



M/M  
STORY

# WRAPPED AROUND YOUR HANDLEBARS

*Azura Ice*



 *Silver*  
25 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

*Let 2012  
it Snow*

# WRAPPED AROUND YOUR HANDLEBARS

*Azura Ice*

# A SILVER PUBLISHING BOOK

Wrapped Around Your Handlebars  
Copyright © 2012 by Azura Ice  
E-book ISBN: 9781614958475

First E-book Publication: December 2012

Cover design by Reese Dante  
Editor: Geoffrey Greene

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## DEDICATION

For all those who struggle during the Christmas season.  
May all your dreams come true.

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*Harley Davidson Electra Glide Classic*: H-D Michigan, LLC

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## CHAPTER ONE

Oak parked his Harley in the lot's last vacant space. The ride up from Key West to Florida City had been a long one. Everyone and their little brother seemed to be driving upstate or farther for Christmas vacation this year. He couldn't complain, though, since he was going north, too. Well, as far as he could go on a motorcycle before the weather stopped him.

He put the kickstand down and shut off his Electra Glide Classic. He'd buy a late lunch and then hit the road, only stopping for brief rest breaks. By the time March rolled around, Kent would be out of his home on Duvall Street—at least he better be!—or he'd have him removed by the authorities. It gave his ex three and a half months to make arrangements for a new place to live, pack up his shit, and move out.

As he strode down the sidewalk that ran along the front of the small restaurant, he stuffed his key into his jeans pocket. Starving and in a mood for a big, thick steak, he wondered how long he'd have to wait for a table. Inside, an elderly couple rose from a tiny corner spot for two and ambled off to pay their bill. So Oak sat in the tight booth and waited for a server to clear off the tabletop.

The noise in the joint—clinking dishes, a cacophony of chatter, and orders barked to the cooks—roared in Oak's ears, but he was used to it after living on Duvall Street for the last eleven years. Still, it would've been nice to have some quiet so he could think things through, although that was what the open road was for. At least the Christmas decorations here were subtle and tasteful. Worker elves, cartoon reindeer, and big 'Merry Christmas' banners in shiny green and red foil always put him in a dour mood.

"I'm sorry you've had to wait," a male voice said. "Business has been crazy today and we're short on servers."

Oak looked up into a pair of dark eyes framed in thick, black, luxurious lashes. The man's penetrating gaze sliced right through him.

Startled, he blurted, "Uh, Christmas travelers?"

"For the most part," the waiter answered, "but two girls quit this morning and another called in sick, so I've been going nonstop since six am." He quickly scooped the dirty dishes into a rubber tub and then wiped the table down. "Bear with me and I'll be back to get your order as soon as I can."

"Take your time," Oak replied. "I'm in no rush."

"Thanks, man."



He watched the younger guy weave his way through customers entering and exiting the restaurant, his attention settling on the waiter's tight rear encased in faded jeans. A worn, rectangular shape drew the eye to his right back pocket where he undoubtedly kept his wallet.

Oak shook himself and returned his attention to the menu. The last thing he needed or wanted was a distraction, especially since his ex would probably battle him daily about moving out of his home—the house that had only Oak's name on the deed—and he'd make damn sure Kent remembered that, too. His thoughts strayed to the bags of white powder he'd discovered taped to the underside of the bathtub. He'd pulled the hardboard free in search of a clogged pipe when he'd stumbled across them in a neat little stack. Several minutes had passed as Oak tried to rationalize what he'd found. He still couldn't believe Kent had turned to trafficking and selling drugs.

Regardless, he'd seen all the signs to the fact and ignored them. The hidden plastic bags only confirmed the dirty truth. All the new friends and strange guests Kent had around the house had begun to make perfect sense.

He drummed his fingers on the Formica tabletop. "I'm the dumbass who kept denying what was right in front of my face," he whispered.

His cell phone jingled in the holder clipped to his belt. He fished it out and looked at the screen—it was Kent. Dismayed, he considered ignoring the call, but the constant chimes were already drawing several annoyed glances. Reluctantly, he flipped the phone open.

"What do you want, Kent?"

"I don't understand why you ordered me to move out," his ex-partner said, his tone soft and lyrical.

Kent's voice was one of the first things that had drawn Oak to him. He steeled himself against it and replied, "We've been drifting apart the last three years."

"You're right, but we can try again, Oak. Let's stoke the flames and see what happens. Christmas is only two weeks away. I don't want to spend the holidays alone."

Irritation flashed through Oak. He hated it whenever Kent used the I'll-be-all-alone card to wear down his resolve. He'd done it the entire eleven years they'd been together, and even though Oak had talked to him about it many times, Kent still wielded the emotional tool like a sword.

"You should've thought about that before you brought drugs into my house," he snapped, trying to keep his voice low.

The silence on the other end of the line told him all he needed to know.

"I've made arrangements with Tony and Charlotte next door to keep an eye on the place, so pack your shit and take only what is yours," Oak stressed. "When I return in March there better not be any sign you were ever in my life. Is that understood?"

"I..."

"You used me, Kent. Looking back now, I realize it started about three years ago, the same time the spark in our relationship began to die. You've used my home as a dealing spot, putting my life in jeopardy, and as I just said—you used me."

"It's Christmas," he whined. "Don't do this to me."

"Don't do this to you?" Oak gripped the cell so hard his fingers ached. He fought to keep his voice low and glanced at the two neighboring tables, but it didn't appear any of the other patrons were paying him any attention. Looking to his left, he startled, nearly dropping his phone when he spotted the waiter standing about four feet away, coffee pot in hand, a sympathetic expression on his smooth, handsome face.

"Look, I don't have the time to get into this right now, nor do I really want to talk to you. You know what

you've done wrong, so don't pretend you're innocent. I'm already halfway up the coastline anyway," he grimaced at the lie, "and after I get something to eat, I'm heading farther north. Be out of my house when I get back."

Oak slapped the cell shut and stuffed it in its holder.

"Sorry, dude," the waiter said as he set a cup and a saucer on the tabletop, then poured Oak some coffee. "I really didn't mean to interrupt a private phone call."

"No problem. Leave it to Kent to call at the most inopportune time."

"Kent, huh? I take it your roommate pissed you off?"

Picking up the mug, Oak drew a deep breath, held it, and then let it out in a big gust. It did nothing to relieve any of his stress. "You could say that."

The waiter nodded. "Relationships are a pain in the ass, but we all got to have someone, ya know?"

"I'm happy to have some solitude for a while. My ex, however, is afraid of being alone, but constantly does things that will make sure he stays that way."

Startled he'd revealed so much to a total stranger he slurped from his cup and burnt his lips and tongue. Grimacing again, he set his coffee down, pain singeing the inside of his mouth, and let his gaze wander over the

server. He finally settled on the nametag just above his shirt pocket—Chandler.

"My dad was the same way." The younger man pulled out an order pad. "After my mom died, he went through girlfriend after girlfriend because none of them were like Mom. Although he was afraid of being alone, he'd always turn into a jerk so his girlfriends would dump him."

"Why?"

"He had this odd notion that he was being unfaithful to my mother."

Oak blinked up at the guy. A strange sense of understanding passed between them. The sensation left Oak confused.

"I'm Chandler Casterock," the waiter said and held out one hand. "Now that I've told you something personal about me, you don't have to feel bad for doing the same."

"How'd you know I felt awkward about that?"

Chandler laughed. "Dude, it was all over your face."

Oak pumped his hand. "Call me Oak."

"That's an odd name."

"It's my last name, but everyone calls me by it."

"Nice to meet you, Oak. What would you like for lunch?"

He studied the waiter for a moment, a snappy retort on the tip of his tongue about how he'd like him submissive and bent over a chair, but he caught himself. "Give me the number six and then the number nine for dessert."

Once the words left his mouth, he groaned.

"Sixty-nine, huh?" Chandler tossed him a mischievous look and then spun on his heel. "Oh, sorry, that was six and nine. I'll put the order in right away." He chuckled and strode across the restaurant.

