



A close-up photograph of a woman's eye. The eye is dark brown and is looking directly at the viewer. The eyelid is heavily lined with red glittery eyeliner, and long, dark, curled eyelashes are coated with black mascara. The skin around the eye is fair and appears slightly textured. The background is a solid black rectangle.

**THE
FOURTH ACT**

LE FRANKS



The bottom edge of the book cover features a torn paper effect, revealing a white, crumpled piece of paper underneath. The rest of the cover is a textured, reddish-brown color with small white specks, resembling a book binding or paper with a distressed finish.

THE FOURTH ACT

I watch him from the shadows. He is seduction. He casts his web of magic. Suspended high above, in this cavernous space, he seems untouchable, held in his own spell. Does he control the red silk or does it control him? Can he be lured from its web?

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

THE FOURTH ACT

By LE Franks

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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THE FOURTH ACT

By LE Franks

Photo Description

A lithe young man is suspended horizontally in the air by a long piece of red silk. He is naked apart from the silk which is wrapped around his hips. His curly, blond hair hides his face, and his upper body is slightly twisted away from the viewer.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Can you help...?

I watch him from the shadows. He is seduction. He casts his web of magic. Suspended high above, in this cavernous space, he seems untouchable, held in his own spell. Does he control the red silk or does it control him? Can he be lured from its web?

Sincerely,

—Elizabetta

P.S. Please, a Contemporary setting, no GFY, would prefer no pnr/fantasy/sci-fi or other-worldly shenanigans; can be plot driven or porny, up to you.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: coming of age, coming out, first time, intern, performance arts, silk aerialist, suspense, theater

Content Warnings: no HEA or HFN

Word Count: 14,523

THE FOURTH ACT

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Act One

The suspended bridge above the stage shimmied and creaked under his bulk. Every movement and every noise was amplified, screaming his presence to the sea of empty seats dotting the blackened theater.

He froze, and adrenalin surged, rising in him like a spring thaw gushing through a dam in a river of ice. It sent blood pounding like storm debris against his eardrums—dampening every sound his shallow panting made as he hunched, cringing in the dark. In an odd way, it kept him anchored in place until the grating stabilized, and the shifting underfoot ceased.

Pulling oxygen into his chest, he felt the burn inflate his lungs for what seemed like the first time in years. He savored the pain. It sharpened his senses, focused his intention. Failure would not be rewarded. One more deep breath and he was back to feeling his way along the walkway, straining his eyes until he could just make out the crossbeam rising out of the gloom, fifty feet above the stage.

So close. Confident now, he quickened his pace beyond a crawl, zeroing in on the spot where the apparatus and safety lines were secured.

As he leaned over to get a better look, the platform swayed, tilting outward as if obliging him with a closer view. It was help he could do without. The warm trickle down his pant leg seemed to punctuate the moment his vertigo struck.

He couldn't do much about the roll of steel he was trying to fuse to the bones in his hands through the sheer force of his grip, or the iron tang leaking from his tongue, so he waited, letting the catwalk and his stomach settle until he could slide one sweat-slick palm off the railing and rub it dry against a thick, wool-covered thigh—the rough fabric scraping the feeling back into his skin.

He took another deep breath. Carefully working the fingers of his free hand into his front pocket, he groped, searching out the warm metal of the Leatherman nestled there. The thought of dropping it, of watching it spin wildly into space before disappearing from view only to land with an explosion of sound, made him nauseous.

He licked his dry lips and, squeezing tight, pulled it out, running a practiced thumb across the pocket tool set, the weight of it comforting in his hand.

He eased it open, unfolding the pliers with a *snick* that froze him in place and sent his heart clogging his throat for what felt like five minutes before another thaw eased him to his knees. He was getting too old for this work.

This time he was prepared for the shifting and lay almost belly flat, his heavy, dark coat bunching over his meaty shoulders, as he reached the nose of the pliers into space, letting the tool guide his hand. It took four agonizing tries before he snagged enough of the rigging to tow it close enough to grab.

The heavy fabric spilled onto the catwalk, covering him in a pool of red so dark in the dim light that, up close, it looked like congealed blood. He bit his tongue to stifle the nervous giggle at the thought and turned his attention back to his task. This time, he carefully folded the handles of the tool forward to cover the plier head, giving him a solid grip for the blade he now eased out.

It was razor-sharp, he knew it—he'd put the edge on it this morning—even so, he couldn't resist brushing his thumb across it just to feel the *scritch* of protest it made where biting steel separated the whorled flesh from his thumb. Somewhere, floating through the night beneath him, like a macabre snowflake, was the one tangible proof he was here.

Shrugging, he straightened the cloth and began scraping his way across the red silk, letting the pressure of his hand drive the naked blade sideways into the fibers. Just the barest hint of encouragement and the threads would unwind themselves, fraying under the weight of the man suspended in mid-air.

With any luck, this time, the artist really *would* be hanging by a thread.

He let go, letting the weight of the fabric slither through his fingers, dragging it back into place ready for the next performance.

By this time tomorrow it would be done.

Act Two

It was worse than I expected.

It stood between a Starbucks and an Armani Express, shedding brick dust and paint. A lone monument to time among the architecturally bland.

Somehow, the Goldwyn Theater had resisted the thrall of modernization that spread like a virus through every corner of a neighborhood once better known for its tenements and factories and immigrants struggling to survive. Now chrome and glass store fronts beckoned to tourists wandering the streets, hoping for pushcarts and pickle barrels, but finding instead the designer clothes, designer coffees, and designer restaurants found everywhere else.

I stepped into the dark.

Five seconds into this year's summer internship at one of New York's oldest and sorriest theaters and I'd moved back in time. One minute I was brushing past clusters of hipsters lingering on the sidewalk flicking through the apps on their iPhones, and the next I was in a scene from a Hollywood production from the '30s.

All I was missing was a guest appearance by Bela Lugosi.

Outside, the sunshine had danced across my shoulders in a celebration of summer. In here, behind heavy red velvet curtains covering the glass doors I'd passed on the street, the dark gloom was oppressive. I could barely make out art deco fixtures and threadbare carpeting. The only light cutting through the gloom came from an old-fashioned popcorn machine wedged between two candy counters.

Dust and heat swirled around my head, coalescing into a heavy fist shoving its way down my throat, trying to clog my lungs. I resisted the urge to fan the air in front of my nose. Awareness of the futility of that act had me chugging down the last of the tepid water in my bottle instead.

The drapes muffled sound as well as light, and the empty foyer of the theater ate my footfalls as I moved deeper, my senses twitching. Straining, I could hear laughter filtering in—the hipsters hadn't moved on. Checking the glowing dial of my diving watch, I wondered what time the box office opened.

Maybe four o'clock, maybe five, or maybe 1945, it was hard to tell given the general air of neglect.

As if on cue, a doorman appeared. Dark and looming, he melted out of the shadows like an extra from central casting, playing the part of henchman number three. The man towered a good foot taller than me, swarthy and silent, his suit hanging off shoulders so rounded that the jacket fell away from his body, revealing a white button-down blousing over a waistband three inches north of fashionable.

We stood eyeing each other, the blinks of my lids counting time, my tongue drying against my palate, until I stepped back, breaking contact. There was no question which one of us was the extra here.

I resisted the urge to raise the water bottle to my lips for the last few drops, but it was a near thing with his gaze drilling through me.

He raised a single brow, an inky slash taking flight above a glittering black eye, and I dug into my pocket for the only offering I had. He took one look at the sweat-dampened note in my hand and gave a silent jerk of a thumb.

Trailing after him like a puppy at the heels of his master, we wound through a warren of gloomy hallways until, reaching the last door on the left, my guide halted. He gave me a single grunt and melted away, back into the shadows, leaving me alone.

I glanced down at the paper. My grandfather's scrawl disappeared into a smudge, but I could still see that the name written in his trembling pencil matched the antique gold lettering stenciled across the rippled glass. Saul Davidovich, Manager.

This was it.

I checked my watch again and was amazed. Time in this place seemed very flexible. What had felt like hours trekking through the theater had only been minutes. Still, I was late.

One last deep breath, one sharp rap, and I opened the door on command.

