If I Were You

by Raine_Wynd

Summary

Nick follows one last order from his immortal teacher and discovers love from an unexpected person.

Notes

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Chapter 1

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Nick Wolfe slung his backpack more firmly on his back and studied the pub, which was in a short, squat, brick building; an alley ran behind it. Next door to it were two other buildings. The nearer one was the taller of the two and housed a Thai restaurant and a Mexican restaurant, separated by a door that led to the offices on the upper twenty floors. The shorter one looked to be half the size of its neighbor and housed a barber shop and a florist, again divided by a door leading up; a signboard advertised, “Live in the Heart of New South Downtown! Loft Apartments for Rent!” Nick stood on the other side of the street, which was occupied by a parking garage, an apartment building, and an office building; the bottom of the office building held a coffee shop.

The entire six-block area looked as though a developer had worked hard to create a new mixed-use area out of nothing, while keeping a historic feel. Nick knew little of Seacouver, but from the map he’d consulted, he knew the area just east of the new development was the port and industrial district. Wanting to get a feel of the city, Nick had deliberately chosen to rent a house in one of the older neighborhoods and taken the bus down to the pub. The extent of the city bus system had surprised Nick, especially it looked as though he could catch a bus back even at 3 AM.

Nick held no illusions about what he would find by coming to Joe’s. For all he knew, the old Watcher could be dead, retired, or not at the blues bar that bore his name. He needed help, though. Amanda had sent him a teacher as an apology for everything, and while Philip Dubois had been exactly the immortal he’d desired to help him make sense of his life, Philip was dead. His will had left specific instructions for Nick to come here – and Nick had chosen to honor one last order from the immortal pirate who’d given him purpose.

Taking a deep breath, Nick crossed the street and walked into the pub. Blues music at a comfortable volume filled his ears. A glance at the interior revealed it was full of lunch patrons, no doubt people from the offices. A small stage filled one corner; flyers advertised the house band would play on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday nights.

Not seeing Joe behind the bar, Nick took a seat. It didn’t take long for a young woman with bright blue hair, wearing a Joe’s Blues Bar t-shirt, a black apron, and jeans, to greet him.

“Hi, I’m Julie. Welcome to Joe’s. Here is our menu; the draft list is on the back.” She laid a single-sheet menu down in front of him. She smiled professionally. “I’ll give you a minute.”

“Thanks,” Nick said. The menu was lunch-focused, Nick noticed, and warned patrons that the dishes changed daily and was sourced from local producers. The food options comprised gourmet burgers, pasta, sandwiches, and soups, with vegan and gluten-free options. The drink options featured local and regional craft breweries. Nick suspected the pub had once had simpler fare but had to revise its options to compete in a crowded market. He wound up ordering the featured burger and the ale Julie recommended.

He ate slowly, savoring the simple pleasure of being. Philip had taken him out of Paris, to a small French city on the Mediterranean Sea. Summer had always felt like the city had surged with new immortals, wishing to experience the city’s beaches. Philip owned a historic schooner, on which he ran charter sailing trips. Nick had learned the many ways he could love and hate tourists while falling in love with the sea. Eating on land, without the pressure to deal with ship-related business within the next half hour, felt decadent.
“Anything else I can get you?” Julie asked when he was halfway finished eating.

“I’m looking for Joe Dawson. My name is Nick Wolfe. We met a long time ago, and I was hoping to talk to him.”

“I’ll let him know,” Julie said easily.

Joe greeted him a few minutes later. “Been a long time, Nick. I heard about Philip. I’m sorry.”

Nick closed his eyes briefly. “He always warned me he wasn’t the finest swordsman, just the strongest surviving pirate.” He offered Joe a resigned look. “The terms of his will directed me to sell his ship and move somewhere else, get out of France. He suggested I start in Seacouver and this pub. Guess he figured you’d have ideas and suggestions for a guy who needs to stay busy or he’ll go crazy.”

Joe barked a laugh. “Well, what do you need?”

“First off – I’d like to apologize for getting so mad at you for your loyalty to Amanda. The last twenty years have reinforced the notion that kind of loyalty is rare, and she put you in an awkward situation.”

The retired Watcher shook his head. “I yelled at her for it, and she’s done worse. You’re forgiven.”

“As for the second thing – if you’re hiring, I’d love to work for you. I’m a quick learner and can handle customers. You don’t know how many times we had customers who got seasick and drunk.”

“Not willing to take up security consulting or police work again?”

Nick shook his head. “Not ready for that yet. I don’t know how much technology has changed those things, and frankly, both are more dangerous than I’m willing to risk myself doing, given the luck I’ve had. I’d rather do something that lets me work for someone I know while I get my land legs back and figure out the politics of this city.”

Joe smiled. “In that case, I can use another bartender. Pay is minimum wage plus tips. Since you’re not a college student, I can give you steady shifts. That work?”

“I appreciate it.” Nick said gratefully, shaking Joe’s hand. “What do you need in terms of paperwork?”

“Finish your lunch, and we’ll get that taken care of,” Joe assured him.

Relieved, Nick let out a breath. Selling the *Sea Trinity* had been like parting with a best friend, but he knew, as Philip had, that he didn’t love the ship the way Philip had. Nick had been a good second mate and a better business manager but putting the ship up for auction had been the way to go. The schooner had sold for several million dollars, settling Philip’s debts, and giving Nick a hefty inheritance on which to base the rest of his life. Still, Nick had learned that he did better when he had something to occupy his time. Coming here, solely on Philip’s instructions, had been a leap of faith.

Two hours later, having completed both his lunch and the required paperwork, Nick made his way out of Joe’s bar. He would start tomorrow, training with Julie, with mostly daytime shifts.

Meanwhile, he needed non-slip shoes and black jeans or pants he didn’t mind getting dirty, neither of which were things he had. Nick had jeans, but all the ones he owned were blue. He also had boat shoes, but he had meant to replace them before the new season of sailing. When he mentioned that to Julie, she had given him directions to the nearest Fred Meyer, which was a grocery and department store. He caught himself trying to convert dollars to Euros and forced himself to stop worrying about
money; he had more than enough.

He reminded himself his plan to restart his life after Philip’s death was now complete. Step one had been to complete the execution of Philip’s will. Step two had been to follow Philip’s orders one last time, come to Seacouver, and talk to Joe. Whatever happened next was now up to him, no more following orders. It scared part of Nick: it had been so easy to fall into Philip’s routines, so easy to get into that rut. The other part, the part that had been a security consultant and a detective who loved to solve puzzles, felt alive for the first time in years. He’d been planning to leave Philip and go back to the States, figuring it had been long enough that no one would remember him in Torago.

Nick sighed as a wave of grief washed through him. He missed the demanding, cranky, often contrary, never-quite-satisfied pirate, but that chapter of his life was over. Time to make new friends, start a new job, and see what came next.

Two weeks later

Immortal presence sounded its siren song as Richie stepped into Joe’s. It was the quiet time between the lunch rush and the dinner crowd, and Richie had been hoping he’d timed his arrival right. Hoping the immortal he sensed was friendly, Richie kept walking forward.