Face burning, Oak muttered a choice profanity under his breath. Chandler seemed too old to be a twink, but he certainly had the air and looks of one. Although he was nearly as tall as Oak, his lithe, wiry build and clean-shaven face presented the look of a very young man. Oak wondered if Chandler's chest and crotch were as smooth as his... He shook away his thoughts. He wasn't into twinks or twinkish guys, preferring his men a little older and rough around the edges. Sneaking a look at the waiter as he refilled everyone's cups at the counter, Oak couldn't help but admire his smooth, muscular arms and chiseled face. Chandler was quite the looker; even the young women in the establishment stole glances at him.

To pass the time, he mentally plotted his route north. He loved the city of St Augustine and decided to

spend a couple of days there. Afterward, he'd travel until he reached Charlotte, North Carolina then veer east until he rolled into Louisville, Kentucky where his family resided—that was if his mother would let him set foot on the property. No, he better steer clear of there. It would be better if he arrived after dark and just watched the farm from afar.

"Here you go."

Oak looked up suddenly and sat back so Chandler could set his plate in front of him.

"You must be hungry," the waiter mused.

He nodded. "I'm going to be on the road for a while."

"Oh? Are you going home for Christmas, too?" He placed a set of napkin-wrapped silverware next to the plate and then looked directly into Oak's eyes.

Once again, something sliced through Oak. It left him feeling simultaneously unsettled and expectant. The combination left him flustered. He pulled the paper ring from the napkin and unrolled his utensils. "I might go home, but I'm not sure yet."

"That's an odd answer," Chandler returned, "but I'm not the sort to pry. It isn't any of my business anyway." He smiled warmly, and a strange sense of comfort settled over

Oak, further mystifying him. "Give me a shout if you need anything."

"I will." Oak tried focusing on his steak and eggs, but something about the younger man kept drawing his attention away from his meal. He sat there with a fork in one hand and a knife in the other, his gaze glued to Chandler's T-shaped figure as he moved from table to table pouring coffee and taking orders.

It was obvious he was popular with the elderly regulars, but the manager, who occasionally appeared to run the register, kept casting dark looks at Chandler, briefly letting his attention settle on Oak before returning it to the customers lining up to pay their bills. For a moment he wondered if the two men were in a relationship. Did the manager think he was a threat?

He snorted at the thought, but before he could examine it further, his cell chimed again. Swearing under his breath, he tugged the phone from its place and answered, "What now?"

"I can't stand to part ways like this," Kent complained over the airwaves.

His ex's tone needled him. "I've had enough, Kent. I tried to spice up our relationship but you never wanted any part of it. I discovered the bags of white powder under the



tub, so now I know what your true love really is. The only reason you're fighting our break-up is because you don't want to relocate. Don't call me again, understand? And if you think you're going to stay in my house, you're in for a surprise—I'll report you to the authorities."

"You would never do that!"

"Just try me, Kent. The only reason I haven't done so already is because I'm hoping you'll re-evaluate your life and clean up your act. Goodbye."

He snapped the cell shut, pressed the power button until the phone shut off, and then tore into his steak. After several minutes of slicing and chewing, Oak began to calm down. He barely glanced at Chandler as he paused to refill his cup.

"Want your dessert now?"

"Yes," answered Oak.

Chandler returned minutes later and set a piece of triple-layered chocolate-fudge cake in front of him. He left without a word.

And Oak preferred it that way. Talking only deepened gaping wounds, and he certainly didn't want to discuss his problems with a slender, good-looking stranger who was an obvious flirt.

## CHAPTER TWO

By the time Oak finished his steak, he'd endured Burl Ives' "Holly Jolly Christmas", Bing Crosby crooning "White Christmas", and Brenda Lee singing "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" belted out by a jukebox decorated in gold and red garland. He began eating his cake as Dean Martin sang about "A Marshmallow World", a song Oak had never considered a holiday tune despite how many marshmallows there were in it.

His mind kept wandering back to his ex. Kent was probably sitting on the balcony right now, rum and Coke within easy reach as an ocean breeze ruffled the tablecloth. His ever-present, unlit cigarette would lay between the fingers of his left hand, a habit he'd kept since he'd quit smoking four years ago. He wondered if Chandler smoked.

The guy removed his apron and stowed everything behind the counter. As he left the dining room, Oak felt a pang of regret, reluctant to see him go.

What was he thinking? He'd just told his lover to be packed and gone by March, and now here he sat watching another man like a love-starved kid.

But he was starved for love—wasn't he? Kent hadn't touched him in over a year, and Oak wasn't the kind of

person to go looking elsewhere. He believed in being faithful to one's significant other until all ties were severed.

So what was he worrying about? Chandler wasn't even his type.

He forked the last bite of cake and fudge into his mouth as "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" burst from the speakers in the ceiling. He looked over at the jukebox and spied a young mother with her two youngsters feeding it more quarters.

Oh, hell no. If "Frosty the Snowman" started playing next, Oak might run out into oncoming traffic. He shivered, then stood suddenly, and tossed a five down on the tabletop. He headed for the cash register.

The manager appeared and rang up his ticket. Every few seconds, he'd shoot Oak a look of disdain, his upper lip curling into a slight sneer. The guy handed him his change and said, "You're leaving, right?"

Taken aback, he met the man's gaze, instantly summing him up. He was the possessive type, one who wanted things to always go his way—and this guy wanted Chandler.

"Cool your jets, dude. I'm not even from Florida City."

The manager's nostrils actually flared, and then he abruptly dismissed Oak, accepting a ticket from the next customer. The man began punching numbers into the register's keyboard.

Irrked by the guy, Oak threw one last glance across the restaurant. Chandler was nowhere around. He shrugged off his disappointment and walked out to the parking lot. He pocketed his money before straddling his Electra Glide, enjoying the way the seat cupped his ass. If nothing else, watching the asphalt slip away beneath his speeding motorcycle always relieved any bad feelings he might have.

He turned the key, reveling in the bike's rumble, and backed out of the spot. Pushing off, he then navigated carefully through the lot, but found the main exit blocked by traffic. Instead, he rode around the back of the building in hopes of finding another way out. There, by the establishment's rear door, stood a sleek 2011 motorcycle. Pulling up alongside the silver-and-black Honda NT700V, he studied the beautiful custom artwork across the gas tank and over the wide wind deflectors.

Whoever owned the bike certainly took great care of it. He peered closer at the paintings. 'In memory of Tommy, 2009' had been looped around a Grizzly's neck as it stared out at a sunset ocean.

"So what do you think? Isn't she a beauty?"

Oak straightened and looked over his shoulder at Chandler standing in the doorway, eating a burger.

"Sorry, man. I wasn't being nosy. There was a traffic jam out front, so when I came this way looking for another exit, I couldn't help but stop and admire the bike."

"I bought her after my brother, Tommy, was killed. He'd always talked about buying a pair of motorcycles and the two of us cruising the countryside. When he was killed, I thought the bike was the best way to keep his memory alive."

Oak shook his head. "You don't have to give me any details, man. It's none of my business."

"Hey, I'm proud of that bike and it's for my big brother, so I tell everyone who will listen. That way people he didn't even know carry him in their memories."

His words sent sympathy and admiration into Oak's heart. "You obviously loved your brother a lot."

"Tommy was my best friend, my only friend who didn't judge me for who I am."

The comment hung in the air between them like an invitation.

Eventually, Oak said, "I thought you were done with your shift?"

A sexy smirk tweaked the corners of Chandler's mouth. "Looking for me, huh?"

He realized too late how his words sounded. The urge to slap himself was almost overwhelming.

Laughter burst from Chandler, the sound throaty and full of vitality. It took Oak by surprise and shot arousal into his loins like he hadn't felt in a long, long time.

"Dude, take it easy. I didn't mean anything by that comment. I'm always a smartass. I find gentle teasing helps put most people at ease." The guy stood looking thoughtful, moving his gaze up and down Oak's body as he chewed the last bite of his sandwich. "Whoever you broke up with certainly has you tied up in knots."

"Let's just say that people can change drastically."

"Ouch. One of those situations."

Oak nodded.

"Hey, I'm not being nosey either."

He met Oak's gaze across the pavement and grinned, the action lighting up his dark-as-sin eyes. Oak smiled back, quickly looking away as a thrill wound through him.