My new boss sat behind a battered wooden desk circa 1940, the stain worn away, leaving only a border of well-aged wood to support the two beefy arms stretching the seams of his sweater. He in no way resembled the wiry, hardboiled character formed in my imagination from too many Saturday matinees.

His torso was twice as wide as it was long, with shoulders sloped so perilously that his navy cardigan seemed like an alpine skier poised to start, only waiting for a shot from a pistol to begin the race downhill to the floor.

This odd combination of body physics brought to mind the cartoonish figure of Popeye. His meaty fists only seemed to underscore this idea as he leaned across his paperwork, one gnarled hand the size of a mitt propping up his head while the other raked through thin gray hairs still sprouting out of his pink scalp.

He might have been fifty, he might have been eighty—it was impossible to tell with his face in shadow. But the blend of vitality evidenced by the barrel chest and swollen biceps was diminished somewhat by his height, his lack of shoulders, and a general sense of ennui that hung over him like a cloud.

I couldn't find a place for him in my head among my grandfather's usual circle of friends. He was a mystery, and that terrified me.

I held my breath and stood there, feeling every ounce of my inexperience and silently cursing my grandfather's interference in my life. I fidgeted for a moment, shifting from foot to foot.

"Misha Glazeroff? You're late." Mr. Davidovich didn't look up, he just held a clipboard out in my general direction.

"Michael, Michael Glazer... my father..." I trailed off. Davidovich was apparently indifferent, or deaf, and the clipboard continued to flap in front of my nose.

"Take this to Ford... he's been bitc—"

A radio squawked, interrupting him, and the clipboard rattled to the desk. I watched the handset vibrate across an old green leather ink blotter as Davidovich tugged at his few remaining strands of hair before snatching up the radio.

"What is it now, Ford?" The bark was sharp and impatient.

"I need the set list. You want this done without problems from the union you must bring..."

"For fuck's sake! The boy just got here."

"Don't swear, Saul." This tone was chiding, disappointed, and it seemed to light a fire under the little man as his face flamed in irritation.

"Oh, for crying... Ford, you overreact, *again*. You can wait five minutes once in a while. It won't kill you!"

"You fail to understand the simplest thing about running a theater—" The patience of a man talking to a dimwitted child, overlaid with a hint of disdain, crackled through the office.

The snort Davidovich returned was rude, the exasperation coming over the radio in return loud and clear. So much of their relationship was revealed to me in the noises they made between their words.

"Why must we do this each time, Saul? Why do you wait until the very last second of the very last minute of the very last hour of the very last day before you...?"

I listened as they continued to argue back and forth until the thread of their conversation broke under the weight of their verbal shorthand, and my thoughts drifted on a river of sound rather than the words. The accent coming through the radio was thick and Eastern European. I envisioned a broad Slavic face with a flat nose above full lips turning down at the corners.

I pegged Ford as Ukrainian, despite all the static, which meant it sounded a little like home to me. I'd heard those softly rounded, slurred consonants coming from our tiny drawing room all my life as my grandfather's friends gathered once a week to share the news and a bottle.

One of the most frequent guests was a carpenter from Kiev who gave fiery speeches after too many glasses of "tea"—railing against the Russian state much to the annoyance of the rest of the room.

And I knew for a fact that Davidovich was a second or third generation Russian Jew with those cultural inflections blending with his Brooklyn roots. I had never met him in our home, though his name had often been on my grandfather's lips throughout the years. Prior to this moment, my impression was that Mr. Davidovich was a devout man. Listening to him swear at Ford... I wasn't sure. Not that it mattered.

My grandfather—though raised Russian Orthodox—hadn't bothered to imprint any religion on me. He'd yet to forgive God for taking his son and daughter in-law, almost a killing blow after he'd already paid such a high price to save what was left of the family.

Ours had been a rich, fertile tree, stretching back centuries in Mother Russia until its decimation, branch by branch. First, it was at the hands of the Tsars,

their feudal repression choking the breath of the middle class, then came the Bolsheviks with their idealism expressed in blood, but it was the Nazis that laid waste to our heartwood when Stalin tossed almost the entirety of a generation onto the fires of war. The Soviet system took their time, year-by-year, pruning away all but the last few twigs.

Seeing the inevitable, my grandfather bundled up his wife and son and immigrated to America.

I watched my new boss snap his radio handset to the off position before tossing it back on the desk, breathing one last curse in Ford's direction before finally turning to me.

He looked me up and down with eyes the color of surf after a winter storm, still flashing and turbulent and half-hidden under heavy brows. The rest of his face was softly folded like the sheets in a linen closet.

He was a man of opposing physical forces: soft and hard, big and small, fearsome and... well, in this case it was only fearsome.

I shivered under the weight of his stare and wondered what he saw as he cataloged me. Whatever it was must have passed muster. He gave me a nod and thrust out the clipboard once more.

"Go."

This time I took it and fled.

I didn't hesitate. How hard could it be to find the stage?

I'd soon kick myself for the rhetorical question.

I made a wrong turn off one of the hallways. Instead of working my way back to the front of the theater, I found myself in another narrow passage containing a series of doors. I discovered storage rooms, cleaning closets, what appeared to be a business office from the fifties—working mimeograph included, if the whiff of alcohol perfuming the tiny space was anything to go by.

The next door opened into a stairwell, the risers sinking away from view until completely swallowed by the black void. I stepped in, leaning over the railing and peering down for any sign of life. The unmistakable sound of an automatic lock engaging behind me froze my bowels.

It was pitch black.

Fuck.

This was fast becoming a scene from a bad slasher movie, and here I was... the only virgin around.

I eased down the steps, turning my mind to all the movie killers, monsters, and supernatural beings I'd become acquainted with over the years. Chances were slim that I'd get one of the fun ones. More likely I was walking into a scene from *SAW* than something campy from the sixties like *The Blob*, though anything was better than dwelling on my lack of love life.

Looking for a distraction, I counted stairs... thirty-five, thirty-six... I imagined the squawking going on in Mr. Davidovich's office right now... thirty-eight, thirty-nine... maybe Ford would send a search party. I hoped it was soon. I'd even welcome Igor the doorman at this point. An eternity later, I counted off the last step and embraced the dim glow of emergency lighting illuminating the entrance to the tunnel running under the stage.

Progress, even if it came clogged with old backdrops and rigging. I kicked a clown painted on plywood and got moving.

The man glowering at me as I exited the tunnel was probably Ford, and he looked *nothing* like I imagined.

He was tall and thin, with a rigid spine, like a piece of rebar had been fused with the bone. His features were vulpine, sharp instead of broad, the nose long and aristocratic rather than flat. His eyes a piercing jade under thick sable locks that brushed the collar of his dark shirt—hair I found myself wanting to touch.

I swallowed my tongue as I tried not to drool in front of this dark angel. He was as beautiful as a renaissance painting—his skin glowed a pearl-white, almost translucent in the low light. And not unlike the avenging angels depicted in paintings of the era, he was a man without humor.

There were no smile lines at either the corners of his mouth or eyes, and his skin, reaping the benefit of his serious nature, was unblemished and smooth. He could pass for any age within a forty-year span, though I guessed it to be on the shortside of thirty rather than close to forty, if pressed.

He had a controlled energy flowing off him that gave him a gravitas which was written into every movement he made and every look he shared, and when he turned that force in my direction, I almost burst into flames.

Softly, he condemned me. “You walk like an elephant. You will not last.” He snatched the clipboard from my hand and spun lightly, like a dancer, disappearing up the stairs.

I followed, not wanting to risk finding my own way out, not wanting to leave that first impression on his lips. Already I wanted to please him, and the fact that I didn’t weighed heavily on my heart. So I kept him in sight, kept watching the slim hips, kept following the flex of his buttocks as he climbed higher. He was a metronome of elegant seduction, and were it not for those hard, damning eyes drilling into me, I could lose myself in his motion.

Watching him, I regretted my lack of experience.

To be gay and living in New York and still a virgin at nineteen felt shameful, wasteful, *juvenile*.

I hated to think about the handful of “almost runs” I’d had so far, but living with my overprotective grandfather had done nothing for my love life.

