



Virgin
With Peaches

Sarah Black

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“I need beets. Lots of beets, carrots, potatoes, cabbage. Red cabbage. Some bones. A piece of beef. Onions, garlic, celery for the stock.”

Matt nudged him with an elbow. “Who are you talking to?”

Kellan looked around the kitchen. “My assistant. Oh, wait a minute. I don’t have an assistant! I guess I’m talking to myself.”

“What are you making? Borscht?”

“Yep. Zeppole’s gonna bake some black peasant bread to go with. You like Borscht?”

“I do, the way you make it with sour cream and green onions on the top.”

“I’ll save some for you, okay?”

“Awesome. And I got a little piece of plum tart with your name on it.”

Matt was a good guy. Kellan watched him walk across the kitchen to his work station. He'd had a mild crush on Matt for a while. Matt had fallen in love with his neighbor, though, and now he was blissful, talking about puppies and home repair. He was a foodie. He understood how Kellan felt about soup.

Kellan ran a paper towel over his cutting board, then rubbed some walnut oil into the wood, giving it a little massage. He liked to let the oil soak in while he gathered his vegetables. The beets were beautiful this year, thick and nobbly and sweet. He loved the darkest red beets for the borscht, and a few of the golden orange beets, which had a little milder flavor that went well with the carrots. He walked over to the meat counter, got some scraps of beef and bones for the stock, threw some thyme and garlic into the roasting pan and put them in the oven.

"Hey, Kellan. Looking good, baby." Sally was the head chef at the co-op. She wore a Pink Floyd tee shirt and jeans underneath her apron. She looked like Annie Lennox, only short and soft as a yeast roll, and was likely to burst into full-throated song at any time. But only songs from 1972 or earlier- she claimed music had died with Janis. She studied the veggies he had piled on the countertop. "We've got an artist in the kitchen today."

"Who is it? Do I know him?"

She shook her head. "He's not a cook. He's a photographer. He asked if he could come in and take pictures of the vegetables."

He frowned at her. "Take pictures..."

She gave his shoulders a quick little massage that meant, *do*

what I want you to do without arguing. “You got a good looking pile of veggies here. Why don’t we let him snap a few pics?”

“Yeah, okay. It won’t take very long, will it? I’ve got to make soup.”

“Great. I told him it was a working kitchen and all that. Let’s just see how it goes. You still need to make stock?”

Kellan nodded. “The beans are already soaking. We’ve got Borscht and Sixteen Bean. That’s the vegetarian soup.”

“Put them up on the chalkboard. And save me a cup of the borscht, okay? I love that soup.”

The photographer had a rough-and-tumble blond ponytail, and three days worth of blonde whiskers. His jeans were old, had a tiny hole on the right knee, and Kellan was amazed to see he had made a neat patch to cover it. He knew guys who took a new pair of jeans, wore holes in them with rocks so they would look old and worn. He was carrying a camera bag over his shoulder and a cardboard box. He held out his hand. “Hi. I’m Alexi.”

He had a delightful accent. “Hi. Where are you from? I’m Kellan.”

“My family came from Russia, Vladivostok.”

“You’re a photographer, right?”

“Yeah, food.”

“Like, for food magazines?”

Alexi shook his head and set down his cardboard box. He studied the pile of vegetables. “Borscht? You make it the old way?”

“Yeah.”

Alexi pulled a piece of cloth out of the top of his box, looked around for a space. “I need a little table, or maybe just a part of the countertop.” The cloth was an old piece of velvet, a dull gold color. It was worn in a few places, the edges frayed. He spotted Kellan’s cutting board, ran his finger over the grain. “That’s beautiful. Can I use this?”

“Sure.”

Alexi put the velvet cloth down, scooted it around until it was spread out over the counter, then he lifted up armfuls of vegetables and dumped them down on the cloth. Kellan could see clods of dirt falling off the beets, a few broken carrot tops. “Hey, that’s gonna mess up your cloth. I didn’t wash anything yet.”

Alexi looked over his shoulder. “I like them this way.” *Okay, whatever.* Alexi roamed around the kitchen, picking up a couple of cloves of red garlic, tossed them in the pile, then some onions with bent green tops. Then he started moving things around the pile, pulled the velvet cloth this way and that, making sure the dirt and frayed edges showed. Alexi hauled in a light, fitted a piece of paper over the light that cast a golden glow over the scene, and Kellan could see it suddenly, the warmth and color.

It looked a hundred years old. “Do you know why people used to paint pictures of food?”

Kellan wasn't sure Alexi was talking to him, but he knew why. “Because they were hungry.”

