

**Dirty Bits**  
**Dirty Hearts Blog Tour**  
By Rhys Ford

## One

My life ended on the doorstep of my aunt's house.

Death came to me, digging into my flesh and leaving a mark I couldn't wipe away. He arrived holding an orchid plant, white paper thin scallops bobbing from fragile verdant threads along a brown stalk. His eyes were gold and hemlock green, filled with a wicked humour cocky enough to lift his smile from sweet to sensual. There was enough Asian in him—Japanese, I found out later—to ghost his skin with a rich golden undertone and pull the edges of his eyes into a curve. His thick brown mostly straight hair was too long to be professional and it fell forward, a sweep of mink across his strong, handsome face.

I knew I was dead when he spoke, a rolling melodic baritone with a splash of brightness sharp enough to make me forget the house of mourners at my back and the guilt I carried in my belly because I survived where my cousin Hyun-Shik did not.

Death says odd things. In this case, Death handed me a business card then said, "I'm Cole McGinnis. My brother Mike said he called ahead. It's about Kim Hyun-Shik. Are you a relative?"

Who names the end of the world *Cole*? And more importantly, why did Uncle need to hire a private investigator? Digging into Hyun-Shik's death would only open wounds just beginning to close. I was already on the outs with Auntie and Grace. Adding a handsome, sexy broad-shouldered man to the mix was only going to damn me further. I didn't need to know how many levels Hell had but if I was around him for much longer, I knew I'd find out.

I wanted him—this investigator into death. I wanted him in ways I'd not felt ever before and I handed him off to Grace as soon as I could, hoping to get lost in the bowels of the large house. There was no reason for him to affect me. I hadn't touched another man in years, hoped to not touch another man for...ever. I'd come to an understanding about who I was. Who I needed to be. And up until I looked into Cole McGinnis' green eyes.

"Food. They will need food." Talking to myself seemed silly but in the emptiness of Aunt's house, it was comforting. The kitchen was tucked away into the back, framed in by French doors that opened up to a pool no one used. I needed something to calm me down and while I'd been trying to break the habit I'd formed when dancing at Dorthi Ki Seu, my lungs itched for a hit of clove-scented smoke.

I slipped outside to light the *kretek*, knowing Aunt wouldn't want the smell in her house. She didn't want *me* in her house but there I was, about to make sure her guests had food and something hot to drink while they cried over Hyun-Shik's death. I was too numb to feel anything. I wasn't sorry Hyun-Shik was dead, another source of my guilt but I'd lost so much...he'd *hurt* me too much... for me to forgive him, even in death.

The sound of a faucet turning on told me someone was in the kitchen and I took one final drag of my cigarette and glanced behind me, expecting to see Grace or possibly one of Aunt's friends who'd come to make tea.

Instead, I found Uncle's investigator staring at me through the partially open doors and the look on his face told me everything I didn't need to know.

Cole McGinnis wanted me. In a way I couldn't risk. In a way I wanted so much the buried part of me cried out for his touch.

In a way we could never *ever* let happen.

## Two

"I don't know what to do with him, *nuna*. He is... he fits around me wrong." I sounded like a child, melodramatic and hurting over a small bruised slight but the bleeding gouge in my gut refused to be staunched. "No matter what I do to pull him off of me, he hold on."

Scarlet *nuna* continued to snip away the dead flowers of her potted rose bushes, either listening intently or ignoring me completely. I couldn't tell which. I never could tell which. There were times when I would pour my heart out to her only to have her blink at me then ask me to repeat what I said or she would appear to be distracted then ask a question so pointed it stabbed me clean through and severed my spine.

Right now, I was half hoping it would be the first but I suspected it was the latter.

I was right.

"I think, *dongsaeng*, if you really wanted him to go away, you would push much harder than you are," she murmured, stretching over one of the rounded bushes to clip away a brown, crinkling leaf. "You forget, I know Cole-ah. He is not an octopus but more of a wolf."

"You sound like a fortune cookie, *nuna*," I teased. Her dark eyes flashed, laughing at me as her mouth flattened into a disapproving line. I knew her frown was a lie. *Nuna's* beauty was a schooled mask of serenity and fierce propriety but her eyes...they were often bawdy and ripe with mischief. "And no, I will admit, I *like* the feel of him around me. I just... can't let him stay there."

"I find it funny you can't even say his name to me. As if if you speak it, he somehow becomes real."