He was my only family left, and until I was sure of what I wanted—or *who* I wanted—I wasn’t prepared to bring home a casual boyfriend and ruin his dreams for our family’s future. But I’d be a liar if I said I didn’t wish I was the kind of person who could say yes to an offer implicit in a glance or a sway of the hips, or that I hadn’t dreamed of catching the attention of a beautiful man like Ford and seeing the desire for me in his eyes.

Ford cast a single, stern, look over his shoulder.

My cheeks burned.

“We are now backstage. No words. No sounds...” Ford narrowed his eyes. “Don’t even breathe.”

With that, I followed him into the magical chaos of his world and found breathing wasn’t going to be an issue. If I thought Ford was the angel of darkness, then what I saw before me—suspended twenty feet above the stage from a single red ribbon—was the angel of light.

Act Three

His name was Semyon Borodin. And he had no words for me.

I learned this from the man in the folding chair.

I had been standing in the wings, hidden in the folds of the heavy black curtains, watching the man floating above the stage, when an utterance cut through my consciousness.

I turned. Another Russian.

A man sat, hands folded precisely across his rounded stomach, the metal creaking beneath his bulk. I'd barely glanced at him when he first spoke, my eyes quickly returning to fix on the twisting form of the man moving through space in front of me, but I'd seen enough to wonder what he was hiding. Despite the thermals rising off the stage lights, the man was cloaked in a heavy, gray overcoat.

"Semyon Borodin. He has no words for you." The heavy accent came on a breath, thick with the smell of sauerkraut and onions, reminding me of Zabar's on a Saturday. I could practically taste the marble rye.

"No words?" I was confused. Maybe the blond was mute, or the man's English was just bad.

The "Da" was growled, and I bit my lip to prevent myself from asking the follow-up question dancing on the tip of my tongue.

I'd seen his type before—my grandfather had made a point of steering me away from men like him all my life—men who seemed more comfortable in the shadows or standing at the shoulders of others.

I turned back to the stage.

The aerialist rose rapidly through space—hand over hand, twisting his body as he climbed the red fall, wrapping it around his naked torso—a slash as bright as fresh blood on snow.

Over and over the ribbon wound—his flexing muscles, his straining thighs drawing him higher until he reached his pinnacle and twisted, suspended in air nearly forty feet above the stage.

I held my breath. Even the muttering Russian behind me stilled.

We watched him, mesmerized by his iron strength and dancer's delicacy as he told his story of an angel fascinated by the mortal below. Moving through his forms, his body was fluid and apparently weightless, until finally he hung anchored only by his feet in an inverted cross.

The spotlight pinned Borodin against a black backdrop, golden curls shining like a halo around his head, and I was close enough to see when the concentration and control he'd been maintaining morphed into a singular expression of utter peace.

He let go.

Releasing his foothold, he flung himself backwards through the darkness, through space, falling to earth in a twisting crescendo of unwrapping silk. The end of the ribbon twisted around his forearm was the only thing halting his momentum, saving him from a hard impact with the stage. My imagination, however, couldn't help but fulfill the plausibility: the angel twisting through air in a death spiral until colliding with earth, the impact violent rather than the artistically broken repose he currently held as the music faded.

"*Goluboi.*" The Russian growled out the slur with such venom that I looked away from the man stretched out on stage.

The word stung.

I'd heard it used too many times by members of our community, and it was a painful reminder of the real reason I hadn't revealed a preference to my grandfather. Until I knew for sure I'd still be welcome in his home, I was frozen in place—neither in nor out—preferring a state of stasis to confrontation or confirmation.

I let the notion that my virginity was somehow pinned to my grandfather's acceptance skitter away as the Russian stood, towering over me.

This close, the man's florid features were clear. He was heavy browed over watery blue eyes, and displayed the pitted, sallow skin of a man who'd spent too many days and nights in a bottle of vodka.

His overcoat had flopped open, and I could clearly see the bulge under his suit jacket as intended. The shoulder holster had been designed not to conceal but to intimidate. I'd been warned.

My emotions were all over the place.

In just the last hour, this theater and its occupants had sent me spinning out of my nice safe orbit, and I didn't like it. I'd dealt with homophobic assholes before, but I hadn't expected it here or from someone so objectively lethal.

The Russian gave one brief look behind me before shoving past to join the blond on stage.

"It is the *Fall From Grace*."

"What is?" I was admittedly still thrown by all the non-sequiturs being tossed around me like juggling pins, and I was annoyed that part of my brain seemed to be telling me that *I should know this one*.

"The name of his piece. Semyon Borodin has been doing this for a while now..."

Ford had snuck up on me while I was having my stare-off with the aerialist's... bodyguard? Keeper?

I ignored the tingle running down my spine as Ford's full vowels formed words filled with contempt, and went back to admiring Borodin—the golden curls sticking damply to pinked cheeks was just one of his celestial features...

"Fitting..." I murmured, my attention now on the pair of nude-colored capris molding the man's thighs and ass. The aerialist was tugging on the red fabric, causing the muscles of his back and arms to ripple with each jerk. His bare skin glistened under the hot lights, holding my gaze while he continued his work and I avoided mine.

Ford leaned in, lips so close they almost touched my ear as he breathed out his words.

"Are they?"

I held my own breath in surprise and embarrassment. Getting caught checking out the man felt worse when it was Ford doing the catching.

"Stay away from him, Misha." The expectation of obedience clear in Ford's tone.

"Michael."

I muttered the correction under my breath, glancing back at him, not sure if he meant Borodin or the Russian thug—though in the case of the latter I was happy to comply.

Ford's expression darkened, and he didn't respond. He just stood—a granite presence next to me. The silence ticked on until I couldn't restrain myself from filling the breach with my babble as we watched the blond work.

"Where's he from?"

Whatever objective Borodin had been aiming for apparently wasn't fulfilled, so hopping up, he gathered the two panels into a single handful and began to climb. Hand over hand he rose, letting his lower body swing like a pendulum until halfway up he stopped and resumed jerking on the material, bobbing up and down with each flex of his biceps.

The silence lay between us once more, only this time it was Ford who broke it.

"Borodin?"

"Mmm..."

"Nowhere. He is a ghost with no story but the one he tells new each day."

"And his friend?"

The hulking Russian paced back and forth across the stage, his eyes never moving from the form rising steadily higher, above him.

"Ah, Yuri. He gives him the stories."

Sounds of the aerialist arguing with the Russian from twenty-five feet up, rose above the general background noise of the stage crew. I couldn't follow more than every third or fourth word.

My Russian was rudimentary and domestic at best, my grandfather refusing to teach it to me at home, so the bulk of my vocabulary consisted of terms of endearment, and the slang I picked up at the student center.

Ford wasn't handicapped in the same way.

The blond finally slid down the red panels to confront the Russian face to face, and in an instant, Ford was there, moving smoothly towards them, scattering crew with a wave of his hand as he went.

I admit that I enjoyed the view as he walked away from me—Ford hadn't lost any poetry in his motion. He successfully drew my eye from the blond long enough for me to ogle him, though embarrassment burned when he looked back and caught me.

Ford stopped at center stage, and the instant he approached them, Borodin and his Russian stopped bickering. "What is the problem?"

"No problem." The Russian glowered, folding his arms across his chest.

"Yes, problem!" Semyon shoved in front of him. "There is too much give in the silk."

"You imagine things like usual, Semy. Always a prima donna." The older man seemed to inflate, his gray wool coat hunching up on his shoulders as he curled over the aerialist with menace. "Be grateful you are still working, as old as you are!"

"Is that a threat, Yuri?" The aerialist turned on the Russian, shoving him with the flat of his hand. It was like trying to move a mountain by blowing bubbles at it. The Russian didn't twitch.

Now that I saw the men together, I could tell that Borodin was a few inches taller than my five-foot-eleven, making Ford and the Russian closer to six-foot-four or five. The Russian had used his height to intimidate me offstage, but from my perspective it was Ford, with his lean wiry build, that stood like a steel-forged blade among stalks of wheat.

"I'll check it myself." Ford's word was absolute, and Borodin gave a sharp nod, golden curls bouncing around his face.