Alexi looked at him over his shoulder and smiled. “Yeah. And people are still hungry.”

Kellan had a plastic quart of borscht that was the borscht of queens, he thought. The beets knew they had been photographed, and the stock might have been the best he had ever made. He picked out a particularly rough looking loaf of black bread, and felt in his pocket again for the card where Alexi had written directions to his place. Alexi had watched him make the borscht, asked him if he would save him a cup. To have a man with blond whiskers ask him with a Russian accent to save him some borscht was a compliment he felt in his knees, and Kellan found the courage to ask if Alexi would like to eat with him. He would bring the soup and bread, and maybe he could see some of Alexi's photographs.

Alexi lived in the back of his studio, a small space he had carved out of what looked like an old industrial warehouse on the southern end of downtown Boise. Kellan thought it looked like a good place to get mugged, but inside Alexi had made his space beautiful and warm, just like he had done with an armful of root vegetables.

His table was a battered old side table from one of the junk

stores in town, the top rough, golden brown barn wood. "Isn't that a pretty color? I have to use a table cloth, though, or I get splinters."

He spread a cloth over the top, set two bowls down and moved a small bunch of irises in a Doctor Pepper bottle to the edge of the table. "Thank you for coming. I haven't had anyone come here before."

"I like your place." Kellan looked around. Alexi had a mattress on the floor, but he'd hung a piece of red Indian cloth from the wall above it, so it looked like a headboard, and there were silkscreened pieces of raw canvas down the wall. They were big, and looked like abstracts of the Boise skyline. "Did you do these?"

"Yes. I like the look of silkscreen on raw canvas, especially from stencils made from photographs."

"So you've just come from Russia?"

"Two years ago. My grandmother and I emigrated, and we stayed up in Alaska. There's a big Russian community there, and she wanted to stay close to the synagogue. When she died I came down here."

"Why did you come to Boise?"

"The food." Kellan blinked at him. "The food in Idaho is so beautiful. I wanted to take pictures of it. But it is small here."

"How do you mean?"

"The community is small for artists, closed. I am not from here, and I did not go to school at Boise State. I am finding it difficult to not have the connections. So you're a cook? What do you call them, chef?"

Kellan shook his head. "I'm a cook, not a chef." Alexi looked a question at him. "A chef means you've been to cooking school. I've just been working over at the co-op."

Alexi took the soup, poured it into a bowl and put it into the microwave. "But you love food. I can tell by the way you touch your vegetables. Why don't you go to school?" Kellan shrugged, stuck his hands down in his pockets and strolled over to the single small window. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

Kellan turned to him. "No, it's complicated. A long story. Too long for tonight."

Kellan watched Alexi eat. He bowed his head over the bowl like he was praying, smelled with his eyes closed, then he picked up the spoon and took a bite. His cheeks flushed, a beautiful rose pink, and when he looked up at Kellan, his blue eyes were dilated, nearly black. He didn't say a word, just lowered his head again and began eating. Kellan tore off a piece of bread and set it next to his bowl, and Alexi picked it up, dunked it into his soup without speaking.

When he raised his head again, he looked at Kellan for a long time, eyes wandering over his face, and said, "Thank you. This meant something to me."

"Was it like the borscht you ate at home?"

“Better. Richer. In the years before we left, our soup got thinner and thinner. Have you ever tasted pickled onions? The way we make them in Russia?” Kellan shook his head. “They’re sweet, sort of like the bread and butter pickles you have here. I used to love to eat pickled onions with borscht. My grandmother would always save the tiny ones for me.” He stood up, picked up the bowls. “Let me make some coffee, then I’ll show you the studio.”

Kellan sat on a stool and watched Alexi move around the tiny kitchen. The bowls were washed and set to drain by the time the coffee was finished brewing, filling the room with the rich, dark smell of coffee beans. Alexi poured him a cup. “I don’t have any cream or sugar.”

“This is good,” Kellan said. “Thanks.”

“Let me show you.” He pulled open a heavy canvas curtain, and Kellan could see that most of the warehouse space had been converted into a studio. He had a station set up for screen printing, and another for photography. Along the back wall, he had a couple of portable display boards set up, like Kellan had seen at art fairs and the farmer’s market, and the photographs were pinned to the board.

They looked antique. He didn’t think there was another word for it. The lighting was soft, old gold, and most of the tables were dark wood, or had the velvet cloth he had used at the cop. Each photograph was a different grouping of food, mostly rough vegetables, dirt clinging to their roots, tops broken and torn. Some had hunks of cheese, or torn loaves of bread. “These look so old,” he said. “I don’t know how to talk about art, sorry. I mean, they’re like paintings. You’ve done mostly vegetables,

and some bread and cheese. Is that the food you like?"

