

Nothing Else Matters...

Rhys Ford

“I swear to God, Dawson,” I shouted over the gunfire. “If you get me killed before my own damned wedding, I’m going to come back and haunt you every time you have sex!”

“Since I’m married to your damned brother, pretty sure if I get you killed, I won’t be having sex ever again, asshole!” My best friend yelled back, grabbing at the back of my head to shove me down. “Stay down. They’re coming back around!”

When he wasn’t having sex with Ichi, my younger brother, or beating me up at JoJo’s Boxing Gym, Bobby spent most of his free time lifting weights or coaching young rugby players on how to bulk up and increase their stamina. He practiced what he preached and for someone nearly twenty years older than me, there was power in those muscular arms of his. Okay, even if he were my age or younger, his strength was plenty impressive and that shove to the back of my head? Brought my nose right down into the rough cracked asphalt.

I was never one to worry about my looks but something told me if I showed up at the altar with road rash all over my face, Jae was going to make me wish I had been shot in the middle of Chinatown.

The side of the minivan we’d chosen to take cover behind was taking hard hits, the metal punched through with round after round of whatever it was the two men across the street were shooting. Around us, the sidewalks were nearly empty, having moments ago been sparsely populated by early morning shoppers looking for a bargain among the stalls set up in a side alley.

Our one almost perfect escape route had been cut off by an old woman who’d taken one look out of her store, spotted what was going on and hastily rolled down the steel door, sealing herself in. Or possibly giving herself enough time to skip out of the back entrance and down the alleyway to get a cup of coffee. Either way, Bobby and I weren’t going to be able to cut through her shop and get out of the line of fire.

“Do you even know these guys?” I yelled into the road I lay face down on. The street sweepers hadn’t been by in years. Either that or someone nearby was still stocking orange Sno-bals and blue-papered cigarettes because that’s what was keeping me company against the curb.

“Might have arrested them a few times,” Bobby confessed. “Or maybe double crossed them when I worked undercover. Does it really fucking matter now, Princess?”

Sure, my stint with the LAPD lasted long enough for me to gain a few enemies but Bobby seemed to have gone out of his way to piss people off when he wore a badge. Okay, so he pissed people off long after he retired too but chances are, the two guys in hoodies and floppy pants weren't ticked off because he sniped their boyfriends at a club. And while those days were long over following his marriage — or at least they *should* be over — there wasn't any guy worth killing over.

Okay, maybe Jae but if I didn't get out of Chinatown in the next hour or so, the angry guys with guns would be the least of my worries.

Seeing as I didn't want to be found dead lying in the middle of a pile of garbage, I pulled myself up, lying as low as I could to keep out of the way. I couldn't hear any more shots being aimed our way but I also didn't hear any sirens. The panicked rush of screams dwindled down to a murmur, mostly spits of Mandarin from a partially open window on the second floor of a nearby phone shop.

“Give me your gun,” Bobby growled at me, shoving me back away from the curb. He looked pissed, not that I blamed him. I mean, shit, we *were* getting shot at. Pity I was about to disappoint the hell out of him.

“I don't have a gun.”

I was right.

He looked disappointed.

And pissed.

“What?” The veins on his temple bulged and his scowl deepened, eyebrows knitting in tight. The bullets began again, less of a barrage and more of a few pot shots aimed at what was left of the minivan's windows. “Why the hell don't you have a gun?”

“I am trying to get married, asshole!” I screamed back, scrambling up to my knees to crouch down as close to the vehicle as possible. “Remember? Came here to get my damned wedding present for Jae?”

“Who the hell orders a camera lens for a present?” Bobby grabbed me, running his hand down my chest then diving into the pockets of my leather jacket. “A knife? Anything? What's this?”

“My house keys.” His hand went lower. “That's my phone. You go down any more and Ichi's going to kill both of us.”

The sound of tires drowned out whatever it was Bobby said and finally the scream of sirens hit the air. I wasn't sure what was more embarrassing... being a private investigator being rescued by the cops or nearly screaming like a startled hyena when the old woman from the shop behind us burst out of her door wielding a short machete.

The first thwack of the blade down onto the sidewalk missed my crotch by a few inches. I was thankful for the boxer briefs Jae snuck into my underwear drawer, my boxers mysteriously disappearing one by one until I noticed. The snug fabric kept everything tucked up against me but my jeans took the hit, tearing above the knee when the tip of the machete snagged the denim. I jerked my leg up, trying to roll out of the way when she followed through with another strike, nearly taking off my left shoulder.