"Or maybe he's like the dead," I replied softly. "We don't speak his name because he will push through the curtain of his world and into mine, bringing all of his monsters and filth with him. I can't have him with me, *nuna*. I just... can't. You know I can't."

She put the snips down then joined me on the patio's long couch. We were twenty stories up above Los Angeles in the penthouse she shared with *hyung*, my half-brother's uncle and for all intents and purposes, his wife.

Except she wasn't. Neither his wife nor a she, *nuna* lived in a half-world, straddling my mostly-uncle's life but never truly existing there. *Hyung had* a wife. She lived in Seoul, wore his name, bore his children and ate at his family's table. She held tremendous power in their family's corporation and helped forge alliances with other *chaebol* families.

*Hyung's* wife had everything of *hyung's* except his love.

That belonged to Scarlet.

But she would never ever be able to say so anywhere it mattered, other than the air between them.

Every time she told me she was happy...that it was enough... my heart broke a little bit more.

I couldn't live her life. Hell, I couldn't live my life. I couldn't simply throw myself into Cole's world and stay there because I was needed in my own world. My family needed me. My sisters needed me. Without me, my family would starve... but I could not *love* Cole out in the open, not where it mattered.

I could exist in that too-small space where I could whisper I loved him without anyone overhearing it.

But Cole was simply too big to fit into that tiny slice of air between us and much too fierce to be silenced by something as small as his need for me.

“Oh God, *nuna*, I love him.” It finally hit me, filling me with the impossibility of an *us*. He terrified me, pulling me apart and enticing me with the promise of a life lived outside of the air between us. I wanted that more than anything, but like *nuna*, would never have it. “What the hell am I going to do with that? I *can't* love him.”

Scarlet sighed and whispered, stroking at the back of my hand. “Sometimes, Jae-ah, our hearts refuse to see the world around us and only see the worlds we *want* to live in.”

## Three

If ever there was a time for violence, it was now. Standing across from Cole's father, I felt the need to wrap my hands around his thick neck and choke him until his skin ran grey and his lips turned blue. I wanted to feel the life leave his body. To tear him apart until I found his spine so I could pluck the bones out and flick them into the fire pit burning at the corner of the covered patio.

Instead, I smiled.

I'd always thought the hardest thing I'd ever have to do would be to walk away from my family. I never thought walking into Cole's would be just as hard. It was difficult seeing parts of his face on an older man, so similar but so different. I didn't think Cole could sour his features with the amount of hate his father poured out of him.

"Jae, do you want a beer?" Maddy steadied herself with a hand against one of the patio's post, leaning over an open ice chest. "Or something fizzy?"

"A soda or water is fine," I replied. The tension building up inside of the house felt ripe to break and I didn't want to be even a little buzzed if things went badly for Cole.

"Homos don't drink beer, Maddy," Cole's father spat. "Probably wants something fruitier. Maybe Cole can make him a mai tai or something."

Something in me broke and I turned to face the older man. It wasn't my place to say anything. This wasn't my family. This wasn't my fight but at the same time, it kind of was. My own family would never confront me so brazenly, so out in the open. Everything thrown at me would be hidden and whispered, sly digs and sharp looks. I would know it was coming only because I was looking for it. To have Cole's father slap at me out in the open was too...bold... even with all of the disgust he had in his voice, I was surprised.

"James—" Maddy straightened up and the fire in her eyes burned nearly as hot as the sun.

"It's all right, Maddy," I said, easing a Coke can from her clenched hand. "He isn't anyone I have to carry with me for the rest of my life. Nothing he says to me will matter. Nothing he does to Cole will matter. We came here to see you and so Cole can visit with his sisters. In a few hours, he and his wife will be a stain on our time and we will go back to Cole's house where we'll probably have bacon for breakfast the next morning. He is *nothing* to me. And eventually, he will be nothing to Cole."

"You fucking—" Cole's father took a step towards me and Mike grabbed at his arm before he could cross the patio.

"Leave it alone, Dad," Mike growled. "You started with your shit. Don't get pissed off when someone spits it back at you. You doing okay, Jae?"

"I am fine," I lied. I'd left Cole in the kitchen with the woman who'd raised him then threw him away. Like my own mother would throw me away. Standing in a boiling stew of conflict and intense hatred, I knew Cole would need someone—need me—once the night was over.