"Misha!" Ford barked at me, and I meant to walk over with dignity, three pairs of eyes watching me as I went, but I hesitated. Only one man appeared happy to see me, and I was reluctant to act like a pet coming to heel in front of him.

I stalled, surveying them.

Ford had the cold, blank face I was coming to expect whenever he looked at me, no matter how mobile his features had been the split second before. A random thought drifted through my mind... someday I wanted to be there to see Ford smile—it could only be spectacular.

The Russian, on the other hand, made no effort to hide his dislike. Under the lights, his eyes gleamed like polished obsidian as he drilled his hate into me. I didn't understand what I'd done to cause this enmity. If I ever ran into this man on the street, I would run, but here in the theater, next to Ford, he was easier to ignore.

Standing next to him was the last man in their trio—a golden flame, the light to their darkness. Semyon stood like the dancer he was, shoulders thrown

back, head tilted proudly. His cascade of blond curls spilling over his brow gave him a mischievous air matching the glint in his blue eyes.

I couldn't help my smile as the blond moved, his steps flowing like water as he crossed the stage to greet me.

As he drew closer everything else faded into shadow, and I was struck dumb, captivated by the brilliant glow surrounding him. Some part of me knew it was a trick of the light, but the impression he'd made on me during his performance still lingered, and I didn't care. The fantasy was only inches away from me, close enough to grab if I was brave enough to reach for it.

"Misha? I am Semyon Borodin—call me Semy." He took my hand in his, pulling me into the circle of his light and I melted.

"Michael." I corrected automatically. The nickname was a diminutive that I'd been trying to duck since first grade.

Semy raised one perfect gold brow in disbelief, and I was sold. He could call me anything he wanted as long as he kept his ethereal gaze on me.

If I'd been in my right mind I would have sworn he'd drugged me. If I were home, the little old lady who spent her days in a chair outside our local bodega would have said he'd spelled me with the kind of magic that came from deep within the ancient forests of the Ural Mountains. Either way I was lost in him.

I took half a step closer—well, I tried—the firm tan hand and elegant fingers wrapping over my shoulder prevented me from making a fool of myself by throwing my body at Semy. From the wolfish smile that transformed the blond's face from angel to predator, Semy hadn't missed a thing. The invitation was plain even to my inexperienced self.

Ford's grip tightened, and he leaned in. "Misha, come. Time to see if you have anything inside that pretty head of yours beyond the stars. So far I haven't seen any sign of intelligent life. Surprise me. Yes?"

Looking over my head to Semy, he continued. "I'll take a look. We have three hours until curtain."

Semy gave us an elegant little bow before retreating to the edge of the stage to gather his things. I watched him make a show of wrapping a towel around his neck, wiping his forehead with long fingers.

He shot me a look from across the stage, pinning my feet in place.

Semy cracked the seal on his water, eyes heavy-lidded and so full of invitation that I felt my dick perk up. Tilting his head back to drink, I admired the white column of throat undulating, and I became jealous of the plastic rim of the bottle pressing against his full, pink bottom lip.

Ford paused at the back of the stage. The eyes of both men rested on me like poles in a magnetic field, each trying to draw me close. I was caught between them.

"Coming, Misha?" Ford's words cracked like a hot whip.

His disappointment in me was palpable, and I was grateful for small favors—Ford only saw half the picture—my attraction to Semy wasn't the only one I was currently struggling with. My desire for both men was heady, and apparently doomed, and I'd only been on the job for two hours.

I needed to get laid, preferably somewhere very far away from here.

"Michael. My name is Michael," I told the blackout curtains as I passed behind them, following in Ford's wake.

It was going to be a very long summer.

"Hold this." Ford handed me the line he used to pull Semyon's rig onto the bridge. "Don't drop it."

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I held back; Ford had me convinced he had a pair of eyes in the back of his head to go along with his ability to read minds.

It was fascinating to watch him. His calm efficiency carried over to his work, his fingers nimble as they straightened and rearranged the red fabric panels.

I'd followed him up into the rafters, carefully stepping across the bridge hovering over the stage.

It was obvious even to me that Semyon wasn't imagining things—the fabric had gotten hung up and twisted on one of the wires that attached the rig to the steel beam running just below the bridge.

I leaned over to get a better view from above, ignoring the dirty look Ford gave me as the bridge shifted with my weight.

"Is it always this touchy?" I was making small talk while he finished, pretending to pay attention when instead I was busy looking around.

The view was spectacular.

From up here, I could see all the way to the back of the theater where Saul stood talking to the big guy I met haunting the lobby earlier, before disappearing out through the swinging doors. I could just imagine what it would be like to watch Semyon's act as he moved through the air below.

I glanced at Ford as he got up and took the ropes back from me, lowering the rigging into place.

"Can I come back up and watch the show from here?"

He eyed me like he was seeing the answer to a question he hadn't asked.

"Maybe." He finished tying off his knot, ignoring me until I started to move away.

"Go find Saul. You're his problem now."

I was halfway down the stairs when he called out. "It wouldn't hurt to have someone here to keep an eye on that rig... You can't move a muscle during the show. Can you do that?"

His stare was back.

This time I couldn't stop the goofy smile that went along with the nodding.

Ford shook his head. "Be in place twenty minutes before curtain."

I saluted him, jumping the last four steps off the stage and taking the direct route, jogging through the theater to get to the lobby where I'd start the process of finding Saul's office all over again.

I figured I'd had enough adventure for one day, but apparently Mr. Davidovich had other ideas.

I rapped on his door, ready to get down to the heavy filing my Grandfather warned me about, until it was time for the show.

"Ford sent me back..." I leaned around the partially open door waiting for his invitation.

"Good. Come." Saul waved me all the way in.

"I'm glad you're back. I have..." He trailed off, busy pawing through the top drawer of his desk, pulling out odd bits and pieces of junk and examining them before tossing them back. "Ha!"

He raised a shaggy brow in triumph and tossed me a bent piece of metal. “Take this. It opens up the paper towel dispensers in the bathrooms. You just need to... hmm... wiggle?”

He looked back and forth between the object and me as if I were capable of confirming the accuracy of his words. I shrugged, and he went back to poking through his desk.

The radio squawked, and I felt like I was in a Fellini film—one of the obscure ones that I barely managed to sit through for my History of Film course—it had already been two of the most confusing hours of my life. This time Saul had his headset on, and I only got half the conversation.

“He’s here. No. No. I told you. Yes. For—” Saul rolled his eyes and slammed his drawer shut.

“He’s *my* inter—”

I wandered over to the window and left Saul to his argument with Ford. The traffic on the street below was heavier, filling up with the early commuters and the minivans full of kids being shuttled to their afternoon dance classes and soccer leagues. The front door of a karate dojo across the street opened up, a flood of gis spilling out onto the sidewalk.

Leaning on my elbows, I looked out over all I’d missed growing up on three square blocks with a relative who didn’t drive and preferred to spend our time together playing chess and drinking tea.

Saul’s “Misha!” jerked me back to the present, and I turned. He was off the radio, and his headset was on the floor, across the room.

“Michael,” I reminded him absently, picking it up and handing it to him.

I got a grunt in return, as Saul fiddled with an earpiece. He sighed and looked up at me.

“We got a flood in one of the dressing rooms. Find Johnny. He’ll show you the supply closet, take you backstage... just...” He trailed off, dropping the headset onto the stack of Playbills weighing down the corner of his desk. I watched him tug on his full lower lip.

“What?”

“Never mind, it’s nothing. Ford is having kittens—stay out of his way when you’re back there.”

“Why? What’s going on?” My gut clenched a little at the thought that Ford didn’t want me around.

“Nothing, nothing. Ford is an odd one, but brilliant. All artists are. You and me? Our job is to clean up after them and make their lives simple, so they can make their magic, which makes me money.”

“Even Ford?” It seemed strange to think of Ford in that light—as the talent.

“Especially Ford. He should be up on that stage instead of that has-been, pipsqueak diva.”

“You mean Semy?” That got another raised brow from him.

“So you call him Semy? No wonder Ford’s shorts are in a bunch. Yes. *Semy*. Be careful with that one—Ford says this will be his last tour, and some hold on a little tight and don’t know when to retire gracefully.”