He spotted Joe behind the bar, talking with a man Richie didn’t recognize. The man had a broad, athletic build, sandy brown hair, and skin that looked like he’d spent a lot of time out in the sun. He had a strongly angled face with a five o’clock shadow. It looked as though they were going through inventory. Richie recognized that task because he’d done so enough times for Joe to know what it looked like.

Richie grinned as he realized the immortal he sensed was the one learning from Joe. The strange immortal appeared distracted by the immortal warning beacon; he kept glancing at Richie. Finally, Joe sighed and looked at who was causing his employee’s distraction.

“Richie!” Joe greeted and hastily moved to greet him.

Richie’s grin widened, and he hugged Joe once he was out from behind the bar. “Hey, Joe. Who’s the new guy?”

“Richie, this is Nick Wolfe,” Joe performed the introductions. “Nick, this is Richie Ryan, an old friend. Nick just moved here two weeks ago. Are you back in the city?”

“Came to see you,” Richie acknowledged. “Figured you’d appreciate the hello.”

“That I do. You still doing cybersecurity?”

Richie nodded. “Seacouver Cyber Partners has been an awesome company to work for.” He turned to Nick and felt the pull of attraction. The Joe’s Bar t-shirt Nick wore only revealed that Nick lifted weights and paid attention to keeping fit; it strained to contain his muscles. He had a long torso, which only emphasized the fact his jeans clung to his hips. Unashamed to be caught staring, he met Nick’s green eyes and read alarm and fear.

Disappointed, Richie took a breath and smiled reassuringly before he continued his conversation with Joe. “Is Mac in town?”

“He’s in Baltimore, but he said to tell you your townhouse is ready for your use. Are you two not talking again?”
“No, Mac thinks my number is one I stopped using a decade ago and I think the one I have for him is wrong too. We really need to sync up our contacts.” Richie chuckled ruefully. “What’s in Baltimore?”

“National conference for martial artists,” Joe told him. “Mac will be back Sunday; he took his dojo to compete in the competitions being held as part of the conference.”

“Oh, great,” Richie said cheerfully. “Is Frank cooking the steak special on Wednesday?”

“You know the menu?” Nick broke in.

“Worked here a few years before I changed careers,” Richie said easily.

“He’s the one who convinced me to upscale the menu, hire a professional chef, and move to a more accessible location,” Joe interjected.

Nick’s eyes widened before he narrowed his gaze. “You’re not as young as you look.”

“Nope,” Richie said, grinning. “And if you want to talk when you’re off shift, I’d love to get to know you, but I should go, unpack, and see if the tenants I had did any damage to my townhouse. Joe, would you give Nick my number? I should let you two get back to work.”

Shaking his head slightly, Joe told Richie, “Planning on shocking Mac when he gets back?”

“You know I live to give him surprises,” Richie said cheerfully, exiting.

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After Richie had left, Nick turned to Joe. “What did he mean by that?”

Joe chuckled. “Mac sometimes forgets Richie isn’t the same man he was twenty years ago, when Richie was forever finding love in the arms of the next woman he met. Richie’s much pickier now about whom he chooses.”

“He seems like a whirlwind of happy.”

“He’s worked hard to be,” Joe noted. “He’s one of the most resilient people I know, and he loves living. He’s also bisexual and interested in you. If that bothers you, I’d be happy to tell him to back off.”

“You don’t have a problem with staff dating customers?”

Joe sighed. “I’m a realist, Nick. It has happened and will happen, whether or not I say it’s OK. You’re an adult and what you do on your own time is your business. As long as that doesn’t interfere with you working here, breaks no laws, and doesn’t invite trouble to come knocking, I don’t much care what you do.”

Nick was quiet while he checked the inventory sheet. “How much older is he?”

“Chronologically, he’s eight years younger than you, but he’s been in the Game since 1993.”

Nick blinked. “He died as a teenager?”

“Yeah,” Joe said roughly. “He was nineteen. And since you’ll meet him when Mac is back in town, his teacher is Duncan ‘Mac’ MacLeod, one of the Highlanders. I used to Watch both, but I Watched Duncan first.”
“Not anymore?”

Joe shook his head. “I’m retired now. I’m too old and have too many immortals I call a friend to be useful.”

“Then how did you know about Philip’s death?”

“Philip’s lawyer called me. Said Philip had left instructions for you to come see me and wanted to know if I would honor the request of a man I’d only met once.”

Nick barked a laugh. “That was Philip. He remembered everybody who was kind to him, but if you asked him if he liked people, he’d growl and tell you no. How did you meet?”

“Amanda dragged him to see me play. I had a bar in Paris then, and it was my last night of operating that bar. Afterwards, she told me I’d met the famous Captain Philip Dubois of the dreaded privateer turned pirate ship Sea Trinity.”

“There were times I could see where he’d been this ruthless pirate captain,” Nick agreed as he checked the liquor on the top shelf of the three-tiered shelving behind the bar. “His way was the only way to do something, unless you learned how to couch it in a way that made it beneficial to him. The first three months I was with him, I thought for sure he would tell me I needed to pick up a sword and learn it, but no, it was how to operate the damn ship.”

“He taught you eventually, I presume?”

“On deck while we were out at sea, no less,” Nick said, grinning. “Looks like we’re out of limoncello. And because he made it about learning to defend myself, I saw what Amanda had been trying to tell me. It’s not an immortal life if you’re not enjoying yourself.”

“Do you forgive her?”

“ Mostly. If she was to walk in here, my heart would quicken, but—” He turned to look at Joe. “I wouldn’t jump into her bed. It’s been too long, and I’d need to know what she wanted from me.” He took a breath. “Which brings me to Richie. He’s a good guy?”

“One of the best,” Joe assured him. “He’s a good friend of mine, and you’ll see him and Mac in here fairly frequently, since they both enjoy the music and the food.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Nick murmured, and changed the subject to finishing the inventory. He wasn’t looking for a lover, he had never been with another man, and he’d sworn off getting involved with another immortal. Yet he found himself wondering just what a man who’d been in the Game longer than he had would be able to teach him. Would Richie take his friendship if he said he wasn’t interested? Did he share Nick’s values? Nick knew he was intrigued and found himself looking forward to the next time Richie was in the bar. He stopped short of asking Joe for Richie’s number, unwilling to take that step until he had a better sense of who Richie was.

Richie’s townhouse was in a neighborhood five miles north of Joe’s and was one of the newer, modern-styled developments constructed during the real estate boom of the early 2000s. Mac had bought it for Richie to use, recognizing that Richie was an adult and didn’t have to abide by Mac’s house rules. Mac then promptly refused to accept any rent payments, saying he wanted Richie to have a home of his own, with no strings. It wasn’t until Richie got the bill from the tax assessor for yearly taxes due that he discovered Mac had gifted him with the property. He’d spent the last two years on a long-term contract in Portland, Oregon, and had worked with Mac to arrange rental of the
Richie loved the 1500-square-foot, two-bedroom, two-bath townhouse. The garage sat at the front of the property and was just large enough to hold a car and a motorcycle. He’d hired a landscaper to turn the postage-stamp yard into a low-maintenance garden instead. He parked his beloved, battered BMW RT1200 in the garage, turned off the engine, dismounted, and shut the garage door as he unstrapped the three duffel bags he had strapped to the pillion seat and the backrest. He dropped the luggage straps on one of the steel shelves at the front of the garage and set his helmet next to them. Picking up the bags, he slung them onto his shoulders, ignoring the fact that the odd number meant he was carrying two on his left shoulder.