Maddy gave me a quick hug then exchanged an inscrutable look with her husband. I envied their secret language, the silence between them filled with so much meaning and my heart twisted with the pain of knowing I would never have that. It all seemed too impossible. My sisters were years away from moving away from my mother's household and even then, she would need me to help her.

I had my own flash of hatred, anger at being less than everyone else. Why shouldn't I have Cole in my life? Why couldn't he depend on me to comfort him after the flaying he'd endure that night? I was enraged for him—for us—at being locked away behind a wall while everyone else laughed and lived.

At that moment, Cole stepped out onto the patio and I physically felt the pain in him strike me. His sisters ran to him, chattering away in girlish voices of little things but there were shards of anguish in his voice when he spoke.

I was at his side before I knew it, pressing my hand against the small of his back and he leaned into me, unaware or uncaring at the disgusted hiss his father gave us from across the cement pad.

"I'm here for you, *agi*," I reminded him, brushing my lips over his jaw. It was barely a kiss but I shocked myself with it. I'd never touched another man so openly before but I felt nothing but a swell of deep affection for the green-eyed handsome private investigator who'd knocked on my aunt's door then pushed his way into my life.

"I know, babe," he whispered back, stealing a kiss from my parted lips. "Just like I'll always be there for you. Always."

## Four

It would have been so easy to simply fold over the edge of *nuna's* balcony railing and hit the street far below. There were problems with that plan. One, I would probably end up landing on someone and killing them while living through the experience or perhaps ending up in a hospital bed for years where my mother could then come by and cluck at me. Two, *nuna* would feel horrible and she would never be able to go out onto the balcony again. If she didn't ask *hyung* to move.

I didn't want to be the reason *nuna* and *hyung* had to move.

It was late afternoon...maybe. I'd lost track of time. I'd lost track of so much; time... Cole...my younger sister. I could still hear her...her broken voice filled with shock and horror and the terrified look on Cole's face when he realized the person he was hugging from behind wasn't me.

I don't know what startled me more... my baby sister's horrified gasp or seeing him with his arms around her. Tiff's disgust was hard to swallow but I'd nearly choked to death on the anger I had well up inside of me watching Cole with someone else.

"God, what am I going to do?" I rubbed at my face and my elbows scraped across the railing. The sky had no answers when I looked up at the clouds gathering overhead. My stomach was a knot, squeezing out every drop of bitterness and loathing I had in me.

There wasn't any choice. Not really. Ha-Eun, Hyun-Shik's mother already had me wrapped up tight with her poisonous words and hatred. I was my mother's only support and one word from her would send my already struggling family into poverty.

"She might not say anything, *dongsaeng*." *Nuna* came up behind me, setting a tray with glasses of iced tea onto the long table in front of the couch. Her face was a curl of worry, a line creasing the space between her eyebrows but *nuna's* smooth face was as beautiful as ever. I was as envious of her serenity as I was of my sister being hugged by Cole. "Get away from there and come sit with me. We can talk through this."

"What is there to say?" I sat but my nerves were too torn for me to settle. "Mother finds out I like men—want a man—and she will turn her back on me. Then where will she and the girls be?"

"We will help," she replied softly. "You are all family to us. She should—"

"You and I both know, Mother won't allow herself to be helped. Too much pride, even when her children are starving," I cut through Scarlet's kind words. "Tiffany's already spoken to Aunt because she thought it would help."

"That is like asking a cobra for a goodnight kiss to make you feel better," Scarlet grumbled. "Ha-Eun will use this to pressure you. She cannot help it. She is that scorpion asking the frog for help across the river. With Grace in prison and Hyun-Shik dead, she has no one to manipulate."

"Especially since Uncle refuses to live with her." I swallowed a bit of tea, hoping the cold liquid would calm my hot stomach. "Ha-Eun told me I need to do right by the family and break it off with Cole. She's still angry Uncle might accept Jae-Su as his son and all she wants to do is hurt my mother."

"She is not the only one," Scarlet said, toasting me with her glass. "I am the last person to tell you what to do with your heart, Jae-Min—"

"But you are going to anyway," I teased.

"I have to." She shrugged. "Because I am your nuna and I know what is like to love from behind smoked glass. Do not let go of Cole-ah. Refuse to give in to your family's pushing at you. You deserve to be loved. You finally found someone who suits you, who loves you for everything you are and understands what you are not. No one will love you like Cole-ah does."