Alexi shook his head. "I just pulled most of this out of the dumpster. I can't afford to buy the good stuff. That lady from the co-op, Sally? She bought one of my pictures, said I could come in to the kitchen and take pictures there. Your beets and carrots, they were so much more beautiful than I was hoping."

"Have you sold many photographs?"

Alexi shook his head. "No. Actually, I've sold one. To Sally. She caught me digging carrots out of the dumpster behind the co-op, and she thought I was hungry. She offered me some leftovers, and I showed her what I was doing. I'm not really sure how to go about selling art. That part of things is a mystery to me." He ran his hands around the edges of one of the photographs. "I can't afford to get these framed, and I think they need frames. Like those heavy old carved wooden frames painted with gilt. You know the ones I mean?"

"Like those Italian paintings of Jesus and Mary?"

"Yes, exactly. Hey, let me show you something." Alexi led the way back to the small space he was living in, pointed to the wall next to his bed. There was a small painting there of a girl holding a basket of peaches, sitting under a tree. She had short red curls, and a beautiful Italian face that Kellan thought looked familiar. The painting was oil, very old, and painted so the dark and light coloring were very strong. The light was falling on the girl's face, and she looked radiant, her cheeks the color of the peach in her hand. "The title is *Virgin with Peaches*. We brought this with us when we left Russia. It's the only thing my grandmother cared about bringing." He gave Kellan a crooked

grin, and Kellan could see some unspoken pain in his face. "Well, no, she cared about bringing me, too."

"You miss her."

"Yes, a great deal. She was a person totally without judgment. Her heart, it was enormous, and once it was given... She loved me without reservation."

"My grandmother, she's that way," Kellan said. "All she can do is cook and love you. It's like, that's how she faces the world, with warm food and love. She taught me how to cook." He studied the painting again. "That's really beautiful, so tender. Sort of the same lighting as your food pictures. Do you know who painted it?"

"Yes." But he didn't say any more.

Kellan took the last sip of his cup of coffee. "Thanks for this evening."

Alexi took Kellan's hand, brought it to his mouth and kissed the knuckles. "Thank you. I wonder if I can see you again."

Kellan looked up into his face, felt totally lost, out of his depth. How could he explain he was the bottom of the barrel? That he was socially inept, clueless, a bit of a hermit, inexperienced? He couldn't even grow a decent beard. Alexi, he was a star waiting to be born. Golden beauty, talent, a soft eye, elegant hands. Kellan could see that, even if Alexi couldn't. It would be easy, Kellan thought, to get his heart ripped to shreds. He was the sort of guy who got left by guys like Alexi when they suddenly

realized they could do better.

Alexi hadn't let go of his hand. "I want to see you again. Why do you look so sad when I say that?"

Kellan shook his head.

"Very well, then. I will see you tomorrow? Come with me," he said, and pulled Kellan closer, and he smiled down at him with his beautiful blue eyes. "I'm going to take pictures downtown. I will show you how to look at brick walls. What could be better?"

"Yeah, okay." What? Brick walls? "I get off at four."

"Perfect. We'll get the pretty golden light of sunset."

Kellan was half expecting him not to show, but when he hauled a plastic milk crate full of scraps out to the dumpsters, Alexi was there, leaning against the wall of the co-op and smoking a cigarette. He immediately thought this was the sexiest thing he had ever seen, and then felt guilty, because of course smoking was *bad*, right? Alexi raised the camera to his eye, took a picture. Kellan laughed, hauled his crate of scraps to the top of the dumpster, tried to ignore the sound of Alexi's camera behind him. "I'll be two minutes," he said, pulling his apron over his head. He washed his hands and forearms in the bathroom, tried to keep from staring at himself in the mirror. He knew what he would see. Brown and brown. Boring. Stop thinking so much, he suggested. Just go have a good time.

What's the big deal? Why do you have to overanalyze every damn thing.... He was ready to clutch his head and howl, but instead he just pushed out the bathroom door and went to join Alexi at the dumpster.

They walked up Eighth Street, passed the Capital building, and when they crossed Bannock, Alexi tugged on his arm. "Hey, have you seen Freak Alley?" Kellan shook his head, followed Alexi down the alley. More dumpsters. Kellan wondered briefly if dumpsters were going to have some erotic role in his imaginings in his old age. When they got past the Greek restaurant, the alley opened up a bit, and Kellan stared around, his mouth hanging open. The walls were covered in graffiti, big, brightly colored grafs that spread across the doors, edged up next to the windows, tumbled down from the roofs. Alexi found a spot against the wall, leaned against it. "Just wait," he said.