“Jesus, woman!” Bobby grabbed at her, his fingers nearly closing over her wrist but she was spry, a wiry thin woman with a bony strength I could admire from my less than safe distance a foot away. “We weren't the ones shooting at ... stop trying to kill me!”

He finally got a hold of her, wrapping his fingers in her thin floral shift but she shimmied away, tearing herself free. She swung the long blade wildly about, nearly clipping his head and I scrambled up to my feet as quickly as I could, making a grab for her right arm. Bobby's elbow caught the old woman on the chin, rocking her head back and her grey-shot black hair twisted partially out of its bun, long strands unspooling around her thin, outraged features as she snarled back at him. A drop of blood edged down one of her pinched nostrils and she spat out a mouthful of pink-foamed saliva onto the dirty sidewalk, her face flushed with anger.

Nearly two feet shorter than Bobby, she took advantage of her diminutive stature and balled up her fist, cranking her left arm back just as I wrenched the machete from her right hand. Twirling about, she screamed with a furious rage I'd only ever heard before from a hamster stuck in an empty toilet paper roll and punched Bobby right in the nuts, yanking herself out of arms length and leaving me standing there with the machete in-hand and a dumbstruck expression on my face. She and I stood transfixed, a mismatched High Noon brawl of an armed six foot tall former cop and a toothpick of a Chinese woman with a bloodied face and a territory she was going to defend to the death while Bobby writhed on the filthy sidewalk, clutching his pearls.

Which looked as bad as it sounded when the cops finally pulled up, drew their guns and told me to get my face on the ground with my hands behind my head.

“I cannot believe you got arrested,” Scarlet hissed at me through the bars, her gaze a hot molten brown behind her long lashes. “Before your *wedding* day?!”

“Shit, you marrying her?” The large man inexplicably named Ralph muttered behind me. “Because hell, you’re a dumb ass for ending up here. She’s hot.”

Scarlet was a timeless Pinoy beauty, older than me by an indeterminate number of years but with her silken golden brown skin, luminous eyes, and trim, supple figure, she’d brought more than one man to his knees with a single glance and ghost of a smile. She favoured a classic Hepburn look — more Audrey than Katherine — with the occasional dip into curve hugging glamorous frocks, playing up her comeliness up with a deft play of makeup and a coquettish slink. She kept her long black hair in chignons, leaving it loose for special occasions or pulled back into a ponytail during the times she helped Jae in our back yard garden.

Today it was pinned back with a gold clip, her shoulders held back and her chin up when she strolled down the cell block hall with a rapid clip of her expensive heels on its cheap linoleum floor. She’d come to rescue me — and maybe Bobby — from the LAPD’s clutches in a pair of black skinny jeans, a white t-shirt and a red leather jacket with a sinful mouth painted as crimson as her jacket. Scarlet had every guy’s attention as soon as the door opened and if I were a stupider man and possessed a huge death wish, I’d have been more than slightly interested in her as well.

Mostly because I was gay and well, Scarlet was a guy.

Or rather, *kathoe*, a beautiful and graceful man-at-birth living his best in fluid third gender state and flipping pronouns as he choose. To me, Scarlet was *nuna*, Jae’s adopted older sister and the person who saved him from a depraved slice of Korean society where he’d almost been passed around until sucked dry of life. So while Scarlet was beautiful no matter how he or she presented on any particular day, she was also the long-time lover of a very powerful Korean businessman who could probably order to have my head sawed off with a piece of dental floss if the thought ever crossed his mind.

So looking at Scarlet with anything other than a brotherly interest was just plain stupid. I probably wasn’t the sharpest or luckiest corkscrew in the drawer, I knew what wine bottles I could stick myself into and Scarlet was clearly not on the menu in any way, shape, or form.

I also loved Jae too much. Hurting him would kill me. I’d already scraped my life back together after so much pain and loss. He’d stumbled into my world with no intention of ever falling in love with me, fighting our attraction every step of the way and I’d been patient, letting him decide how far he wanted to go, how much of himself he would give to me.

Because I was that lost... I was so stupid, crazy in love with him I would have taken anything he’d given me. Anything. Instead, he’d given me his heart and told me not to break it.

And I had no intention of doing so.

“*Nuna*, I swear to all that is holy,” I murmured, holding up my hand in some ad hoc Boy Scout salute. “I did not start any of this shit. We were just—”

“I know what you were just doing,” she cut me off, waving her hand at the bemused cop standing at the end of the hall. “I’ve heard all about it from your idiot best man.”

