

Heart and Haven 2: Send Lawyers, Guns, and Roses
Copyright © April 2016 by Heloise West

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the original purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

Image/art disclaimer: Licensed material is being used for illustrative purposes only. Any person depicted in the licensed material is a model.

eISBN 9781682521120
Editor: Raven McKnight
Cover Artist: Syneca Featherstone
Published in the United States of America

Loose Id LLC
PO Box 170549
San Francisco CA 94117-0549
www.loose-id.com

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * *

DISCLAIMER: Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.

Chapter One

Alex

The door closed behind the last customer, and the noisy bar finally returned to silence, a booze-fumed, tacky-underfoot silence where the small noises Alex made seemed twice as loud. His ears rang as he picked up the broom to sweep out the crap on the floor behind the bar. It'd been busy, and he was on alone.

The front door opened again, and his shoulders tensed. He cursed himself for not locking it when he'd shoved out the last drunk patron, distracted by the e-mail he'd just received. A stupid mistake. He groped under the bar for the bat the owner had urged him to use if he felt the need.

"Excuse me," the man said in the doorway said. He'd been in the bar earlier that night, an Asian man along with a rather bland, nondescript white guy.

Alex looked closer, not moving away from the bat. "We're closed. Need me to call a cab for you?"

The man appeared innocuous, but innocuous-looking people could still be trouble. The instincts that Alex had honed all those months on the run had stayed with him. Director Flint's warnings about retaliation flashed through his brain.

The guy opened his mouth to answer Alex's question, but someone shoved him from behind before he could speak, and he stumbled. Alex grabbed the neck of the bat.

"Didja ask him? Is it him?" The pushy friend pressed himself forward a few steps. He was far drunker than his buddy, who apparently wasn't in trouble—he was *with* trouble.

"We're. Closed." Alex threw some menace behind the authority in his voice and revealed the bat. The Asian man flinched and grabbed at his friend, who was fishing in his pocket for something.

"It's him. You. Boy Blue," the drunk man burred.

Alex froze, shifting gears. He tightened his grip on the bat. Anger fueled his ass up and over the bar to land a few feet in front of the drunk, who pulled out a phone, aimed it in his direction, and blinded him with the flash.

"You fucker!" Alex reached out to slap the phone away – too late, because the man had thrust it back into his pocket. Alex smacked the bat against the tiles on the floor. It made a sharp, solid noise, and they both looked at him with drunken, slow-motion surprise. "Get the fuck out before I call the cops!"

"Asshole!" The first guy grabbed his friend again, shoved him out the door, and slammed it shut behind him.

Alex locked it this time and leaned against it, heart racing. When it finally began to slow, he took a deep breath and another, and his temper faded. He had a date tonight, and if he didn't move his ass, he'd be late. Cranking up Dropkick Murphys to exorcise the intruders, Alex cleaned the place out in record time. When he was done, he opened the e-mail still waiting in his inbox, saw there was a video attachment, and clicked it open.

Happy Birthday! The handmade sign filled the screen. Alex smiled.

Bare feet on their unmade bed. Hunter wiggled his toes, and Alex laughed. The webcam traveled along Hunter's shins to his knees, all dusted with brown and copper-tinted hair, and he bent his left knee, the sheet falling from his muscular thigh. Hey, was that pointed birthday hat covering his – shit, it was. Hunter stretched like a big cat, and the tip of the hat rocked as he adjusted his hips. Alex swallowed hard, mesmerized as the webcam swept across Hunter's hips and flat belly, up the opposite side of his body, past an erect pink nipple, the tattoo, and the hairy armpit, along his biceps, which he flexed, then forearm to wrist and the silver bracelet around it. Alex's heart gave a

little lurch, beating faster. His boyfriend had handcuffed himself naked to the bed for his birthday.

The webcam swept down again, across Hunter's body to reveal the other erect nipple, and down to his naked ass. As the man shifted his hips again, Alex's cock shoved up against the front of his jeans, and he had to stand and make room for the monster in his pants.