Whistling to himself, he walked through the garage entry into the laundry room. He dropped the bags long enough to hang his motorcycle jacket on a hanger in the coat closet by the door, removing his sword from its sheath in the jacket. He then set his sword on the pegs on the wall of the kitchen, close to the door; a non-immortal would think he’d simply chosen a broadsword rapier as decor. He left two of the bags in the laundry room, picking up the third. The galley-style kitchen was just past the laundry room, separating the living and dining area from the laundry and garage. To his left were the stairs to the second floor.

Richie’s travels to Paris and through Mexico and Central America had resulted in him choosing wall art and decor that reflected his appreciation for local artists and global patterns. He’d chosen practical, comfortable, and long-lasting, easy-to-clean furniture. Now as he moved through the space towards the second-floor master bedroom, he smelled the lemon scent of cleaner and saw freshly vacuumed carpets, telling him that besides ensuring his furniture and décor was back where he had them originally, Mac had either gotten professional cleaners into the space or had done it himself.

Pleased by what he saw, Richie dropped the duffel bag to his bed. Years of spending time on the road had reduced his luggage to what he could strap to the pillion seat of his motorcycle. Now, he looked forward to doing laundry and being home again. He unpacked the duffel, which held his laptop, toiletries, shoes, and accessories. He then headed back downstairs to unpack the other two duffels straight into the washer.

As he went through the routine of laundry, he contemplated his meeting with Nick. Nick was his type: solid, muscular, fit, and confident. What had made a man want to learn to tend bar? Nick struck him as someone who’d had a job before, something important, something that fit that ‘protect and serve’ vibe he projected. What was Nick afraid of? Was it being with another man, or just with another immortal?

Richie told himself he had to be patient. Nothing worth keeping was worth rushing through, and he had plenty of time. The Game had quieted down of late, though Richie knew it would surge the closer they got to the end of the decade. Fall, too, seemed to increase the headhunters, as if they needed to get their Quickenings while everyone was wearing coats and while the dark could hide their intentions.

He found Mac’s note to him on his fridge, held by the katana magnet. Richie grinned; he’d specifically bought the magnet set because it had that sword as part of it.

_I had the property company replace the carpet; the tenants had pets. Text me when you’ve gotten home. 555-555-555. – Duncan_

Richie promptly texted him. _Thanks, Mac. I thought the carpet felt different. How’s the meet going? My students are doing well. Will you be available to teach Saturdays? Trent just informed me he’s_
accepted a position in Baltimore and won’t be flying back with us.

Depends on what you’re teaching on Saturdays, Richie texted back. We can talk about it when you get back, but I’m available since I won’t be working Joe’s. He has a new bartender, one of us named Nick Wolfe.

Oh, good; I was hoping he would hire more help. Can you pick me up at the airport? The parents and friends are meeting all the kids and I’d like to refuse Anita’s mother’s invitation.

Smothering a chuckle, Richie agreed. You know you can say no, he teased Duncan now. He knew his former teacher had no interest in another relationship; his last had ended badly. Though it had been six months, Duncan was still smarting from discovering his lover had been cheating on him. The only consolation was that he hadn’t yet revealed immortality to her.

Duncan sent him emojis that showed what he thought of Richie’s suggestion.

Laughing, Richie put his phone down and went to finish settling back into his home. He had groceries to buy, meals to plan so he wouldn’t be spending all his money on dining out, and an intriguing man to get to know. Silently, Richie sent a prayer to the Universe that Nick was not using Joe or scheming his way into something nefarious. Richie’s last long-term relationship had ended when his lover had revealed he wanted biological children, but it had left Richie wishing for more. He missed the openness that came with being with another immortal and wondered if Nick had any objections to dating another immortal. Richie wanted another immortal as a friend, but he wanted to have a lover as well.

Tempting fate, Richie, he told himself. You’ve only had one immortal lover who wasn’t evil, crazy, or out to win the Game. Your success rate isn’t that great with others of your kind.

Yeah, but if Nick and I work out, then the past doesn’t matter, he told himself. With that thought in mind, he began to plan out his strategy for wooing Nick.
Chapter 2

Nick wasn’t sure what to expect when he next saw Richie, who showed up with Duncan MacLeod, who looked more Mediterranean or Italian than Scottish. Both men acted as though Nick was merely a prospective friend, someone to get to know, and seemed genuine in their enthusiasm. Over the next few weeks, he saw them both, either separately or together, and they continued to radiate the same friendliness. Slowly, his apprehension over what they wanted from him abated. Yet the thread of interest from Richie only seemed to increase. Nick wondered what it would feel like to be held by someone with such enthusiasm for life, who could passionately debate the city’s move to ban tents on sidewalks and cite his experiences as a homeless teenager, ask Nick if he was interested in giving a hand to help construct new housing for the homeless at a privately funded site, and who would happily point out that being a beer snob was a product of exposure and privilege. Richie fascinated him.

From Joe, Nick knew Richie had a reputation in the Game as a skilled fighter who had won more often than he had lost. It seemed fitting, somehow, given what Nick had learned about the Highlanders’ reputations as among the best in the Game, that one of their students was not someone weak or easily cowed. When Nick had asked Richie about it, Richie had answered him honestly.

“Most days, I don’t think about it, but I train like I can’t forget. It’s habit now I get up, lift weights, run, and practice sword katas. The few days I don’t do that because I was traveling, exhausted, or whatever, I feel weird until I do at least one of those things,” Richie replied. “Enough people know I exist that there’ll be someone who wants my head. Until they show up, though, I’m not interested in hunting them down. Even then, I’m inclined to ask them if they’d rather grab a beer and talk about why they think winning the Game matters.”

That answer had surprised Nick. “You don’t want to fight?”

“Hell no. I’ve had to learn how to control my anger and how not make my first knee-jerk reaction the only one I make, because that way leads to a lot of regrets.”

“Did you ever have some immortal friend of your teacher’s try to tell you how you should live your life?”

Richie laughed. “Oh yeah. He told me I should never believe anyone claiming to be Methos, the oldest living immortal, and preaching how I should lay down my sword.”

Nick stared at Richie. “And here I thought the worst advice I ever got was ‘if you stay with Philip, he’ll take you out to sea and you won’t see land for years.’”

“Did he?”

“We always came back, but one winter, Philip got a hankering to go somewhere warmer. We hit a bad storm and I thought for sure that old ship was going to go down, but we managed to get through it. As it was, a wave slammed me against the deck, and I died. He turned us back to port and we never went farther than our set sailing route after that.”

“Wow,” Richie marveled. “And really: in hindsight, I should’ve listened to that advice. Almost lost my head because I wanted, desperately, to believe I could stop fighting, regardless of who was talking.”

