

One

San Francisco — Kane, Donal, and Connor Morgan

Kane Morgan still felt the burden of his star in his back pocket. Every step he took had a greater weight to it, a seven-point piece of metal with a number — *his* number — anchoring him the city beneath his feet. It was a familiar symbol, one he'd grown up playing with when his father came home and shed parts of his uniform at the end of his day. One of Kane's first arguments in school had been how many points does a star have and the teacher, a sweet young woman with hopes and dreams to lead joyful children towards knowledge, found herself embroiled in a heated battle concerning how to draw a proper star.

He hadn't been much more than five, but Kane had been adamant. Stars — *true stars* — had seven points and a number engraved in them.

Now he had a number. Now he had a seven-point star. Now he came home... the same home he'd grown up in since he just come out of the Academy and didn't make enough money to have his own place... and shed parts of his uniform nearly in the same spots as his father had.

As his brother Connor had as well.

Kane wouldn't of said he lived in Connor's shadow but sometimes it was hard to get out from under his older brother and his father. He'd — he still — worshiped both of them, even found himself trying to do things like they did. The badge, however, was his own.

Even if he was the third Morgan to be issued a seven-point star in San Francisco.

And from the multiple trips to the principal's office for arguing with their teachers, it looked like the twins Kiki and Riley would be following in their footsteps.

Quinn, his fractured, stained glass, brilliant next younger brother, probably wouldn't and it broke a little bit of Kane's heart knowing his green eyed, quirky sibling would not have a star of his own.

"He'll find his own place," their father, Donal said one day when a 10-year-old Kane wondered aloud about what path Quinn would follow in life if he wasn't going to be a cop. "And who knows? Ye might be changing your mind, *boyo*. Ye can be anything ye want, son. Ye don't have to wear the badge and blues just because I do. It's hard and thankless at times. There are some days when it seems like no one wants ye around or hate ye because of that badge. It's an honor to wear it but it's also a burden. Aren't ye sure ye don't want to be an artist instead?"

Kane reminded his father of that conversation on the day he stood proud and tall while his own badge pinned to his uniform for the first time. Donal laughed, saying it hadn't been the first time he'd had that conversation and it hadn't been the last.

As his eyes raked over the cluster of Morgans standing around their short, redheaded mother, he'd said, "I might have one more — maybe two — to go. But my answer will always remain the same. All I want for any of ye is to be happy, to love, and to be loved."

Kane was working on the first and dabbling second and the third. He was young, not even in his late twenties and for some reason, tramping through Chinatown on a rainy Saturday night looking for the alleyway entrance of a tattoo shop.

"It's right over there." Connor's deep voice echoed through the tight streets. His older brother was practically vibrating with excitement and an overabundance of energy. "I've seen one that he's done on someone else and I really liked how it looks like the patch but it's better. I wanted one like it but not exactly. He said that wouldn't be a problem. I'm excited to see what he's got."

“So ye haven’t even seen the art?” Donal’s eyebrow lifted and Kane instinctively took a slower step, leaving Connor well within his father’s firing range while taking himself out of Donal’s field of view. “Ye be meaning to tell me that my son is going to be putting something permanent on his skin — something he will have to defend it to his mother — and he doesn’t even know what it is?”

“Well, I know it’s going to be *Gold In Peace, Iron In War* and there will be a phoenix on it. I just don’t know what to look like exactly. But Da, you should see what he’s done.” Connor’s broad shoulders shrugged, and he gave their father a sheepish look. “Besides, I might’ve told him more than one of us will get a tattoo tonight.”

Kane slowed his walk even further. Just in case.

His father said nothing at first. Donal merely gave his oldest son an assessing look then said, “If I come home with another tattoo, yer mum is likely to say something to say about it. Let’s see how yer man is first. And if he’s not good enough, he will not be putting in any ink on ye. Because that is just asking for yer mum to kill me.”

The alley way reeked, and the tattoo shop was practically a cliché. Tucked in between a fortune cookie factory and an all-you-can-eat Szechuan buffet, Lucky Cat Tattoos’ door was a slender black plank painted with a grinning *maneko* underneath a pink neon arrow flashing open with a nearly seizure inducing frenzy. There were no windows to see inside of the shop and judging by the three-foot distance between the black door and the two open security doors on either side, there didn’t seem to be much space to walk much less have a tattoo shop.

As if Connor could read Kane’s mind, he said, “He said there is going to be a long hallway in then the space opens up to the shop.”

“I am still reserving judgment,” Donal murmured under his breath. “Let’s see what is on the other side of the door first.”

“If we open the door and there is a large blue temple surrounded by clouds with a horned dog screaming Zuul at us, I am closing the fucking door and they can have Connor,” Kane replied to his father’s mostly low whisper.

“Just remember, son,” the older man gave Kane a mischievous wink. “If anyone asks if yer a God, ye say yes.”

“Da, if I’m a God, what does it make you?”

“A fool for letting yer idiot brother talk us into going with him to get inked in a Chinatown alleyway tattoo shop.” Donal shook his head. “Well, if things go south, at least he has armed backup.”

“Unless a giant marshmallow man shows up. Then we’re fucked.” Kane smiled broadly at his brother who was holding the shop’s door open.

“You two know I can hear every word you’re saying, yes?” Connor gave Kane a light punch on the arm. “I’m standing right in front of you.”

“Really?” Kane teased. “I thought you SWAT guys couldn’t hear over your own awesomeness. Good to know. And if you end up with something that looks like a zombie duck flying over the Golden Gate Bridge, I am going to laugh my ass off.”

§

Lucky Cat Tattoos was, for all intents and purposes, contained within a large cinderblock box.

It shared a bathroom with the restaurant, a Jack and Jill situation that led to several confused Asian women opening the connecting door then apologizing profusely before slamming it shut behind them, disappearing back into the buffet. Its long wall opposite of the hallway to the front door faced the street, a long row of cracked-open jalousie windows letting some of the muggy night air into the closed off space.

“Did you notice, Da, the windows are the kind that let air in but you can’t jump out?” Kane ducked behind his father’s shoulder, whispering into his ear. “Just in case you are having second thoughts.”

“Keep up with that line of thinking and ye’ll make inspector one day.” Donal replied. “I tried to talk yer mum into putting those kind of windows into yer rooms but she didn’t like the look of them. Wasn’t worried to too much about Quinn but ye two got up to some nonsense with Sionn and Rafe that put some of the silver in my hair.”

“Those days are long over, Da. Well, for me at least. Not like I’m Rafe running around with rock stars.” He snorted, thinking of his younger siblings. “Although Kiki and Riley gave us a run for our money but Braden... that’s the one that’s going to be giving you trouble.”