A cool ocean breeze kicked up some tiny papers, and a foam cup rolled toward Chandler. He snatched it and tossed it in a nearby dumpster.

Oak shivered. He hated it when the usually warm Florida temperatures dropped into the mid-sixties. He turned the bike off and dismounted. Opening one of the saddlebags, he then pulled out a leather jacket and a matching hat.

On the side street, lined by surfer supply shops, drugstores, and gift boutiques, a bell began ringing. Oak spotted a Salvation Army volunteer on the far sidewalk who had set up a kettle on a tripod. He sighed and shook his head at yet another telltale sign of Christmas.

Closing the bag, he heard the guy's voice behind him. "I'm guessing you're not a fan of the holidays?"

"Not really."

"Why not?"

He shrugged into the short coat and then tugged the hat over his head. "My father always made Christmas special. He was big into decorations and made sure everyone had exactly the same amount of gifts under the tree so no one felt cheated." Turning, he looked at Chandler. "He even threw a big winter bash every December twentieth, inviting all the neighbors and his coworkers."

"And?"

"And we had a big falling out."

Chandler frowned at him.

"My father passed away two years ago," Oak explained. "Christmas reminds me too much of him."

"Ah." A sympathetic expression slid over the younger man's face. "And the falling out you had was over your partner?"

"Until I married a woman, I wasn't allowed to set foot on the property. Kent and I moved to Key West. I bought a boat, turning it into a glass-bottom tour ride, and Kent was a bartender by trade, so it didn't take long for him to find permanent employment. Well, until he decided drugs were a more lucrative business."

"Damn, you've been on a roll of bad luck, haven't you?"

Oak shrugged.

Another gust of wind whistled across the lot. Chandler grimaced and opened the door.

"Why don't you come in for a while?"

Oak didn't know what to say. He kept telling himself that the guy really wasn't his type, but he still felt drawn to him. Not to mention Chandler's chocolate-colored eyes certainly played hell with his libido. He wasn't asking Oak in for a quick romp, but it was clear his new friend wanted to know more about him.



"Come on," Chandler coaxed. "What do you have to lose? You're hitting the road soon, right?"

## CHAPTER THREE

Shrugging, he pocketed the bike keys and followed him inside. A storeroom full of foam take-out boxes, cups, straws, and dozens upon dozens of cans and bottles of various foods and condiments lined two of the walls. Four huge upright freezers took up the third cinder-block wall to his right. A door stood in between them. Chandler passed through it and a light popped on, spilling illumination across the concrete floor.

"In here," he called. "It's not much, but it's all I need."

Oak followed a narrow path through boxes stacked across the floor. He found his new acquaintance standing in the center of a tiny room barely large enough for the meager furnishings within—a single bed, a dresser, and a metal foldout chair. Motorcycle saddlebags with some clothes hanging out of one of the sides had been thrown over the bed's scarred footboard. Deodorant, a bottle of cologne, a comb, and a razor with extra blades rested on the dresser top. On the extreme left of the surface sat a four-cup coffeemaker with a couple packets of coffee and a short stack of foam cups.

Inwardly, he smiled. Even this tiny, depressing place had a splash of holiday cheer. Two long ropes of

garland, one green and the other silver, hung along the wall over the bed. A strand of multi-colored LED Christmas lights glowed around the headboard where Chandler had wrapped them, their colors vivid in the otherwise dull room.

"Part of my pay here is room and board," Chandler explained. "Since I travel so much, whenever I need money I find employment like this, if possible. I stay long enough to save up the dough to live on for a while and then move on."

The idea of riding from state to state via motorcycle appealed to Oak, but the thought of never being in one place long enough to develop friends or set up a comfortable home bothered him. It had to be a lonely life. "I take it you don't like to set down roots?"

Chandler shrugged as he dumped one of the coffee packets into a tiny filter. "I grew up in a great home, had wonderful parents." He passed Oak with the pot in one hand, disappearing into the storage room where the sound of running water reached him in the tiny quarters. "When Tommy died and I bought my bike, I decided I'd visit each state." He returned and then poured water from the pot into the coffeemaker. "Well, except for Hawaii. I can't drive there," he grinned at Oak over one shoulder, "and I don't

really want to ship my ride over the ocean on a plane or boat, so I think Tommy will understand."

"I'm sure he will, too."

"You probably think I'm weird, don't you?"

"Not weird," Oak replied, surprised by his question.

"Just different—but it's refreshing."

Turning, Chandler looked him directly in the eyes.

"I'm guessing your relationship grew stale."

Startled even further, Oak nodded. How could this guy know so much? It was like Chandler had cracked open his skull and peeked inside.

"What happened—if you don't mind me asking?"

The tiny java maker beeped, and Chandler busied himself by pouring two cups full of brew. He handed one to Oak.

The steam off the liquid warmed his fingertips. He hadn't realized how chilled he was until then. How could this man sleep in such a dreary, cold room and not complain? Oak would bitch up seven kinds of hell if he had to live this way, but Chandler was at ease with it, almost grateful for the experience. His strange fascination for the fellow grew more pronounced. Chandler was offering to listen, and Oak was going to be out on the road soon

anyway. What would it hurt to vent some of the stress that had built in him the last few months?

Motioning to the foldout chair, Chandler prompted, "Have a seat."

Oak sat, careful not to spill his coffee. "I guess Kent and I just grew apart. I tried to bring back the old spark, but by that time he'd made too many drug connections through his bartending job. When I found out, he made it clear he didn't want to give up the money he was making. I was adamant I didn't want to live in a dangerous situation. Basically, Kent wants his cake and to eat it, too."

"Ah, so he's to clear out while you're gone for a few weeks." Slowly, Chandler sat on the edge of the bed.

"Exactly."

"So where are you headed?"

With the cup halfway to his lips, he paused. Although he was drawn to Chandler, he didn't know anything about him other than he'd had a good childhood and adored his older brother. He wasn't so sure he wanted to tell the guy where he was going. A person had to be careful nowadays, and even when he thought he knew someone well, like Kent, for example, the person often wasn't what he or she appeared to be.

"Never mind," Chandler said, holding up his free hand. "I see my question bothers you. I apologize."

"It's not that—"

"I get it and I don't blame you. Here I am talking to you like we've known one another forever. You don't know me from Adam, so you have to be careful."

"How can someone so young be so astute?"

Chandler burst out laughing. "I'm not as young as I look. You probably thought I was a twink when you first saw me, didn't you?"

Chagrined, Oak dipped his head once.

"I turn thirty in mid-January."

"Damn, you sure don't look it."

"My mother's English genes are to thank for that." He swept his gaze over Oak. "I'm guessing you're what? Thirty-four?"

"Thirty-seven."

"You're tall, rugged, and well-built."

Warmth singed his cheeks. "It's from lots of swimming in the Keys. I love to swim, but I'm big into snorkeling, too."

"I'm more of a hunter and fisherman," Chandler stated, "but I do like the clear waters of The Keys. It's the

sharks that keep me from putting more than my big toe in the ocean."

Oak smiled. He really liked the guy's sense of humor. It was also nice to have someone to just talk to, even if it was only for a few minutes.

Sensing it was okay to question Chandler, he asked, "How'd your brother die?"

"We were on a hunting reserve in Montana. Some jerk that was part of an illegal hunting party shot a grizzly, wounding it—but more than anything he just pissed it off. The animal burst through the undergrowth, startling Tommy, and the bear was on my brother before he could even turn and run."

"Illegal hunting party?"

"Yeah. There were three guys without hunting licenses on the reserve's property. They were poaching bear and elk. Both the hunting resort and my parents pressed charges against them."

"I'm glad they were prosecuted and I'm really sorry about your brother."

"So am I on both counts."

"What happened to your parents?"

"A few months after Tommy died, Dad slipped getting out of the bathtub. He hit his head and drowned."

Mom found him when she came in that evening from work. Two and a half years later, she was in a car accident. She had a lot of internal injuries and just wasn't strong enough to hang on."

"Damn," said Oak. "Your family seems to have been hit with one thing after another."

"I still have my older sisters and my grandparents. We're a close family. I call or text everyone nearly every day." Chandler drew one foot up, resting it on the other knee. "Actually, I've been thinking of spending Christmas with them this year."