“You said Ford should be on the stage...” I wanted to know more.

“Ah, that you’ll have to get from Ford, himself. You may be the grandson of one of my oldest friends, but he is my godson. Now, go. Find Johnny. You can’t miss him, I think he lives in that lobby.”

Dressing Room B was one of four situated at the back of the building on the same level as the stage.

Dressing Room A was the largest, being ringed with counters and mirrors and enough seats for an entire chorus to dress and do makeup together. It had one wall dedicated to lockers but no bathroom of its own.

Neither did Dressing Room C or E. Johnny had taken me on the full dressing room tour and was surprisingly chatty when it came to bathroom access, and which performers could or could not use which one. I hope they had a handout prepared unless this was a standard backstage protocol across the tri-state area. Somehow I doubted that.

“Here it is. Dressing Room B. We keep the *talent* here.” Johnny was serious.

I wanted to smile every time he used the word “talent”, which was often, sprinkled through his monologue on the wonderful Mr. Davidovich, and how lucky I was to work for him. Johnny’s Brooklyn accent was as thick as mustard on a corndog, and once you got him going, he wouldn’t shut up. I almost missed his lumbering, ominous presence from earlier.

Johnny left me then, fading away back to his post in the lobby while I stood there, mop in hand, hesitating. This felt... I was about to take a step back when the door slowly opened.

"*Misha.*"

Semyon.

Swallowing air, my tongue stuck to the roof of my gaping mouth.

I was so dead.

Act Four

"Michael," came out as a croak, not a whisper, the Pavlovian response to my nickname automatically falling out of my mouth to land somewhere between me and the naked man standing in the doorway.

I was just thankful no drool followed along behind my words. I brushed a hand across my mouth and chin, just to be sure.

At that, Semyon Borodin smiled. Not the beatific smile of saints, no, this one had more in common with the pigmented grins of satyrs cavorting with Rubenesque beauties in painted woodland scenes. This was no angel.

Stretching further across his face, his parted lips showed off snaggletoothed canines, so wickedly sharp they were as dangerous to me as to a nice filet. My knees shook just a little, and I felt a surprising kinship with a platter of meat.

"Misha..." Semyon purred, grabbing me by the shirt and pulling me inside. "...you are *just* in time."

I found myself standing inside Dressing Room B with my back to the closed door, staring at Semyon Borodin. He stood five feet and a million lifetimes of experience away from me, in all his glory.

With my mop and pail, I felt overdressed.

He wasn't *entirely* naked—he still wore his wolfy grin, and there was a tiny scrap of white covering his groin and most of one hip. If I had to guess, it was either a gym towel or the world's most generous washcloth.

Heat sizzled through me, battling my discomfort at being so close to someone I'd just been fantasizing about. From above the stage, hanging from his crimson rope, Borodin had seemed lighter than air—sleek and fluid in his movements and forms and *angelic*, which made it worse. My thoughts had been anything *but*.

Uncomfortable, I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye, resting my gaze on his plum red lip, instead. It curved above a sweetly rounded chin that added to the illusion of his celestial nature, one that the fine scattering of bronze stubble along with the wickedly curling lip destroyed.

So I kept going.

Like a theme park ride, I was powerless to stop myself once my visual journey began sinking lower, bobbing along the fall of his white throat, tracking the line of his carotid artery and the ligaments of his neck, snagging on his prominent Adam's apple before finally getting caught in the eddy made by the hollow of his throat.

I remembered where I was. "Mr. Davidovich sent me."

My whisper echoed in my ears, crackling with the sound of wax paper wadding in a fist, jolting me out of my hesitation. I raced on, hoping to discover all the treasures, the hills and valleys his marble flesh held, before I was stopped, and I lost this chance forever.

Semyon's shoulders rose, a towering mountain range of power above the landscape of his chest—years of training left it a broad mesa broken only by the undulation of his pecs and the pink nipples surrounded by a few translucent hairs. The power of his frame was mirrored in his sculpted biceps and arms.

Down I went, skittering over his navel and the impulse to dip my tongue in the divot it left in his perfect skin and run it across his rippling abdominals teased me, my fingers tingled, itching to touch the Y of abs sinking out of sight behind the white terrycloth.

It was all too much, and the heat that started in my cheeks the first second he opened the dressing room door now spread like a brush fire, igniting every cell in my body with a singular point of desire currently manifesting itself painfully in my jeans. I had to pull myself together or risk the ultimate humiliation of spontaneous combustion.

Licking my lip, I tried to see around the very human mass of hard muscle and pale skin into the room beyond.

"Saul... he said you have a flood in your dressing room?" I asked as I finally met his eyes—a glacial blue with an intensity that did nothing to cool me down.

Instead of answering me, Semyon reached for the large bottle of water resting on the counter, cracking the seal. He took one sip, then upended it, letting the water cascade onto the painted concrete floor. It splashed over his bare feet and onto the naked skin of his legs, forming a puddle that grew between us.

Watching water drops slide down one well-formed calf, it struck me that up until this moment, Semyon Borodin had been *completely dry*. Subconsciously, I

had assumed I'd either pulled him out of the shower with my knock or caught him shortly after he took one. But now...

Semyon tossed the empty bottle aside and walked across the watery divide to reach me, though his perverse parody wasn't intended for my salvation.

"Misha..." The hand that slid around me, cupping the base of my skull, was as warm as his breath on my lips, the thumb caressing my cheek as gentle as his tone. It was the approach one would make to a wild animal or stray dog, and half of me resented the assumptions he made about me while the other half didn't care, melting against him.

"You are so beautiful..." The lips were closer, and my guts froze, terrified about what might happen... and what might not.

I screwed my eyes shut tight and held my breath.

"I saw you, from above. I saw you watch me, want me..." He was nuzzling under my jaw, and I tried to swallow against the desert that had sprung up in my throat under his ministrations. I felt the wire handle of the bucket cut into my palm as I flexed my hand, willing myself not to move.

"...I wondered where you came from..." His lips parted, and I felt teeth trace the trail his nose had blazed.

"...like a vision from my dreams." His breath in my right ear was the only warning I got before a sharp pain rocketed my arousal to new heights. Semyon bit down on my earlobe, working it with his teeth—tugging and sucking on it.

I heard the clatter before I realized my hands were empty.

"So sweet. You taste like honey cake and tea..." He leaned into me, barely touching his chest to mine, but it was almost more than I could take. Without the mop to hold onto, my hands hovered at my sides, rising and falling like a kestrel riding the thermals on a sunny day. I wanted to touch him back, to hold onto something that would anchor me in my skin. Instead, I grabbed air.

"Shhhh... Misha, relax. I won't hurt you..." Gently uncurling my fingers enough to unclench my fists and slide his fingers between mine, Semyon simultaneously soothed me and ratcheted me higher.

Easing my hands over my head as he took full advantage of the opportunity I presented, he continued his invasion, leaning his full body weight against me.

"You like this—I can tell..."

I felt the heat rise in my face as he pressed a lean thigh between my legs, and I could feel his erection against my stomach. Slowly he began to move, grinding against my dick until I lost the ability to breathe, to think—all neurons firing with singular focus on the stimulation working its way through my jeans and up my spine.

“Let me have you, Misha. Let go and I will catch you.”

It was almost sweet, and the sentiment almost genuine if the cadence of his words weren’t matching the undulations of our rut. He had his own thrusting urgency, pressing long and hard against my abdomen.

I was about to pull away to argue the point when an explosion of sensation tore through me in a blinding wave of white light, incinerating any humiliation before it could form as I came, and Semyon finally, *finally* kissed me, wrapping me in his arms.

I shook with the aftershocks of my first orgasm outside of my own lubricated fist, and he pulled his mouth away from exploring mine. “So pretty, Misha... if you could only see yourself now... as I do.”

He didn’t wait for me to respond. The only sounds I could make alternated between pants for breath and moans.

He took the sag of my body against his as some sort of green light to continue doing whatever he wanted. So he did. Digging under my waistband, Semyon tugged at my shirt until the tail pulled free, and he could reach the skin underneath.