Hunter wasn't done. The view took in his hip and the swell of his ass and swept down to reveal a trail of multicolored ribbons behind him. The camera dipped, and the ribbons appeared to disappear into his butt.

Oh, honey. Alex groaned, grabbed his wallet and keys from the cash register, and ran for the door.

The June night was warm and the sky clear and sparkling over Delingham as he jogged out to the car and jumped in. Thursday night was his Friday—as the newest hire, he had to put his time in before he'd get the plum weekend shifts. His thoughts were on getting home without wrecking the car while Hunter's video replayed in his head. It was late, nobody out, so that was okay. His blood boiled for Hunter.

He drove through the quiet streets. Alex hadn't wanted to come back to Delingham at all, but Hunter's family had made sure the rent was paid on his apartment. At least they had a safe place to go to when Hunter recovered from Dale Markham's accidental gunshot wound. Dale Markham, former FBI agent, currently rotted in jail—someplace hot, Alex hoped, good practice for when he got to hell. Nick Truman too, but no one was willing to tell Alex what his status was. Maybe they had put him in Witness Protection like Nick had hoped. The case against the two men who had murdered Alex's uncle had become a nonissue, since before they could be taken into custody, someone had killed them.

Nothing like thinking about those things to defeat the raging hard-on, so he blasted out Dropkick Murphys again to fuel up the testosterone.

"Here I come, baby," he murmured.

What do you want for your birthday?

To bang you stupid.

He guessed he was getting his wish.

Not finding a parking spot near the apartment building set him seething and grinding his teeth. His lot in life had improved, but not his temper. He dropped the keys twice on the front stairs and finally made it through the door before he considered alerting Hunter that he was in the lobby. Alex texted quickly—*coming up now*—and smiled to think again of Hunter there, waiting, naked, and handcuffed to the bed. They'd talked about playing like that but hadn't got around to it yet. In the video, Hunter had kept the wounded leg covered; he hated the scar, the asymmetry where they'd taken some of the muscle during surgery. He was doing better, finally, after a pretty deep funk before his physical therapist got him motivated and on the road to getting back in shape.

Yeah, we're doing good.

Alex kicked away his shoes and whipped off his socks. "It's me!" In the bedroom, both the music and the lights were low. Alex opened the door, grinning from ear to ear. The naked man on the bed grinned back, the party hat on his head tipped at a rakish angle. A second set of cuffs dangled off the tips of his fingers. Alex pulled his shirt up and over his head, wrecking his hair, but he didn't care. Hunter's eyes were on him; that's what Alex wanted, Hunter drinking him in as much as Alex drank in Hunter. Alex had set himself up with a rigorous workout schedule to prep for the physical part of the special agent application process. He didn't know for sure if he'd get accepted, but the real payoff was in Hunter's eyes.

Alex worked the zipper of his jeans. "Do you have to take a piss? Have you been waiting long?" He stripped off his jeans and underwear.

"I'm fine. Come and have your birthday cake." Hunter laughed that sexy, dirty laugh Alex loved, the one that was an instant hard-on for him. Hunter's whole body moved in a sinuous, inviting wiggle, and the cuffs rattled. Yeah, just like that—Alex's

cock and heart led him right into the bed like the needle on a compass pointing true north. He straddled Hunter, their legs tangling together in the sheets. He ran his hands over Hunter's bulging biceps; he and Hunter had been working out together.

There were days Alex couldn't believe Hunter was his, something that had once seemed impossible, unreachable. His selfishness for staying with Hunter kept him awake at night, tossing and turning, his head filled with fear. Fear that Vargas or Truman would take Hunter from him, from the world, and he'd be left to live out his days without Hunter, knowing he had been the one to cause his death.

Alex kissed Hunter to burn away his fears. When he put his hand down on the bed to brace himself, he touched the second set of cuffs. "I can't believe you did this for me."

"I guess you liked the video?"

Alex froze for a moment, like he had in the bar when the drunk guy had called him Boy Blue. Looking around, he found the webcam on the nightstand beside Hunter's laptop and moved it into the top drawer.

"Ah," Hunter said. "I thought you might want to make a sex tape, you know, for us?" His smile was cute and sexy, but Alex shook his head.