“And yet here I am standing waiting for my oldest to get a tattoo in Chinatown by a man named Bear.” Donal scratched at the back of his head, returning a smile he got from a slender man at one of the other stalls. “I hope yer brother knows what he’s doing. He said the man came highly recommended so let’s see what he’s got.”

“I like the art he’s done and the tattoos he has in his portfolio are nice. But just a spot of advice, Da, unless you want to have a date tonight, you should probably stop smiling every time you make eye contact with that guy.” Kane was proud he kept a grin off his face when his father’s expression went from thoughtful to confused. “You’re an attractive guy. And the smiling isn’t helping.”

“You’re insane, son. I’ve got to be at least twenty-five years older than that boy.”

“Yeah, Da, that’s a thing.” Kane patted his father’s broad back. “And it’s probably not helping that you’re calling me son. Flash your wedding ring at him. That’ll either help or seal the deal.”

“Yer more like yer mother every day.” Donal gave him a light push towards the stall at the far end of the shop. “Let’s see what yer brother is up to. And keep your mouth shut to yer mum about the young man. She gives me enough of a hard time about the women at the PTA meetings.”

It was interesting to see the different kinds of tattoo examples each artist had hanging on the walls of their stall. It seemed like most people in the shop specialized in American Traditional with a few spots of Japanese here and there. Connor’s tattoo artist was different. His stall was decorated in a variety of styles although the classic eagle, anchor and hula girl were present, there were also whimsical drawings of teddy bears and unicorns.

His portfolio included the first police patch Connor had shown them as an example as well as a couple of others, each with its own flare and take on the force’s beloved emblem. The artist definitely had his name passed around through the department because Kane found more than a few St. Michael’s in the mix. A sketchbook was open on the table in the stall and they’d interrupted the artist when they’d come in, pulling him away from a screaming eagle with its talons clenched into a torn-up banner.

Kane had to admit when Connor introduced them to Bear Jackson, he had his doubts. The man was Connor’s age or a couple of years older and about nearly the same size if not bigger. Bear had a warm smile and a quiet peace about him, a short scruff of beard accentuating his strong features and his dark blue eyes sparkled as he spoke about the sketch he’d created for Connor. The artist and cop bonded for a few moments about being frost giants, chuckling over having younger and smaller siblings, then focused on the artwork Bear had done for Connor’s tattoo.

If Kane ever got a tattoo, it would be the one Connor was going to get in a few minutes.

There was an Irish feel to the lines, a subtle Celtic flair to their curves. The shield’s emblematic phoenix could have been lifted from the book of Kells, the fire of its feathers knotted and turned and the lettering on its banners were a fine balance between delicate calligraphy and masculine strength.

He coveted the tattoo as much as he’d wanted the fully loaded metal fire truck with flashing lights and working sirens Connor got for Christmas when he was seven, a fire truck Kane eventually inherited and still held a place of honour in his bedroom.

“Oh, son,” Donal dropped his voice to a hushed whisper. “That is a beautiful piece of art.”

“You know, Da, the three of us can wear this together,” Connor said quietly. “It’s something that connects us. Not that I love the rest of them any less it’s just that none of the others understand what it means to go through a door or to hear the crackle of a call come across the radio. It defines who we are in a lot of ways.”

“It’ll go nice with the Saint Michael I have in my shoulder,” their father mused. “What do ye say, Kane?”

It was a singular beautiful piece of art done with such passion Kane could feel the love of the artist in every line. But his star was new, untarnished and clean, a silver seven-point symbol of who he’d always dreamed could be. His father and brother deserved to wear the phoenix and to have *Oro en paz. Fierro en guerra* emblazoned on their skin. He hadn’t *earned* it yet. He needed to have more cop in him first.

“I’d like to one day, but I haven’t bruised my star yet,” he confessed. Tapping at the original art, Kane asked Bear, “In case I can’t find you when I’m ready, can I have a copy of the art? But if you’re around, I’d like you to put it on me when I’m a Lieutenant. Because I think by that time, I can say I’ve earned the right to have this on me.”

“Sure.” Bear broke out into a wide grin. “I’m actually opening up my own shop in a little bit down by the pier. Signed the lease today so when you’re ready, or if you want to get *any* tattoo, come find me at 415 Ink. I’ll be looking for you.”

Two

Tokyo — Damien Mitchell and Miki St. John

Tokyo was a tangle of lights, metal, cars and a language Miki couldn't understand to save his life, but the food was amazing and the crowds were incredible. They were scheduled to play four shows in Japan, sold out crowds in every arena but it was Tokyo that they'd been waiting for.

Bukodan.

The night before had been... mind blowing. Miki couldn't imagine how their lives could get any better. Standing on a stage — a legendary stage — for the sound check, he'd been humbled and driven into an anxiety spiral only broken when Damien placed his hand in the middle of Miki's back, pressing between his shoulder blades.

"If we sell out, I'll get that tattoo I've always wanted," his brother whispered beneath the buzz of the amps firing up behind them. "Dave hook me up with this guy here in Tokyo that's apparently this incredible tattoo artist. It's really underground here but if you know a guy who knows a guy, they will ink you. I've already talked to him on the phone and I kind of want you to be there."

"Where the fuck else would I be?" Miki snorted. "Even if we don't sell out, do it. We're fucking playing at *Bukodan*, D. The fact that we're on this stage is... I don't have any words, brother. Get the tattoo. I'll be right there with you."

His ears were still ringing and just like any large show, every time he turned his head, Miki heard a buzz, an audible kiss left in his hearing from standing in front of stacks of amps. It was an occupational hazard at times and he knew he should have worn the discrete earplugs Johnny tossed at him at the beginning of every show, but they dampened the sound of the crowd and Miki wanted to hear every damned last bit of applause and every shrieking cheer.

Because he would never play that stage again. Or at least he would never have that first time ever again and he wanted to bathe in the furious glee of the audience singing back at him and dancing to their songs.

The buzz was so *fucking* worth it.

Damien found a driver to take them, mostly by bribing the hotel's concierge to find and someone who would bring them to the depths of Tokyo's underground after the band's chauffeur refused. The car was dinky and battered, but the young Japanese man who'd popped out of the driver's side door had been delighted to meet them, asking for their autographs while holding up a bootleg CD of their first album. They'd thankfully signed it, and Damien asked one of the bellhops to grab their driver a band shirt from their storage area, sealing their friendship with the improbably named Stan.

"Maru Tattoos?" Stan said in a heavily accented English when Damien showed him the address he'd gotten over the phone. "You are going to get a tattoo? Here?"

"That's the plan," Damien responded. "I'm supposed to be there in an hour. Think we can make it?"

"I can get you there," Stan promised. "Hard to park in the area but I will find a space after dropping you off and wait. You call when you're done. I'll give you my phone number."

