappeared. She left a note that explained she was going to Human-Four to help you repair the COM systems. If she follows the same course as Oralia, she should arrive within a month, assuming she does not fly straight into your moon. She did this *after* being directly told to not by me, her mentor, *and* Sylviona. She will be poled properly for her disobedience when she returns but, until then, you will hang and lash her when you see her—three with five.”

“I understand, Overlord.”

Xavier woke with a start and found himself naked in his bed. His three dogs lay in the bed with him, which was surprising since they had no way to reach the loft save for scaling the vertical ladder. Nonetheless, he was happy to see them. Gambit licked his face and Kismet, who had been asleep between his legs, stood and tried to squeeze up along Xavier's bare side. Unfortunately, his bed was not very wide, and Kismet was stuck on the narrower side.

Xavier scooted over a few inches closer to Gambit, and his back both burned and stung when he moved the slightest bit. He groaned with pain, but Kismet was immensely happy. The dog saddled up next to Xavier and lowered onto his belly.

“Valiant, are you here, too, buddy?”

The sprightly young shepherd dog's head popped up over the edge of the bed and barked several times. Xavier chuckled, pushed himself into a somewhat upright position, and called Valiant onto the lower part of the mattress.

He played with them for several minutes then reclined his head against the headboard and closed his eyes. His mind swirled while it tried to piece together how he reached the loft or, at least, what happened last. Slowly, he remembered antagonizing Jacob and the beating that followed. He also remembered crawling into the barn.... *‘Did I make it? No, not up the ladder.’*

“No, Mr. Steele, I'm not doing that.”

Xavier's ears detected the words accidentally as his senses relaxed. When they relaxed, their scope broadened. It was Olivia's voice, and she was outside the barn. His father was harassing Olivia!

Xavier sprung from his bed, despite the pain, and ran to the loading window. He threw open the doors and searched the grounds for his only friend. She stood not far from his barn and in front of one of the fertilizing spray-trucks. Jacob stood by her side and was pointing at one of the spray-arms above them. Xavier was supposed to clean and fill the machine that morning, so his father could spray down the Far Southeast field.

Apparently, after listening to a few more exchanges, Jacob wanted her to climb up and unclog the nozzles, and she was adamant that she would not. Xavier was surprised to see her wearing his work boots and overalls. She also was wearing his good cowboy hat!

“Liv,” shouted Xavier, “What are you doing?”

Jacob chuckled, snorted, and hollered back. “She's doing your work and a better job at it than you, too.”

On that note, Olivia told Jacob to do the rest himself, that she had done more than enough for one day, and walked away. She walked toward the main barn where Xavier lived.

Once it was clear that she was not in danger, the pain in Xavier's back became significantly more noticeable. He barely made it back to the bed without collapsing. He was just seating himself on the edge when Olivia crested the bay and pulled herself to her feet. He reached for a shirt on the floor, so he could cover his marred upper body before she could see it. He quickly slipped his arms into the sleeves and pulled it closed; however, the quick movements caused the muscles in his back to seize with a series of cramps.

He did his best to hide the pain from his face, but she noticed it immediately. She walked over, sat next to him, and shook her head. “You idiot. Bet you tore half your stitches running to the window and back, and probably tore the other half diving for the shirt. Do yeh really think we haven't seen them, X? Who do you think got you up here and into bed?” She playfully walloped the side of his head, but her smile then faded into a grim expression. “Why didn't you

tell me!?”

Xavier was not in the mood to talk. His back hurt quite a bit. He answered with a grunt then flopped backward with as much control as he could muster in his condition. He looked like an exhausted walrus wiggling up onto a sandy knoll. Olivia stood and helped him get into position. She then kicked off her boots and returned to her seat on the edge of the mattress.

“Don't ignore me, X. Why didn't you tell me? I would've—.”

“Would've what?” sharply snapped Xavier. His eyes darkened into a glower, but he turned his gaze to the mattress instead of her. “You couldn't have done anything, Liv. I don't want to discuss it.” His gaze lifted then and narrowed onto her. “I don't like you being around Jacob, either. He's dangerous.”

She sighed and chewed the corner of her lip. “Okay. You don't have to worry about that. Trust me, if he ever puts a finger on me, I'll have no probl—“

Xavier lurched upward and snarled at some invisible enemy. “If he ever touches you or so much as yells at you, I want you to tell me and I'll fucking kill him. I mean it. In fact, you will tell me; that's an order.”

Olivia smirked. “An order, huh? Someone is all bossy now that his face is out of the dirt.” She paused a moment then, when her attempt at humor did not seem to ease the tension, tried again. “So... how do you live up here without a T.V.?”