A couple of minutes later, the back door to the Greek restaurant opened, and a couple of cooks came out. They were wearing long white aprons, the fronts spattered and speckled with food-lots of tomato sauce, Kellan noted. They looked tired, their faces damp from the heat of the kitchen. They pulled off their hats, leaned against the wall and pulled smokes out from under their aprons.

Alexi was taking pictures, and they must have seen him, but they never glanced in his direction, just smoked and studied the sky, and let the December air cool down their overheated cheeks. When they finished smoking, they stubbed out the butts, then picked them up and put them in an old coffee can sitting next to the door. The older cook gave Alexi a little wave before he pushed open the door and went back to work.

"I'm doing a time study," Alexi said. "Same door, different times of day. It's giving me some interesting pictures. What I really notice, though, is the changes depending on the day of the week. These same guys, after a busy Saturday cooking, compared to Tuesday at the same time. People in America must eat at home on Tuesday. What I think," and Alexi looked down at him, "is you cooks must love cooking, and food, because it pays like crap and you're always exhausted at the end of the day." He gestured toward the Greek restaurant. "That's what the Greeks tell me."

"The co-op's different," Kellan said. "The part that gets really exhausting is when you have to be around people. Just being around food, cooking, that's like heaven, man. I try to stay in the kitchen as much as I can."

Alexi drew in on his cigarette, bliss drifting across his face. "And I try to stay in alleys, with the dumpsters, my friend. Come on," he put his hand on Kellan's shoulder. "You want a coffee?"

"My treat," Kellan said, reaching into his pocket. "Dawson's has good coffee, only a dollar twenty five a cup. Plus fifty cent refills."

"Perfect," Alexi said. "I can pay for the refills."

In the coffee shop, Kellan brought the cups to the table and Alexi showed him how to see the pictures on the view screen on the back of the camera. When they got to the pictures Alexi had taken of him behind the co-op, Alexi nudged him with his elbow. "Who's that good-looking guy?"

Kellan had never had anyone call him good-looking before, not with a Russian accent. Alexi watched him blush, raised Kellan's fist slowly to his mouth for another kiss. His mouth was very soft, and very warm, and the tiniest bit wet, and Kellan was pretty sure he would not be able to stand up and fetch the refills. He was relieved when the phone in his pocket started to ring. Kellan looked at the screen. "It's my grandmother."

He answered the phone. "Hey, Gram."

"Kellan, I'm about to put the pasta in the water. Where are you?"

"I'm at Dawson's having coffee. Where am I supposed to be?"

"Weren't you coming to dinner? I made meatballs."

"Did you ask me to dinner?"

"Didn't I? Kellan, I must be losing my marbles. But don't worry. I can always swallow rat poison if it turns out to be Alzheimer's."

"Gram, please don't take rat poison." Alexi stared at him, his cup halfway to his mouth. "But I'm out with a friend. I can't come to dinner."

"Bring your friend, too! I have enough meatballs for at least six big boys. I was going to send them home with you."

Kellan looked at Alexi. He was grinning. "She says come to dinner, both of us."

“Of course she does! She wants to see who you’re dating.”

“Are we dating?”

Alexi looked at him, then he smiled, and Kellan felt the blush start at his toes and work its way up.

Kellan turned back to the phone. “Okay, Gram. We’ll be there in ten minutes.”

She opened the door, wearing jeans under her red Christmas apron. Reindeer cavorted over the front, with lots of candy-cane striped Ho Hos. Kellan had given her this apron for Christmas the year he’d been twelve, and she’d worn it for the holidays every year. “I have cookies, too! Oh, no! Did you boys get snowed on? You didn’t walk here from downtown, did you? Well, I guess you had to, because I know you wouldn’t ride your bike in the snow, that is much too dangerous, sliding out and whatnot, not to mention decreased visibility.”

Kellan was used to his grandmother, so he stood still while she brushed the snow off him and unzipped his jacket, the familiar flood of words warming him up. Then he got to turn and watch Alexi when she did it to him. “What do you have under this jacket? Oh, a camera? This little jacket is too thin for the winter. And you need a hat, though I admit with hair as thick as yours your head really should stay warm. Your head, but not your ears.” She put her hands over Alexi’s ears to warm them up. “Maybe some earmuffs? I know I have a pair around here somewhere. You aren’t Jewish, are you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Well, I’ll ask God to forgive the meatballs, then, because they have pork in them. But I got the pork from the co-op so it should be good. Not kosher, of course, but at least clean. Sometimes all we can ask for is clean. The cookies are sugar cookies and gingerbread. And I have the sprinkles and the frosting ready! You can stay for Christmas cookies, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I’ll hunt around until I can find the candles. We can have lots of candles to celebrate the—which one is it? Passover? Something about the miracle at the Temple, I remember that much. Well, we must have candles. You can’t celebrate miracles too often.”