"It's going to be hours," the guitarist warned. "I don't even know if it's going to get finished today. It's a back piece."

"Then I will come to the place and if you need something, I will get it." Stan pulled into an insane stream of traffic, waving his arm out the open window as he merged. "You will need lots of caffeine. It will help with the pain."

"Well, I was kinda hoping for whiskey," Damien muttered across the back seat to Miki. "But I guess coffee is the next best thing."

Stan hadn't been joking. The streets got smaller and smaller until even the small speck of a black car had a difficult time weaving in and out of the tight turns. They pulled up to what looked like a sidewalk and turned right, narrowly avoiding a placard with a dancing duck holding a pair of chopsticks on it. Miki grabbed at the strap dangling next to the window, gulping when it came off in his hand. Damien merely laughed then hooked his arm around Miki's waist, holding on tightly while Stan made another insane turn. As quickly as they dove down into the narrow, dark alleys, the car came to an abrupt start, and Stan twisted around, grinning maniacally.

"Can't drive more. Too tight." Stan punched a finger forward, pointing down a walkway to the left. "See the red sign with the circle on it? That is Maru. You go there and I will come find you. You want coffee? Iced? I'll bring some *ika* too. You will want something to eat."

"That's cuttlefish," Miki muttered to Damien under his breath.

"Did I like it?" Damien whispered back.

"I do. But I liked the hot one better." Miki dug into his pocket, coming up with a handful of yen. "Can you get the spicy one? Or the rolled sweet one? Those are good."

"Can do." Stan grabbed at the money. "I'll come find you."

A few moments later, Damien and Miki stood under a dimly lit array of paper lanterns, watching Stan's little car zoom away, screeching around a corner and disappearing from view. Clearing his throat, Damien chuckled, nudging Miki in the ribs with his elbow.

"Think we'll ever see him again?" He asked through a laugh.

"God, I fucking hope so. Because if not, we're going to have to call up Edie and beg her to send someone to come out and get us," Miki grumbled. "And she does not like getting those kind of phone calls. Remember what she did to Dave when he got caught in that manatee tank in Florida?"

"Dude, I think that had more to do with the manatee tank than the call coming in at three in the morning," Damien replied. "But yeah, she was not happy. Well, hopefully Stan comes back and if not, we'll just find someplace to drink. It's almost ten right now, maybe we won't even be done until breakfast time and it'll be fine."

There was barely enough room to walk and both of them had to duck several times to avoid a low-slung wire or lantern dangling in the way. Judging by the glass beer and sake bottles in wooden racks hung above many of the curtained doors, the alley was where someone came to drink. The boisterous laughter breaking free of one place was as familiar as any Miki'd heard in countless cities, but the food smells wafting from a walk-up yakisoba shop definitely was Tokyo, a rich blend of salty savoury with a hint of curry beneath it. His stomach grumbled a bit as they passed, Damien catching him by the elbow when Miki slowed to peer at the picture menu taped to the side of the shop's open order window.

"Later. Or at least come back when I'm screaming in pain and need something in my mouth besides my own tongue," Damien said, hurrying him along. "The shop's just right there."

"Fine," Miki reluctantly agreed. "But you owe me some noodles. Maybe even a beer."

"Jesus, if it's not music, it's food. You've got two tracks in that busy head of yours," his brother replied. "Let me just meet up this Ichiro Tokugawa guy and I'll cut you loose to get some noodles. Just... don't pull a Stan. I want you there when he starts."

“Dude, I’m not going anywhere,” Miki promised. “I’m here ‘til the end. And if this Ichiro guy screws up your tattoo, I’ll even buy you that whiskey... right before I call Edie to come bail me out of jail for murder.”

§

The first bite of pain came fast and hard, a splash of fire on his skin then settling into his bones. Gripping the back of the chair he was sitting on, Damien breathed through the sting of coals being dragged across his flesh and focused on whatever was in front of him...whatever he could see through the filmy veil of tears clouding his vision.

He’d loved the tattoo, an elaborate kirin with a defiant smirk and flaming mane, but Ichi warned him it would be more than a few sessions to complete. They’d made arrangements to meet again in San Francisco and Los Angeles when Ichi came over to do a tour, but the initial work—the hardest part—would be done in Tokyo, a six to seven hour stretch of outlines and packed in black stippling.

There was going to be a hell of a lot of drinking once he was able to get out of the chair.

His brother Miki was hungry...although to be fair, Miki was always hungry.

He’d gotten taller since the day Damie heard him belting out Joplin on a Chinatown fire escape and gained a bit of muscle mass, adding a wiry strength to his lanky frame. His hair was longer, a messy chestnut-streaked brown mane and his face had filled out, taking him from a chipmunk cute kid to a stunningly pretty young man. His green-flecked hazel eyes were the same, guarded, skeptical, and usually hooded, taking in everything around him.

Just like he was doing right now.

At midnight, the tattoo shop was busy, filled with the chatter of artists and a couple of clients who kept sneaking glances over at the mixed-race singer sprawled out over a weathered velvet wingchair Ichi’d dragged over for Miki to sit in. Sitting was... difficult for Miki. He lounged into things, his lean body was a sinuous liquid pour of elegant dismissal of physics and manners, his long legs draped over chair arms. If it were anyone else, Damie would have thought the artful arrangement of limbs and the erotic cant of Miki’s head against the chair’s upper swoop was a calculated pose meant to seduce and arouse.

Damie knew better. Miki was fucking oblivious.

Not so much that his eyes didn’t narrow when Damien hissed at the mounting pain but still, clueless as to how he was affecting many of the people in the shop.

Oddly enough, as gorgeous and sensual of a creature as Miki was, he did absolutely nothing for Damien... except invoke a need to protect and possibly shove as much food down his brother’s throat as humanly possible.

Someone in the shop switched the music over, flipping from classic *L’arc En Ciel* to *Sinners Gin and Damien* laughed at Miki’s eye roll.

“Why don’t you get those noodles you wanted?” Damien suggested through a hiss. “I’m going to be here a while.”

“Want some too? Or do you want me to grab you some coffee instead?” Miki eased up out of the chair with a sinewy grace. “I’ve got my card on me and some cash but the noodle place had one of those signs so I should be okay.”

“Just... grab me something cold. Jesus fucking Christ this hurts.” Damien gulped down some air, hoping to cool off the burn from the inside out. Ichi made some murmuring noises he took as a question about if Damien wanted to stop so he shook his head. “I’m good. It just... fuck, right over that spot.”

“Spines are the worst,” Ichi confirmed then hummed to himself. “Well, necks. Anything with connective tissue. The pain travels sometimes so you’ll feel it in other places. If you need to stop—”

"He won't," Miki snorted. "Stubborn as fuck. Probably crawl back out of his grave because he's not ready to be dead when the Reaper comes for him. Just you watch."

