

*Excerpt from Patchouli for Christmas by Bren Christopher. Published by Loose Id in ©2011.*

*Sensitive?* Was that the polite word for it back in her day?

Michael still fumed the next morning as he got off the subway and headed to the building in trendy SoHo, where all the trendy artists lived in their big, trendy, artists' lofts. He paused outside the building and took a deep breath.

He couldn't figure out why the comment bothered him so much. Not because of the delicate reference to being gay. Mrs. Kendrick seemed to love her grandson regardless of his being "sensitive." No. It was the implication that Michael wasn't good enough to have anything but the most professional relationship with her grandson. Well, he might not be rich, but he owned his own business, and business was good. Especially this time of year.

Or maybe he had it wrong. There had been the crack about being experienced. Where had that come from? She couldn't know about his rare trips to the club to pick up a one-nighter when he became desperate for a little company.

Did she really think he would try to seduce her innocent Jude? He snorted. He already didn't like the guy and didn't have time for a relationship anyway. Not with a business to run.

It stung, though. He couldn't deny that. He genuinely liked and respected Mrs. Kendrick, and he'd thought it mutual.

*Let it go, Michael.* He went in to give the doorman his name.

No, he wasn't expected. Of course not. This, despite the early-morning phone call from Mrs. Kendrick telling him to go to her grandson's loft.

"Ring him for me, will you?" he asked the doorman. "Tell him his grandmother sent me."

The doorman picked up the phone and spoke. Then he gave Michael a nod.

Michael took the elevator up to the loft. He found the right apartment and stood in front of the door for a moment, not at all eager to spend his morning trying to sort through a bunch of paintings to find the least depressing ones. Especially under the hostile gaze of the artist. Reluctantly, he knocked.

The door opened. The man looked like his paintings--angry.

And he smelled like patchouli. *God help us all.* Michael squeezed his eyes shut.

When he opened them again, the dark brown eyes were still frowning. At least, what he could see of those eyes certainly didn't seem happy, half-hidden as they were by an unruly tumble of

chestnut hair. Light red-brown fuzz dusted his jaw. Brown and white wooden beads closely circled his throat, strung on a--good Lord--was that a hemp necklace?

*You're a professional. You can do this.* He stuck out his hand. "Michael Cove, of Cove's Premiere Events."

"I know." The man took his hand as if touching a snake, then dropped it quickly. "My grandmother doesn't think I'm competent to pick out a few paintings, even though I painted them and I know which are good and which ones suck."

"I'm sure that's not what she--"

The man turned on his heel--his bare heel--and retreated into the apartment. He wore a pair of loose linen pants that only came to midcalf and a rumpled T-shirt. He appeared to have just woken up.

Michael closed the door and followed him. "If this is a bad time, I can come back. But she told me I should come this morning."

"She didn't call. Probably because she knew I'd tell her to forget the whole idea. My stuff is not suitable to show at a damned Christmas party."

*Amen to that.* Michael managed to keep from saying it out loud as he surveyed the loft. A few unframed paintings hung on the brick walls, but many more rested on the wood floor, propped up against the brick. They seemed to be in various stages of completion. Large windows let in the crisp morning light. An easel stood near one window, and a long worktable held paints and brushes.

Jude made for the open kitchen running along the north side of the apartment. Michael trailed him, gazing at the paintings as he went. Some were like the angry rock picture in Mrs. Kendrick's study. They might be depressing, but at least he could tell what they were. But many were abstracts. Hell, he couldn't even figure out if some of them were finished or still works in progress.

Unlike his grandmother's place, Jude's apartment held no holiday decorations, unless they were hidden in the rooms blocked off behind curtains of beads spaced around the large open living area. But he doubted it. No Christmas spirit here. No pine scent. Just the smell of patchouli and paint and something acrid--probably whatever the artist used to clean his brushes.

Jude stood at the island counter and poured from a teapot. "Tea?" He didn't wait for an answer. He turned to pull a second cup from the cupboard.