"No one has ever loved me like Cole-ah," I acquiesced. "But love doesn't feed a family, *nuna*, and it won't protect them from Ha-Eun's anger. She is looking for something to use against Mother and she has me. I am the perfect knife to sink into my mother's heart. And now that Tiffany told her what happened, Aunt has a perfect opportunity to tell Mother I am..." I couldn't say the word, not out loud, not yet. "She can leave Hyun-Shik out of it and saves herself from shame while setting me on fire. Mother won't look to you or *hyung* for help and Uncle isn't ready to give money to Mother or Jae-Su. I can't let my family starve and they will if Mother disowns me."

I knew what I had to do. And I hated myself for it. I would be breaking Cole-ah's heart because I couldn't be less of a son. Nuna understood—even as she disagreed with me—I knew she understood.

"You will kill him with this, *musang*," she whispered. "Are you ready to do that? Are you able to carve his heart out and kill him like his friend did to him back then?"

"He has other people—Bobby and Mike," I protested but it was weak. I had a pain in me I couldn't make go away and I was growing more numb with each passing second. There was salt in the tea and I wiped at my face only to find I was crying. "He won't be alone this time, *nuna*."

"That won't make it any better, Jae-ah," Scarlet murmured as she leaned over to dab at my cheeks with a napkin. "You are still going to break his heart and devastate his life. No friend will ever fill his soul like you do. No matter how hard you wish it."

## Five

“Jae honey, pass me that pepper sauce over there.” Claudia nudged around me, unpinning the alarmingly elaborate red hat perched on her head. “It looks like something I’d use to make my pork loin. Might be nice to change things up a bit.”

I snagged the rooster sauce from the kitchen counter and slid it over to the island where Marcus’d put down the grocery bags they’d brought with them. With her son dispatched to wherever six-foot-tall, shy sons to go when dropping their mothers off to help someone cook, Claudia took one of the aprons I’d hung on the pantry door, looped it over her head then tied it around her waist, all the while surveying the kitchen.

We’d done this dance a few hundred times before but this time was... different. I was alone in Cole’s house—alone with my cat—and waiting for Bobby or Mike to bring him home from the hospital. I was trying to feel *normal* about the whole thing, as if packing the fridge and freezer full of food was something I did every week because the idiot I’d fallen for couldn’t cook to save his life and he’d just spent two days lying on his back because he fell off a building after being blasted in the butt by a crazy man with a shotgun.

It was a lot to take in. Heck, it was a lot to live through and not for the first time since I’d laid eyes on Cole McGinnis, I wondered if being with him... having him in my life was worth it.

Neko’s tiny complaining mewl from somewhere in the house was enough of a sign to keep me from slipping out of the house before anyone else showed up. She’d been all I had, the only thing I knew loved me—as much as a cat can love—and Cole risked his life for her...for me.

“You have the look of a man who is torn between digging in or flying away,” Claudia said softly, tugging at my sleeve to get my attention. “Talk to me, Jae. You having doubts about being here or is it just too much with everyone descending down on this place like locusts?”

I smiled at the maternal scold in her eyes. If there was one thing I knew about Claudia, it was she considered Cole her much paler and possibly stupidest son. Shaking my head, I lied, “No, I’m fine.”

My own mother is not the woman Claudia is. Not by any means. Claudia cared. Like Scarlet cared. It was odd receiving that kind of maternal love after so many years of thinking I knew what a mother was like. The force of her emotions washing over me was nearly as overwhelming as thinking about Cole. I got another look—one that stripped me bare and left my aching raw soul open to the searing wind—and then she shook her head, mumbling something under her breath while she reached for a bunch of chard I’d left on the island.

“He’s good for you, you know,” Claudia finally said, shattering the tense quiet between us. “And you’re good for him. I had my doubts. Not going to lie about that but once I saw him with you, I knew you two were going to be all right.”

It never felt right to reach out. To talk about how life affected me. It wasn’t how I was raised. It wasn’t the world I’d ever lived in but stumbling into Cole’s arms meant falling into his world and it was a place where people *talked*...where people *hugged*... and there were so many times when I couldn’t be held one moment longer because it hurt to feel so much inside of me.