I’d worn a French blue button-down to work—Grandfather had made noises about my first choice—so I compromised on the shirt but drew the line at the rest, and after stumbling through the bowels of the theater I was glad I left my slippery dress shoes at home.

But Semyon didn’t seem impressed. Grabbing my shirt placket, he yanked, tearing it open in a hail of buttons.

“Fuck, Semyon!” I gasped at the unexpected violence as he dragged what was left of my shirt off my shoulders, pinning my elbows behind me in a tangle of cotton.

He ignored me, dropping to his knees and yanking first one running shoe off my foot, and then the other. I was torn between wanting to yell at him—demanding that he release my arms—and wanting him to continue.

"Hush, Misha. Too many clothes." He kissed my stomach and worked the zipper on my jeans, though it parted easily under his practiced fingers. I shuddered as he brushed across the sticky mess under my boxer briefs.

"Don't..." I was horrified, realizing that Semyon wasn't stopping, and I started to struggle, trying to free my hands from my buttoned cuffs and the fabric that still bound me. "...please..."

He looked up. Kneeling at my feet, he was a living statue. The golden curls framing his face softened the dark look he gave me. This close I could see the fine lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth.

"There is no shame in your body expressing pleasure, Misha."

It was the only acknowledgment I got, beyond a large hand splayed across my bare torso as he stripped away the rest of my dignity along with my underwear.

As long as I was restrained, I wasn't responsible for what my body did, and any objection I had was next to go as his mouth descended to my groin, and he cleaned me of all evidence of my emission. Gently licking the head of my penis, running his tongue along my slit and through the hair at the base of my shaft.

Each lick, each suck was on replay in my head as I imagined the sensation on my own tongue—the taste in my own mouth.

"Oh, Misha... so good." He kept me pressed against the door as I writhed—his tongue and mouth now working my ballsac, gently sucking first one testicle then the next.

He worked his way down, firing the nerves ringing my hole, darting the tip of his tongue into my folds—the sensation was a wet, warm fire, the tingle burning bright when he replaced his tongue with his thumbnail—scrapping across my taint as he moved back to the head of my cock.

"Holy fuck!" I was hard again, had been practically from the second I'd first come, but to have this man sucking me down, the head of my penis bumping across the roof of his mouth while the suction he applied sent my head spinning—it was too much, and I could feel my balls tightening with the urge to come.

He pulled off me. And stood.

Shit.

"Ah... look at you, so ready for me again. So beautiful, Misha." Semyon towered over me, keeping a hand wrapped around my prick.

"Michael." I could only gasp the correction—it was the only thing I had at my command. I wanted to grab him and drag his head back down, so I could come in his mouth, but I was in no condition—even without the use of my hands he had me shaking with helpless need.

"Let's do this together—eh, Misha?" The towel disappeared, and I almost swallowed my tongue at the sensation of Semyon's elegant cock sliding against mine, friction heating my skin as we moved in sync.

It didn't take long to push me over the edge again. A few short strokes under his iron grip, and I was flying apart. I felt the shock wave of his own release shuddering through his body, thick, white spurts of come flooding his hand and covering my own ejaculate. He bent, laughing and riding out the last of the waves, touching his forehead to mine for a brief moment, eyes closed.

I went cross-eyed in my desire to etch the memory of his face permanently in my mind. All I could focus on was the brush of white-tipped lashes against flushed cheeks. I was mesmerized by his vulnerability, though as soon as his eyes cracked open, it disappeared.

His lupine nature came rushing back with a grin and a lick of his hand.

Reaching down, he extracted my soiled boxers from the tangle of my jeans and wiped his hands and stomach. His pause spoke volumes. I could read the instant he stopped himself from tossing them at me—the minute he finally looked at me again. I saw myself through his eyes... debauched, slumped against his door wearing only my skin and the shirt he'd torn open and shoved behind me still keeping me a prisoner.

The smile changed. Became guarded. False.

He wiped me down with the clinical efficiency of a veteran nurse, brusquely pulling my shirt back over my shoulders, effectively freeing and羞ing me at the same time. Standing there, my shirt hanging open and penis dangling, left me more vulnerable than I'd been at any other point in my life.

I gathered up my jeans, one leg sopping wet from where it landed in the puddle, and started looking for my shoes.

It was the distraction that Semyon must have been watching for. As soon as I was on the floor reaching under his dressing table for my left shoe, he was

Backing away towards the small bathroom in the back. He paused in the light spilling from the open doorway.

"Thank you Misha..." Tossing the fouled underwear in my direction, he turned, calling over his shoulder, "Don't forget to clean up before you go."

He shut the door, the click of a lock echoing in my head.

Going commando in wet jeans and a dusty T-shirt taken from the wall of the concession stand was uncomfortably embarrassing.

Saul hadn't bothered to look up before sending me off to get water for the green room. Johnny, on the other hand, had taken one look at my torn shirt and disheveled appearance and barreled straight back to the dressing rooms, intent on tearing Semyon apart.

He was quick for a big guy. And while it was nice that he cared, it was hard work to catch him. Stopping him long enough to confess the humiliating truth—that I'd let Semyon relieve me of my nineteen years of build-up—was almost unbearable. Johnny just slapped me on the back and got me the shirt.

Bumping into Ford backstage was another matter entirely. One look at me had him frozen in place—a flicker of disappointment in his eyes. He cataloged the change in my appearance, and I could practically read the lecture in the way he held his body.

He had time—the curtains were drawn, and the stage set for the first act—so I wasn't surprised when he pulled off his headset, dropped it onto his podium, and then took me aside. I felt the heat of his body as he leaned in to wipe something off my cheek with his thumb. I tried not to dwell on what that might be.

"Misha..." Ford's features were dark, and it looked like he was struggling with his words. I brushed him off.

"You can't understand how much I hate that name." I said it as if that was the answer to everything.

I wanted to tell him to back the fuck up, to stay out of my business. Instead, I walked away. Annoyed. Apparently, I now wore a giant letter "L" stamped onto my forehead—just laid. The fact that I was smaller than all these guys didn't make me a girl that needed protecting.

I no longer held any illusions about Semyon Borodin, but he'd done me a favor by liberating my dick and teaching me the difference between love and sex, emotion and lust. I was nineteen, and it was just in time. I didn't need the burden of a first crush or wasted nights dreaming of Disney endings. His role, flying above the stage, was pure fantasy, when in reality he was just another asshole.

But Semyon had shown me something no one else had, and I was sold—given another chance to have his mouth on my dick I couldn't honestly say I wouldn't unzip my jeans myself.

My leg was beginning to cramp from my perch above the stage, and I was desperate for the current act to finish, so I could adjust my position during the applause. I'd moved into place on the bridge above the stage during intermission, nodding to Ford as I slipped by him to make my way to the stairs. I could tell he wanted to say something to me, but I didn't linger.

I hadn't been as lucky with the Russian. He was back—same gray metal folding chair, same position in the wings—watching me wind my way past stagehands and performers alike, waiting until I was close enough to trip. He stretched one long leg between mine as I moved past.

To the casual observer, it looked like he rose just in time to save me from falling. By the glances he kept darting over my shoulder, I suspected that Ford was occupied or the Russian wouldn't have chanced it, grinding the bones in my wrist together as he pulled me in close, our legs tangled.

I tried yanking away, but the grip tightened and pain flared.

"I tell you once, Semyon is not for you, but you ignore me..." The words drowned in his heavy accent, but his intention was clear. He kept growling. "...for the last time, stay away. I will not speak of this again to you."

I ignored the threat, which was probably stupid given the fact that he still had me pinned.

I'd been called out for acting rashly before, but I had no idea what kind of threat I could possibly be to the performer, and my sense of fair play demanded that I was in no real danger. After all, between the two of us, I wasn't the one playing the predator to Semyon's prey.

Maybe it was the way of all bodyguards—or maybe just the Slavic ones. Ford seemed to be made from the same overprotective cloth, though in my case

he appeared to be a reluctant defender. Or possibly it was some weird theater hazing ritual: gaslight the poor naïve intern on his first day of work.

But the discomfort pulsing in my body flared, pushing away everything but the pain, and the hold on my temper snapped.