The Greenpeace T-shirt he wore was a couple of sizes too large. Did the shirt belong to a boyfriend? Jude wasn't a big man, but he was solidly built, his arms muscled and tight. The shirt slipped off one shoulder to reveal smooth skin and a graceful curve of neck. To his dismay, Michael found himself wondering if that sweet-looking skin would taste like...

"Sugar?"

"What?" Michael jumped.

Jude repeated with exaggerated slowness. "Do...you...want...sugar?"

Oh. In the tea. Right. Michael tried not to let the condescending tone get to him. "Yes, please," he answered, determined to display the utmost professional politeness.

That lasted until he took a sip of the tea. He practically spat it out. "Jesus Christ," he choked, "if you don't want me here, just say so. You don't have to kill me."

"Red clover and yellow dock. Good blood cleanser and a little bit of a tension reducer." He looked Michael up and down. "Seems like you could use that."

Michael stared at him in disbelief. *He* was the cranky one. Except now he seemed to be struggling to keep the corner of his mouth from turning up. If he weren't careful, a smile might actually crack that scowl.

"Maybe it needs more sugar," Jude suggested. "It's turbinado," he added, as if that made a difference.

Michael carefully set the cup aside. "I don't think that will help."

Jude took another sip. "It's an acquired taste."

The artist gazed pensively down into the liquid. Was he reading his future or something? Maybe Michael could start going through the paintings without Jude's help. Except it all looked equally depressing to him, so how could he pick anything out?

Michael fidgeted. It felt warm in the apartment, and the man hadn't offered to take his jacket. He pulled it off and searched for some place to hang it. "Do you mind...?"

Jude wrinkled his nose. "You can put that dead animal skin on the hook by the door."

Michael barely turned away in time to hide his grimace. "Dead animal skin," he muttered. He'd paid an arm and a leg for that damned jacket.

After hanging the jacket, he rolled up the sleeves of the black silk shirt he'd worn for the day. He'd decided to forgo the tie. No meetings with new clients today. Just arrangements with the florists for an anniversary party tonight and the final meeting with the entertainment for Mrs. Kendrick's event. He'd go home and change before heading over to the anniversary party to manage the decorations and get everything set up.

Michael walked down the row of paintings. The artist followed him. They stopped in front of a large canvas propped against the wall. An old-fashioned, dilapidated gas station, reminiscent of

'50s style. It stood deserted on a lonely highway running through the open desert. No people. No trees. No green at all. Depressing. He sighed.

Jude crossed his arms. The scowl was firmly back in place. "Like I said, none of them are right to show at a party."

"Oh, I don't know." Michael cocked his head, studying the picture. "We could hang it right in the foyer by the tree. Throw some red and green garlands around the frame. Maybe spotlight it with a colored strobe." He glanced at the artist. The scowl had disappeared, replaced by a mouth hanging open in dismay. The expression made him look young, and for a moment, Michael caught a glimpse of the vulnerability his grandmother seemed worried about.

Michael struggled to hold back his smile, but it only took Jude a second to catch on.

"Oh, aren't you a funny guy." He sounded annoyed, but his expression had relaxed, and his arms were no longer folded defensively.

Michael held his hands up in surrender. "I agree, all right? I don't know a thing about art. But I know about setting a mood for a party, and it's not going to be easy with these. I don't see that we have a choice. When your grandmother decides she wants something, she gets it."

Jude nodded. "She's used to having things her way. That's for sure."

Ah. Common ground. Nothing like a mutual enemy to bring people together.

But Jude was no dummy. He quirked an eyebrow. "You're pretty good at this, aren't you?"

Michael widened his eyes, giving his best innocent look. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

Jude snorted. Michael found it disarmingly cute instead of annoying. Okay, that was bad.

"What the hell," Jude said. "Let's get this over with. I'll pick out the ones I think are best. You'll have to figure out what to do with them."

They spent the next hour flipping through the canvases and setting aside a dozen. Jude selected his best work, and Michael tried to match the sizes with the space they had to work with in the living and hall areas of the penthouse.