“Which one? I’ve got two of them,” I teased, giving her what I hoped was my best pirate-smuggler bad boy smile. From the flat look on her face, it did little to charm her. “Hey, if Mike hadn’t been busy finishing stuff up at the office, he could have been right in here with me. Seriously wasn’t my fault.”

“It never is, Cole-ah,” Scarlett replied with a bit of a snip to her voice, moving out of the way so the cop could get to the door. “What the hell were the two of you thinking? Hitting an old woman. And if you’re lucky, that ice pack Bobby’s sitting on in the waiting area will bring that swelling down or he’s not going to be walking straight much less down the aisle at your wedding.”

“Tell me they impounded your truck so it’s here in the holding yard.” I rubbed at my face, the stink of jail sticking to the inside of my nostrils. “Then at least we’d have a ride back to Chinatown.”

Considering I was allegedly on the right side of the law, it was astonishing at how much time I’d spent inside that particular institution. There was a particular smell to incarceration. Not prison which came with its own unique blend of aromas but jail itself, that pit stop between freedom and hard time. It was the slosh bucket of the seven sins, awash with puke, fear and bravado. Packed in tight with little room for long movements, men circled like guppies in a fish tank, watching the top of the water for the net to take them out and any larger shadows edging closer, a sure sign of a predator moving into their midst.

It was good to get out of there although from the sounds of things, Ralph made some really poor life choices he was going to have to live with for a long time. I left him with my contact information, promising him if he was able to shake loose the goat-napping charges, I’d work to help him find his uncle. One of the guys in the cell with us snorted loudly and within a second, a full-scale brawl had me backing down the hallway, eager to follow Scarlet out into the sunlight. Once I was reunited with Bobby, Scarlet dismissed us with a wave of her hand and after asking her driver to bring around the town car, she told us in no uncertain terms what she thought about us landing in trouble.

Every bit of the hard-scrabble young Filipino boy who’d clawed his way out of his own prisons emerged and my back snapped in straight. There was a lot of steel in Scarlet, a survivor who’d

learned to love and nurture but there was never any questioning the strength it took to get her to where she was.

“Be there, Cole-ah,” she growled with a rare fierceness, peeling back the layers of sophisticated poise she draped herself in. “Disappoint Jae-Min today and you will spend what little time you have for the rest of your life regretting every crack you make in his heart. I love you — very much — but sometimes, love isn’t enough to save someone. And it won’t save *you*.”

“Nuna, you know me.” I’d protested, holding my hands up in surrender. Not because I was afraid Scarlet would hurt me but her driver and bodyguard both carried very wicked looking guns under their suit jackets and they’d stiffened up like old hunting hounds catching a whiff of duck in the air. “If zombies bite me and I’m sloughing off pieces of my body, I’ll be there. Nothing is going to keep me from marrying him.”

“Nothing but your lack of common sense,” she muttered, giving Bobby a stabbing glare. “And you, don’t make me regret taking you out of there. You are on borrowed time, dongsaeng, both of you.”

She left us in a chatter of heels, the afternoon sun smearing butter and apricot jam light through the clouds. Her car pulled away from the curb before it dawned on me we were without a vehicle, leading me to pray the cops somehow dragged Bobby’s truck on some magical mystery tour and it was waiting for us in the impound yard like some dancing pony on a side quest.

“No, they didn’t impound my truck so though I don’t want to go back down there, we’ve got to.” Bobby rubbed at his flat stomach, still a bit green around the gills. I’d been kicked in the nuts more than a few times in my life, most of them by Mike my older brother during one of our childhood fights so I knew the residual wave of sick lingering in the back of Bobby’s visceral memories. “Let’s make it fast. You heard what Scarlet said. Our necks are wound out for the axe if we don’t show up on time.”

“Just one problem there, Dawson,” I said with an apologetic grin. “I still have to pick up Jae’s present but if we don’t hustle, the shop’s going to be closed and I’m going to be fucked.”

“Pretty sure there’s only one thing Jae really wants from you for your wedding and that’s to be there.” He smirked, slapping me on the shoulder. “But sure, come on, once more unto the breach, Princess, once more.”

“That’s a lot of coin for a bit of mirrors and plastic.” Bobby’s grumbling hadn’t stopped since I’d begged the shop owner to open up for a few minutes so I could pick up the special order I’d placed nearly two months ago. “I mean, how many cameras does the guy need? And why didn’t he get it for himself? You’re swimming in money.”