The two kept each other's company for several hours. The two were old friends being friends. They told stories, sang songs, detailed their plans for the future, and discussed the boys and girls they found most attractive. He asked about which farm chores she did and which needed to be done, but she refused to tell him. He considered ordering her to tell him, but that might have opened a can of worms he was not ready to open—soon, though. She assured him that everything was being handled and his animals were well.

About two hours before sunset, Brittany visited his loft for the first time in many years. She brought him a nice dinner: a real rib-eye steak sliced and arranged into a sub-sandwich with coleslaw and apple cobbler on the side. Everything was homemade from scratch, including the bread, and it was delicious!

While he ate, she cleaned. She picked up his stray clothes, dusted and polished his raw-wood furniture, and swept the floorboards of the bay until they were dust free. When he was nearly finished with his amazing dinner, she slid one of his crate-chairs near the bed and sat.

“Xavier.... How often does he hurt you?”

Olivia visibly cringed when Brittany brought up the subject. Xavier did, too. He unknowingly growled a bit and caused Valiant and Kismet to both bark. Brittany's eyes stayed firmly locked onto his, and she was not smiling or seemingly interested in arguing the matter. However, despite her clear resolve, she did not look hostile or antagonistic, just calmly determined.

He tossed the rest of his food onto the ground for the dogs then crossed his arms defensively. “Don't know what you're talking about.”

“Xavier. I am not reporting him to the police, though I should. I am not planning to disrupt your life in any way you do not wish. I promise, I shall do nothing to take away what control you have over your current life. Please, do not lie to me.”

“Brie,” interjected Olivia, “I don't think he wants to discuss it.”

Brittany's voice cracked like a whip at Olivia. “Stay out of this, Lia!” The words that followed, which were directed at Xavier, were the exact opposite: gentle. “If you think you are protecting us by keeping this a secret, you should know that, by not telling me, I can only assume

the worst conceivable possibility and fret nightly that it might be happening.”

*‘Is she trying to manipulate me?’* He grunted and shook his head. Brittany and Olivia were not like the other women he had encountered or heard about. They were straight forward and never manipulated. Well, Olivia manipulated some but rarely, but Brittany never had, until that moment. Nonetheless, he knew what she said was reasonable. Therefore, the only reasonable way to protect her was to give her a believable lie. He did not want her or Olivia knowing how his situation was truly horrible. They would be powerless to stop it and only feel worse by knowing. He had made that decision long ago. “Not too often. It sometimes happens when he drinks a shit-ton... about two or three times a year. It's usually nothing severe, assuming I don't resist, and half the time I can avoid him until he falls down and passes out. Most of these scars are just from work. Animals can be uncaring bastards at times.”

Brittany tilted her head aside, frowned exasperatedly, and shook her head. “Xavier, you are incorrigible. Do you expect me to believe the animals cut and burned you?”

He bristled dramatically and inflated his chest. “Shit happens on a farm! You know that. Besides... I deserved what happened.” He glanced at Olivia, who was lying across his calves and spooning with Gambit. She noticed his gaze then noticed the sharper one cast by Brittany. She sighed, kissed Gambit's black-brown ears, then mumbled through his warm, furry coat.

“No, you didn't.”

“Enough,” came his sudden outburst, “Believe me or not, I don't care. You asked. I answered. That's it. I'm not discussing this anymore. It's none of your business, anyway. This is a family matter.”

Brittany stood smoothly but abruptly. “Yes, it is, which is why we are here.” Brittany exchanged a brief glance with her sister then approached Xavier. “I would appreciate if you did not bark at me. I will not be chased away like one of your sheep. Now... please... let me check your wounds and change your bandages, then we will leave you alone with your animals.”

“Good,” he grouched and sat forward.

She peeled his shirt off, and his confidence shriveled in front of them. It obviously bothered him very much to bare his chest and its myriad wounds. The view made all three uncomfortable. Olivia looked down and intentionally preoccupied herself with loving Gambit. Brittany remained focused on tending the wounds and tried to hide all reactions from her face. It hurt to look at his scars; neither of them could imagine how much it must have hurt to actually acquire them. A decade of torture, nothing less, decorated his body.

When she finished, Wendy rushed into the barn and shouted up from below. “Xavier.”

He jumped and answered quickly, “Wait! Don't come up yet, Wendy.”

“You have a visitor.”

Olivia bounced off the bed and fetched a clean shirt from his wardrobe closet. She and Brittany worked together to put it on him and button it up. He thanked them then hollered down for Wendy to send up his guest.

“How do I...?” He heard the guest, a girl, ask Wendy. It was Elise Blake!

“You have to climb up the ladder.”

“Oh.”

Nearly a minute later, her head popped into view and was met by Valiant's wet, nosy nose. Once at the top, she did not seem to know how to slip over the edge without falling backward, but Brittany helped her to her feet.