Alexi followed him into the kitchen, and Kellan could see he had the lens cap off, the camera warming up to the room. The table was set with red candles and a bowl of old Christmas ornaments, and she had put three place settings down. The plates were the old Santa plates. One countertop was covered with newly baked cookies, and she had little bowls full of sprinkles and frosting, ready for decorating. The spaghetti sauce was cooking on the stovetop, in the big red spaghetti pot she had used since he’d been a boy.

Alexi gestured with his camera. “Kellan, you stand next to your grandmother. I’ll take a picture of the two of you.” Kellan put his arm around her, the stove in the background, and she talked through the entire picture. Alexi took several shots, and Kellan hoped he was able to get one with her mouth closed.

“Okay, boys, cider or hot chocolate?”

Gram put the pasta in the boiling water, and Alexi went into the bathroom to wash his hands. As soon as he was gone, Gram pinned him with a look. “So? What do you think? Is this serious?”

“I just met him, Gram.”

Her eyebrows winged up and down. “I can have hope, then?”

When Alexi came back, they sat at the table, and Gram served then two meatballs each, then pulled the angel hair from the water, piled enough on each plate to feed a lumberjack. “You need to eat more in the winter,” she said, with the ladle full of sauce, “because in the winter your body needs more energy to keep warm. Alexi, you’re from Russia? Did you eat more in winter?”

He hesitated. “Food can be scarce in the winter. But yes, the cold makes one very hungry.”

She poured his ladleful of sauce over the pasta, then put it down and hugged him, one of those on-the-fly hugs she had given Kellan since he was a boy. It was like a dive-bomber coming out of the sky, one minute you were free, then the next, wrapped up in soft, warm arms, your head smothered in a cushiony shoulder that smelled like lily of the valley dusting powder and spaghetti sauce.

“Eat! I’m coming, but don’t wait for me, the meatballs are getting cold.”

After Kellan had refused seconds, and then, when he ate the seconds, refused thirds, he staggered into the living room and sat in the old recliner. Alexi hadn't bothered to say no to more, he just kept his head down and polished off every meatball he was given. "I may have to sleep on this couch," he said, easing back. "I think I'm too full to walk home."

"I usually have to be medicated after I eat here," Kellan said. "Tums, or..."

"No, you don't!" Gram looked in from the kitchen. "You boys just rest, then we'll have some cookies!"

Kellan fell asleep in the recliner, and he woke to the sound of voices. Alexi was talking about his grandmother. "She was very strong, fierce, even. But that's because she lived through the war. She traveled from St. Petersburg, where her family lived, all the way to Vladivostok, on the coast near Japan."

"She was running from the Germans?"

"There was so much to run from. I always thought she was just looking for a safe place for the children. She had her younger brothers and a young sister, then my father was born. She never talked about it, just said that war strips everyone of their humanity."

"So what happened to you, Alexi? Why is the sadness in your eyes?"

He didn't answer, and Kellan got up from the recliner, leaned against the doorway into the kitchen. Gram was sitting with

Alexi at the table, holding her hand against his cheek.

The cookies were a great success, since Alexi decided to dress the gingerbread men in traditional Cossack clothing, including tiny silver bells on their boots, and Kellan decorated stars and sleighs and Christmas trees in wild stripes and zigzags and polka dots, mixing the colors- pink and blue and silver, red and gold and purple. He was very tempted to start drawing fat red hearts on every cookie in the kitchen, toss sprinkles wildly in the air, but he managed to keep himself under control. Gram lit candles and talked about miracles; there must have been twenty candles, and they spread gold light and warmth against the walls. They walked home in the snow, each carrying a plastic storage bin of meatballs and sauce, and paper bags full of cookies.

“Come back with me,” Alexi said, reaching for Kellan’s hand. “You aren’t seeing anyone, are you?” Kellan shook his head, and Alexi twined their fingers together. “Then come home with me.”

Kellan couldn’t speak, just nodded, let Alexi pull him along. When they got back to Alexi’s studio, he took their food and stuck it into the tiny dorm fridge, set the bags of cookies down on the table, and tugged Kellan toward the bed. Alexi’s hands were shaking, and he closed his eyes, put his palms on either side of Kellan’s head, leaned down and kissed him.