There was no explaining the distinction between equipment to Dawson. He found things he liked and stuck with them, changing up only when something caught his eye and needs. It was something he and Ichi shared. Their love of loud, teeth-rattling motorcycles and hedonism drew them together. They loved to push themselves to the edge of things, thrilling in the free-fall of an uncontrolled roller coaster drop and laughing maniacally when they survived the experience to come out the other side. I hadn't seen it in the beginning, blinded more by the confusion of two people I held in my heart as brothers hooking up and then marrying.

All told, it was a perplexing time until I took a really good hard look at who they were and what they meant to one another.

And damn it, the bastards fit.

“Because Jae won't spend any money he didn't earn on his photography equipment. It's a thing for him and I don't push.” Like comprehending how Bobby and Ichi worked, it'd taken me a bit to understand why Jae refused to splurge and buy anything he wanted, even as I encouraged him to do so. It wasn't pride, per se but a dignity. He wanted to carve his own path into any mountain standing in his way and the best thing I could do for him was to respect that. “It's his, dude. But special occasions mean I can sneak a few things into his kit bag and since our wedding happens to hit just as this stuff dropped into the market, I can excuse it as a present.”

“Yeah, maybe he'll do the same and get you a Kevlar vest,” Bobby chortled, laughing harder when I flipped him off. “Or pajamas. That's something you need. Bullet-proof jammies. The kind with the feet on them.”

“I can't believe Ichi fell in love with you.” It was a common refrain, usually one I reserved for when I didn't have a comeback. “Someone must have dropped him on his head or something. That's the only thing that makes sense.”

“He married me because we...” Bobby trailed off, his knuckles going white as he gripped the truck's steering wheel. His gaze softened, staring out over a sea of bumper-to-bumper cars wending their way through the freeway's afternoon traffic. “First time I got married, I thought I was doing the right thing, you know? Marrying a woman would make a man out of me. I'd forget how much I wanted to bury myself into some twinkling eyed pretty boy and live the American dream, complete with the kid, a dog and that white picket fence. I made everyone around me miserable. Hell, I was a miserable asshole myself and that twinkling eyed pretty boy just became more alluring because I couldn't have him. So I cheated... on my wife, on myself, hell on every bit of my life until I broke everything I had.

“This time around, I wasn't looking for a happily ever after. You know me, Princess. Last thing I wanted was to wake up next to the same guy for the rest of my life and then, bam!” He smacked the dashboard, a hard solid thwack with his flattened hand. “There was Ichiro, daring me to be

better. Daring me to be someone he'd take home and keep. All of a sudden, it seemed like life was too damned short and every minute I spent without him was like liquid gold slipping out from between my fingers. That's how you know when you're in love, kid. When in the middle of a freaking argument about a couch, you realize it doesn't really matter if the damned thing is brown leather or black suede, you just want to have the damned couch so you can sit on it together and not waste any of those minutes you've been given."

"Notice the couch is brown leather, though," I remarked, pointedly ignoring the misty gleam in his eyes.

"Yeah well, he pointed out that it's easier to wipe off after a long night," Bobby said with a leer. "And if there's one thing I really love about your baby brother, it's that he's practical as hell."

"You ready to do this, little brother?"

If I wasn't so nervous, I'd have mocked Mike calling *me* little. He'd inherited some stocky Japanese ancestor's build and features, including a bristle of hair no amount of product could tame. I'd lost my other best man, Bobby to his husband, hopefully to check on if there was enough wrapping paper for Jae's gift. Mo's wife whose name I knew quite well appeared to have fallen into a bubble of amnesia for me because at the exact moment she offered to take care of it, everything I knew about her, her family and possibly the alpaca she'd rescued out of a raging river in Peru slipped from my brain.

And if that wasn't bad enough, I couldn't for the life of me remember my niece's name either but I wouldn't have to really worry about that until after the ceremony although I did grunt approvingly at her fluffy princess dress when she and Mad Dog came by to show off her rose-petal scattering skills.

I didn't even know we were going to *have* scattered rose petals.

Hell, if it wasn't for Mike, I wouldn't have even been sure I'd made it to the right place.

"Why the hell am I nervous?" I paced about, feeling the carpet tickle the soles of my feet. Staring down, I realized my pinky toes were tucked right into the curve of the one next to it, something I hadn't noticed before. "Why are my feet naked? Did you know my feet were naked? I'm commando right now."