"I just want my cake." He nibbled Hunter's neck.

"Did something happen in the bar tonight?" Hunter's eyes were so light blue they appeared gray, but this close they were dark with concern. "You looked worried there for a minute."

"Nothing to worry about," Alex assured him, hoping that was true.

"Okay?" Hunter bucked his hips under his. "Come on, baby. Let's go. I've been laying here thinking about you and all the things you're going to do to me when you get home."

"You're ready for me?" Alex followed his glance to the multicolored ribbons trailing off the end of the bed. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Butt plug," Hunter said smugly, wagging his eyebrows.

"You look good enough to eat. And lick." Alex flicked his tongue across the letters of Hunter's tattoo. When he took a hard little nipple in his mouth, Hunter arched his body with a moan, and Alex tightened his thighs around him. Hunter pulled at the cuffs. They rattled again, the play of straining muscle in his arms mesmerizing Alex. He unwrapped Hunter like a present, pulling the sheets from them both until they were completely naked. Alex's cock dripped precum. As he reached for the lube, he tightened one hand around both their cocks and squeezed and stroked them together. Hunter's groans set his blood on fire, and he strained to keep from sinking into Hunter's ass and fucking the daylights out of him.

Hunter knew it too, the bastard, and pulled on the ribbons, releasing the plug.

"So ready for you." He moaned, arching up against Alex, the heated slide of their skin making Alex shiver. "Come on, tiger."

Alex moved Hunter's wrist gently to the headboard and cuffed his other hand to the top of the wooden frame.

Monogamy had freed them from the tyranny of condoms. Hunter's hot and ready flesh welcomed Alex, wrapping around his aching cock like a velvet glove, and he pummeled the soft nub of Hunter's prostate until his body completely fell under Alex's control. No wrestling with his bossy bottom—Hunter took what Alex gave him, and Alex gave everything he had. He stared into Hunter's eyes as he fucked him, the eye contact a live wire between them while he drove into Hunter, so sexy, so much love.

"Coming," Hunter groaned out, tears in his eyes. "Oh, God...Alex...I love you."

Alex couldn't form words. Hunter had melted his brain. Alex stroked him until he came in Alex's hands, crying out his name as orgasm racked his body. Alex didn't hold back anymore and came like a rocket.

* * * *

It was noon before Alex cracked his eyelids open for good. They'd had a little more cake earlier in the morning, without the cuffs, and his insides were glowing with sated love and lust. The smell of coffee, French toast, and bacon reached him, and he hauled his ass out of bed. He showered, shaved, put on jeans, and headed for the kitchen, unable to make himself stop smiling.

Hunter plated up breakfast deftly, even with the crutch under his arm; he knew Alex was there, because he was grinning when he turned to set the plate on the kitchen table. Alex sat, and Hunter put a full coffee cup down in front of him, with a kiss to his forehead. "Happy Birthday, Alex."

Alex felt lucky to be alive to celebrate his twenty-fourth birthday on a warm day in June with what seemed like every flower on the planet in bloom. Winter had hung on forever up north; it had even snowed in May. Somehow the bullets aimed in their direction had yet to find them.

He had more days of joy now than of the endless despair that had dogged him since he'd witnessed his uncle's murder, been placed in protective custody, then been betrayed by his guardian agent Nicolas Truman. Another good man had died trying to protect Alex. He'd almost lost Hunter because he'd refused to give up on Alex, taking him to his family of lawmen in the North Country for safety.

Perhaps it was odd that when Director Flint had suggested Alex apply to the FBI, he had jumped at the chance. Hunter had seemed to think so. The FBI had failed him, though that was due to the rotten apples like Truman and Markham, who worked for Oscar Vargas, former leader of a Mexican drug cartel in Las Vegas. Vargas's incompetent son and his friend had murdered Alex's uncle, and Alex had been the only witness. Vargas had wanted him dead so his son wouldn't have to go to jail.

Alex's old life was gone. He had a hard time seeing himself as he was before it all happened; grad school so he could teach history had been derailed. Why wouldn't he want to devote his energies to stopping men like Vargas and his cronies from hurting innocent people and destroying their lives?