He sat quietly with Chandler for several minutes, the comfortable silence between them both invigorating and fascinating. He'd never been able to share such moments with his ex, who had always fidgeted or talked incessantly; to Kent, peace and quiet meant there was something wrong between them.

His new friend leaned back against the wall, his gaze on the short strand of lights blinking around the headboard. He sipped his coffee and, once it was drained, scooted to the edge, rose, and refilled his cup.

"Want a top-off?"

"Sounds good." Oak held out his cup.



As Chandler poured the coffee, Oak admired his large, long-fingered hands and wondered what they'd feel like caressing him. Shocked by the thought, he almost dropped the cup.

Dark eyes locked with Oak's. "Something wrong?" Chandler questioned.

"Uh..." Should he tell the guy he was attracted to him, that he was intrigued by his personality, the way he carried and presented himself, and that he wanted to know more about Chandler's life and his family? "What do you say to traveling north with me?"

He blinked, and Chandler blinked back at him. A smile gradually spread across his friend's face, and the action created a bright glow in his eyes.

"Are you serious?" he asked Oak. "I don't want you changing your mind a couple of hours after we're on the road."

Oak pondered his offer and realized he truly did mean it. He wanted to know more about Chandler. No, he *needed* to know more about him.

"Yes, I'd really like you to join me."

Stepping away, Chandler switched off the coffeemaker and then moved over to the bed where he began unwinding the LEDs from the headboard. "What

about the weather up north? We can't exactly ride motorcycles in snow."

"I have friends who live in Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia. They've all said it's been unseasonably warm up there this year," Oak explained, his hopes rising higher with each word he spoke. "That's why I decided to take my bike and clear my head via the open road."

His handsome waiter nodded, removing the last of the lights, and then switched off the little plastic battery box. "I was about done with this place anyway." He carefully coiled the strand and stowed it in the open saddlebag. "First, though, we need to make sure there's plenty of spark."

Confusion swept over Oak. "Excuse me?"

"Look," Chandler zipped the bag, "let's cut the bullshit. We're attracted to one another, and obviously there's something we sense that's drawing us together; otherwise, I would've never invited you inside." In two steps he closed the distance between them. Standing toe to toe with Oak, he smiled. "Although your relationship has been over for some time, you were still betrayed. I need to know you're not going to have second thoughts, that we're going to be friends first and then maybe partners later. I don't want to be out in the middle of nowhere and then you

suddenly decide you're ditching me to go back to this Kent guy." He studied him for a moment, his gaze lingering on Oak's mouth. "Besides, you said earlier you wanted solitude. You can't have that if I go with you."

"I meant solitude from Kent. He's on my last nerve." The way Chandler was looking at him set his blood on a low simmer. "The only thing really bothering me is the fear I feel."

"Fear?"

Chandler's aroma, a tantalizing combination of coffee, French fries, and a clean, strong male scent swirled over Oak. His cock tightened, and his pulse jumped a few notches.

"I've been with Kent for several years. I've never strayed. I don't believe in that sort of behavior, so when I kicked him out, I made sure we were done—and we are. However..." He gulped as Chandler's irises widened with sexual arousal. "However, my attraction to you is unusually sudden. It's so strong it scares the hell out of me."

"Ah, well that's understandable." Chandler's smile grew wider, his teeth even and white. "Now that we both know what the other fears, we'll respect those factors."

"Sounds good."

"Well?" asked Chandler.

It took Oak a moment to realize Chandler had given him permission. He realized he was biting his lower lip and released it. A teasing smirk danced at the corners of his new friend's lips. Oak studied his face. Earlier, Chandler had been clean-shaven, but now a five o'clock shadow graced his jaws and chin, the stubble oh-so sexy. His nose wasn't too long or too short, nor was it too wide, but it did possess a curious bump in the bridge as if it had been broken once. His coal-black hair lay tousled around his head and fell over his forehead in gentle, wavy locks, complimenting his dark eyebrows and thick lashes.

He liked the fact that his waiter was only an inch shorter, if that. His broad shoulders tapered to a trim waist, and judging by the way lean, taut muscles roped his arms, Oak suspected his new pal liked to work out whenever possible. Chandler was toned and lithe instead of heavily muscled, just the way he liked his men.

"Damn," said Chandler suddenly, "I'll turn thirty before you ever make a move."

With that, he kissed Oak, stealing his breath and sending his every coherent thought careening into the stratosphere.

## CHAPTER FOUR

His firm lips caressed Oak's in a way that left him panting. Oak's cock hardened until he thought it would burst through his zipper, and his heart crashed against his ribs as if it would shatter the bones. Adrenaline zipped through Oak, the sensation simultaneously overwhelming and heady. There was a time he'd felt wonderful in Kent's arms, but Kent had never inspired such incredible feelings like this.

The stubble on Chandler's chin grated pleasantly with Oak's. The taste of coffee and his own subtle, personal flavor urged Oak to deepen the kiss, but he held himself in check. This was all so fresh, so fast. His desire—mixed with the excitement of someone different—nearly knocked him off his feet. He wanted so much to throw Chandler on the bed and—no, they had to pace themselves, take their time with one another. A rebound affair wasn't a good idea. He must make sure his raging feelings weren't inspired by the last three years of a dying relationship.

With strength Oak didn't know he had, he broke the kiss and held Chandler at arm's length.

"Wow," said Chandler. "That was something."

"It certainly was," a voice replied.

Startled, Oak whirled to find the manager standing in the doorway.

"Shit, Carl. What the hell are you doing here?" Chandler snarled.

"You're mine," the man stated firmly. Hatred filled his eyes as he glared at Oak. "If you know what's good for you, you'll plant your ass on that bike out back and get lost."

"There was and never will be anything between us, Carl." Chandler angrily grabbed the saddlebags and flung them over one shoulder. He faced the other man, Chandler's expression dangerous. "I told you my time here was only temporary and that I was not interested in you, period. I'm out of here. Give my job to someone who really needs it."

He strode past Oak, back rigid, anger radiating off of him. As he started to brush past Carl, the man snaked his hand out and latched onto Chandler's upper arm.

"You're not going anywhere."

"Piss off, Carl!"

Protectiveness gripped Oak. Before he fully knew what he was doing, he'd pushed Chandler aside and snatched the manager's front collar, lifting him off his feet and planting him against the doorframe.

"Do you," he ground out between clenched teeth, "have a problem?"

"Let go of me, asshole!" Carl snapped, face contorting in outrage.

Oak thumped the guy's head against the cinder-blocks. "What was that? Did you say something?"

Carl gasped, both hands flying to the back of his head. "Put me down!"

Oak whacked his skull against the wall again. "I'm afraid I didn't hear you."

"I said," Carl's blue eyes rolled back in his head, "have a nice trip."

"That's what I thought. You can't force someone to like you; it just doesn't work that way. When I paid for my meal earlier, I summed you up in a flash. Sadly, it turns out I was right." He let go of Carl, who landed on his feet and then slid down the wall where he crouched on the floor. Oak motioned for Chandler to exit the room. Once he did, Oak stepped around the manager. He paused, looking down at the guy who visibly trembled as he stroked his throat. "Oh, by the way, merry fucking Christmas, dude."

Chandler's rich, velvety laughter reached him from the other side of the storage area.

Following on his heels, Oak found him outside anchoring the saddlebags to his bike.

"Do you have a radio in your helmet?" Chandler asked.

"Yep."

He tuned their helmets to the same frequency and then handed Chandler's back to him. "Are you sure there's nothing between you and that guy?"

"Positive. I knew Carl was interested in me when he hired me, but I needed work for a few weeks, so I ignored his advances and invitations."

"So why does he think you're a couple?"

"He's a control freak and he thinks he's irresistible. The guy makes me sick, but like I said, I needed the work. Plus the pay here is better than most other menial jobs in this town."

Oak arched an eyebrow, uncertain whether or not to believe him, but on the other hand, his earlier assessment of the manager matched Chandler's.

"Look," his new friend sighed heavily, "Carl likes it rough. One night after work, he put the moves on me. When I told him twice to back off and he didn't, I slugged him. Carl interpreted it as a love tap and the fight was on. I won, but he was determined to best me, forcing me to



surrender to him." He pulled the strand of LED lights from his bag. "So I've spent the last couple of weeks fending him off."