Kellan had the front of Alexi’s shirt in his fist, holding himself up. Alexi kissed like he meant business, like the entire world was made for soft warm wet mouths. His jeans were suddenly

two sizes too small, then Alexi was tugging on the hem of his sweatshirt, lifting it up, sliding his hands across Kellan's chest. "Your mouth tastes like honey," he said, tossing the sweatshirt aside. Kellan was unable to speak, his mouth throbbing, a little pulse of lust in his bottom lip, matching the pulse in his cock, and he stood there, let Alexi pull his clothes off, watched him pull off his own. "Kissing is better skin to skin, don't you think?"

Think? Kellan couldn't think. Breathing was out of the question. He reached out, slid his fingers through a chest covered with fine, golden hair, down a too-thin belly and felt the damp head of Alexi's cock, reaching up for him.

"Come on." Alexi pulled him onto the bed, rolled over until they were toe to toe, belly to belly, chest to chest. Alexi ran his hand down over Kellan's ribs, over the curve of his hip. Then he reached out, tugged Kellan against his chest, and kissed him again. He was right, kissing was better skin to skin. Skin that was warm, sweet-tasting, covered with blond hair, smelling like gingerbread cookies. He flung his leg over Alexi's hip, pulled him closer, felt the weight of a cock sliding next to his own. Skin to skin was definitely the best way to kiss.

They were sitting crosslegged on Alexi's bed, eating meatballs out of the plastic containers when the phone rang in the pocket of Kellan's jeans. He scrambled off the bed, pulled it out. Gram was the only person who would call him in the middle of the night. It was St. Luke's ER. "Now, darling, don't panic. I don't want you to come out in this snow. But I wonder, if you have a minute tomorrow could you go by my house and get me a few

things?”

“Gram? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. Maybe a little stroke. Probably I just fell asleep on the wrong side of my head or something. Now, I don’t want you to...”

Her voice didn’t sound right. “Where are you? I’m coming now. I’m coming, just wait for me. Don’t do anything until I get there.”

“Darling, it’s the middle of the night! I’m okay at the hospital. They’re going to get me all tucked up in bed here in a moment.”

“Is there a doctor there I can talk to?”

“Of course! Well, I’m not sure if she’s a doctor or a nurse practitioner. Everyone looks alike in those scrub outfits they wear. Anyway, let me see if she can speak to you.”

Alexi was off the bed, pulling on his jeans, and he handed Kellan his boxers. “I’ll come with you.” Kellan stuffed his feet into his jeans, nearly fell over when he realized they were inside out. Alexi pulled them off, straightened the legs.

“Hello?”

“Yes, this is Kellan De Luca. You have my grandmother there. What happened?”

“Central retinal artery occlusion of the right eye.”

“Yes? What does that mean?”

“It’s a tiny stroke in the blood vessel of the eye.”

“Okay, but what does that mean?”

“She has lost the vision in one eye.”

“For how long?”

The woman on the phone hesitated. “This is most probably permanent.”

“I’m coming. I’m coming right now.”

“We’ll plan on having her in the hospital for a couple of days. I think she wants some pajamas, her toothbrush, some slippers.”

Kellan could hear his grandmother in the background. “Tell him to bring the photo album!”

Kellan hung up, turned to look at Alexi, who was pulling a sweatshirt on over his head. He was so afraid he was stuttering. “She’s lost the vision in one of her eyes. Forever. Like, that eye is blind.”

Alexi pulled him into a hug. “Okay, so let’s get her what she needs for the hospital.”

Gram's house seemed forlorn without her chattering away in the kitchen. He found a little overnight bag in the closet, the sides made of flowered canvas. He pulled out the nightgown that was at the top of the stack, then dug a little deeper, found a pretty pink nightgown with embroidered roses along the neckline. "This is nice, don't you think?"

Alexi looked out from the bathroom. "Yes, that looks good. She'll want the good one." He came out with her toothbrush and a tube of paste, a small container of lily of the valley dusting powder, some Cody night cream for youthful skin, and a tube of lipstick.

Kellan looked at the lipstick. "Is she gonna want that? Really?"

"Yes, really. I promise. When my grandmother was in the hospital, before she died, she had me put blush on her cheeks every day. I knew things were serious when she didn't care about putting on her face anymore." He looked over at the things Kellan was packing. "You need to get her some clean underwear."

"Oh, right. And the photo album."

"Where is it? I'll get it."