"Cole, come here." Mike held his hand out to me then grabbed my wrist when I stared at his fingers as if I'd never seen them before. "You need to breathe. You're about to pass out."

Easy for him to say. He had working lungs and was already married.

I said as much as soon as my ass hit the chair in the room they'd given us as a place to get ready for the wedding.

“Suppose I screw this up, Mike?” There were wasps buzzing about in my head, unsettling my thoughts. On the other side of the expanse, tucked away in a room similar to the one we were in, Jae probably was asking his friend Ivo if he was doing the right thing by marrying me. “Jae’s... he helped me find myself again. Without him—”

“You two found each other,” my brother said, sliding a nearby ottoman over to sit on. After parking himself in front of me, Mike grabbed at my right foot, lifting it up to work a sock over my toes. “Shut up and listen to me because I know you’re losing it right now because you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared about marrying him,” I refuted, exhaling hard enough for my chest to hurt. “Hell, I think I fell in love with him the moment I saw him.”

“You fell in lust. Which isn’t a bad thing because if anyone needed to get his blood pumping again, it was you, little brother.” Mike tugged the sock up then grabbed my other foot. “It took you a bit longer to fall in love and I had some worries about him. Don’t punch me in the face. Because I know you’re thinking about it. But the day Jae told Dad to go fuck himself — that time at my house — I knew he was the one you needed in your life. So, since I have you here, and our father’s a piece of crap not worth the stamp to even tell him you’ve found happiness, I guess it’s up to me to tell you about what you need to know about being married.”

We were both shoed and suited, cradling bottles of ice cold hard cider when Mike finally decided to man up and share what little wisdom Maddy imparted on him after she put a gold ring on his finger. I couldn’t hear anything outside of the room and the windows’ draperies were thick, heavy brocade, keeping the parting day from seeping in. The giant grandfather clock by the door began to toll the hour, warning me I only had about an hour and a half left of bachelorhood but my stomach didn’t drop in fear.

I was still terrified of screwing Jae’s life up but I’d calmed down enough to realize he was willingly jumping into the fray with me.

At least we would descend into the madness together and that seemed like a pretty good way to go.

The cider also didn’t hurt.

“Here’s the thing about marriage,” Mike began, resting his arms on his legs to lean towards me. “No one knows what the hell they’re doing.”

“Not exactly the best start to a pep talk, big brother,” I pointed out. The cider was a bright sting of apple and tang on my tongue, numbing a bit of my mouth before going down. “Remind me to give the kiddo the birds and the bees talk when she’s older. God knows what she’ll walk away from if you’re the one doing it.”

“She’s never going to have sex. Not even a kiss,” he retorted, stabbing at my chest with a stiff finger. “She’s going to be a nun.”

“You’re not even Catholic.” I rubbed at the spot, smirking at the guilty flush over Mike’s cheek. “Sides, Mad Dog will probably make sure she’s set right. She gets you on course. All the time.”

“See, that’s what I’m talking about. Marriage isn’t just something you do once.” He reached over and rubbed at the spot he’d poked. “You say I do every time you wake up. Each time he does something that gets on your nerves and all the times when he smiles at you. That’s what marriage is really about. Committing to those shitty moments as well as the good ones. You’re going to have to learn to say I do over and over again. And mean it. Because the moment you don’t, that’s when you’re in trouble. Marriage is work. Don’t let anyone lie to you. But it’s worth it. Both of you are. Now finish that thing and let’s get you out there. It’s time to say I do.”

§

“You nervous, boy?” Claudia’s hat bobbed and weaved about as she talked, a veritable Muhammad Ali of haberdashery. “Because you look like you’re about to pass out.”

She’d come dressed to the nines, tens and elevens, a deep red sparkling dress cinched about her voluptuous curves with a dazzle of bezel-set diamonds strung about her neck. The bling matched the one we’d given Scarlet, gifts for the women who stood by us through thick and thin, and the ones walking us down the aisle as the mothers of the grooms.

Stuck in an alcove while guests milled about, streaming into the Majestic’s long hall to find a seat for the event of my life, we were cozened up tight, hidden away from Jae and Scarlet in the opposite niche. They were speaking Ilocano, or at least I guessed they were. Maybe Korean. I couldn’t tell anymore through the buzz of people chatting as if today were nothing more than a movie they were going to see at the end of their work day.

Today was everything to me and the cider in my belly was telling me drinking it down quickly was perhaps a bigger mistake than punching at an old Chinese woman hacking at my best friend with a machete.