“I kinda felt that way a few times. Philip and I were attacked by a pair of headhunters one summer
night nine years ago. We’d been warned of a bad storm, and the local port police wouldn’t let us stay aboard the ship because it wasn’t safe, so we’d taken shelter in the inn. We’d gone out to dinner and were headed back to the inn when they attacked. Philip and I wound up fighting back-to-back. I still don’t know how we didn’t tie our Quickenings together; we were so close when we won.”


Nick nodded. “He told me later he didn’t want us to be joined that way, but that it could happen. He said he had things he didn’t want me to know about the man he’d been before he’d become a privateer and had to learn how to work with diverse people.” Nick grimaced. “He’d been a slave trader; I found the proof in his papers after he died.”

“I’m sorry. Did that change the way you felt about him?”

“A bit,” Nick agreed. “You can’t unsee something like that, but I also found evidence that showed he tried to right the wrongs he’d done, within the confines of the society he’d lived in. Some of his crew were slaves he’d freed.”

“He sounds like a man who’d learned from his mistakes.”

Nodding, Nick said, “He was big about that. He said when you learn that your life isn’t limited to one lifetime, you have a chance to do better, one person at a time. He knew he couldn’t change everything, but he wanted to do what he could. Using his old ship as a historic educational vessel was part of that.”

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In hindsight, Nick should have expected Richie’s weekly visitations at the pub would turn into wanting to get him alone, but Nick had been distracted by the realization that while Richie drank alcohol, he was just as likely to nurse a beer as he was to sip a soft drink. Richie’s interest in him was equally distracting. For the first time, Nick found himself wondering what it would feel like to kiss another man. He looked forward to seeing Richie at Joe’s, his pulse quickening in anticipation, and his heart sinking when Richie wasn’t in when Nick thought he’d show up.

Nick was therefore not prepared for the day in late June when Richie showed up just as he was getting off shift. It had been a long, crazy Wednesday, and Nick had been running around like a madman since he’d walked in the pub’s door at 8 AM to prep for what he’d expected to be an ordinary Wednesday in a pub consistently full of lunch regulars and random tourists, exploring the city’s newest destination neighborhood. A midday protest march had generated a late lunch crowd. Nick had gratefully escaped the madness at just past seven. He crossed the street, intending to catch the bus at the stop one block west of the pub, when he felt another immortal.

Hearing footsteps, he turned to see Richie approach him.

“A little birdie told me you might appreciate not being around too many other people tonight, but that you hadn’t eaten lunch or dinner yet.”

Nick’s eyes widened. As if on cue, his stomach rumbled. “Joe,” he guessed. “Yeah, I wasn’t looking forward to taking the bus home.”

“My bike’s this way.” Taking his acceptance for granted, Richie handed him a motorcycle helmet. “While you and I come with a bumper-to-bumper guarantee, this means you and I can talk while I drive.”

Surprised, Nick took the helmet and followed Richie into the parking garage. The battered BMW RT
1200 looked like it was no garage queen. After putting on the borrowed helmet, Nick waited until Richie had mounted before taking position on the pillion seat.

“Press the button on the right side of the helmet,” Richie told him before starting the engine.

Nick heard a tone before he heard Richie ask, “Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, you’re clear. A lot clearer than I thought you’d be.”

“Okay then. Hang on; we won’t go over 30 miles per hour, but my townhouse is up the hill from here.”

“Nice bike,” Nick said. “I had a Harley twenty years ago that I restored, but I sold it after I left Paris.”

“You were in Paris?”

“Yeah, I was there for four months before I moved to a small city on the southern coast of France. Amanda and a friend got me involved in running a bar on holy ground.”

Richie laughed. “Sounds like something Amanda would do.”

“You know her?” Nick asked cautiously.

“She’s one of Mac’s on-again, off-again girlfriends,” Richie said easily, shrugging. “I’ve known her since I was eighteen, so that’s been… twenty-six, no, twenty-seven years. She wanders through, causes chaos, and then leaves everyone else to pick up the pieces, but if she’s your friend, she’ll do anything to help you. How did you meet her?”

“I was the cop who tried to arrest her,” Nick admitted. “That was in 1998. She turned my world upside down.” He took a deep breath. His earlier conversations with Richie had solidified a sense of a man who cared deeply, enjoyed his work, and was not capricious. “She’s the one who told me about immortality and then hid the fact I would be one until she had to shoot me to save me.”

“Mac and his cousin, Connor, rescued me from a life on the streets and petty crime,” Richie volunteered. “I spent a year wondering why the most sophisticated, wealthy, articulate man I’d ever known, with a gorgeous, artistic, spirited Frenchwoman as his girlfriend, would waste a minute on keeping me safe. Then a mugger shot said girlfriend and me. I then spent the next two weeks terrified Connor or Mac would tell me I was to blame for not protecting Tessa and that I was to go back to sleeping in alleys and doorways.”

“They didn’t,” Nick surmised.

“No. Connor helped me sell the building where we’d lived above the antique store Mac ran and the workshop where Tessa made her metalwork sculptures, but Mac and Connor both made a point of showing me I still had a room in the new building Mac bought, still had a job, though it was not being a clerk in an antique store. Knowing Amanda, she probably pissed you off too much to make you want to listen to anything she said.”

Hearing that, something in Nick eased. “Yeah. She does that to everyone?”

“Oh yeah. I once watched Mac and another ex-boyfriend of hers argue over who had the most right to kick her ass.” Richie chuckled. “Trust me, it was entertaining and enlightening. Did she make it up to you?”
“Sent me a sword and a teacher. Philip Dubois was a privateer in the Caribbean turned pirate. He kept his ship – don’t ask me how – and was running sailing charters on a ‘historic privateer.’ He stayed aboard and wanted me to do the same, so I only met other immortals when I went on shore or occasionally if one of us boarded the ship as part of a charter. We shopped for supplies once a month. Summer was when I met the most of us.”

“But the Game was quiet for you, and you needed that,” Richie guessed.

“How did you know that?”

“Amanda told me she’d had a bad year and wanted a distraction. She came looking for me. I was working in a motorcycle repair shop in Cancun, so she must have gotten Joe to tell her where I was. I told her I’d listen to her vent, take her to a club so we could dance the night away, and then she had to promise to leave me alone.”

“She did that for you?”

“Keep in mind, Nick, I’d known her for several years at that point. She got me into so much trouble with Mac that I wasn’t willing to do it again. When she found me in Cancun, I knew what a year of taking heads looked like because I’d had a year like that.”

“You never slept with her?”

Richie laughed. “No. By the time she found me in Cancun, I’d had enough of women trying to use my love for them. She had no chance then or before that.”

“And if she walked into your life right now?”

“I’d ask her what she’s doing here. You sound like you fell in love with her.”

“Yeah, I did.”

Richie took his right hand off his handlebar long enough to squeeze Nick’s, where he was holding onto Richie’s hips. “Cory, that ex-boyfriend I mentioned? He and I have become best friends. He told me once it’s hard to love a woman like Amanda, because she’s independent and comfortable being that way. You can hold on to her for a time, but that’s it. Whether she stays or goes isn’t something you can entirely control.”