“Don’t worry, I got all I wanted from your precious pet!”

Snarling in his face wasn’t the smartest thing to do. Usually I have better control than provoking an angry bear, but after my day so far and the chafing from my damp jeans, I’d had enough.

We were still too close for comfort—our farce of a lovers’ embrace—entwined with a man emitting enough menace to make me disappear from the face of the earth through sheer ill-will alone, and my bravado failed.

By the time the Russian released my arm, I wondered if he’d broken a bone... or two.

He thrust me away with a hiss. “Stay away from Semyon.” His push sent me rocketing backwards, I was in danger of tumbling out of the wings and onto the stage to join the Russian acrobats busy balancing on stacks of chairs.

This time, I did need an arm wrapping around my waist to keep my face from meeting the floor.

Ford.

Again.

This constant rescuing was eating away at me, so I left them, ignoring the angry hiss of Russian following me up the stairs.

Settling down on the bridge high above the stage, I waited, watching the performers and enjoying the change in perspective. From here, I could see the crew working in the wings and backstage, dancing in their own ballet, working ropes and props and backdrops in concert with the acts on stage.

It was peaceful above the lights, and being so removed from the action made me reflective. I was nineteen—still living with my Grandfather, still hiding myself from him in an effort to save him more pain—I didn’t know how he’d react to an announcement that his last living relative was gay, but continuing the family was everything to my grandfather.

While being gay no longer meant an automatic end to our genetic line, the idea of having children made me shudder. I wasn’t so naïve that I didn’t realize it had more to do with me being closer in age to a child than to an adult, but only time would tell.

The idea that I could possibly lose the one absolute in my life was unbearable, and now, in one short afternoon, I'd managed to ditch my virginity and out myself to half the theater. Saul was one of my grandfather's oldest friends and wasn't as oblivious as he made himself out to be. I'd be a fool to think he didn't know everything that went on here.

And then there was Ford.

My wrist throbbed. It was a reminder of the altercation that put me in Ford's arms, stirring up feelings of confusion when he pulled me closer into his chest for the barest fraction of a second, before abruptly releasing me when I caught my balance.

It might have been my imagination, except that at his touch I'd forgotten all about the Russian, or the sex I'd just had with Semyon. Instead my senses were filled with Ford's scent and the warmth of his body against mine.

I looked out over the crowded theater from my perch, trying to decide what to do next.

Only one thing was certain; I'd run out of time to play my game of denial.

Semyon Borodin was an artist. A silk aerialist. A devil in angel's wings. My first "lover" and my first lesson in the nature of seduction. But when he started his act, I lost my ability to hold a grudge against him. Gratitude and appreciation flooded my senses as he rose above the stage.

He'd held me with those hands now gripping the red silk, he'd shown me the same strength taking me apart with his body as he did now controlling his own. I couldn't tear my eyes away from his beauty and his grace. I watched his muscles flex, and I felt their ghost on the skin of my hands.

He was beautiful and heartbreakng, and I realized that he'd let me off easy. He could have kept me in his thrall, made me love him. Even from this distance I could see the eyes of the audience shining as they watched from the front row. But instead, he gave me himself, as much as he could at any rate. A pain I hadn't identified, eased in my chest. I'd let him hurt my feelings, but now... I could see the care he'd taken to protect my heart, and I was grateful.

The music swelled, and the tension inside me built as I watched Semyon begin his final climb before his big leap. I turned, hearing a small noise behind me. Ford had joined me. Squatting down, he handed me an icepack, silently gesturing to my wrist. The searing cold felt wonderful, numbing the pain I'd

been pushing to the back of my consciousness. If there was light enough, I'm sure I'd see heavy purple bruises ringing my wrist, matching the ache I felt down in my bones.

I smiled, but the distraction had been enough to break the enchantment Semyon had woven around me with his performance. I barely glanced at him, feeling Ford's presence acutely. I silently chastised myself for allowing an attraction to flare so quickly on the heels of my tryst with Semyon.

Slut.

Semyon was moving into his inverted-cross position when I heard the first threads breaking and fabric parting, like a bizarre echo from earlier in the day when Semyon had torn my shirt open.

The cloth!

I moved as fast as I could, legs tangled under me as I scuttled along the lurching platform. Five feet felt like fifty as I lunged over the side, grabbing for his rig.

The sound of ripping was as unmistakable as Semyon's gasp.

Time became a stop-motion stutter: Semyon exploding out of his curl into the spring that would launch him—the shock in his eyes—the panel of cloth separating from his rig fluttering past his face, the last thing I noticed before he was gone, flying into the light, was Semyon's cry, ricocheting in my ears.

I couldn't breathe.

Whether it was the severed ribbon falling to the stage, or Semyon's furious Russian that drew attention to his plight, but a shout from the audience triggered the rising tide of panic that now filled the theater with a thrum.

I blocked out the noise.

Semyon still had one panel anchoring him to his rig, and my hands clamped around it, desperately wrapping the material around my wrist and forearm. The burn was immediate.

I braced myself as best I could with the bridge swinging wildly, trying to use the brute strength of my arms and shoulders to keep Semyon safe long enough for him to untangle himself and land.

I could feel him out of control below me, and the drag on my body was relentless.

My wrist screamed in pain, and as I slid closer and closer to the edge, the reptilian part of my brain flared to life, shocking me with the realization that he was pulling me over with him. I wanted to gag at the instinct screaming in my head to let go of the panel and save myself.

The relief I felt when Ford landed on top of me, stretching across my body, pressing his length into me, was explosive.

He was a rock, and the weight almost crushing me was a gift. I felt him reach along my arms, past my hands, twining enough of the fabric into a tight grip of his own that some of the pressure was removed.

Together, we kept Semyon anchored, and we stayed that way—rocking together, every breath lasting a lifetime—until the strain on our arms was gone, and Semyon was down.

Ford was the first to let go, flicking the red silk off his body before gently unwinding it from my own. He was still pressed against me, though now it seemed far more intimate than desperate.

I felt his lips kiss the back of my head, and his body sink deeper onto mine—my own shuddering in welcome as his pelvis ground into the cradle of my ass. My arousal in response was instantaneous, my attraction to him still hovering from before, and I let the moment drift.

I wasn't sure if the desire I felt was real. We seemed to be operating on pure instinct amid the backwash of adrenaline.

There was a primal urge to celebrate our victory in battle with sex, and it was strong, but I couldn't tell if what I wanted from Ford went beyond it. Without a doubt, I craved the feel of him—the idea that with him I could be as naked physically, as I was raw emotionally, sent my heart racing.

The moment passed, and Ford buried his face in my hair even as he was lifting himself off me.

“Thank you.”

He paused at my whisper to press a final kiss behind my right ear before moving away, making enough room for me to sit next to him.

We stayed that way. Sitting side by side—exhausted and pumped full of adrenaline.

I looked down at the man taking his bows at center stage, acting as if nothing had happened, and was irritated all over again.

Ford stared at the remnants of the panel that had torn free from the rig. Leaning over, he ran his finger along the frayed edge.

I'd seen Ford annoyed enough times, I'd seen him pissed when he confronted The Russian after he accosted me, but this was a new level of fury. I was pretty sure it wasn't directed at me, so I asked him.

"What?"

"Fabric doesn't tear like that... not in a nice even line like it had the little holes that let you tear pages out of a book." Ford's accent was hard now.

"Perforated?"

"Yes, that. Without it, you might have a tear start where there is damage, but then it doesn't tear so nicely—it would be stretched in places until the fibers gave away. See how nice and neat the line is? It is only stretched at the very edge before it gave way completely."

"You mean this was on purpose?"

"Yes." The word was diamond like—hard and reflective as Ford's eyes.

"Who would cut it?"

"Who indeed. If there has been a tear, it would have been seen during inspection. We checked the panel where it attached to the rig—where you would see wearing from rubbing against the frame. If there were nicks further down they should still have been visible during the visual..."

"You think Semyon did this?" I couldn't believe it. The shock and fear I'd seen in his eyes as the fabric tore away seemed genuine. "He wouldn't risk his own life!"