"What are you thinking about?" Hunter sat opposite Alex and leaned the crutch against the wall beside him.

"I'm psyching myself up to put my application into the special agent Talent Network tomorrow." He didn't know why he said it, because there'd been a great vibe going in the sunny kitchen up until that moment.

Hunter frowned. "You decided on applying as a linguistic specialist."

"It's my only chance to get in. I'm fluent in Spanish and in Mom Alice's Mexicano—Nahuatl. I've got French and Japanese for my foreign-language minor." He said it like a mantra, as Hunter knew all this already. Maybe Alex wanted Hunter to try and talk him out of it one more time. Alex wanted this job more than almost anything in his life, and Hunter hated it. He didn't say he hated it now, but he lowered his gaze and kept it on his plate, though he didn't eat.

"You're scary smart, mister."

"I'm rusty. I need to pick up a couple review classes." On top of the martial arts classes. "It's really bugging you."

Hunter made a noncommittal sound. "It's what you need to do. For John and because of Truman."

"That's not all." Alex's heart grew heavy.

Hunter looked up from the plate. "I get it. Why wouldn't I? I respect you for wanting to be a part of the FBI."

He hadn't said that before, and Alex let out his breath. He really needed to hear it from Hunter and to reassure him. "Your family puts their lives on the line every day. It won't be like that."

"Of course it will. I don't buy the idea they'll stick you in an office somewhere to push paper, right? Flint sees something in you, something the FBI can use."

Hell, yeah.

"You're competitive. That's part of the reason you survived." Hunter poured syrup over his French toast. "That's what they want. You'll also be good at it because of me."

Alex reached across the table for Hunter's hand, and Hunter met him halfway. "I'll be good at anything because of you. They still might not accept me."

"You have a plan B. Getting your master's and teaching. Or applying to the police academy."

"I'm afraid— I don't want this to come between us down the line." Alex did want to protect Hunter, protect them both. The FBI would let him do that. Alex wasn't sure the fallout from his life wasn't still out there like a ticking bomb.

"I hear Virginia is nice, with hardly any snow. I'm sure there'll be work for me there. And it's not like the ER anywhere is impervious to violence, considering how we, ah...met." Hunter let go of Alex's hand and picked up his fork. "And I'd love to prove Flint and you-know-who wrong." He winked. "We keep talking, like we always do."

The first time Alex had brought up the subject, Hunter was still in the hospital but only days away from getting released. They'd fought about it loud enough to bring a couple of shocked nurses in to check on them. Alex almost smiled at the memory.

Hunter sobered and put the fork down. "I understand. I really do. But it's going to change you, and I love you the way you are. The job is going to take you away from me. You're always going to be traveling."

"I want you to come home to. I didn't think any of it would be easy for either of us, but you've obviously been thinking about it."

Hunter shrugged. "Who wants easy?" He nodded. "I'm with you whatever you decide, whatever happens. I want you to be happy. Come on—we have a birthday to do. We can make the next train into Boston if we hurry our asses up."

Chapter Two

Hunter

The place where the crutch went into Hunter's armpit ached as he held on to the overhead strap with one hand and the crutch with the other. Alex stood beside him on the crowded train, on alert to catch him if he fell or if someone knocked into him. The Green Line train lurched and squealed around tight corners and rattled at breakneck speed through the tunnels in a way that was homey yet made him uneasy.

Hunter wished he could reach the ibuprofen tin in his pocket. The birthday excursion was worth the inconvenience of relying on the hated crutch, but the healing muscle of his thigh ached with the exertion. Boston was his old stomping ground, and he had managed to stick with the public transportation map in his head, finding buses and trains to get where they wanted to go easily. First they walked through Faneuil Hall and Government Plaza to the King's Church. They took a cab farther up Park Street along the Common and across to the Victorian Gardens, from the crowded Haymarket stalls, past the steaming giant teapot, to the swan boats. Now they were on their way to the Blue Line for the aquarium and, later, dinner in the North End.