“I wish someone had told me that when I was getting to know her,” Nick mused. “I don’t know if I would have listened – I was dead-set on my way back then – but it would’ve helped later. Have you heard from her?”

“Not recently. She took losing Lucy hard. I heard through the grapevine an old mutual friend took her to a secluded island so she could grieve, but that was five years ago.”

“I didn’t know Lucy was dead. I’m sorry I missed the funeral. She was one of the bright spots out of the nine months after I met Amanda.”

“I met her briefly; she tried to get me to get her a date with Joe.”

Nick laughed. “Those two would have been a hell of a match. I would’ve loved to have seen that.”

“Joe turned her down. He was afraid that would mean getting involved in Amanda’s life to a degree he wasn’t comfortable with.”
Fifteen minutes later, having gotten a tour through a part of the city Nick hadn’t known existed, Richie pulled into his garage. Nick had nearly forgotten what it had felt like to be on a motorcycle. He had sold the one he’d had in Paris three months after moving in with Philip, who lived on the ship, unwilling to trust its security to port officials.

“Thanks for the ride. I should get one; I’ve missed my motorcycle.” He handed Richie the helmet he’d borrowed, which Richie then set on a wall shelf next to his.

“Parking’s expensive in the city,” Richie pointed out, “but I hate waiting for a bus.”

“I’m getting to a point where I don’t like it much either.” Following Richie through the garage, Nick noted the layout, seeing how open the first-floor space was. He noted, too, that Richie appreciated art: paintings, sculptures of varying sizes and mediums, and vases full of plants filled the space without overwhelming it. The brown leather couch was flanked by two oversized side chairs made of a green suede-like fabric, was centered on a large, wall-mounted TV, and was separated from it by a large wooden coffee table. The galley-style, pass-through kitchen had a breakfast bar with four padded swivel barstools.

The smell of leek, truffle mushrooms, and chicken drew Nick into the kitchen. He saw a rice cooker venting steam next to a slow cooker. He turned to Richie, who had taken advantage of his distraction to discard his motorcycle jacket.

“When you said you knew a place where dinner would be free of other people, you meant it.” Admiration colored Nick’s voice.

Richie grinned. “I try not to lead people on. Tessa, Mac’s girlfriend, taught me how to cook her mother’s recipes, weld metal into something requiring a crane to lift, and speak French like a native. All that helped me pass my GED. I’ve been grateful to her ever since; it’s meant I haven’t been limited in what I do for my career.”

“Do you need me to do anything?”

“You’ve been serving people all day. Have a seat at the table and I’ll bring everything over.”

The table Richie pointed to was just large enough to seat four, but it sat between the kitchen and the living room without constricting the flow between the three rooms. It looked hand carved and old. Richie had set it for two, with a simple place setting and cloth napkins. “This table looks heavy.”

“It is. It’s a hundred years old; Mac had it in his warehouse as part of back stock for the antique store. When we didn’t reopen the store, I asked Mac if I could have it when I finally got my place, never thinking he’d give it.”

“Joe said something about how you and Mac have sometimes argued.”

“Yeah. He tends to want to protect his friends. I spent most of my childhood fending for myself, so we butt heads.” He shrugged easily. “He also tried to kill me under the influence of a Dark Quickening, but that was twenty years ago.”

Nick stared at him. “You managed to forgive him for that?” he asked, stunned.

“Any of us can overload,” Richie said calmly. “He made the mistake of trusting that a friend of his never would. I trusted that Mac would never kill me and that he had told me everything I needed to know about Quickenings. Both of us were proven wrong.” He smiled ruefully. “I couldn’t spar against him without someone else present for several years after that.”
“I don’t know if I could have the friendship you appear to have with him if that happened to me,” Nick murmured.

“It took a lot of work, some intervention from a mutual friend, and therapy,” Richie agreed. “I wouldn’t wish what we’ve been through on anyone, but we’re stronger for it.”

“I admire you both for it.”

Richie poured Nick a glass of white wine and brought it to the table, along with a glass for himself. He then brought out the stew and rice he had made, plating both into shallow individual dishes before bringing them to the table. He also brought two bowls full of extra helpings, should either of them want more, before sitting down across from Nick.

“This smells delicious. What is it?”


Amused and recognizing this made up their first date, Nick raised his glass and proposed a toast. “To first dates.”

Richie grinned and clinked glasses. “Just to be clear, Nick: whatever happens next is up to you. I’ll take your friendship, but I’d like to know you as a lover. If I were you, I’d take the option that’s most comfortable to you. I’ll be disappointed if you tell me we’ll only be friends, but I will do my best not to moon over you like a jilted suitor if that’s the door you take.” He flashed a smile.

Nick swallowed. He’d been thinking about it a lot since meeting Richie. “I haven’t ever been with another man, but you intrigue me. I usually avoid getting involved with another one of us, especially after what happened with Amanda.”

“Then we’ll go slow,” Richie said easily. He reached across the table and gripped Nick’s wrist reassuringly. “And for the record – no, you’re not my first, but the first in several years. If I push too hard, please let me know. My enthusiasm for something doesn’t mean you’re obligated to make that something happen.”

Nick blinked. “And if I said I wasn’t interested in you as a lover?” he tried.

“Then this is just a dinner between friends,” Richie assured him. “I love to cook, and if you’d turned me down, it wouldn’t have gone to waste. I also have a nineteen-year-old’s metabolism, so I eat a lot and burn through what I eat faster than someone older, so I’m used to cooking a lot.”

“That explains why you always order extra fries,” Nick murmured. He took an experimental bite of the chicken dish, finding Richie had simmered the chicken long enough to be fall-apart tender. The whole meal was delicious, worthy of any French restaurant he’d ever eaten at, and he told Richie so.

Richie chuckled. “I found the sauce at an expensive kitchen products store, tasted it, and realized it wasn’t much different than a recipe I already knew. Buying the sauce was a waste of money in my book after that first time, so I usually make it from scratch when I make it. Do you cook?”

“There’s a lot,” Nick told him. “You want good Midwestern food – meatloaf, burgers, potato salads, stuff you take to a potluck – I’m your guy. Philip was still stuck on ‘I’ll eat whatever I need to, doesn’t have to taste good’ when we met.”

Richie laughed again. “Yeah, I’ve met a few people like that, not just immortals. The worst was a cook in a diner I worked at – he didn’t get that raw pancakes weren’t only not edible, but food
poisoning.”

“Oh God. That would be awful. Did you do a lot of traveling, then?”

“My first six years as an immortal. Mac and I were working through a lot of shit back then – some it thrown at us from headhunters, some of it just weird and rare shit that happens if you’re one of the Highlanders, like the Dark Quickening – and it was easier to just leave this city and meet back up with him in Paris or here when the weather turned too cold to ride. I worked a lot of diners and dives and a few sketchy motorcycle repair shops; traded work for a warm place to sleep and gas in my motorcycle. I know how to ask for gas, motorcycle parts, and hostels in Arabic, French, and Spanish.”