"Go get your damned noodles. And maybe a beer," Damie chanced a glance over his shoulder at Ichi. "Beer okay? Can we drink? Do *you* want to drink?"

"None for me. I'm... driving a needle," the Japanese artist teased, shifting his chair around to work over Damien's shoulder. "And yes, you can drink... a little bit. Just do not get drunk. Not good for the skin. If they have an iced Coffee Boss that would be nice."

"Okay, some pisswater beer for Damie, a coffee thing for Ichi and noodles for me." Miki grunted at them. "I'll be back in a bit. Hopefully they've got chicken. I mean octopus is okay, but I'd rather have chicken."

Ichi grew still, pulling the buzzing needle away from Damien's skin and a thoughtful expression settled on his handsome features as Miki ambled out of the front door, letting the *noren* drop behind him. Damien knew that look. He'd seen it a thousand times before, but Ichiro simply dipped his tattoo machine head back into the ink well and began again.

"Jesus, I don't know what's worse," Damien muttered. "You working on it without stopping or you stopping long enough for my skin to think it's over and then you start again."

"I think it's worse when they stop." Another dip and the burn began again in a different spot. "Tell me about your friend. He looks... complicated. Beautiful but *very* complicated."

"That is possibly the best description of Miki St. John that I've ever heard." Damien held himself extremely still as the needle drifted back across the spine. It hit a cluster of nerves and his toes began to tingle then it drifted away, filling in another line. "If you're interested... he likes guys — for the most part — he's just kind of... a mess."

"Do you say that because he is not sentimental or because you want to keep others away from him?" This time the pinprick of pain did not come for the needle but rather from Ichi's words, but Damien hissed anyway. "I like how he looks. And he seems like he would be a challenge but not one that I would survive. His skin is on too tight and you seem to be the only one he trusts. I would sooner offer him friendship than anything else. I think that is something he could return without me losing any of my fingers. As much as I would love to see how he tastes, I like having my tongue in my mouth."

"Yeah, I don't know if there's someone out there who will ever when Miki's heart but if he exists, I hope to hell he has a strong stomach because that fucker eats the weirdest things." Another buzz, another burn, and Damien settled in against the chair, thinking he finally had gotten a grip on the pain coursing over his skin when Ichiro circled back, adding an embellish. "*Motherfucker*. Jesus, and somebody did this to Miki when he was a kid?"

If Ichiro was curious about what Damien said, he didn't get a chance to ask because Miki came through the shop's curtained door holding a plastic bag in one hand and what looked like a short bottle shaped can in the other. His brother paused for a second, probably caught up in the tangle of his own lyrics wrapping around him as he walked through the shop. Ducking his head down, Miki stalked forward.

"Hey, D! I got you... what the fuck is this?" Miki studied the can as he approached the stall. "It's Michelob. Guy says it's American, but I don't know it's Japanese. Could be horse piss but he said it was the best they had. Ichi, I got you a couple of those coffee things. Where can I put this stuff down? Can I eat in here? Or do I have to go back outside?"

"No you're fine," Ichi informed him. "Have a seat. You can use the table over there if you want. When Damien feels the need to stop, he'll be able to reach for his drink."

"I've changed my mind," Damien grumbled. "Go get me some fucking whiskey."

“You’re going to have to be happy with the beer for right now. I’ll get you something after I eat.” Sitting down on the wing chair, Miki dug out a Styrofoam container and a pair of chopsticks then opened it up, letting out a cloud of pungent steam. Whatever Miki brought back with him smelled more like someone had dredged the Bay and served up in a taco than anything edible but knowing his brother, Miki didn’t care. “I want to eat this while it’s still hot.”

“I have literally seen you eat a forkful of macaroni and cheese that is fallen into a snow bank. You don’t give a shit if your food is hot. You don’t even give a shit if your food is *cooked*.” The next line brought tears to Damien’s eyes, and he ground his teeth together to stop himself from yelping. “Pass me the *fucking* beer.”

There wasn’t enough alcohol in the can to do anything other than dampen the back of Damien’s mouth, and he gratefully accepted one of Ichi’s coffees, hoping the still missing-in-action Stan have been right about the caffeine. Either he was getting used to the drag of fire across his flesh, or Stan had been right because after a few minutes, the agony didn’t seem so bad. He was actually considering telling Ichi to see how far he could go when Damien spotted the six-inch long pink tentacle Miki slurped up from his noodles.

“Okay, that’s kind of disgusting.” Damien wrinkled his nose. “I’m getting tattooed here and you’re doing Cthulhu impressions.”

“Fuck you. You’re just mad because I won’t get you some whiskey until I’m done eating.” Miki picked up another piece of a cephalopod with his chopsticks and nibbled on its end. Gesturing with the tentacle, he said in his husky, smoky voice. “That looks like it hurts.”

“Shit, you think?” He sneered back only to get flipped off. “You don’t remember what it feels like?”

“Me?” Miki glanced down at his arm, his tattoo hidden under his sleeve. “Nope. I don’t remember anything.”

“He said you got a tattoo when you’re a child,” Ichiro commented, circling back around to Damien’s other side, his rolling chair squeaking as he moved. “That is... wrong. Never children.”

“Yeah, nobody asked me,” Miki said, putting down his chopsticks. Dragging up his sleeve, he showed Ichiro the mangled, patchy blue lines on his arm. “One of the cops told someone it meant Miekko so they wrote that down is my name but...”

“That is not what that says.” Ichiro’s frown grew deeper. “I don’t recognize it. Not that I know every kanji but usually I can hammer away at the edges of one. I’ve never seen that.”

“Yeah, nobody else has either. Or least a couple of times when I brought it up to someone I thought might know,” Miki said, pulling his sleeve back down. “They just change the subject and walked away.”

“Hey, I’ve got an idea.” Damien set up before Ichiro began again. “Do you think you can cover it? I mean, Miki, you hate it. Ichiro here is a God and how often are you going to have some free time and there is a tattoo God right next to you?”

For a moment, Miki’s face softened with an expression Damien could only call regret and then his brother, in true Miki form, picked his chopsticks back up and laid Damien’s soul out for the vultures to pick clean.

“I can’t do that, D. What happens if someone comes looking for me and all they have to find me is this?” Miki tapped at his arm with the blunt ends of his chopsticks. “This is all I have that’s really me. Everything else is something gave to me like leftovers and hand-me-downs but this — as fucking ugly as it is — is all I’ve got that’s mine. So maybe one day, when I’ve given up on anyone giving a shit about me, I’ll get it covered. But for right now, it stays. Because someone still might need me to have it. And I want them to be able to find me.”