Like it hurt now. Waiting for him to come home and knowing I would have to wait until everyone left before I could simply sit with him and watch him breathe. I didn’t know how to tell him I loved him. I was scared to say it out loud. He would grab my words and hold on to them tightly, so tightly I knew I would feel his hands around my untouched heart.

He *terrified* me.

So I took the first step I could, tentatively reaching out to whisper a secret I'd held in since he'd told me everything was going to be okay.

"I think I love him, *nuna*," I whispered to Claudia. "I just don't know how to say it"

"You'll find a way, honey." She patted my hand, her fingers slick with the water from the cut greens. "You take your time and tell him when you're ready. He'll wait. That boy will wait forever and a day for you. You mark my words."

## Six

There was literally nothing in Cole-ah's pantry. Or rather, nothing without a ton of salt and preservatives. His refrigerator and freezer weren't much better, more a vast wasteland of frozen chunks of meat I couldn't identify. It was like excavating a mastodon, scraping back the thermafrost in the hopes of reading a label so worn by the crush of ice it was impossible to say if the print said steak or pork.

And there was nothing to say about the bin of frozen burritos taking up an entire shelf of the restaurant-grade freezer. I didn't even realize they made 15 different types of burritos and I felt kind of dirty, as if I'd somehow stumbled onto Cole's odd tortilla-fueled fetish collection without a clue about how to use any of it.

So I simply shut the door.

Then sighed.

Salvation came in the form of Scarlet. A phone call to complain turned into a plan of action and within an hour, there was a knock on Cole's front door and one of *hyung's* junior security guards brought groceries into the kitchen. He refused money and food but reluctantly took an iced milk coffee with him when he left. Closing the door behind him, I surveyed Cole's enormous kitchen and got to work.

There is something relaxing about creating a meal. It relaxed me, taking away any troubles I had laying on my mind. I don't know why slicing a mound of vegetables and meats was better for my soul than going to temple and praying but I never felt closer to the universe and God than when my hands were plunged down deep into the earth's bounty. I loved the richness of spices feathering out of my hands into a stew and the pungent bite of garlic when I smashed it with the flat of a blade. I enjoyed slicing thin ribbons of chicken with a sharp knife, thick enough to curl in a hot broth but not so thin as to whisper away under the heat. The sweet-acrid tang of green onions hitting a pool of sizzling sesame oil carried through the house and I inhaled the scents of the kitchen, filling my mind with the promise of a good meal and a warm cuddle on the couch afterwards.

Neko mewed at my feet as I worked, tirelessly scolding me for neglecting her belly as I worked through the fish, shrimp and chicken I planned to put into the chigae. She was tiny, a light pouf of black fur and sharp teeth but her scream was enough to rattle my eardrums. I gave her a tiny bit of fish, enough to send her away and keep her content but not so much I'd have to worry about scraping it from the carpet because her stomach was too full.

I was so intent on what I was doing, I didn't hear the front door open or Cole coming into the kitchen. When his arms wrapped around my waist, I jumped, nearly slashing both of us with the paring knife I was using on a piece of daikon.

"Aish, you scared the crap out of me, Cole-ah." My heart pounded, driving the blood into my ears. I set down the knife, willing my hands to stop shaking. I sniffed, catching his scent, a peppery blend of sunshine, lemon soap and a touch of male musk.

The smell of him, the feel of him against me turned my insides to liquid and I ached to have him in me. Cole was warm and fierce, wrapped around me and I had to step out of his embrace or I'd have embarrassed myself by shoving him down to the kitchen floor, doing very wrong things with his firm, hard body and probably burning dinner at the same time.

I knew what I had to do. There was one thing Cole McGinnis couldn't stand and luckily enough, I had the means. He wasn't going to let go and he'd begun to make a nibbling trail down my neck, stirring my lust. Digging my hands into the plastic bag I used to put scraps and vegetable peelings into, I came up with

Cole's greatest fear stuck to several of my fingers—the beady-eyed severed heads of the long-antenna shrimp I'd purchased for the chigae.

His scream of unbridled terror was sweet as was the chase he led me through the house. I caught him in the bedroom, pinned up against the wall and yelling loud enough to wake the dead if there were any around. Laughing, he kissed me, straining at the same time to stay out of my reach and I let him pluck the shrimp heads from my fingers then drag me into the bathroom to scrub my hands with a froth of soap.

It wasn't the only thing I let him do to me. And luckily, dinner was only slightly charred.