The crutch was a good excuse to stand close to Alex, who had a protective hand on him. He took Alex's care in stride for the most part, though he'd fought it at first because he hated to be babied. Unheeding feet kicked at the crutch and made him glad to have Alex there. The leg was still weak, and he had to think twice before moving anywhere.

Most of the people in their car got off at the next stop, and only a few stepped into the train. Two women loaded with shopping bags caught Hunter's attention as they sat and arranged bags and limbs. His mouth went dry with fear. The younger woman

pulled out a cell phone and checked it as the older woman closed her eyes and leaned back in the seat.

"What's the matter?" Alex whispered. "Let's sit."

"No!" Hunter said in an undertone, and Alex stiffened at his urgency. If they moved, they'd definitely be noticed, handicapped with the crutch as he was.

Alex's expression sharpened as he glanced up and down the car to assess the new threat. Not seeing one, he said, "Are you in pain?"

"No. Just give me your hat." Hunter took the Giants cap from Alex and eased it onto his own head. "And wait." Hunter forced himself to stop staring at the women. Ducking his head so the bill covered most of his face, he wished he and Alex could move to another car, but he knew as soon as they started moving, the crutch would make people—her—focus on him.

He stared out the big window of the subway car at the tunnel walls flashing by, the lights flickering for whatever reason the lights always flickered in this spot. Closing his eyes eased the anxiety yet made him dizzy. When he opened them, Alex's blue eyes were filled with concern, but he didn't say a word.

She'll get off soon for the Red Line. For Southie.

The train squealed to a stop and again left off more passengers than it let on. Shit. Now he felt really exposed.

When the train started rolling once more, Alex said, "That woman keeps staring at you," confirming his fears. "The older lady in the leopard-print blouse. You're shaking, honey."

Hunter moved his head to the side and saw her clearly in the glass, glaring at him. Her daughter turned in his direction. The weight of their accusatory glances pressed against his back. Hunter couldn't bite back the groan of fear that rushed through him, along with a collage of images—Jerry standing over him with bloodied fists, screaming; Jerry pointing a gun at him later that day in the hospital parking lot, the sheer

determination on Jerry's face leaving Hunter sure he was going to die and that the next beat of his heart would be his last.

"Honey?"

Less than a year later, he was taken hostage in another ER; the cold metal of the gun against his forehead still burned like a brand. His memories rushed forward in time. The roar in his ears was the sound of the DHART helicopter as it flew him to Dartmouth-Hitchcock Hospital after Dale Markham accidentally shot him. He knew it was only memory, but as sudden sweat drenched him, his heart felt as if it were going to fly out of his chest.

"That's...Jerry's mom and sister," he managed to whisper.

"Hold on. Hold on to me, Hunter. Hunter, listen."

Alex.

Despite the screech of wheels on tracks, the shudder and lurch of the subway cars, a low humming flowed into Hunter's ears. Alex pulled him close, his chin nearly resting on Hunter's shoulder. He hummed a song low and tuneful, something Hunter half recognized.

How many times had he awoken to that deeply comforting sound, whispered song lyrics in the dim light of the hospital room, nightmares thrashing at him, the pain in his leg ebbing and flowing with the drip of the IV meds? He'd peel his eyes open to see Alex smiling at him, holding his hand or rubbing his arm, and when he could tolerate it better, feel Alex's long, lean body against him on the bed, fingers lightly massaging his scalp.

He could barely hear the humming over the racket of the subway, but it was enough. The tension slowly crept away, taking with it some of the terror. He breathed deep the scent of their shared sandalwood soap and let it out. The weight of the women and their loss pressed against his back, but he could stand up to it.

The subway car screeched to a drawn-out halt. The doors of the car whipped open, and Alex turned him toward them. Hunter didn't look back at the women as he

limped out the door. They couldn't see what had really happened, because their own pain and loss was so huge, and he felt bad; he really didn't blame them.

A few people jumped into the car, and the doors snapped shut.