Ford grunted. "Maybe, maybe not. People do many things for money. This is his last season on tour..." Ford stood before bending down to pull me up by my elbows. "It is not our problem, Michael. We leave it to Saul and his men in the suits. We're done here."

I followed him back downstairs, and he was right. Saul was already waiting for Ford.

Saul took one look at me, patted my cheek, and ordered me to the hospital to get my wrist checked. I couldn't argue—it was red and swollen, the silk had

rubbed raw furrows into my skin, which stung. If I had to bet, I'd put money on me wearing a cast before bed.

So much for my newfound sexual liberation; I'd have to put my plans for a trip to the city on hold for the time being.

I walked slowly back through the hallways, thinking about Semyon and his act. About his bodyguard and the seduction.

I was bothered enough that I found myself standing outside of Dressing Room B, opening the door without knocking.

Semyon and I no longer had the same boundaries for personal space, not after all that had happened between us. We'd lived a lifetime together within a single afternoon.

He wasn't surprised to see me.

"Are you okay?"

I wanted to be done. I'd wanted to ask him "why" but instead, watching my entrance from his makeup mirror, Semyon had looked haggard and twenty years older. It bothered me that I hadn't noticed before.

He ignored the question and resumed cleaning the makeup from his face, not meeting my eyes, and I let the silence bloom until he looked up again.

He was expecting me to ask him another question, or maybe even the same one. Instead I looked around, and it occurred to me that I hadn't seen The Russian since our altercation backstage.

"Where's your guy?"

"Who? Ivan?"

I shrugged. Ivan seemed like a fitting name for a Russian thug.

"He left. After..."

"After what? After he nearly killed you... and you nearly took Ford and me along for the ride?"

He didn't answer, his eyes traveling across the room to fall on the open gym bag filled with the tools of his trade. I guessed if I looked through it closely enough, I'd find the answer for myself—but I wanted him to say it, and he looked like he might.

Semyon sat, lips pressed together as if he had to work hard to keep words from passing his lips in confession or accusation. Not that I cared about Ivan—he was the cartoon character villain of the piece—but Semyon... they say you always remember your first time, but it was supposed to be young love. Not this.

I was tired of dancing around the truth.

I was tired of feeling like a fool.

I felt the heat rise in my cheeks, the leading edge of the anger that had been building from the moment I'd stepped through his door.

"You put me there—didn't you? On that bridge? To make sure I was interested enough, invested enough... just in case?

"Did you have your pet threaten me early on, so I'd be curious? I wondered about that... what was the point? I was never any threat to you.

"You... *you*, on the other hand..." My whole arm throbbed, and my shoulder ached from the strain of keeping Semyon from landing headfirst on the stage.

I was pissed, and he owed me.

Semyon flushed. At least he felt a little shame.

"I was not expecting you to be there... I wasn't expecting it at all..." The face reflecting back at me from his mirror looked haunted instead of the imperious façade I expected to see.

"Without you there... Thank you." Semyon trailed off, and a chill ran down my spine. I had a flashback to that moment of terror above the stage when I thought we would both die.

"Can you at least tell me why?"

He didn't answer right away, just sat wiping off the face cream before leaning into the mirror to dab at the dark circles under his eyes with fresh concealer.

There was so much about him, I hadn't noticed before.

I was beginning to think he wouldn't answer me at all when he turned. Gone was the beautiful seducer, the angel of light. In his place was a hard, brittle survivor who exuded fragility—a man who could have stepped from the pages of Tolstoy—tragedy was written all over him. I steeled myself against a flood of sympathy and waited.

"You always know, when you get into bed with men like the ones who own us, that you are only as safe as you are profitable... there are always insurance policies." He shrugged. "Apparently my contract with them is at an end."

His stoic recitation sounded like a catechism he'd been weaned on, and given the Russian zeitgeist for fatalism, it probably was.

If it was true that I only stumbled onto Ivan's sabotage plot by accident, and that Semyon hadn't used me as a fail-safe in some publicity stunt, then I remained uncertain about his original reason for seeking me out.

Here I was, standing in almost the exact spot where Semyon had seduced me earlier in the day, still feeling like the same nineteen-year-old virgin. Blushing.

I hated that. "Why me?"

Semyon smirked, looking like himself once more. "You were so young and pretty, and you liked me. Why not?"

He stood then, walking close enough to run a calloused finger across my hairless cheek, his touch lingering as if comparing it with his own roughened one.

"One day, Misha, you will be old. You will see."

He cupped my face and leaned in to kiss me, and I realized I was done with him.

I was embarrassed that I'd fallen for the illusions he'd spun, the web of deceit he made for himself, the fantasy he clung to that left him vulnerable to the men who controlled him.

He was a handsome man at any age—the face he'd bared to me, without the makeup and tricks, was appealing—it was just the man inside who wasn't.

That he was hiding what was real was a waste, but at least we had that in common.

Just thinking about it made me uncomfortable.

I could spend my life creating my own illusion designed to prevent the world from finding out I was gay. Eventually it would fail.

Or even if it didn't, if I left it in place until my grandfather was dead, what would I have left? Who would I be?

So far I'd lived my short life avoiding the question altogether, but the fire Semyon had lit in me, the first time he put his hands on me, would burn for a lifetime.

I thought of my grandfather again, the man who loved me so fiercely, who protected me with every breath he had, and I was ashamed.

I owed him the chance to love every part of me, and I owed myself the chance to be loved completely by him.

And if he didn't?

It would hurt.

But I also thought about Saul and Ford and Johnny—even Semyon. In the space of a single day my world had broadened with possibilities for friendship, for lust. Maybe even for love. I would survive.

Semyon wouldn't, not unless today's events shocked him into action—he was literally at the end of his rope with nowhere to go.

He wouldn't age gracefully like my grandfather whose vitality shone like a beacon in my life every day. He wouldn't age like this theater, enduring shabbily through time, resisting the march of change all around yet prevailing all the same.

Grateful that he hadn't lingered in my life long enough to do more than superficial damage, I was happy to shut the door on him, figuratively and literally.

Without a word, I pushed him away before he could touch me with his mouth.

Stepping away felt good, the tension I'd been carrying all day dissipating as I turned to face the open door.

Ford was there. Standing in the hallway, he held out an old leather jacket. I could see him trying to read my face.

"Michael." He breathed my true name, his accent was like a balm to my nerves, and when I smiled, his blank façade cracked just a little.

I shut the door on Semyon and moved stiffly over to join him.

"Thank you." I nodded to the jacket, but we both knew I meant more than that.

He draped it across my shoulders, and as its warmth enveloped me, I caught a whiff of new wood and machine oil, the scent I now associated with Ford.

He was treating me like a girl, but this time I welcomed it. I was exhausted and in pain. I had no doubt that the smallest kindness from Ford was more valuable to me than any grand gesture men like Semyon could offer.

I followed him out, willing to trust in this man who'd saved me at least once tonight.

The End

Author Bio

LE Franks is an author of Gay Romance fiction, living in the SF Bay Area surrounded by inspiration; and after years of ignoring the voices in her head, she's now giving them free reign in the form of her characters.

Don't expect the typical rugged hero or sophisticated businessman with the world at their feet; LE's men are living in the margins—they're in the middle of their journey, doing the best they can while searching for a connection with something bigger than themselves.

Her stories are a unique mix of humor and drama with enough suspense to produce fast-paced stories filled with emotion and passion, and featuring characters that are quirky and complicated. With a little effort and a lot of luck they may actually find their happily-ever-afters, but not until LE is through with them.

These days LE Franks can be found frequently writing stories about sexy men who desperately need a happily ever after while wrangling an odd assortment of jobs (six—at last count), houseguests (including pro baseball players), family, and friends. Manifesting an odd combination of contradictory talents and traits, LE is tragically honest and personally deceptive, and makes a damn fine pie.

LE Franks and her occasional writing partner Sara York are finalists in the 2013 Rainbow Awards.

Also By:

Can This Be Real, MLR Press

First Last Kiss, Grand Adventures Anthology, Dreamspinner Press

6 Days to Valentine, Wilde City Press

Snow Globe, Dreamspinner Press

Prodigal Wolf, Book One, Wolves and Waves Series with Sara York, MLR Press

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