## Seven

I'd once gotten a handful of wet, cut chili peppers smeared into my right eye. It'd been a spiteful, hateful gesture Aunt Ha-Eun felt would somehow teach me a lesson about keeping my place.

Aunt really liked to remind me to keep my place and I hadn't felt a pain like that since.

Until right now.

I couldn't seem to shake the burning pain creeping through my body and oddly, my skin felt numb and my muscles weren't responding when I tried to move. There was something in my throat, something hard and scratchy and when I tried to swallow, I choked on its rigid sides. My legs were cold and there was something dripping to the right of me, a slow steady plunk every other second. Blinking did no good because my eyes were heavy, weighed down by the same evasive lethargy spreading through my limbs and chest.

Then I remembered. I'd been shot. By Sheila and Cole'd held me as I slowly died in his arms.

At least it felt like dying. At the moment, all I felt was pain and that too rigid hardness in my throat, making it hard for me to catch my breath.

I felt a hand on my arm then a woman's voice telling me she was going to remove the tube. There were other words, other sounds but I didn't hear a word she was saying. Instead I was listening for a certain footstep, a rumble of a baritone voice amid the beeps and whispers of machines but all I could hear was the rasp of the tube as it left my throat, burning on its way out.

"You can't be in here, sir." The woman's words were sharp and cutting. "You are going to have to *leave*. You are not *allowed*—"

I would have told her she'd have better luck arguing with the wind but my throat was too raw and dry for me to speak. I knew who'd come in just by the scent of his skin and the soft tread of his feet on the floor. His hand was warm, centering me and the pain whispered away, driven out by Cole's soft touch.

"You do your job, ma'am," Cole said gently but there was no mistaking the steel in his voice. It sang through the room, a clear bell tone strong enough to guide me home. "And I'll do mine."

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The next time I woke up, I could open my eyes. The beeping was still there, an electronica score set to an off beat and night shoved its way into the room, darkening the walls and corners through the large windows on the left wall. Noises were coming through the partially open door, clanging and voices too muffled for me to make anything out but distinctly hospital in nature.

I had a needle shoved into my left arm and a Japanese-Irish man asleep on my right.

The pain was still there. Sharper and biting but not spreading through my body. I moaned or squeaked because Cole jerked awake, sitting up in his chair and his hand tightened on my forearm, squeezing down into my flesh.

There were dark circles under his hazel eyes and his skin was drawn tight over his cheeks, his face pale and tired under the dim lights. His thick hair was a riot of crests poking up every what it could and his mouth was bruised and chapped from bites, a bad habit he had when he was worried.

I must have worried him deeper than he'd ever been before because there were tiny scabs along his lower lip and the fear in his eyes turned them dark and troubled.

His smile, however, chased the night right back out of the window and to the horizon where it belonged.

God, I was in love.

I'd never been in love. I'd never been loved. Not like this. And Cole loved me. I could feel his soul and heart wrap around me simply by looking into his face. And his smile—*that* smile—made me glad I could draw in a breath, even as much as it hurt to do so, I didn't mind the pain because I knew he'd spent hours in an uncomfortable chair, reeking of stale fear and sweat just so I wouldn't be alone.

"Hey, baby," Cole whispered. "You're going to be okay. Docs got the bullet out and everything. You're going to be fine."

"I know, *agi*," I teased, using the silly mistranslation we'd thrown at each other since nearly the first time we'd kissed. My words were rough, scraped out slowly but at least understandable. "Because you're here. Why would I go anywhere else?"

"Because you're sane?" He chuckled hoarsely. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit," I confessed. "And don't take this wrong, Cole-ah, why the hell do you get shot all the time? This fucking *hurts*."

## Eight

There was nothing more erotic than watching Cole McGinnis undress.

Cole stripped off his clothes in brisk, graceful movements, slowly unveiling a body hardened by work, boxing and sex. I was in love with his form. There was an elegant power to Cole's body, a shade too heavy to be called lean and marbled with scars and blemishes from past mistakes and tragedies. He was perfect in his imperfections, the body of a god carved into by life.

He also had the sexiest, silly grin, hot enough to tickle my cock with a flash of white teeth but shaded with a promise of mischief and a hell of a lot of trouble.