“Cute panties,” belted Wendy from below, followed by a mischievous giggle. She giggled all of the way out of the barn.

Elise blushed heavily. “I... I guess I wore the wrong clothes.” The poor rich girl looked horribly out of her element. She also looked like she might have run away, if she knew how to get back down. She was beautiful, though, as always. She wore a strapless black, flared, gypsy dress with a mauve embroidered floral pattern, magenta-colored embroidery, and a lace-adorned bottom hem. Her feet were covered by black, peep-toe, one-inch Mary Jane heels with a solid white-gold coin-shaped buckle centered at the top of her feet. The buckle was stamped with her initials. She also carried a magenta and silver book satchel, and her nails were painted silver, too.

Brittany looked her over then pulled her into a reassuring hug. “You look gorgeous, ahm...?” She glanced over at Xavier, waiting for introductions. He caught on after a few seconds.

“Elise. Elise, these are my neighbors, business associates, and friends, Brittany and, as you know, Olivia. Brie, Liv, this is Elise, one of my classmates.”

“A well dressed and pretty classmate,” corrected Brittany with a teasing grin.

Elise and Xavier both blushed that time. Olivia, on the other hand, glared at Brittany with unambiguously territorial jealousy.

“Xavier, I brought the schoolwork and notes you missed yesterday and today. I didn't want you to fall too far behind.

“You have a nice place. I like the dogs, especially that one—she's beautiful.”

“His name is Gambit. Yeh, everyone loves the looks of the Lassie dog. I breed them, if you'd like one.”

She smiled nervously and glanced around the loft, taking everything in. As far as he could tell, she looked and sounded genuine with her compliments, even though he was sure she probably lived in a mansion and drank from crystal glasses. Eventually, her eyes settled back onto Xavier.

“I heard you had a farming accident. How badly were you hurt?”

He unconsciously straightened his posture. “I fell and was drug a few yards in the gravel. It scratched me up a bit but nothing serious.”

Olivia harrumphed and ran her hands down Gambit's back. “You can set the stuff down on that table. I can go over it with him.”

Brittany, in a single, smooth stride, stepped to the foot of the bed, firmly gripped her sister's forearm, and pulled her straight up onto her feet. “I think we should return home, sister, and finish our work for the day.”

Elise smiled largely, almost matching Brittany's in size and gentility. “Oh, Olivia, I brought your homework, too.” She set her satchel onto Xavier's desk and dug inside until she found a blue plastic folder. She removed and handed it to Olivia, who offered her a petty, faux smile in return.

“Thank you, Elise.”

Brittany thanked Elise and bid farewell, and she then led Olivia down the ladder and out of the barn, leaving Elise and Xavier alone.

Elise sat with him as if she were a normal girl and reviewed her notes with him. She was shy, socially backwards, and especially feminine and “girly,” but, she was sincere. Her sensitive, demure nature was natural for her, and he found that a thousand times more enjoyable than the hundreds of girls who tried to pretend they were tough and capable as any man when they clearly were not. Her behavior showed an indisputably higher class but, unlike Rachel and half of the other female students at the Augusta Academy, she did not judge or condescend.

She noticed the differences in lifestyles, but the differences carried no value in her mind except as a measure of comparison. Their cultural upbringings were on opposite ends of the spectrum, but, to her, that did not make one superior to the other. In fact, she was hungry to learn about him as a person as much as him as a farmer. As someone who spent her life in exclusive societies and governed social exchanges only with others of similar class, Xavier was refreshingly genuine for her, too. All the other high society boys were enshrouded by pomp, ego, and family-determined behaviors. For her, Xavier was real and earnest, a rare commodity her rich family never acquired.

“Oh, you play chess?” Her eyes found the scratched-up board sticking out over the top of the wardrobe closet.

Xavier laughed. “I love chess. Do you play?”

She giggled. “Of course! After all, I am Rus—....” She quieted suddenly and swallowed. She did not know what to say, but, apparently, she knew what not to say.

Xavier let her off the hook. “Would you like to play a game?”

“Yes! But, just so you know, I will not let you win just because I'm a girl and you're a boy.”

They both laughed, and Xavier pushed the dogs off the bed to make room for the board. Unfortunately, just as they began setting up the pieces, a man's voice called up from the entrance to the barn. He said it was time for them to leave.

Elise sighed and apologized. “He's my driver and chaperon. I... I wish I could stay, but I can't.”

Xavier told her it was okay and left the invitation to chess open. Despite how it hurt to move, he escorted her to the edge of the bay and helped her over the edge.

After she left, he climbed back into bed and basked in the pleasant aromas left by the three recent visitors. He fell asleep contented and almost happy.