"Am I an escape route out of here?" Dismay needled Oak as he turned his cell on and then returned it to the holder.

"Hell no. I like you, Oak. Like we discussed a few minutes ago, we're drawn to each other, but I find you really interesting, too."

"I feel the same way." Relief skipped through him.

"Good," Chandler replied. "Now put these on your bike."

"What?" He stared at the lights that had adorned the guy's headboard.

Smiling, Chandler said, "You need to get back in the Christmas spirit. Your past is tearing you up." He held the strand out. "Once these are wrapped around your handlebars, you'll feel better."

"Think so, huh?" The guy's enthusiasm brought a grin to Oak's face.

"I know so. Maybe later, once we get to know one another better, you can wrap me around your handlebars instead."

Oak met his enticing gaze and struggled not to show the desire kicking through his system, his balls already tightening, cock hardening.

"The lights even have a battery pack." Chandler waved them in front of Oak's face.

Damn, if the man only knew what he was doing to him! Not wanting to upset him, Oak looped the short length over and around the front of the Electra Glide, making sure they didn't interfere with anything important for the machine's operation.

After straddling and starting the bike, he turned the lights' battery pack on, put the kickstand up, and rode out of the back lot and past the volunteer standing by the donation kettle. He felt ridiculous riding with a strand of Christmas lights twinkling on the front, but he checked traffic and pulled out into the thoroughfare. He kept Chandler in his side mirror as they motored out of Florida City and up along the coast. Once in a while a Christmas song playing on outdoor speakers would pierce Oak's helmet, but other than the occasional holiday tune and the rumble of their bikes, he rode in silence.

He led his new pal through Daytona Beach and then steadily north toward St Augustine, but his desire to stop and visit the city waned. After talking to Chandler about his

father, an intense need to see his mother and his two younger sisters nagged him to keep riding.

Plus his phone vibrated seven times as he rode. The last thing he wanted to deal with was more of Kent's whining and excuses.

As if reading his mind, Oak heard Chandler's voice over the radio. "Do you want to stop anywhere?"

He thought about it for a long moment. Finally, he made up his mind and answered, "No. I want to go home and see my family. If you're okay with it, we'll just stop for food, piss breaks, and find a motel when we need to crash for a while."

"I thought you were shunned by your kin?"

"I am—or was." He frowned and signaled to pass a convertible with its top down despite the fact both occupants wore jackets. "Dad kicked me out, but I have no idea what Mom thought about the situation. He wouldn't let me talk to her." Sighing, he added, "I'll fill you in a little more when we stop for a break."

"Okay."

\* \* \* \*

Two hours north of St Augustine, Oak pulled into a rest area.

"About time," Chandler called as he coasted to a stop next to him. "My teeth were floating."

He chuckled, shutting his bike off and securing it. Two little girls, both around eight or nine, saw the twinkling lights fastened to the Electra's handlebars. They beamed at Oak.

"Merry Christmas, mister," they said in unison.

"Aw, how can you not like Christmas? Those two are adorable, and the one's even wearing a Santa hat."

Oak glanced at Chandler, his cheeks burning, and shrugged. "I didn't say I hated *everything* about the holiday."

"Maybe there's hope for you yet," Chandler stated.

Once Chandler had taken care of his bike, too, Oak strolled with him toward the facilities. When they were both finished, he bought Coca-Colas and two bags of chips from the vending machines. He sat with Chandler at a picnic table beneath a cluster of palms that waved their fronds in the wind.

"Well, Oak," his companion began. "Since that's your last name, what's your Christian name?"

"Forget it. Just call me Oak."

Chandler blinked rapidly and then grinned from ear to ear. The comical expression forced laughter to burble up in Oak, but he managed to keep it at bay.

"Your name can't be that bad."

"As I said, just call me Oak. Everyone does. Well, except for my mother and oldest sister, Cassandra."

"So tell me why your father never let you talk to your mom."

He chugged half his soda. After he sat quietly for a long moment, he sighed. "Dad just would not let me speak to her, plain and simple. He said I was a disgrace to the family. Also, Mom didn't approve of homosexuality either, so she undoubtedly agreed with Dad's decision."

"Are you saying you don't know for sure what your mother really thought about the situation?"

"No, but I do know Dad had a lot of sway over her, so I'll bet money she stood by him."

"You should call your mother and tell her you're on your way up to...?"

"Louisville. It's a farm about twenty miles south of it."

Chandler nodded then gathered their empty chip bags and pop cans. "Tell your mother you'll be there in a few hours."

"I don't know if that's—"

Oak's cell chimed and vibrated yet again. He looked at its display and groaned.

"Kent?" Chandler asked as he tossed their garbage in a nearby bin.

"Yeah. Although I'm really sick of his shit, it's still really sad how things between us ended."

A grave light settled in Chandler's eyes. "Are you having second thoughts?"

"No, definitely not. I just wish he'd leave me alone. It really is over between us. There's no repairing what he won't change or give up."

"Getting different digits won't solve anything either," Chandler pointed out. "Once you call him to see if he's left your house, he'll have your new number."

"I don't have to call him. I can check with the neighbors and find out if he's gone." He stood and stretched. "First cell store I see, I'll stop and have the number changed."

"And your mother?"

"I can't change her number."

Laughing, Chandler retorted, "No, smartass. What are you going to do about calling her?"

"I'll wait until we're almost there. Then if she doesn't want to see me, we'll cruise on over to Cincinnati and then up to Chicago for Christmas."

Chandler zipped up his jacket. "Sounds like a plan, but we'll need warmer gear if we go that far. Anyone you know in Chicago?"

"Nope. I've always wanted to go there, though, and Christmas in a big, snowy city sounds pretty cool."

"Then let's go."

"Hey, Chandler?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for coming with me."

A warm smile spread across Chandler's face. Bright pinpoints danced in his eyes, reminding Oak of the brilliant flickering candles his childhood church always set out on the front steps every Christmas Eve.

He didn't say a word, but clapped Oak on the shoulder and squeezed. Reassurance, hope, and the sense of finally belonging filled Oak. With a spring in his step, he followed Chandler back to their motorcycles.

## CHAPTER FIVE

As he rode his motorcycle alongside Chandler's Honda, the sound of their bikes' engines almost blended. Thankfully his companion wasn't in a talkative mood, so Oak kept his attention on the congested Interstate traffic. After midnight, they crossed the state line into Georgia.

Two-thirds of the way through the state, Oak said, "Ready to stop for the night?"

"Sure am," Chandler's voice came back to him. "I'm beat."

He signaled and took an off ramp, following signs to a small hotel with a blinking, neon-green vacancy billboard.

Once Oak had parked and Chandler had gathered his stuff, he walked into the office to rent a room. Decorated in tiny red bulbs, a miniature Christmas tree stood on the counter.

"One or two rooms?" asked the elderly woman around a lit cigarette.

"Two," Chandler answered.

Although surprised and a little disconcerted, Oak said nothing.

"I'll get these," his friend added. "You get the ones tomorrow night."



He nodded.

Outside, his saddlebags clutched in his arms, Oak asked, "We could've shared a room. It would've been cheaper."

"Are you offering your bed to me already?"

Oak paused, unsure how to interpret his odd tone or the quick way he'd replied.

"Look," Chandler continued, his voice soothing this time, "here's the deal. You're coming out of a sticky break-up. We like one another and there's definitely sparks between us, but I sure as hell don't want to do anything to jeopardize the great friendship we have so far." A soft smile tweaked his mouth. "I want what happens between us to be genuine, not swayed by circumstances."

What he'd said made perfect sense. Relieved, Oak stopped at the door with the number matching his tagged room key. The explanation helped him see Chandler in a slightly different light. His friend wanted something that would endure, not a fling that might last two or three weeks before they'd part ways.

"You're right. I just had a little panic attack." He sighed and shot him a worried glance. "I hope you don't think I'm needy and insecure. This is just all so new to me."

"You're vulnerable," Chandler stated. "Kent's behavior and withdrawal from you left a big void in your heart. Take time to regroup, dude, and while you do, I'm here for you all the way."