Nick grinned. “I was on a basketball scholarship to Stanford when I blew out my knee. A friend of mine convinced me the thing to do was to go work on a freighter bound for Marseilles. I wound up not only learning French, but Russian, and getting into an underground boxing ring before I realized the next knockout might kill me.”

“What were you studying?”

“Law,” Nick admitted. “When I got back to the States, I had just enough money to finish college, so I got my degree in criminal justice instead.” He ate more before asking, “How does Joe’s favorite former bartender get into cybersecurity?”

Richie grinned. “Saw an ad online saying a local firm was looking for people to train as coders and hackers. Mac had bought this townhouse, and I knew I could not pay him rent consistently if I was working at Joe’s, so I took the leap. Fell in love with it; spent a year working for a large international firm that sent me into various client sites setting up cybersecurity systems. I tired of the traveling, so I went looking for a company that wouldn’t send me so far away. Of course, that’s when we got a client that wants someone on site in Portland.”

“But you’re back in this city for good?”

Richie nodded, taking a sip of his wine. “I told them I don’t want to leave again, and they told me they haven’t been happy with that client’s rate of payment. I don’t think they will be as eager to send their employees out again.” He paused. “I can’t see you working for Joe forever.”

Nick grimaced at that assessment. “I might. I worked for Philip for twenty years, until he lost his head. He treated me like the son he’d never had. But his death forced me to realize I’d gotten into a rut. I enjoy working for Joe; the people who go to his bar overall seem to be a decent group of people. I enjoy knowing that same office workers patronize the bar, getting to know them, predicting what they might order.”

“Don’t you miss being a cop?”

“Haven’t let myself think about it,” Nick admitted. “I resigned myself to thinking that chapter of my life was over.”

“I died on a racetrack in Paris. Someone posted that video to YouTube a few years ago. I got it taken down, but for a moment, my heart was in my throat, wondering if anyone could connect Richie Ryan, a racer with Saracen Racing, with me. It made me stop racing in amateur races for six months. But I know I’ll race again, because I enjoy going that fast.”

Nick stared at him. “You don’t fear facial recognition.”

Richie shook his head. “Or DNA analysis, or whatever the next generation of identity tech will
bring. I can’t live that way; I have enough trouble chasing my ass as it is. Either the day will come when we have to admit to the world we exist, or we’ll keep living as we have, creating new identities when we die publicly or when it’s no longer convenient to be where we are, and loving whom we love. I’m gambling that most people won’t care. Those who do might fear we’ll kill them next, but for most immortals I know, we only fight when backed against a wall, and only another immortal.”

Fascinated, Nick leaned in. “You think I could be a cop again.”

“Or anything else you want to be. One of Mac’s friends has been a lawman for the better part of seven centuries. I could introduce you two if you’re interested.”

“I might be,” Nick said cautiously. “You know a lot of us?”

Richie smiled. “Yes. The Macleod clan raised both Mac and Connor to be their clan chiefs. Having a network of friends is the closest they’ll get to that clan they love. Through them, I’ve met a lot of us, and count a few as my friends. Mac swears that he thinks I made a terrible choice in calling Cory Raines my best friend, but Cory’s also older than Mac and gave me a perspective on being immortal I desperately needed.”

“Which was?”

“Every day he gets up is a blessing beyond what he ever dreamed of having as a peasant boy in medieval England, so he might as well enjoy it.”

“That explains your enthusiasm.”

“Some of it,” Richie agreed. “Some of it is that I realized I couldn’t spend the rest of my life being Eeyore, because that could be hundreds of years, or as long as tonight.”

“How’d you get this sanguine?”

Richie hesitated before settling with, “A lot of experience I’d rather not get into now. So where are you living?”

“I rented a house in the Flour Mill neighborhood. Do you know why it’s called that?”

Richie grinned. “It’s the site of one of the original mills in the city. They turned it into a development after World War II. It’s still one of the middle-class neighborhoods. When I was in foster care, I was in a family in that neighborhood for kindergarten through the end of third grade.”

“What happened in third grade?”

Richie shrugged. “They moved out of the city and didn’t want to take me, so I went back into a group home. I bounced around a lot until I got sick of it, ran away, and dropped out of school. I wasn’t the ideal kid – short attention span, easily distracted, needed a lot of support – and I didn’t get it from the right people in time. Did you have a family growing up?”

“Yeah. My parents told me and my brother they adopted us, but we looked close enough to them we passed for natural. I didn’t think it was a big deal for years.”

“Do you still talk to your brother?”

Nick shook his head. “Not since I moved to France. He told me I didn’t need to keep on pretending we were ‘real’ brothers since our parents were dead and hung up on me.”
“Ouch,” Richie said, sympathetic. “Some people make those distinctions.”

Nick shrugged. “Michael was one of those people who don’t fit well with other people. I know our parents tried to reach him, but he always wanted to be alone. He’s why I think some people aren’t wired to be with other people. Philip initially reminded me of him.”

“Was Philip good to you?”

“He was a tough old bastard, who hated dealing with anyone on land for everything. He taught me to fight while he anchored us offshore, without a speck of land in sight. He made me wonder if he was fighting old demons or me or both every single time. I think I was his payback for something he owed Amanda.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it. She told me once she was on board a ship that broke up in a storm. Everyone on board drowned; she said she washed ashore on an island in the Caribbean. I can see where she might have found a privateer to take her where she wanted to go.”

“I can’t imagine what I’d do if I was the only survivor of a plane that crashed,” Nick mused.

“Especially if it was a plane that crashed into the ocean. I’d either be glad my name is common enough or afraid to look to see if someone posted photos of all the dead.”

“You could just say it’s an uncanny resemblance, for the rare instance where someone recognized you as one of those passengers. I think most people don’t remember and don’t care enough to pay that much attention. You’d have to be a crash investigator or a news reporter or something like that for it to be significant.”

“I suppose,” Nick conceded.

A small silence fell while they finished eating.

“I feel better for having sat down finally and eaten. Will you take a hand with cleanup?”

Richie smiled. “If you insist, but it won’t take long; everything is dishwasher safe.”

Once cleanup was over, Nick looked at Richie. “Thank you for dinner, but I should get home.” He met Richie’s worried gaze, took a deep breath, and said, “I’m interested in you, too, Richie, but the last lover I had was someone I picked up on the beach, and barely a one-night stand.”

Richie nodded in understanding. “Like I said earlier: we’ll go as fast as you want, Nick. I want you to enjoy this, and I’m pragmatic enough to know we might see each other years down the line, after we’ve gone our separate ways. I’d like to hope we’ll be pleased to see each other when that happens. Until then, though: may I kiss you? If nothing sparks from that, then we’ll just be friends.”

Standing in the kitchen, Nick considered the idea. Realizing the idea had merit, he agreed. Richie leaned in and kissed him.

Nick met his kiss and then realized his mistake. Richie kissed like it was the opening parry of a conversation, and Nick wanted to meet it, to keep talking this way. He had forgotten what it felt like to kiss someone new; forgotten just how attractive the lure of the unknown and forbidden was to him. Richie had skill, and his kiss was not just one kiss. No, it was a series of kisses, soft, welcoming, warm, and tempting in their gentleness. Nick was just tired enough he sighed into the comfort Richie offered, unconsciously stepping in closer as he did so.