"Let's sit. The next train won't be for a while, right?" Alex put his hand to the small of Hunter's back as they moved toward wooden benches. "Jeesh, you told me they hated you, but that Medusa—"

"Don't. Just...don't." Hunter sat with a heavy sigh. He wanted to kick the crutch onto the third rail and watch it burn. "Your parents were lucky to get you back—they thought you were dead. Jerry's never coming back." He took Alex's hand to soften the words. Around them, Bostonians rushed toward the exits or hurtled down the steps to make the next train, voices echoing against the subterranean ceiling. He leaned over and kissed Alex's cheek. "Thanks. For the distraction. Stupid PTSD."

Alex blushed, smiled, and squeezed his hand. "We can go home if you want. The aquarium's not going anywhere."

"You only get one twenty-fourth birthday," Hunter said. He was feeling better, and damn it, the past was not going to ruin Alex's birthday. Alex hadn't wanted to come back to Delingham in the first place. Maybe he was right. "I've been looking forward to this since we started talking about it. New England can be pretty at least five months out of the year. And you really wanted to see the fishies."

Alex snorted. "If you're tired..."

"I'm not. I'm really not. My armpit hurts, but..." He located the ibuprofen and dry-swallowed a couple. "That should take care of it. I want to see the fishies too."

"I love you, you know."

"I know. I love you too."

* * * *

They made it to the aquarium and out again without further mishap. In the North End, a couple of assholes smoking cigarettes outside a bar took exception to their linked

hands. "Homos!" one called out loudly as Hunter and Alex walked past them on the way to the restaurant. Alex shot them a death glare that Hunter swore left a scorched scent in the air, until they ducked their heads and turned away into the darkness of the bar.

"Patented Uncle Gordon Storm Trooper Top Dog expression," Hunter said before they stepped through the door of Napolito's. He handed Alex back his cap.

"He helped me a lot." Alex tucked the cap into his pocket. "Got me on the shooting range. Distracted me a little when you were in the hospital."

Yeah, but it was time to focus on the present.

"Reservation for Charbonneau, two," Hunter told the host, who checked his computer, nodded, grabbed two menus, and beckoned them to follow. Sinatra crooned overhead as they threaded past white-linen-covered tables, flickering candlelight, and murals of golden hillsides with grape arbors, olive orchards, and sunflowers. Hunter smiled when he saw their table; champagne in a frosty bucket of ice stood nearby, and a dozen red roses wrapped in gold paper lay on the small table.

A few whispered "aww, cutes" took the sting out of the dirty looks from some of the older, traditional-appearing patrons and a really young couple who were frankly staring and frowning. Despite the mixed reactions, if he and Alex didn't start making out at the table, they'd get through dinner without a problem. Hunter smiled at Alex as he sat in the chair in front of the flowers. All that mattered was here, smiling back at him with those big blue eyes and oddly shy smile. The waiter gently popped the cork and poured the champagne.

Hunter raised his glass. "They say it's your birthday."

Alex grinned. "Well, it's my birthday too."

They tapped glasses together and drank, gazing into each other's eyes. The restaurant specialized in these romantic dinners for two, from antipasto to tiramisu. They shared a mixed platter of lasagna, eggplant and veal parmesan, meatballs, sausages, and a bottle of ruby-red valpolicella.

"I can't believe you – this is so effing good." Alex speared another sausage. "So glad I'm not a vegetarian anymore."

"Somehow, I didn't think we'd want the Sicilian seafood platter after visiting the fish equivalent of Bambi, either." Hunter filled their glasses again. "How'd I do with the wine?"

Alex rolled his eyes with a groan, smiling and chewing. He swallowed. "We're going to have to roll home, if we can even stagger to the trains after all this."

"No, we don't." Hunter waited a beat, until Alex glanced from his plate up to meet his eyes. "I booked us a room at the Ritz-Carlton."

Alex's mouth dropped open.

"And a horse-drawn carriage is going to pick us up and take us to the hotel."

"You did not!"

"Did."

Alex put the sausage down. He scooted his chair closer to Hunter so their foreheads nearly touched. "It's too much, honey," he whispered. "I'd have been happy with a movie and a blowjob, as long as I was with you."