"Thank you." Oak unlocked the door and then looked over his shoulder at him. "You're a special guy. I mean that."

"So are you, and don't you ever forget it. Now get some sleep."

He bid Chandler goodnight and stepped inside his room. After locking the door, he tossed his belongings on a chair, stripped off his clothes, and then showered. While hot water sluiced down his body, his thoughts kept revolving around what Chandler had told him. Although they were on the brink of starting a romantic relationship, Oak sensed this one was different than his last one. As he rinsed the suds away, hope settled in his heart that he might be on the edge of a permanent partnership.

Finished, he returned to the main room and rummaged for clean briefs. After the constant rumble of their motorcycles, the quiet seemed profound so he flipped on the television and searched for the music channels, but paused on a weather forecast for the state of Kentucky. He hated to park his motorcycle, but if the weather was going

to turn bad, he had no choice. Surfing channels, he spotted the holiday tunes and clicked on them.

For the first time in years, he sat and truly enjoyed listening to Christmas music. With "Silent Night" playing faintly, he drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Chimes kept interrupting his sleep. Oak frowned. He could've sworn he'd gotten up a little after three am to shut off the TV set and relieve himself in the bathroom before returning to his warm spot in the bed.

The tinny melody kept playing. Slowly, awareness descended on him and he realized his cell phone was ringing.

"Please, don't be Kent." He picked up the phone and looked at it. "Damn." Irritated, he hit the answer button. "What do you want at," he glanced at the clock on the nightstand, "six-forty-five in the morning?"

"I want you back, Oak."

The whine in Kent's voice set Oak's teeth on edge. He already knew the answer to his next question, but he gave his ex the benefit of the doubt. "Are you going to give up selling and trafficking drugs?"

"You know I can't do that."

"You can't or you won't?"

Silence.

A knock on the door prompted him to hop out of bed. He peeked through the spy hole and saw Chandler backlit by a cloudy sky. He opened the door and motioned for him to come in.

"Kent," said Oak, "it's over between us. Just accept it. You love your money and your next hit more than you ever loved me. We're done, got it? I've found someone else."

"You've found—?"

"Yes, I'm with someone else now. We're traveling together. Don't bother calling me again because I'm changing my number. If you have any questions about anything, leave them with Tony and Charlotte and I'll check in with them after New Year's." He looked at Chandler and rolled his eyes to show his annoyance with Kent's call. "You had your chance—several of them, in fact. I tried for the last three years to work things out with you, but you cared only for your little side business. I'm sorry it has to end this way. Take care, Kent, and Merry Christmas. Try to start the New Year on the right foot this time."

Oak hit the END button and groaned, closing his eyes and willing his blood pressure to abate.

"What a way to start the day," Chandler quipped and handed him a cup of coffee.

"Thanks, I really need this." He took off the lid. The rich aroma hinted at the coffee's strength.

"I had the clerk make it extra strong."

"Three years of talking, begging, and jumping through emotional hoops..." He raked one hand through his hair, his fingers catching in the snarls and knots. "Finally I get enough strength to order him out of my home and then *that's* when Kent decides he wants to work things out."

Pulling a chair out from the tiny table at the window, Chandler sat and leaned back in it. "Drink your coffee then get dressed. You need to take your own advice."

"I do?" Frowning, he sipped from his cup. "What advice was that?"

"It's time for you to get started on your new life, too, but you're going to do it before New Year's gets here."

Oak quirked an eyebrow at him.

"You're going to see your mom," Chandler explained.

The heady scent of the Starbucks coffee caressed Oak's senses. He slurped noisily as he considered his pal's announcement. "You're right, Chandler. You're absolutely right."

He set the cup on the nightstand, grabbed a change of clothes, and headed to the bathroom. Once he'd dressed, brushed his teeth and hair, and pulled on his boots, he stowed all his belongings in the saddlebags.

"Time to check out," he told Chandler.

Outside, Oak fastened their saddlebags to each bike while Chandler returned their room keys to the office. Soon they were back on the Interstate heading into South Carolina.

Oak was thankful that the day passed with better traffic conditions. They pulled into rest areas several times to grab vending-machine food, then hit the road for a few more hours of travel.

Right before midnight, Chandler picked a small, clean motel, and Oak paid for their second night's rest.

"If it's okay with you," Oak began, "we'll share a room with two single beds. It's room number nine. The manager said it's the only one he has left."

"Suits me." Grabbing their things, Chandler winked. He pointed at the door to their room. "Look over there."

There's nothing like a little Christmas cheer to end our day."

Oak's gaze followed the direction of Chandler's pointing finger. A wreath trimmed in bright blue LEDs glowed on number nine.

"Imagine that," he said. Warmth and contentment floated over him. "How about some holiday music on satellite TV to go with it?"

"And pizza," Chandler added. "I'm starved."

Oak laughed and followed him to their room.

## CHAPTER SIX

The ride through the Blue Ridge Mountains filled Oak with a sense of wonder. Although all the leaves were gone, the views amazed the eyes and thrilled the mind. He wanted to stop at all the lookout points, but the need to see his mother and know once and for all how she felt about him overwhelmed everything else. He cruised around one turn after another, up one mountainside and down the next until the steep, curvy slopes subsided into the foothills. He led the way from the tip of Tennessee up into the lower eastern edge of Kentucky and set their course for Louisville.

Halfway through the state, the temperature dropped drastically.

"Careful of black ice," Oak said. "I'd hate to have an accident when we're almost there."

"I thought you said your friends assured you of nice weather in the north?" Chandler's voice filled Oak's helmet. "It's getting colder."

"They did, but I caught the weather forecast last night before I fell asleep. There's an unexpected weather front that cropped up, so the weather report calls for Kentucky's first snowfall of the year. I have a pickup truck stored at my homestead. If nothing else, Mom will



probably let us park the bikes in the barn and take my truck."

A light chuckle filled his ears. "Maybe we'll have a white Christmas."

Oak thought about that for a moment. It had been a long, long time since he'd enjoyed snow during the holidays.

His thoughts returned to his mother. What if she didn't want to see him? Until he came out of the closet and his father banished him, he'd always been very close to his mom. If she turned her back on him again, Oak didn't know if he could handle it. An image of her standing at the stove rose in his mind. She always cooked several pounds of Christmas candy each holiday season. He imagined her as she stirred fudge or maybe the sweet, aromatic liquid that would harden into rock candy. Short, slightly plump, and with her silvered blonde hair drawn up in a loose bun, she'd always instilled comfort and love in those around her.

Not knowing how she felt about him was better than facing the awful truth looming in his near future.

He pulled into a gas station. Once both bikes' tanks were full, he paid the clerk for the fill-ups.

"In another hour or so, we'll be at my family's farm," he told Chandler.

"Are you ready to see them?"

Shrugging, he straddled the seat. "I'd love to see mom and my sisters. The big question is will they be glad to see me?"

Chandler offered him a sympathetic expression and climbed on his bike.

As he rode toward the Oak Farm, careful of the increasingly poor road conditions, he struggled with a leaden ball of worry steadily growing larger beneath his breastbone. Once he spotted the turn-off, his anxiety inflated to epic proportions until his racing pulse and short breaths forced him to pull into the parking lot of the little country church where he and his family used to attend holiday services. Someone had lit the candles placed on either end of the steps, but the lovely image did nothing to relieve his anxiety.

After Chandler coasted to a stop, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"My nerves have gotten the best of me."

"Call your mom. See what she has to say when you tell her you want to visit."

He punched the key to bring up her number. After several rings and no answer, he ended the call. "I guess

she's not home. Maybe she went shopping and isn't back yet."

"Does she have a cell?"

He shook his head. "Mom always said less is more."

"Maybe you should go see for yourself if she's there."

"What if she sends me away?"

Grinning, Chandler replied, "How will you ever know if you just sit here and fret about it?"

A freezing wind whipped up the road and rustled the trees' bare branches. The aroma of snow tantalized Oak's senses, and every now and then he caught the faint waxy odor of the burning candles. Continuing on their bikes in this weather wasn't an option, so if nothing else, he could swap them at the farm for his pickup.