Sunburst scars dappled his chest and ribs, postcards from a past life filled with violence, betrayal and loss. The one on his side pulled a bit at his skin, the adhesion thickened in a spot I knew was sensitive to the touch. Other stretches were numb, the nerves numb from being sliced through and stitched together. His skin was golden all over, an even tint he'd gotten from our trip down to the Keys where we'd spent our days naked on the beach and our nights tangled in thin cotton sheets.

"Where do you want me?" He was suddenly bashful, a bit of a shy amid the brash. Cole wasn't a boastful man, confident yes but not one to preen or strut. As comfortable as he was in his own skin and head, I was asking him to stretch out and let me capture a part of him he never thought of as beautiful.

And God, he was so beautiful.

"Just lie down on the platform. I'll set the lights up so I can figure out how I want to shoot you." I blanched at my words, still stumbling over the realization he'd taken more bullets than a road sign out in the desert. "Sorry, I just... I need to figure out what I want to do with you."

"Oh I can think of a lot of things," he murmured, stretching his nude body out over the draped platform. "And most of them have you under me."

"Cole-ah," I admonished.

"Or on top." He shrugged, giving me another easy smile. "I'm flexible."

"Lie back," I ordered gently. "And just look pretty."

It was easy to shoot Cole. After a few minutes, he became a canvas of skin and muscle, a play of light on gold. The lights were hot but the air conditioning soothed away the sear. I caught the long stretch of his body on the white sheets, arranging the folds until I liked how the shadows ran over his hips. He grew aroused when I bent over him, my breath on his belly but he didn't touch me, simply letting me rearrange his body and turn his head so I could step back and take the shot.

I liked what I did to him. I enjoyed knowing I had the power to affect such a potent construction of brawn and survival. I'd never done a shoot with a lover before...never truly had a lover before and the closest I'd come to doing an intimate portrait was of Scarlet's bare face and her brutal truths.

This was different. Cole was different. Where Scarlet wore her life as burdens on her shoulder, her elegant strength resonating with her life's weight, Cole celebrated his. The splays of keloids were symbols, his badges of life's beatings and surviving the fires he'd walked through.

He was form and function for hours, shadows and light, easily malleable to my every touch and word. I captured every familiar inch of Cole's body, places I'd licked and bit over a long stretch of days when I'd thought I'd never have him forever.

I was capturing our forever. In that moment. In the studio, I was making a promise to my heart that the man laid out before me was mine and I'd always have him with me.

Because he promised.

And Cole McGinnis never *ever* broke his promises.

His stomach, however, had a mind of its own and its rumbling growl broke my concentration. I blinked and stood up from a crouch, groaning at the tightness in my back and thighs. Cole held the pose I'd put him in, chuckling a bit when his belly protested again. A glance at the clock startled me more than his hunger. I'd worked Cole for three hours, far longer than we'd agreed to and still, not enough to satisfy my own hunger for him.

"Sorry," I apologized. "I shouldn't have gone on so long. Let's call it a day. You're probably sore."

"I've been worse," he admitted, moving slowly. Stretching his arms out over his head, Cole's dark nipples elongated over his chest and I regretted not having my camera at the ready.

"Thank you for doing this." I walked over to the raised platform to touch his face. "You are...I needed to shoot you so thank you."

"Hey, less painful than others but definitely more embarrassing," Cole whispered. Sliding his hand over my hip, he pulled me forward and kissed the spot over my heart. "What are you going to do with them?"

"I don't know I'll need someplace to hang them. Maybe put them in a show. I don't know if I'm ready to share you with anyone yet. I'll have to see. Maybe I'll print them and hang them in your living room," I teased. "So when I stay over, I'll have parts of you to look at while you're out leaping over tall buildings and fighting windmills."

"Yeah, about that." Cole cleared his throat. "I've been meaning to ask you...for a long time now. Maybe we should stop thinking about it as *my* living room and more *our* living room. Maybe it's time you and me, we stopped shuffling our lives around and live together. Because Jae baby, I sure as hell can't live without you.."

## Nine

If there was one thing Cole McGinnis was good at, it was squeezing his way out of tight spaces.

Considering he and Bobby were trying to get an antique armoire I'd bought in San Diego up the Craftsman's main staircase, he was going to need every bit of flexibility he could muster. Especially since it looked like Bobby had him wedged up against the top post. There was a lot of swearing, nothing I hadn't heard before and oddly enough, it was comforting to hear.

They were brothers in their own way. A brotherhood I never had. Not until I'd met Cole's younger brother then suddenly I understood. There were people you loved with all of your heart and soul and then there were people who simply were a part of you because where else would they be?