"But you deserve more than that," Hunter whispered back. "I hired a couple of porn stars to feed us expensive chocolates and more champagne while they give us a bubble bath. Plus, they have really big cannoli, baby. We can't disappoint them."

Alex dropped his head into his hands and laughed.

* * * *

They had espresso and anisette, shared a tiramisu, and let the waiter convince them a little limoncello wouldn't hurt. Not long after, a man in old-fashioned livery with a top hat that had a rainbow band stepped up to the hostess station. Hunter paid for the meal, collected the roses, and left a tip. He was so damn happy, he barely felt the alcohol – though they *had* consumed a huge amount of food to balance it out. Even the crutch had become a fifth limb. Outside the restaurant, he grabbed Alex and kissed him,

the roses crushed between them. The driver opened the door to the carriage and handed them both in, perhaps worried they'd fall on their faces before the fare even got going.

The night was warm and clear, with no hint that winter had ever stepped foot here. The bars and nightclubs were still open, and people in the outdoor bars waved at them as they clopped by. The bells on the horses jingled lightly, and Hunter, drunk and in love, felt like it was the stars jingling above them. They sat shoulder to shoulder, hands gripped, kissing and laughing, the moment encased in a bubble of magic.

Alex cuddled closer. "We never got to do this."

At least he understood.

Chapter Three

Alex

Once they got to the room, there were no porn stars, but there was more champagne, crackers, cheese, fruit, a bowl of kettle corn, and a great big marble tub for two that the bath butler had filled before they arrived.

"A bath butler? Really?" Alex glanced around. Flickering candlelight filled the bathroom, the sweet scent of honey filling the air.

"Puttin' on the Ritz for you, baby."

Alex did not want to touch another drop of alcohol, because he never could keep up with Hunter, and his belly ached with laughing. Stupidly, he was on the verge of tears in the candlelit room, but by the time they had unbuttoned shirts and stripped off pants to get into the hot, fragrant water, Hunter had him laughing again.

They soaked in the huge tub, all tangled together. Alex nearly drifted off to sleep with his head on Hunter's chest, listening to his heartbeat. Alex was too full of food, wine, and contentment for sex. The water cooled, so they got out, dried off, and wrapped up in thick, luxurious robes.

Hunter jumped onto the queen-size bed, made a lame joke about muscle queens, and patted the space beside him. He picked up the remote and switched on the television as Alex climbed in on top of the covers, under Hunter's arm, and in practically the same position they'd shared in the tub.

"I'm wrecked," Alex told him through a yawn. "You must be too. Leg hurt?"

Hunter sighed and rubbed Alex's back. "The hot soak helped."

Alex loved Hunter with everything he had, down to the marrow, to every cell in his body. And Hunter loved Alex, but he didn't know how scared Alex was—of how fragile this all felt, of losing him, of fucking things up between them. Of a stupid accident taking him from Alex, like the gun that had gone off when Clark's dog burst out of the woods and attacked Dale. Alex wasn't there for Hunter then. He was asleep in Hunter's father's house, thinking he had caught the norovirus from Nick Truman. He still couldn't believe Hunter had planned all that without him, had followed Nick, of all the damn people, into the woods to rescue Hunter's sister-in-law, Joan. Alex would have gone in his place, but Hunter had been there and taken the bullet meant for Alex.

Hunter went to counseling, but Alex had been putting it off. Wrong of him, he knew, especially since he was so close to sending off his special agent application. It could be a month, maybe two, before he heard anything. Director Flint had been the one to suggest Alex join the FBI, since he'd managed to elude them for nine months. In retrospect, maybe he was afraid Alex was going to write a book about it. He smiled at the thought and drifted off to sleep, Hunter's arm and hand heavy against his back.

"...new arrests in the ongoing investigation into a West Coast branch of the Federal Bureau of Investigation up next."

Alex jumped awake at those words.

"Fuck it." Hunter turned off the television and shifted his body toward Alex with a sexy grin. He pulled at Alex's bathrobe. "Come here, you. I am going to rock your birthday world a little bit more tonight."

Yeah, and he did.

* * * *

Want to know what happened next?

<http://www.loose-id.com/send-lawyers-guns-and-roses.html>