“You’re going to be fine,” Claudia reassured me in a tumbled molasses motherly tone she normally reserved for the times when I’d been shot or did something so incredibly stupid she felt like she needed to tell me to inhale or exhale before I suffocated to death. “You’re doing a good thing today. Waited a long time to see you get this kind of happy and thank God I am still alive to

see it. Thought you two were going to take forever and a day to get here. He's good for you. And you're good for him."

"I can see the one but sure as hell not the other," I retorted, dodging the playful slap she aimed at my shoulder. "And this isn't God's house. I can swear."

"Man of God is in there waiting to tie your souls together for all eternity. Close enough." She had a gleam in her eye, one that promised a good mouth-washing with a bar of Ivory soap and I wasn't too big for her to give me one. "And definitely the other as well. You taught that boy he was worth being loved. You've given him the greatest gift you have and that's your heart and before you say that it's nothing, I'm going to remind you I know exactly how great it is because you've given it to me as well. So I know how precious it is. And there's the music. Now, let's march on in there so everyone inside can get a damned good look at my fine hat."

I didn't remember much past seeing Jae walk out of the alcove with Scarlet on his arm. The world faded away, leaving me in a swirl of stars with the rushing song of the sun roaring in my ears. My feet found their purpose, gliding Claudia along an aisle lined with familiar faces and beneath massive circular pendant lights draped with a waterfall of crystals, flashing rainbow streams suspended high above our heads. Jae walked in front of us, Scarlet whispering something into his ear and his laugh carried back to me, wrapping its silvery threads around my heart and squeezing me tight.

It dawned on me right then that I'd be hearing that laugh for the rest of my life and in that moment, I could only dream of it carrying me beyond, cradling me even as I dropped from existence. We would be there in each other's twilights, probably bickering over the butter dish being left on the counter or being put into the fridge, something we disagreed vehemently about. As much as I hated cold butter, he'd won that argument after I'd left the butter out and eventually the sun found it, slugging it across the counter and onto the floor.

Mike was right. Sometimes it was the little arguments that made the big issues seem small. And the easy solutions like a second butter dish wasn't something actually worth doing because it was fun to tease one another... and Jae's neck tasted delicious when smeared with the butter I got all over my hands from cleaning up the counter.

There were deep pink rose petals flung into small piles along the aisle, evidence my very young niece took her first familial obligation very seriously. Faces on either side of me were a blur, my existence focused on three points; the minister at the end of the walk, Claudia's hand clenching my arm and Jae's back as he led me towards our marriage.

I wasn't sure if the end of the aisle came too soon or took forever to get to but the last row of chairs were there and I accepted a hug and kiss from Scarlet and Claudia before helping them sit. Turning back around, I was unsure of what I was supposed to do next then Jae held his hand out to me, his smile wistful and sweet, and my path became quite clear.

His fingers were warm, the embrace of his hand on mine a reassuring caress and we both took the final steps towards what awaited us.

There were murmurs from the men we'd chosen to stand up with us, witnesses to our greatest folly and deep love telling us they were proud of us, happy we were there and in Ivo's case, congratulating Jae on finally dragging me in front of a preacher.

Then no one else existed but the man I'd fallen head over heels for. Standing in the rolling drone of the minister's opening, I ran my knuckles across his cheek, luxuriating in the lush feel of his skin on mine. Jae tilted his head, brushing his mouth across my finger. His lips parted, curving into a ghost of a smile then he bit me, lightly digging his sharp white teeth into my flesh.

"Hey." My protest was weak but he let go, giving me a full grin. "Worse than your cat."

"Our cat," he corrected then his gaze softened, his reserve melting away, stripping Jae down to a vulnerability normally only seen when we were alone. This was the man I held during tragedies and triumphs, the one who shook in my arms when we made love and the one who I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. "Saranghae-yo, agi."

It was so silly. An odd phrasing of formal and nonsensical Korean mashed up and molded by my utter lack of language skills and well-meaning intentions. But it was ours. Much like the cat, the dog, the house and all of the people surrounding us. We were taking a step towards our future, a new set of adventures we'd face hand in hand.

And I for one couldn't wait.

"Saranghae-yo, agi." I leaned down to touch my forehead to his, holding the world at bay for just a moment longer. The preacher's question punched through the serenity we'd woven around us and I whispered into the space where only Jae and I existed, "For as long as we both shall live...and beyond...I do."