Richie gentled the kiss, responding with tender enthusiasm, before reluctantly stepping back. “As tempting as you are, Nick, I should get you home,” he told him huskily. “Much more of this and I’ll
forget my manners.”

Nick breathed in deep and nodded his acceptance. Richie took him home like a gentleman, even walking him to the door and making sure he was inside before leaving. Nick couldn’t remember the last time anyone had bothered to show that level of concern.
Chapter 3

Over the next several weeks, Richie took Nick out to dinner, to the movies, to explore Seacouver’s art and history museums, and to baseball games. He kissed Nick in greeting and in goodbyes, held his hand, and treated him like he was worth Richie’s time and effort while holding himself to the limit Nick had set. As time went on, Nick did his research on gay sex, wanting to know what he was getting into, and discovered that yes, gay porn did turn him on, but some acts were just as disgusting to him as they had been when they involved women. Nick wondered what it would feel like Richie do more than kiss his mouth. Nick had had anal sex with a woman, so he knew the mechanics. He caught himself wondering if he should buy a dildo and prepare himself before he realized Richie might enjoy that exercise.

Richie mixed up going out to dinner with eating at home; his restaurant choices covered the gamut from cheap to expensive and included a wide breadth of cuisines. Tonight was Saturday night, and Nick had had the day off, since he’d worked the last six days in a row. Richie had taken Nick to one of the city’s pricier restaurants, an upscale Pan-Asian restaurant helmed by a chef friend of Richie’s. The food was, as Nick expected from one of Richie’s picks, first-rate, memorable for its impeccable execution, and delicious. Richie had even borrowed a car so they could dress appropriately; the classic Corvette convertible made Nick drool with envy.

“Where did you find this?”

“Joe’s drummer owns this, but he can’t drive it anymore since it aggravates his back.”

“Wow, this is gorgeous. How long do you have it?”

“Just until Sunday afternoon. I promised Henry I’d bring it back then.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll let me drive it?”

“It’s a stick shift.”

Nick made a face. “I haven’t driven stick in a car in too long; I probably shouldn’t. Damn. When did you learn?”

“Mac has had a few classic cars; he taught me.”

“Got it.”

After dinner, Richie drove them to Nick’s house.

Nick hesitated. “If I said I wanted to go home with you, what would you assume?”

“That you wanted to spend the night,” Richie said. “And Nick, to be clear – if that means all we do is cuddle and kiss, I’m okay with that.”

“And if I said I wanted more?”

Richie put the car in gear. “Then we’ll discuss how much more when I’m not focused on crashing this.”
Nick imagined the rest of the evening would go in a blur, but it didn’t. Richie kept asking him where his limit was, until he got frustrated enough to demand, “Just make love to me, please? I want your hands on me, touching me, stroking me, taking me to places I’ve never been with another guy.”

Richie leaned in and kissed him. Slowly and tenderly, Richie gave into Nick’s demand, until both were naked and lying in Richie’s bed, the covers pushed back. Richie drove Nick crazy discovering just how much he liked his nipples sucked, how much hand stroking Nick would tolerate before he demanded Richie use his mouth to taste his cock, how much Nick would gasp out his name like a mantra as Richie brought him expertly to the peak of pleasure. Nick tried to give back as much as Richie gave. He settled for touching everywhere he could when it became clear Richie was set on giving him pleasure first.

When he lay there, mind stunned by the ecstasy he’d reached, Richie held him close, dropping kisses on the side of his face and down his neck until Nick turned his head and kissed him deeply. It felt strange to taste his release from the mouth of another man, but it did not differ from when he had done so with a woman and felt just as exciting. Nick thrust his pelvis gently up against Richie, feeling his arousal as he did so. “More, please,” he whispered huskily. “Want you in me.”

“We don’t have to go there tonight; it’s not a race,” Richie reminded him.

“I know, but I want it. I don’t want to obsess about it later.”

Richie kissed him. “Then let’s make it something you obsess about wanting for the right reasons.” He urged Nick to turn over to his hands and knees while he got the lubricant out of the nightstand drawer. He then prepped Nick, turning it into something Nick knew he’d want again, before sliding his cock inside of Nick.

For a moment, Nick wasn’t sure it would fit, but he remembered thinking that every time he’d ever had anal sex with a woman and let out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. Richie slid in that much deeper and Nick groaned at the sensation. With infinite care, Richie made shallow thrusts until he was fully seated, then slowly transitioned to a more deliberate in-and-out motion. Nick groaned again and knew he liked the feeling of Richie’s cock inside him. Unconsciously, he shifted, wanting to meet Richie’s thrusts.

“That’s it, Nick,” Richie encouraged. “You feel so good.”

Nick couldn’t remember when he’d last had sex as intense as this was – sometime with Amanda, when things had still been good, and they’d been celebrating – but he let that thought skitter out of his head. Richie was with him, caressing his back, stroking his cock, filling his ass, and Nick couldn’t think anymore. He could only feel the heat rising between them, the pressure to go flying across the cliff of desire because Richie was making him feel so wanted, so alive. Soon, the need to come became too much, and Nick shuddered through his second orgasm of the night seconds before Richie shivered through his release.

Richie held him for a moment before reluctantly moving. He helped Nick turn over before kissing him thoroughly.

“Thank you,” Nick told him, meaning it.

Richie grinned. “You’re welcome. Thank you for giving me that gift.” He kissed Nick again. It was a long time before either of them fell asleep.

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“You’ve been spending a lot of time with Nick,” Duncan noted. It was Wednesday evening, and
Richie had filled in for one of the other instructors who had called in sick. The class was over, and it
was just the two of them, cleaning up the studio. “Getting serious?”

“Yes,” Richie said as he set the broom he’d just used back in the supplies closet. “You sound
worried. Something I should know?”

“Joe told me Nick and Amanda have a history. You aren’t afraid he’s just waiting for her to show up
again?”

Richie barked a laugh. “It’s been two decades since he saw her. If she came through again, she’d
probably be looking for you first.”

Duncan acknowledged that with a tip of his head. “And I don’t know if I’d be inclined,” he
admitted. “It’s been at least that long for her and me too.” He paused. “Last time I saw you this
happy, you were with Brian.”

Richie sighed. “Brian wanted kids, dogs, and a white picket fence where the biggest danger would
be from the kids winding up the dogs into biting someone. I couldn’t see myself in that picture, at
least not the way he imagined we’d be. Brian thought I could just stop playing the Game cold turkey
and never have anyone come after me.”

Duncan nodded. “I remember you telling me how frustrated you were with him for that belief. And
now? Have you discussed what you want from Nick and each other, long-term?”

“We haven’t discussed that yet,” Richie noted. “And we’ll get to that conversation before too long.
Right now, I’ll take what I can get and be happy.”

Duncan smiled grimly at that. “You’ve always done that better than me. But Nick has the look of a
man who needs to know where he’s going, and who’s going there with him, before he feels
completely safe.”