He pushed off, giving his motorcycle some gas and maneuvering onto the road again.

Although his home place was only a mile down the road, Oak felt like it took a lifetime to reach the gate. He slowed and turned onto the gravel drive lined by bare maples and hickories.

The house appeared in the deepening dusk. It looked like it did the day he'd left it eleven years ago except for an extension on the sunroom that now wrapped

around the right side. As night settled over the farm, Christmas lights winked along the eaves and around the banister enclosing the porch. A huge pine wreath adorned with white bulbs hung on the front door. Even the evergreens growing in the lawn wore ornaments. A skiff of snow complemented the holiday air surrounding his childhood home.

He rumbled to a stop and waited for Chandler to pull up beside him.

"Beautiful place," his companion mused aloud.

"I've really missed it," Oak said sadly. "A lot."

The front door opened. He stiffened, his heart hammering so hard that ringing started in his ears.

A portly woman in her mid-fifties stepped out onto the porch. Oak saw her focus on him. She tipped her head left then right. Even from the driveway and darkness settling around them, Oak saw the deep frown lines across his mother's forehead.

"Alowishus?" she called, surprise in her voice. "Is that you, baby?"

An amused snort issued beside Oak. "Alowishus?"

"One crack about my given name and I'll knock you off that motorcycle," Oak growled.

"I can certainly see,"—another snort reached him—  
"why you use your last name."

"Chandler." His warning tone earned him a huge mischievous grin from his companion.

"Okay, okay. I'll keep my comments to myself."

"Thank you."

"It is you!" Oak's mother chortled. "Oh, thank Heaven! I'm so happy to see you, honey!"

"Let us park the bikes in the storage barn, Mom," he said loudly so she could hear him over the evening breeze kicking up.

"Oh, no you don't." She hustled down the steps and across the lawn with her arms out to him, hair blowing in the wind. "You're going to give your mother a big hug and kiss before you do anything else!"

He put down the kickstand and managed to dismount before his mother launched herself into his arms. She hugged him tightly, her strength amazing him. The familiar aromas of baked cookies and her favorite perfume invaded his senses. Memories of his childhood swept through his mind. Tears pricked his eyes, and he hugged his mom a little harder.

"I have missed you so much, honey!" Emotion choked her.

"Same here, Mom," he rubbed his cheek across the top of her head, "same here."

She pulled back and looked up at him with tears glimmering in her eyes. "It's darn cold out here. Go store your motorcycles." She turned and trotted to the porch steps, her long denim skirt plastered to her legs by another gale. "I'll be in the kitchen putting some coffee on to brew," his mother hollered once she was up on the porch again. She yanked open the front door and barreled into the house, but before the door closed Oak heard her shout, "Girls! Your brother's here! He's finally come home!"

Delighted squeals slipped through the door as it shut.

Soft laughter captured Oak's attention. He looked over at Chandler.

"And you were worried your mother wouldn't want anything to do with you."

"Well, since this is a warm homecoming," he said, "be prepared to be mauled once we walk through the door."

Starting his bike again, Oak followed the lane around to the storage buildings located behind the house. He shut his ride off again, opened the double doors of the largest shed where his truck was kept, and then returned to push his bike inside. Chandler gave his Honda just enough

gas to coax it in behind Oak's bike and shut off the motor. Quickly, Oak hopped in the Dodge, started it, and moved it outdoors.

Once Chandler had shut and locked the building again, Oak led him to the sunroom where they entered through a side entrance. He paused before opening the inner door to the kitchen. "Are you sure you're ready for this? They may not react well to you being with me."

"If they don't," Chandler shrugged, his eyes serious, "then it won't be the first time. It probably won't be the last either."

"You and I think a lot alike."

"I smell coffee."

Laughter burst from Oak. "I swear it's no wonder you work in restaurants. All you want to do is eat or drink coffee."

Pushing him gently toward the door, Chandler chuckled, too. "Dude, I'm freezing my nuts off out here."

Oak stepped inside to more squeals from his sisters, but before they could reach him, his mother threw her arms around him, hugging him so hard, he almost couldn't breathe. Behind her, his sisters practically danced in place waiting for their turns to embrace him, their faces bright with happiness.

"I tried calling you a few minutes ago," he said. "I didn't want to burst in on you like this."

She kept squeezing. "I didn't hear the phone ringing, baby. We were all up in the attic gathering boxes of Christmas decorations. I was beginning to think you were never going to come back," she gushed.

"I almost didn't. You have my friend Chandler to thank for me being here." He held her out at arm's length. "He convinced me to ride up for a visit."

She held out a pudgy hand. "Nice to meet you, Chandler...?"

"Casterock," he supplied as she pumped his hand. "It's good to meet you, Mrs Oak."

"Call me Peggy," she ordered gently. She quickly introduced Cassandra, his older sister, and Vanessa. "Come. Sit. I bet you could both use a cup of joe."

Rooted to the spot, emotion surged into Oak, his eyes stinging. He took in the image of his two grown sisters and then looked at his mother. "Mom," he croaked. "I'm so sorry I didn't come back when Dad died."

"Oh, honey." She hugged him again. "Your father was a good man, but he was also stubborn and often had a warped way of looking at things. He knows you're sorry, and I know he is, too."



"How do you know that?"

"He told me the day before he died."

"Oh." Guilt slapped him hard. He met his sisters' gazes, their expressions full of understanding.

"And don't you go blaming yourself for his death either."

He grinned sheepishly. His mother could still read him so easily.

She wagged her index finger at him. "His emphysema was bad, but he urged it on with those darn cigars. He just wouldn't give those things up." She tugged on his hand, drawing him over to the table where Cassandra poured cups of coffee and Vanessa sliced pumpkin pie. "Like I said, honey, he was stubborn."

"Is this your new man?" Vanessa asked. She set a dessert plate laden with pie at each chair. "He's cute."

"Leave it to you to embarrass everyone," Cassandra snapped.

"I didn't—"

"It's okay," Chandler interjected. "And to answer your question, we've only known one another a couple of days."

"What happened to Kent?" Oak's mother questioned.

Quickly, he explained the changes in his ex and the ultimate result. "So," he finished, "Kent better be out of my house by mid-March."

"I'm so sorry," she replied. "It's a shame that when people do change it's often for the worse."

He let his gaze wander over the kitchen done in yellow, cream, and white. Everything was the same except for a new refrigerator with Christmas bulb magnets on it and the holiday-themed curtains at the windows.

He sighed and then looked directly into his mother's eyes. "It's actually been over between us for a while now, Mom."

"Sit," she said. "Have some coffee and pie. Supper won't be ready for a couple of hours."

Oak wanted to discuss his father with his mom, but Cassandra took over the conversation with her announcement that she was engaged. He couldn't believe she was getting married. The last time he'd seen her, she'd been a skinny fourteen-year-old girl still wearing her hair in a braid and braces on her teeth. Now she was a beautiful, tall, slender woman, taking her build from their father, and her blonde, curly hair from their mom.

The discussion shifted to Vanessa's college courses, and he turned his attention to her. At nineteen, three years

younger than her sister and the baby of the family, she was shorter like their mother, but curvier. Her dark hair hung to her shoulder blades in a thick, wavy sheaf. She looked more like their dad right down to her piercing dark eyes and high cheekbones.

"You will be staying with us for a few days, right?" Cassandra questioned.

"Please, Oakie?"

He smiled at Vanessa's cutesy endearment. She was the only one in the family who had ever called him something besides Alowishus.

"I'm fine with it if you are," Chandler stated, "and if your mom doesn't mind."

"Of course I don't mind."

Oak looked at his mother.

"My boy is home again." She patted Chandler on the arm. "And he brought me another boy to dote on, too. We're family and that's the way it should've been from the start."

With the back of his hand, Oak wiped tears away.

"Sheesh, Oakie." Standing, Vanessa began gathering the dirty dessert dishes. "Since when did you turn into such a softie?"

"Since I met someone who reminded me I can't keep my heart in the dark," he retorted and glanced at Chandler, who grinned back.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Once supper was finished, the dishes washed, and the leftovers had been put away, Oak's mother ushered everyone into the family room while Oak stoked the coals in the fireplace and added several pieces of wood to it.