Three

Los Angeles — Cole McGinnis and Ichi Tokugawa

“I thought this was supposed to be a simple job!” Cole yelled over his shoulder. “Go left! We can get some cover in those bushes!”

When dealing with my older brother Cole the phrase hindsight is 20-20 always comes to mind. The simplest things always seem to go wrong and for some reason, either a gun, knife, or fist fight breaks out in his immediate vicinity. Sometimes, it is even a combination of two or more of those events.

In this case, it was a brawl but the evening was young yet so there was still time to add more elements to the fuckery Cole delivered us into.

Technically, he was right. It was supposed to be a simple job. I know because I was the one who hired him to do it.

“We can’t —” I began to yell at him, but he’d already made the turn and we plunged through a nest of tangled hedges, trying to get away from the small mob of angry Japanese elders chasing us.

There was no talking to Cole when he was in full samurai mode, or at least that is how I thought of it. If he’d been pure Japanese and not gay, my father would have taken him into the Tokugawa fold and made Cole his heir. He was everything I was not, something that became more and more apparent the longer I got to know him. There was a fatalistic elegance to his desire for justice and truth, an unwillingness to turn his back on a tenuous situation even though it meant he could come to some harm.

When I’d first met our eldest brother, Mike, he told me our middle brother led with his heart instead of his head. Since my first impression of Mike was of a man who took precautions and planned out every situation down to the last detail, I took his words with a grain of salt — another Cole-appropriate saying — and expected our shared brother to be simply a bit more relaxed in nature.

What Mike meant to say was Cole Kenjiro McGinnis was bat shit fucking nuts and would run into a burning building if someone even whispered there might be a kitten inside.

I knew that. I hadn’t believed it until the day someone began shooting into a crowd of people on a Los Angeles street and my beloved, crazy older brother ran towards the gunfire.

My life up until that point had been exciting and risky — or so I thought — but in a blink of an eye and without any warning, I found myself thrust into Cole’s world and it was terrifying. I’d never tasted fear before. I’d *felt* it. I’d had its sharp fingers run over my skin but the astringent bitterness of its kiss in my mouth was something I’d never imagined. It paralyzed me. I was man enough to admit it afterwards but in that moment, all I could think of was... I didn’t want to lose my brother.

That’s when I discovered that Cole had a greater calling... had a greater courage than I did.

He was also foolish, reckless and didn’t have a single scrap of self-preservation in his entire body, but he faced down monsters and demons for the people who couldn’t... even when he didn’t have to.

But we were both in agreement that when faced with a band of enraged, mostly-retired yakuza from Kyoto who’d come over from Japan for a funeral it was better to run than reason things out. Considering the grieving widow had led us to the back room with the intent on showing me the deceased man’s antique tattooing implements and had been surprised to find his friends gathered around his recently de-coffined body laid out on a table, Cole had been remarkably calm. Even when the yakuza grew incensed when the dead man’s widow told them we were there to buy his entire private collection despite their insisting she had no right to sell them off.

Cole's Japanese extended to knowing what kind of ramen to order and how to pronounce our various names, so he stood by blissfully unaware when the yakuza began to threaten to use our guts to strangle us with and only seemed to know something had gone wrong when I backed up into him and told him to run.

My brother... he is very good at adapting to changing situations and facing down death without panicking.

He didn't ask questions when one of them threw a punch at him or blinked when another drew out a small, sharp blade and tried to gut me. Cole realized we were blocked off from the door we'd come in, so he'd picked up a chair and threw it through a picture window to give us an exit and told me to hurry up. There were no recriminations or blame. Just a casual flat out run through the twisted streets above Little Tokyo.

I appreciated his restraint especially since I'd been the one to put us in the middle of a make shift abattoir while the former criminals were gathered around their friend's embalmed corpse, discussing how they would skin him to preserve the decades of intricate tattoos.

"I think we are behind a school or something," Cole said, not even panting hard despite the full trot he'd fallen into. I knew his stamina came from the miles he ran with my husband Bobby as well as the regular boxing sparring matches they had every week, but I still hated him for it. Grabbing my arm, Cole yanked me through a slender break in a standard of juniper trees. "Ichi, this way."

"Do you even know where you are going?" I was trying not to breathe heavily, but I needed to take a moment to suck some air into my lungs. Once again, I made a promise to myself to stop smoking kreteks and maybe work out a bit more, but I knew it was a lie.

"Sure." As in all things, Cole sounded confident.

I knew this was *a/so* a lie.

Especially since we'd made a wrong turn at some point and the sidewalk ended.

We, however, were going too fast to stop.

There was something about falling twenty feet at a dead run. The momentum we picked up was fierce, and the hill was a sharp, unexpected catastrophe. One moment I had solid ground beneath my sneakers, and the next I was flying.

I was airborne for about three... maybe four glorious seconds when gravity snatched me and threw me down into the ground.

That was when I discovered Los Angeles' highway landscaping crews did not clear all of the rocks from the ground before they rooted ice plants into the soft soil.

We landed hard, rolling over slick, spongy succulents and my spine felt every jut of rock embedded in the soil on the way down. Luckily for us, the hill ended in a gradual slope and we tumbled onto a broad sidewalk lining one of the busier Los Angeles avenues. A truck's horn blared in my ear, but I didn't care because the ground was not moving beneath my back and despite the aches and pains in my limbs, I was just glad to be alive.

It also seems like the yakuza had stopped chasing us because I couldn't hear any Japanese other than the swearing going on in my own head.

"You alive?" My brother asked from his prone position next to me. He began to sit up then probably decided it would be too much effort because he lay back down with a groan. "I'm going to take a minute."

"I'm fine. Just ... bruised probably," I wheezed out, staring up at the streetlamp directly above us. "*Baka*, after all of that, I didn't get the dead guy's antique tattoo instruments. I was supposed to meet his widow."

“Well, if it was that rolled up bundle of cloth on the table next to his leg, I’ve got that in my jacket.” Cole leaned his head back, meeting my eyes. “And if it’s not, then I owe the guy I kicked in the balls to let go of it a really huge apology.”

§

The Little Tokyo top-floor apartment I shared with my husband Bobby would’ve been the smart choice to go get cleaned up but there were two reasons why my Hollywood tattoo shop was a better option. Bobby had a tendency to say I-told-you-so even if he hadn’t actually warned me off of doing something. In this instance, I went in knowing Cole was bad news to any plan, and yet I’d persisted, asking my brother for his help.

It was a staggeringly humbling experience to have one’s husband look up from what he was doing, his jaded smoky gaze raking over me and then glancing behind me to my brother — his best friend — when we both look like we had gone more than a couple of rounds with an Ent.