"On the coffee table in the living room."

Alexi didn't come back. Kellan put some of the strangest looking underwear he had ever seen, like mint-green nylon

bloomers, into the bag and closed it up. If he was missing anything, he could always come back. He needed to call into work. He was supposed to be cooking at seven. He carried the overnight bag into the living room. Alexi had the album open and was staring down at one of the pages.

“Kellan, what is this?” His voice sounded strained, and Kellan sat down next to him, looked at the picture. It was old, a formal portrait of a little girl in a pretty dress, her ankles crossed and her long black curls falling over her shoulder. She was sitting in a chair next to a stone fireplace, and on the mantel of the fireplace was a picture in a heavy gilt frame. It looked like the picture Alexi had showed him in his room, the one he had brought from Russia. What did he say it was called? *Virgin with Peaches*.

“That’s Gram. She was born in Italy, but her family sent her to American just before the war. Hey, that picture looks like yours. Maybe the same artist painted it.”

“Yes, well, he painted lots of pictures. Is this just some odd little coincidence? Hard to believe. Do I look like a fool? How did you know?” Alexi’s voice was different, hard, cynical, and when he looked at Kellan, he could have been looking at a stranger.

Then Kellan could see the anger behind his eyes, and he took a step back. “What is your deal? My grandmother’s sick, okay? Whatever you’re having a snit about, it’s gonna have to wait! Who cares if there was a painting sitting on her mantelpiece in 1940 that looks like yours?”

“It’s the same painting. There could not be two. You really

don't know what it is, do you?"

"I already said that, and guess what? I don't care, either! I've got to get to my grandmother. You mind giving me that?" He held out his hand, and Alexi closed the photo album and gave it to him.

"I have to go, Kellan."

Kellan watched him walk out the door, and it was all he could do not to scream out loud. What the hell just happened? How did they go from *your mouth tastes like honey* to spitting at each other over a photograph that was seventy years old? He shoved the album in the overnight bag and locked the front door behind him. Some snow slid down the back of his neck. He'd forgotten his hat. By the time he got to the hospital, his shoes were soaked through and his toes were cold as icicles.

Gram was in the ICU, with a needle in her hand attached to a bag of IV fluid- *stroke juice*, she called it, when he asked her what it was. "Kellan, I'm just so relieved I have what small bit of my brain is still left! That this was the worst of it. I mean, I have another eye. What if I couldn't think anymore? Or if I had that aphasia? Where you know what you want to say, but the words come out all garbled? I would hate that. It would be the rat poison for sure."

"Gram, please don't talk about rat poison."

She studied him carefully. "What happened? Did something happen with that Russian boy? I thought you liked him."

"It's nothing. Just a misunderstanding."

She settled herself a little more comfortably on the pillow. "Well, then it will be easy to fix. Tell me everything."

Kellan looked at her, let his head fall into his hand. "Gram..."

"You know you want to talk about it. Besides, how much longer will I be here to give you advice? I could pop off any moment! Too much salt in the pasta, and I'm a goner!"

"Okay, well, I don't know what's wrong! I mean, everything was fine, we were getting along, and then he freaks out and splits! He saw this old picture in the album, then next thing I know he's yelling and says *do I look like a fool*, then he storms out!"

"What picture?"

Kellan pulled out the album, showed her the portrait. "How old were you in this picture? Six?"

"Five." She studied it. "So what was it? He doesn't like little girls?"

"No, it was that painting. *Virgin with Peaches*."

Gram took a deep breath. "How did you know it was called that?"

"I've seen it. Alexi told me that was the title."

Gram looked confused. “What do you mean? What did you see?”

Kellan pointed to the photograph. He was getting a little tired of the mystery. “That! I saw that picture. Alexi has it. He brought it from Russia with him.”

Gram stared at him for so long Kellan leaned forward, checked the heart monitor over the bed.

“Kellan, have you ever heard of Michelangelo Merisi?” He shook his head. “Caravaggio.”

Gram fell asleep, and before she closed her eyes, she begged him to leave her in peace and go back to work. Sally was happy to see him, because the snow had kept several cooks from coming in to work.

Caravaggio. No way. After work, he pulled off his apron, noted there was no Alexi at the dumpster, waiting to charm him, and headed over to the library. He pulled out a book with big color prints of Caravaggio’s paintings, and it wasn’t very long before he saw some familiar red curls. It was the same woman, in a painting called Martha and Mary Magdalene. The painting had the same strange light and dark, like there were storm clouds overhead. There was something about the light and dark that really touched him.