Richie nodded. “I noticed. We’ll talk, Mac, and I won’t assume he’s going in the same direction as
me. I learned my lesson on that one.” He flashed his former teacher a smile. “Anything else you need
me to do before we lock up?”

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“When are you and that hot young boyfriend of yours going on a date again?” Julie asked Nick later
the following week. “Let me live vicariously, please.”

Nick laughed. It was Friday, and they were getting ready for the weekend crush. “Not until next
week. I’m scheduled to work all weekend, remember?”

“No late-night nookie for you, huh? I would’ve figured since Richie’s younger than you, his sex
drive would be through the roof.”

“He also has a regular corporate job,” Nick reminded his coworker. “And he’s a gentleman.”

Amused, Julie said, “All that means is that he asks first before he sticks it in you instead of acting like
it’s God’s gift to you. You’re blushing. Did I hit a nerve?”

“Usually I’m the guy who’s asking the girl for permission,” Nick managed.

“He’s your first guy? Oh, wow. He’s so sweet. You got lucky, Nick. Better make sure you two talk
or you’ll trip over a bunch of assumptions.”

“What makes you say that?” Nick wondered.

“Lesbian,” Julie said, pointing to herself, “contemplating her life choices in women. God, we’re sometimes so awful to each other, and you’d think for all the bitching we do about women getting treated unfairly, we wouldn’t be the same way to each other.”

“Sometimes the distance between you and the mirror is awfully short,” Nick noted.

Julie laughed. “Ain’t that the truth. You light up when you talk about or see him; he’s been good to you. I wish you the best.”

“Thanks, Julie. Hand me that empty bottle? It looks like we’re out of orange juice.”

“No, hang on, I just saw that in the fridge. Casey keeps hiding the damn things; God knows why.”

Further conversation stalled as the pub filled with lunch patrons, but what Julie had said made Nick think.

When he got a break, he texted Richie. Just wanted to say hello and let you know I was thinking of you.

Didn’t want to interrupt if you were busy, came the immediate reply. I know how crazy Joe’s gets on Fridays.

I’m on break for another five minutes. Are you free next Friday? Joe says I’m off at five next Friday and won’t need to come in until Monday. I’d like to see you.

I’ll come by and pick you up so he can’t keep you, Richie wrote, adding a kiss emoji.

Nick sent the same one in return and smiled. He wasn’t sure what would happen next in their relationship, but he knew he wanted to see where it would take them. He was falling in love with Richie and wanted to not make the same mistakes he’d made with Amanda. He’d never believed that she was telling him the whole truth while simultaneously believing she was more open with him than anyone else. He’d tried to reconcile her past and her non-monogamous habits with his desire to be her one and only. Both had backfired on him. Julie was right: he needed to get some assumptions clarified, before they were both emotionally compromised.

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Richie looked at Nick, surprised by his concerns. “I have no reason to lie to you about anything,” he told Nick, trying not to show how hurt the statement had made him. “I’d tell you if a headhunter was in town, provided I knew about them, just like I’d tell you if I had a project with a difficult client.”

Nick stared at him. “You wouldn’t con me into thinking everything is fine?”

“No, because that would only leave you open to assuming it was and then not reacting appropriately.” Richie sighed. “Let me guess: Amanda did that. I’m not her; I never will be. I want you safe, yes, but I also trust you’re capable of defending yourself. You wear your sword everywhere, just like I do, which tells me you’ve fought enough to know the worst place is having your sword just far enough away to be unreachable.”

“I haven’t taken that many heads, but enough came to challenge Philip and me we twice wound up fighting a few back-to-back. I get the sense Seacouer’s a bigger draw than the little seaside city I
“It is, but I’m hoping this peace sticks around a while longer. I haven’t missed taking challenges. What else concerns you?”

Nick drew a breath. “That we’ll get to a place where we can’t talk like this.”

“That day may yet come, but until then – let’s not get there. I’d rather we keep talking and not assume whatever perceived drama is going through our heads is the reality.”

Nick leaned into kiss him. “How’d I get so lucky?” he marveled. “I swear it feels like Philip knew I’d meet someone important if I came here.”

“Maybe he did,” Richie offered. “Connor gets visions; it’s how he knew to come to Seacouver looking for a headhunter that was coming after his cousin. All the legends are true in some fashion, Nick. I’ve seen enough to know that for a fact.”

Nick contemplated that idea for a moment. “If Philip did, he never said, and by the time I figured out he was dead, his challenger was long gone from the scene, so I don’t even know who took his head. He only told me that the sea gives gifts to special people, and that was how he viewed immortality.”

“Must’ve died at sea then,” Richie surmised. “But back to us: I promise you, Nick, that the love I feel for you is not made up. It’s not based solely on sex, although now I’ve had a taste, I want more, and have no shame in admitting I’d love to do it with you again. I love you, respect you, and want to be with you. I’ll keep talking and listening as long as you do the same.”

“And you don’t feel you need to protect me?”

“You survived twenty years with an immortal pirate,” Richie pointed out, “and that’s apparently a feat. My Watcher told me you’re the first student Philip ever took on that he let stay with him for as long as you did; most of the others left within a year, calling him a ruthless bastard whose idea of training was brutal, backward, and unsafe.”

Nick blinked at that. “You asked? But Philip didn’t scare me. It was rough, but I needed not to think about Amanda that first six months.”

“Which explains why you put up with it,” Richie agreed. “And yes, I asked, because I care, and while Joe’s retired, my Watcher isn’t, and knows I’ll keep asking if it’s something related to you. If Sandy left a certain Chronicle in my bag accidentally and I read it, then she can claim I was merely helping her hide it because she left it on a table.”

“Uh huh,” Nick said, seeing the split hair. “Right. You don’t think it’s an unfair advantage?”

“I’d never use it to challenge another immortal,” Richie told him. “But to look at you and say, ‘Damn, that was an accomplishment’ – sure. I love you, Nick, and I think you’re falling in love with me. Am I wrong?”

Nick shook his head. “No. I don’t think I’m ready to say it’s more than that, but that’s why I needed to talk to you.”

“Anytime you need to talk, tell me. I’ll always make the time. I want to be with you for as long as you’ll have me. That includes moving in together and talking about what kind of commitment we want to make, whether it’s something formal and legal like marriage or something else. I don’t want to make the mistake of assuming you’re going in the same direction as me. If you ever decide you want something else, please let me know.”
Nick kissed him. “I appreciate that, Richie. I’ve always wanted marriage; I was married before, but
the marriage didn’t last.” He took a deep breath, feeling a surge of emotion. “I’ve rarely wanted to be
with anyone like I want to be with you, Richie, which tells me what I feel is really strong.”

Richie held him close. “Don’t feel you have to tell me you love me before you’re ready, Nick. I
don’t need you to lie to me. I want what you can give me freely.”

Closing his eyes, Nick shuddered through a breath. “Thanks, Richie.”

Richie smiled and kissed him. “You’re welcome. I’m so glad you’re in my life.”

They would make it work, Nick thought, and damn anyone who told them otherwise.

Chapter End Notes

Comments, constructive criticism, keyboard smashes, "I liked this!", and kudos always
welcome - even when this fic is "old."

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