I knew how that conversation would go. I’d had it more times than I cared to count. There were variations, mostly situational, depending upon what Cole and I had gotten into but still... humbling. There was a certain way Bobby snickered silently. I’d never met a man who could with a curl of his lip and a lift of an eyebrow communicate so much mockery he didn’t have to say anything for me to know he was laughing at me inside.

And sometimes, he even laughed out loud.

This was going to be one of those times. Because my crew working the shop that night certainly busted out in an uproarious thunderstorm of applause and guffaws when Cole and I walked through the front door.

“Laugh while you can, monkey boy.” Cole muttered at Susan, one of my lead artists, quoting from a movie he loved. “Although, I suppose in your case it would be girl but that’s not what Bigboote says.”

“Oh, I’ll take the boy part,” Susan said through her giggles. Her round face dimpled as she chuckled, making a big show out of circling around me to inspect the damage. Normally, I liked the Seoul-born and raised woman but today I wasn’t feeling much love. “You have leaves coming out of your ears, *oppa*.”

“What the hell *happened* to the two of you?” Trey, the second artists on shift that night, was a child born to a generation of hippies, his long blonde hair twisted into thin dreads and held back by a chromatic scarf he’d woven himself. “I thought you two were just going to pick up the old man’s punch tools.”

“I got them... thanks to *hyung* but we ran into a small complication,” I started.

“We had to fight off the yakuza for them.” Cole nodded when Susan’s eyes widened in amazement. “Well if by fight, you mean runaway then we did a mighty battle. One minute we were standing around at a memorial — which was kind of awkward — and the next second, his friends were throwing punches on us.”

“You really need to work on your Japanese,” I muttered at my brother. “They were debating whether or not to remove his tattoos and donate them to a museum in Japan, which was what he wanted but his wife did not. They thought we were there to stop them.”

“And did you?” Trey cocked his head. “Because I’m not sure I’d want to be skinned and taxidermized like a jackalope. I mean how would you even display —”

My Japanese-ness reared its oddly ritualized head at the strangest times and apparently, it appeared consigning the dead’s skin offended some deeply rooted traditional thread in my being because I cut Trey off with a shake of my head then stalked into the large full bathroom at the back of the shop.

Cole joined me five minutes later to find me sitting on the bench near the showers with a towel wrapped around my waist and picking a few pebbles out from my right elbow. The grit was in deep and it stung when I sluiced cold water over the area, and I couldn’t tell if I was going to have to repair any of my ink.

"Hey, you're bleeding." Cole frowned, then dug his wallet out of his jeans' back pocket. "Hold on, I have some antiseptic wipes."

"In your wallet?" I eyed him suspiciously. "Although I suppose you no longer need the space for condoms."

"I've *never* kept condoms in my wallet." He tsked at me, straddling the bench and motioning me to turn so he could look at my arm. "Before..." Cole took a breath, his voice cracking. "Anyway, when Jae came along, most of our fun times were in the house so I didn't need to have anything in my wallet. Unlike Bobby..."

I would've objected to Cole calling Bobby... ready for sexual intimacy at the drop of a dime but I knew my husband's past. I knew my own. Monogamy was something neither one of us was looking for, but it found us. Actually, it did more than find us. It grabbed both of us by the balls, dragged us over in front of a priest with all of our friends around us, and we'd somehow found the words to promise each other a lifetime of fidelity and love.

There were times when I woke up and was shocked to see the gold wedding band on my finger, but I had no regrets.

Okay, a couple of regrets but they have nothing to do with Bobby and everything to do with us hiding our relationship from Cole only to have him find out because Bobby couldn't keep his mouth shut. It made for a couple of awkward dinners and then eventually, Cole's good nature took over.

Bobby wasn't who Cole would've wanted for me to fall in love with. He wasn't wrong. Bobby had been a volatile, loose, sarcastic bundle of contradictions... that I'd wanted to push down into a bed and fuck him silly from the moment I saw him. Even during the times that I hated him, he'd been there for me and now, always would be.

"You know, I was just teasing," Cole murmured, gently scraping the sidewalk debris out of my skin. "I'm glad the two of you are together."

The antiseptic stung, and I grabbed at the bench, knocking Cole's wallet over. It tumbled open, falling to the floor and an old folded piece of paper slid out of one of the card slots. Cole and I both reached for it, knocking our heads together, and I almost lost my towel when my fingers closed over the edge of the paper. He'd grab the wallet then held his hand out for the note.

I'd been an only child for most of my life, and I still had problems with the camaraderie of brotherhood. For all of their squabbling, Mike and Cole were staunch in their support for each other, but it took me a while to figure out their bickering was mostly hot air and ego. I struggled with it myself. Mostly, because I'm Japanese and they are American, but also it requires a lot of faith that the other person won't get angry at being poked at. I could tease my friends but somehow teasing the son of my mother was fraught with emotional danger.

Or at least that's how I thought of Mike. *Cole* I could tease the fuck out of.

"It's Korean." I grimaced because I realized how stupid that sounded as soon as I said it but I was shocked to see it wasn't in English for some reason. I recognize the handwriting. I knew Jae's strong block printing well. "When did he write this?"

"About three months after we'd met." Cole's eyes always went soft whenever he spoke of Jae. The sentimentality of his expression lasted for about a second then he grinned at me, turning into the charismatic charmer he normally showed the world. "You know, he said I love you first. Or at least, I like to think so. I didn't know it at the time because I don't speak Korean, but he said something and when I asked him what it meant, he told me I needed to learn Korean.

"Later on, I realized he'd said saranghae-yo." Cole chuckled, spreading out the paper so I could see those exact words written in Jae's distinctive handwriting. "He wrote this at the bottom of a long note telling me where he was going to be on a shoot junket and when I asked him what it meant, he told me... I needed to learn Korean. So, I knew exactly what it meant."

“And you carried with you? Always?” I asked gently. The paper was creased and torn, obviously handled in million and one times before.

“Always. I will never not carry it,” Cole replied. “There were times when I thought he would slip away from me but we fought so hard to be together, I will never take that for granted. I will never take *him* for granted.”

“So then, *hyung*, let me put that on you so you can carry it forever. Let me put it on your wrist so you could see it all the time.” I couldn’t breathe through the hug Cole gave me, but it didn’t matter. My effusive, golden retriever of a brother loved me enough... trusted me enough... to ink his lover’s words on his skin.

“That is a fucking fantastic idea,” Cole said, kissing my forehead noisily. “But first, for all that is holy, put on some pants.”