"Where's your Christmas tree, Mom?" he asked as she walked in carrying a tray with a coffee set and cups.

"That's our plan for tomorrow afternoon," she replied. "Care to help us?"

He straightened and looked at her. "You bet!"

"Let Chandler chat with your sisters." She held a cup out to him. "I want to talk to you alone for a few minutes."

The steam rising from the mug tickled his nose with the aroma of his mom's favorite Colombian brew. He blew across its surface and asked, "Did I do something wrong?"

"On the contrary." She waved him over to the seat in the big bay window. "I just want to explain a couple of things to you."

He followed her across the room, her bobbing side-to-side walk urging a smile to his lips. She settled on the padded seat and smoothed her long denim skirt with one hand. Sitting next to her, he glanced out at the darkness and heard the wind whistling around the corner of the house.

"I want you to know that although your announcement about Kent shocked your father, it didn't surprise me."

Startled, he glanced at her sharply. "It didn't?"

She hid her smile behind her cup, but she couldn't keep it from dancing in her gaze. "You forget that a mother knows her children better than they know themselves."

A noise of embarrassed amusement slipped from him. "I tried really hard to hide the truth because of Dad. I wasn't his real son, so I expected him to react the way he did about my sexual preference, but I just assumed you'd feel the same way he did."

"Alowishus," she said sternly, "you are my son, my only son. How could I stop loving you because you prefer men over women? What kind of mother would I be if I did that?" She pulled a faded envelope from her skirt pocket. "I can't say I understand your sexual orientation, but you're my baby and I'll take you anyway I can get you." She smiled and then leaned over and kissed his forehead. "I'm over the moon to have you home again."

Confusion filled him. "But I thought you shunned me, too."

She shook her head vigorously. "I wasn't shunning you. I was shocked, and your father laid down the law in

the house and said not to even mention what happened. You were plenty old enough to be on your own, but I still had your two young sisters to raise. Your father could be very difficult to live with when something upset him, so I kept my mouth shut about you and so did your sisters. The three of us knew you'd come back eventually, although I honestly thought it wouldn't take you this long." Remembering the envelope, she held it out to him. "This is from your father. He wrote it the day before he passed away."

He closed trembling fingers over the offering, the paper still warm from her body heat. Carefully, he broke the seal and pulled out a single sheet of stationery.

"What does it say?" she asked.

He read it aloud. "Son, forgive me. I'm sorry. I may not be your birth father, but I've always thought of you as my blood son. I love you. Please forgive a stubborn old man."

Tears rolled down his face. His mother took his cup and set both his and hers on a lamp stand nearby. She pulled Oak into her arms.

Finally, his tears spent, he sat back. She handed him a tissue from her deep pockets. Wiping his eyes, he caught movement to his side and looked up to find Chandler.

"When my brother was killed," he began, "it took me a long time to realize it wasn't my fault. I kept thinking there was something I could've done, but eventually I came to terms with the fact that the bear would've killed me, too, and then my grandparents and my sisters would've lost two of us. I didn't get to say goodbye to Tommy just like you didn't with your dad." He squeezed Oak's shoulder. "One thing I did do that helped me a lot was when I went to my brother's grave. I sat there talking to him all afternoon. When I left, I knew he'd heard me and I felt so much better for it."

"Your father is buried at the edge of the pine grove," said Oak's mother. "Over the years that spot always gave him comfort. Why don't you go there tomorrow?"

He rose and quickly hugged Chandler. Turning, he said, "No, I want to go now. I'll take a lantern." An idea formed, and he added, "Do you have any extra Christmas decorations, Mom?"

"Yes, they're in the upstairs hall. I brought them down to decorate the tree. Why?"

"I'm going to take some Christmas to Dad."

\* \* \* \*



The cold poked icy fingers into Oak's collar. He tugged it up around his neck and set the halogen lantern on the ground next to a marble gravestone carved with evergreens and mountains. Next to him, Chandler held a plastic bag.

"I overheard part of what you and your mom were talking about," said Chandler. "I understand now why you took your father's reaction so hard. It also answered my question about how you're so much older than your sisters."

"Yeah, Mom got in the family way—as she calls it—when she was fifteen. I was four years old when she met her husband." He pointed at the marker. "He's the only one I've ever known as a father."

Chandler pulled the lights from the bag.

"I got your message, Dad," said Oak. Part of him felt ridiculous for talking to a headstone, but the other side of him knew his father was listening. "I'm sorry for upsetting you, but life doesn't always turn out like we think it should. I'm not mad at you. I've always loved you."

With that, he leaned over and kissed the top of the marker, its smooth surface cold against his lips. He felt a nudge on his shoulder and turned to accept a long, thick strand of blue garland from Chandler. Oak wrapped it around the tombstone, leaving his father's name uncovered.

Next, he hooked half a dozen silver bulbs on the glistening rope, and then accepted a roll of duct tape from the bag to secure the ends of the garland against the back of the marker.

"I hope you don't mind," Chandler began, "but I took these off your bike. I thought your dad might like some Christmas lights, too."

Warmth permeated Oak's heart. He took the strand of LEDs from him and weaved them through the garland. Flipping the switch, he smiled as the tiny bulbs cast a rainbow of colors across the frozen ground and reflected off the shiny marble.

"Merry Christmas, Dad."

He gathered the tape and the lantern.

"We can pick up some more batteries for the lights tomorrow," Chandler suggested.

Nodding, Oak lit the way as they headed back to the house.

"Well," said Chandler, "now I have to find something else to wrap around your handlebars."

Halfway across the chilly meadow, Oak paused and faced his companion. "How about you wrap your heart around it?"

"Dude, now that you've patched things up with your family, it's made you poetic." Grinning, Chandler stood toe to toe with him. "You should write me a love poem and sign it Alowishus—"

With a halfhearted growl, Oak yanked him closer and claimed his lips. At that moment, the biting wind, the creak of the tall pines, and the distant barking of a neighbor's dog all seemed heightened, special. Chandler sighed and pushed closer to Oak, his fingers winding into the front of Oak's jacket. He deepened the kiss, his free hand kneading Chandler's hip as he sensed desire rising in his new lover like glistening morning fog.

Finally, he drew back and looked into Chandler's glittering eyes. "This is going to be the best holiday season ever."

"I was just thinking the same thing," he replied breathily. "I'm glad I met you, Oak."

"We'll do our best to always be open and talk to one another, okay?"

Chandler nodded. "Always."

"Let's go back before we freeze out here." Holding the lantern up, Oak draped his other arm across Chandler's shoulders.

"Can I call you Alowishus?"

Oak grimaced, but a chuckle escaped him regardless. "Not if you want to live to tell about it."

"What about Al?"

"No."

"Wishus?"

He tightened his arm around Chandler's neck and drew him into a light choke hold. "Can I call you Chani?"

"Ugh, no!"

"Then shut up."

Laughing hard now, Chandler straightened and swatted Oak across the butt. "Merry Christmas, Oak."

"Merry Christmas to you, too." He started jogging. "Hurry up. I want another slice of Mom's pumpkin pie."

As he beat Chandler to the back stoop, the first snowfall of the year drifted down on the farm in big cotton-ball flakes.

*The End*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Azura Ice writes several subgenres of romance, which includes but is not limited to het, ménage, m/m and can be set in contemporary times or even in a faraway world or another dimension. Azura's muse leads her by the hand, and her fingers do the light-speed typing.

Who is Azura Ice? She's a full-time author who is owned by two crazy felines of tabby descent (although they swear they're of Egyptian lineage). Azura writes in an attic study that overlooks a beautiful valley, and enjoys her husband's company when he's permitted to enter her domain.

However, if he brings offerings of coffee and an occasional chocolaty treat, she's inclined to let him in her office more often.

Azura takes her writing seriously, so she doesn't hang out on group loops (she tries to avoid shiny object syndrome). She also writes as F.L. Bicknell, Molly Diamond, Amber Redd, and Cutter Phoenix. Her work has appeared in such publications as Penthouse Variations and The Ohio Writer not to mention her numerous titles with several different e-publishers. She's represented by TriadaUS Literary Agency, but if you'd like to contact her, interview her, etc., you can reach her at the following links.

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