"They're going to break the stairs," Claudia muttered under her breath as she passed behind me to get to the kitchen. "Then they're going to break their fool heads open and it'll be matching ambulances to the hospital."

"Pretty sure he gets bonuses or something. Like other people have airline miles, Cole gets ambulance points." Ichi wrestled his way through the front door, carrying a box of my equipment. "Where do you want this, Jae-chan?"

"In the back. Through that door. Cole's converted it to a studio for me." I eased out of the way just as Mike wiped his feet on the stoop. His box was marked kitchen and for the life of me, I don't know why I'd marked everything in *hangul*. "Those are pans. I'm hoping the stove won't die in shock at being used every night."

"The stove?" Mike chuckled, a deeper version of Cole's playful laugh. "Cole's going to die from the shock of eating actual food every day. He's made up of twinkies and pizza."

"And burgers!" Cole shouted from his pinned in position. "Bobby, swear to God, you're going to cut off my dick with this thing if you shove it again. Move it to the right."

"Does this really have to go upstairs?" Bobby complained for the tenth time. "What's wrong with the living room? Or the foyer?"

"Upstairs," Cole and I said at the same time. He winked at me and mouthed *I love you* before grabbing the armoire again. "To the right, Dawson."

"This better be worth it." Bobby grunted, putting his shoulder into lifting the armoire up over the stair. "I expect food and beer."

"I'll put the ribs on the grill as soon as you are done," I promised.

Half an hour later, the smell of grilling ribs filled the back yard and I was sharing a wicker love seat with the man who'd showed me how happy felt. He was listening to a story Scarlet was telling about a hairy man in pink high heels trying to dance the salsa, laughing heartily when she pantomimed the faces of the firemen who'd shown up to extract the man from the wrought iron railing rods he somehow gotten stuck in.

It was odd to be leaning against a man who held me at night, loved me body and soul and held my hand out in the open where everyone could see. It was hard for me to be touched but Cole's touch... Cole's hands... Cole's mouth... felt *right* on me. I knew in that moment of sunshine, cut grass and sweet smoky pork aromas, I'd found where I would live forever... in Cole's heart.

We would grow old together, probably in the same Craftsman house he'd rebuilt after his own life crashed and burned. He would hold me during every storm and laugh when my heart jumped in shock at the crash of thunder against the sky. There would be days when we would sulk at one another before one of us would seek the other out, wrapping around each other as if nothing happened because our lives were too short to be spent apart.

I would feed him food he wouldn't want to eat but would anyway because I made it and he would insist I tell him where I was going on a shoot so he'd know where to go if I needed to be bailed out for trespassing. He would be at my side during any of my shows, a sleek beautiful creature in a black suit and smiles and I would always remind him khaki and bright green did not go together.

I looked forward to the mornings where I would be kissed awake or shoved out of bed with a gentle plea for bacon and coffee. Our lives would be spent together, knitted into one another and our odd, patchwork family and I would never ever have any regrets answering the knock on my aunt's door because I hadn't truly lived until Cole breathed life into me with his kisses.

And I would one day find him forever asleep in a chair, silver haired and wrinkled but with that damned smile on his handsome face, always beckoning me to take another step forward with him. I would cry on that day. It will break me but that single moment would be nothing compared to the star field of memories we'd have already hung in the sky.

"Whatcha thinking about, babe?" Cole whispered into my ear. "Ready to make everyone a plate of food and kick them out? Or would that be rude?"

"Very rude," I conceded. "But doable. They wouldn't mind...much. If we gave Bobby the ribs, he would go willingly. Maddy's already said all she wants is the potato salad."

"Hey, salad's mine. So's the pie." He cocked his head, green eyes slightly out of focus. "Okay they can order pizza when they get home. They get none of this."

"We promised we'd feed them," I reminded him. "Promises are never to be broken, Cole-ah. Remember?"

"Yeah, I know." He gave me a playful grimace then sighed. "Besides, it's kind of nice to just sit here, you know. Being here is kind of...everything. Like these little moments make up the best part of life and I kind of like having everyone here with us. Today. With us."

"Here is to the us, *agi*," I murmured, toasting him with my beer bottle. "May we have many more of these little moments."

Cole kissed me, hard enough to steal my breath then he said, "And everyone to share them with."