Four

San Francisco — Bear Jackson and Gus Scott

415 Ink smelled of coffee, paint, and the sharp edge of stolen pleasure. Closing down for a couple of days was tricky but necessary. They'd repainted the walls that morning and refinished the floor until it gleamed. Bear spent a couple of hours putting up new half walls to cordon off the tattooing stations, so each artist could have a sense of privacy and ownership. Mace came up with the brilliant idea of hitting up used medical supply outlets to find room divider tracks for curtains they could pull around each stall if a client was feeling body shy. The other three — Luke, Gus, and Ivo — painted, cleaned and teased while they worked without complaint.

It was a sign of how far all five of them had come. How dedicated everyone was to the place that kept them fed and with a roof over their heads for the past few years. Refurbishing the shop had been Ivo's idea, one broached over a dinner meal with an eye to firm up 415's branding. The suggestion took off before Bear even had a chance to contemplate and the next thing he knew, there was a color scheme and merchandise in the works.

And every single brother had a hand in it and worked towards fulfilling the project... just like they had everything else they'd wanted.

The shop was a gamble, a pie-in-the-sky dream Bear had since the moment he'd picked up a tattoo machine and put it down on someone's skin. It was both humbling and scary to lay down a piece of art someone would walk away with and carry for the rest of their lives. He'd always felt a twinge of regret doing a cover up — even when the original tattoos were particularly hideous — because he knew how it felt to hope someone loved what they wore.

He'd tried talking Gus out of becoming an inker, but the pull of the machine and ink were too strong for his cousin — no, his baby brother — and the sometimes flighty, always roughly sensitive, blond artist had been bitten with the bug and now there was no going back. From the noises Ivo had begun making lately, Bear feared their youngest brother was going to go down the same path.

When Bear found himself looking at the mounting piles of bills from raising four young men in a broken-down, constantly under renovation Victorian house in the hills, finding a decent paying job where he could be home during the afternoons was next to impossible. Until he'd found tattooing and then Bear could breathe a sigh of relief because it was something he was *damned* good at.

Then Gus came along and blew Bear's mind.

The inkers at 415 Ink were competent and a couple were very good but like many tattoo artists, they lived in a transient state, working a particular shop and learning from its stable master inkers before moving on to another location. The pier-side shop only had one designated stall — Bear's — that is until today.

"So where are we going to put his name tag?" Mace held up the wooden placard Bear had made to go on the outside wall of Gus's stall. "And you know which one he wants?"

"I haven't told him yet but he likes that one over there. Put it up and we'll show them when were done." Bear adjusted one of the framed out pieces of wall then anchored it down. "Luke! See if you can get Heckle and Jekyll over there to start putting curtains up on the rails. Hang them in the middle in front of the stalls so they don't get any paint on them of the walls are wet."

"Got it. I'm on it." Luke shot a look over his shoulder where the two actual brothers in their cobbled-together family stood near the front of the shop arguing about the merchandise arrangement in the store window. "Wish me luck."

It took Gus almost two hours before he saw the sign with his name attached to the stall... about the time the shop was completely finished, and the staff arrived for the subsequent relaunch of 415 Ink. The smell of coffee was soon replaced with the yeasty froth of beer and a spicy aromatic cloud from the pizza and taco buffet set up by the

reception area. His younger brother had been speechless and took the various backslapping he got from the family and other artists in stride.

Bear only saw a flicker of tears in Gus's pale blue eyes when Rey Montenegro hugged him and even then, only for a moment. There was something between them, Bear was sure of it, but as much as he wanted to encourage Rey with Gus, he wasn't sure if his younger brother was ready for any kind of relationship... especially since he had to learn how to love himself first.

It was close to nine at night by the time Gus cornered Bear to say thank you. The hug had come out of nowhere and was bone-crushingly fierce, but Bear welcomed his brother's affection, happy to feel Gus's joy in the embrace.

"Jesus, it's stupid, you know? I mean, it's just a fucking space but..." Gus let go of Bear, rocking back on his heels. "It's just so fucking big."

"How much have you had to drink, Goose?" Bear teased, tugging at Gus's shirt. "You're drooling."

"Nah, that's... Ivo spilled some soda on me." He glanced down then sputtered when Bear lifted his finger up to catch his nose. "Fuck you. Why do I fall for that?"

"Because you're an idiot." Bear laughed when his brother flipped him off. "I love you but sometimes you're an idiot."

"Hey, how drunk are you?" Gus's fingernail chimed against Bear's bottle. "I kind of want to commemorate today. Is that kind of stupid?"

"No, it's not stupid at all. And I've only had a couple of sips so I'm good to go," he replied. "What did you have in mind?"

What Gus proposed was easily within Bear's wheelhouse and once he had the design down on paper, Gus got a bit of ribbing from the other artists about his word choice, but his younger brother stood firm. If anyone needed a little bit of rebellion, it was Gus. He'd drifted after they'd all been put into foster care, finally latching onto Luke and then rolling into the family Bear knitted together but until he'd picked up a tattoo machine, Gus had been lost. The art that poured out of his blood and soul had been his own means of escaping the darkness stalking him but inking finally turned him outward... giving him an outlet to express himself in ways he hadn't imagined.

"Are you sure?" Bear asked as he shaved Gus's forearm. "It's kind of prime real estate. Sure you don't want to leave this for something more —"

"I can't imagine anything I want more than you doing me an eagle," Gus replied, running his free hand through his long, dirty blond hair. "It is everything that I am right now and everything that I need to be... done by you... here in 415 Ink. And I got my own fucking stall. What else could I ask for?"

Bear couldn't help but notice Gus's gaze drift over to where Rey and Mace were chatting up a couple of past clients. There was a palatable need in his brother's eyes and a longing expression he couldn't hide on his face. It hurt to see the want there if only because Gus *never* wanted anything. He'd always taken anything life gave him without chasing after more... never believing he deserved more than the scraps handed to him.

"You can be anything you want to be, Gus," Bear said as he laid down the stencil on his brother's arm. "I have faith in you. I can't wait to see what you do here. Shit, I can't wait to see what you do in life."

"I hope you're right." Gus's teeth flashed white with a quick smile then he said, "Go on, Bear, make me a rebel."

Five

San Francisco — Kane Morgan and Miki St. John

There were very few times in his life when Miki was by his side as he strolled past the Fisherman's Wharf sign. That path was usually reserved for Rafe, Sionn and Connor, especially when they were on a run or hitting up the old crab shack for lunch. It seemed odd to have his rangy, too-pretty rock star of a lover walking next to him in bright daylight and not be headed to Finnegan's.

Even stranger were the stares Miki pulled in as he walked by small crowds of people. He *knew* Miki was famous. He couldn't turn on a radio without hearing Miki's voice rotating through a song list, and there'd been more than a few times when they were out and someone approached cautiously, eager to get Miki's attention but reluctant to interrupt.