Maybe the reason the skin was so beautiful, nearly glowing, was because of the darkness, the contrast. He didn’t know

anything about art, but the paintings, they were beautiful. Sorrowful. He studied a painting called Basket of Fruit. This is what Alexi was going for. His photographs of vegetables had this same air of desperation, of sorrow. Like the beets were going to roll over and weep little red tears.

Kellan went back to his place, took a shower, and when he saw a little passion mark on his chest, he leaned against the shower wall and wept a few quiet tears of his own. Well, he knew from the start that it was going to end badly, but why did it have to end so quickly? Couldn't they have had a little more time, before Alexi got angry and... So what was he so mad about, anyway?

What was with him? Alexi was thin because he didn't have enough food to eat. He didn't know how to sell his art. He was living in a corner of his studio. Why didn't he sell the painting, live on the money forever? Oh, no, he would never sell it. That would be too easy. He had only known him two days, but Kellan already knew Alexi would never walk the easy road. In fact, Alexi would pick the hardest road, the one with lots of nasty sharp rocks, and then take off his shoes!

Maybe he was afraid Kellan would steal it? Or tell someone about it? Why would he think that? Well, they didn't know each other at all, did they? Alexi had invited him into his little cave, showed him his most valuable treasure. It was obvious Kellan didn't know what it was. Then he must have known Gram was going to tell him what it was. What he didn't know was Kellan didn't care if he had a lost Caravaggio masterpiece hanging on his wall.

He didn't want Alexi to worry that his painting was going to be

stolen, or that word was somehow going to get out, and he would be in danger of losing his beautiful Virgin with Peaches. Alexi was something special. The way Kellan had felt, in his company—that was like nothing he'd felt before. Just the idea that it could be like that for him someday, that there might be a man like that out there for him, and he could feel that way again...Feel that tenderness, in another person's touch--that was treasure worth a painting by Caravaggio.

He got dressed, went back to the co-op and got a quart of chicken corn chowder and a couple of rolls. He walked down to Alexi's place, set them outside next to his door with a note that said, *I promise you don't have anything to worry about. I won't tell anyone. And thanks for last night.*

When he walked into Gram's hospital room, she was wearing her pink nightgown, and her hair had been brushed out. He smelled some lily of the valley powder, and noted with amazement she had put a dab of lipstick on. There were tears on her cheeks, and next to her bed, propped up on the nightstand, was *Virgin with Peaches*. "Why are you crying, Gram? And what's this doing here?"

"I'm not crying, darling. It's just that sometimes life is so full, you know? Joy and sorrow walking hand in hand. The doctors say the vision in my eye is gone. Gone for good. The other one is okay for now." She turned so she could see the painting, and they looked at it together, the pure golden light from the sky, the shade from the tree, the girl's face, so pale and innocent, and the rich color of the peach in her hand. "He said he wanted me to see it again. He was worried about my eyes, that I

wouldn't have a chance to see it later." She turned to him, reached out for his hand. "Kellan, you need to take it back to him. Wrap it up in a pillowcase so no one sees it. Then when I get home tomorrow, you bring him over, so I can thank him. He said he made a mistake, and hurt you." She reached out, ran her finger along the edge of the canvas. "I'm afraid I wept like a girl when I saw it, so silly, and then he cried, too. Go on, now. He's waiting for you."

Kellan wrapped Virgin with Peaches up in two pillowcases, since it was starting to snow again, and he walked through downtown, looking at the interesting brick walls, until he came to Alexi's warehouse. His feet were cold, and he was sick of walking in the snow. It had lost all its charm. The soup and the note were gone from the doorstep. He knocked on the door, and Alexi pulled it open. "Kellan. Come in."

Kellan handed the painting over, and Alexi pulled the damp pillowcases off. "Let me put it in the kitchen to dry. Thank you for the soup."

"No problem." He leaned against the door, wondering if he could just leave, avoid the awkwardness to come. He was really cold. "I'm gonna head out, okay?"

Alexi came out of the cramped little studio and held out his hand. "Please, Kellan."

"Look, it's cool. I really appreciate what you did for Gram, and I don't want you to..."

Alexi pulled him into his arms, kissed him, and the whole

strange stew of feelings between the two bubbled up, regret and apologies, and lust and hope and tenderness, mouths sweet as honey and gingerbread cookies, and Alexi pulled him toward his bed, murmuring against his mouth, *stay with me, Kellan*, and *I'm sorry, I'm so sorry*, and then Kellan was weeping, and Alexi kissed his tears away.

And the Virgin watched them, a warm summer peach in her hand, watched love fill the room.