That was when Kane remembered he shared Miki with the world. It wasn't a bad thing, especially when he watched his prickly lover turn bashful and shy. He could talk music for hours — and had, blowing their reservations at a dinner once — but just like the star Kane wore, Miki had a calling and enthusiastic fans were simply part of it.

Even if Miki hated the attention, he always stopped and listened, smiling when Kane knew he wanted to die a little bit inside when all eyes were on him, and he could see their faces. It'd taken a long time for Kane to understand the difference. Up close and personal was hard but on stage, Miki saw nothing but heard their voices, a chorus chanting back the band's words, filling in the silence Miki often nursed inside of himself. Performing was a way for Miki to bathe in the music and touch the stars.

"You always stop. You have to stop." Miki snorted with disgust when Connor innocently suggested the band excused themselves from fan encounters. "They're the reason we're up there. Somebody worked at a shitty job so they could see us up on stage. They might have eaten ramen for month for those tickets or even that album. Yeah, they don't own us but they've invested in us. And all I've got to invest in them is time so I'm always gonna stop."

While Kane agreed with the sentiment, today he hoped no one reached out to touch his rock star. Today was a long day coming, a gift he'd promised himself years before. Today was the day he would finally become a Morgan cop.

"It's shitty the parking structure so far away." Miki shivered a bit, ducking his head down when the light turned green, and they had to dash across the street through the chilly rain. "Course I guess I should just be fucking glad there's a parking structure. Remember when you had to circle around a lot? And we used to have this beat-up old van that was bigger than a Cadillac so we'd have gigs down here at eight but came down to park in the afternoon and feed the meter just so we had a spot."

"You know, that's one of my biggest regrets... not seeing you guys play before." Kane snuck a look at Miki's pale face, worried that he was setting too hard of a pace for Miki's blown out knee. "You must have had some really kick ass shows."

Miki wrinkled his nose as if he'd just been served a large helping of bitter melon stew. "Not back then. I mean there are a lot of places down here that have good music but the ones that hired us were just looking for some background noise while everybody drank. We played covers mostly and there were some nights we drank more than what we were paid but it was fun. Mostly. Sometimes, not so much but that's what happens when you're in a band. This is the same place that we went to for Ichi, right? They've got a dog named... Earl."

"Of course you remember the dog," Kane chuckled. "Yeah, this is the place."

"I remember the guys. We partied with them a few times and Damie wants one of them — Gus — to do the artwork for our next album." Another light with three more to go and the cold drizzle turned into a downpour. "Fuck, we're going to be frozen by the time we get there."

"Well I know that they've got coffee going so we'll get some in you," he said, reaching for Miki's hand. The open intimacy wasn't something they did often and for a moment Kane wasn't sure if Miki would let him, but Miki didn't hesitate, threading their fingers together. "I really appreciate you coming down here with me. It means a lot."

"Duh, why wouldn't I? It's really important to you," Miki scoffed. "Like your — our — dad says, this thing is a two-way street and sometimes both of us have to drive but we should always be willing to be the passenger for the others dream."

"My da said that?" Kane slowed his stride as the sidewalk turned uneven. "Most of the advice I get from him is a reminder to breathe and do not try to cage you in."

"Okay, so yeah he says that more to Damie about me but the sentiment's the same. D gets a little hyper focused on the shit he wants to do and forgets about the rest of us but I can usually yank him back." Miki shrugged and edged in closer to Kane, an elegant feline grace to his walk. "Here, right?"

"Yeah. Here." Kane stopped in front of the tattoo shop's door to catch the moment before it passed. "Jesus, I've been waiting to do this for years."

"Okay so how about if we get the fuck inside and out of the cold?" Miki shivered again despite his heavy leather jacket. "I really need some coffee and you really need some ink."

It was a shock to see his father and older brother there in the shop. Kane couldn't speak... couldn't think past the bright sparkles of sentimental joy flowing through him. The hug from Connor was appropriately manly and brotherly, a bruising, ripped cracking moment then came his father's more gentle embrace.

Being held by Donal with Miki's hand pressed between his shoulder blades brought Kane to tears. He should have been made of sterner stuff but the Irish in him was strong and his family *cried*... with sorrow and with joy. It wasn't simply the hug. Everything about Donal wrapping his arms around him broke Kane's soul open. It was the familiar scent of Irish spring soap and the scratch of his father's knuckles on his cheek where Donal brushed away a tear. The hint of butterscotch on his father's breath was achingly sweet, a candy habit he never intended to break and one that always ensured he had a handful of treats in his pockets for his children. And it was the smoky echo of peat and fresh green in his father's rumbling voice that always took Kane's heart home.

"I'm glad the two of you are here," Kane mumbled around his burgeoning emotions. "Funny, I just said that to Mick. Thought you guys had to work."

"Yer better half gave a sound argument for us being here even after ye told us not to come down." Donal's chuckle was as rich as the whiskey he liked. "So it was either respect yer wishes or listen to him. Ye see what we've chosen."

Kane cocked his head. "What did he say?"

"He told us to get the fuck down," Connor interjected. "He seemed pretty serious so I canceled my training session. And well, he's right. This is something we should do together. Like the first time."

"You three about done? Because you're standing in the middle of the doorway and I need some coffee," Miki grumbled, trying to get past them. "You guys are like mountains."

Bear was waiting for them once they actually got through the door and into the shop itself. If Barrett Jackson had looked a bit more Irish, he could pass for one of Kane's brothers, especially once Kane heard a sigh of exasperation when Ivo, one of Bear's younger brothers, came out of the back room followed by a very wet shaggy mutt with the tips of his ears dyed blue.

Miki of course headed for the dog and from the sounds of it made fast friends with Ivo and Earl.

"You ready to do this now?" Bear asked. The stencil in his hand was a familiar one, and Kane grinned at the stupid look on Connor's face. "It's been a few years. You sure you haven't change your mind?"

"No, I promised myself this," Kane replied, stripping his shirt off and ignored the mocking wolf whistle he heard from the other side of the shop, mostly because he wasn't sure if it came from Miki or Ivo. "Let's do this. Time for me to become a *real* Morgan."

"You've always been a Morgan," Miki said as he approached Kane, the scruffy wet dog trotting behind him. His lover's fingers were tinted blue and the coffee cup he held in his hand let out a steam that promised the brew inside of it was strong enough to strip off paint... just the way Miki liked it. "The best fucking Morgan there is. I'm including Donal in that."

The kiss he got from Miki was as hot as the coffee and Kane had to lean his head back when they were done, willing his body to calm down and fighting the instinct to drag Miki to the back of the shop to find anyplace flat enough for them to have sex on.

"You're the best thing that is ever happened to me, a *ghra*," Kane whispered into Miki's ear. "The very best damned thing and I'm so fucking glad your dog is a thief."