Michael asked a few questions about various works as they looked through the paintings. Jude explained the background of some of the pictures and the techniques he'd used. In his element, and at last having accepted the inevitability of caving to his grandmother's wishes, he became a younger, slightly more relaxed version of the rude Jude on the phone. And he did seem young. Probably not long out of college.

Michael found himself surprised by his interest in Jude's explanations. He asked about the painting of the run-down old gas station. "What about this one? Did you see it out west somewhere?"

Jude leaned past him to straighten the picture. His arm brushed Michael's, leaving behind a slight tingling sensation and a rash of goose bumps on Michael's skin. This close, the patchouli smelled stronger, but Michael also detected a unique scent belonging to Jude alone. His breath caught at his own unexpected reaction to the brief contact.

Jude didn't seem to notice, Michael thought with relief. At least, he went right on speaking. "Yes, in Arizona." He smiled at the memory. "My parents loved to go on long car trips when I was a kid. We drove around in a beat-up old van. I took a photo of that gas station and painted the picture from the photo."

"Do you still go on car trips with them?"

Jude's smile faded. "No," he answered quietly. "They died in a car accident a few years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Michael said in dismay. "That was a stupid question. Your grandmother never mentioned your parents, so I should have guessed they weren't around anymore."

"You couldn't have known." Jude didn't look at him. His attention was on the picture. His hand lingered along the top of the canvas.

"I'm sorry," Michael said again. "I mean, about your parents, not just about my big mouth." Jude stood so close. Michael touched the back of his hand in sympathy--a brief brush of his fingers. Jude surprised him by turning his hand up to give Michael's a quick squeeze before pulling away.

"Thanks," Jude said. "So do you think we should include this one?"

"Definitely."

They went back to work and had just finished when the doorbell rang.

Jude glanced at the wall clock. "They're early."

He crossed to the door and opened it. A middle-aged woman with long brown hair shot with streaks of gray entered, carrying a covered dish. A bald man with a bushy beard followed her.

"Hi, Betsy." Jude gave the woman a kiss on the cheek and then shook the man's hand. "Good to see you, Ron."

He took the dish from the woman and carried it into the kitchen.

"I know we're a little early," Betsy said. "I need to warm up the casserole, and we thought we could help you set up the chairs."

Michael took that as his cue to leave. It appeared Jude was about to host some kind of get-together, and they were done anyway, at least for the moment.

The woman spotted him. "Who's your friend, Jude? Is he staying for the meeting?"

Jude seemed to think that was funny for some reason. He gave a genuine grin for the first time. "Yes, Michael, why don't you stay? Betsy and Ron are my downstairs neighbors. We're having a meeting of our local animal rescue group, and Betts made a wonderful tofu and dandelion green casserole for us. You must try it."

Teasing bastard. As if.

"I'm afraid I have a few things I need to do today."

Betsy frowned. "Nonsense. What could be more important than alleviating the suffering of feral animals in our city?"

Was this Jude's idea of payback? He certainly seemed to think it was funny. Michael would have been irritated at the way the man barely suppressed his snickers if not for the fact that the grin had completely transformed the scowling face and lightened the dark eyes with laughter.

He decided not to examine the weird thing that grin did to his insides. No good could come of it. Instead, he focused on the horrifying thought of being trapped with a bunch of tofu-eating tree-huggers for a couple of hours while they plotted to capture and unman some poor tomcat.

"I'm sure it's a good cause, but I have a couple of meetings today that I simply can't miss."

"Very important meetings," Jude added. "Michael runs his own business. He's a party planner."

"Oh." Betsy stared at him. "You can actually make a living doing that? Planning parties?"

A very good living, Michael wanted to tell her. But only if you worked your ass off and kept your appointments. Like the one he had soon with the florists.

"I plan all sorts of events," he told her. "It keeps me very busy, and I help keep a lot of people working."

She knit her eyebrows together and pursed her lips in disapproval. "But that's what you do? For a living? Go to parties?"

"Plan them," he corrected her and started to elaborate. Then he stopped himself. He had no reason to be defensive. He glared at Jude, who had apparently known exactly how his friends would react to Michael's profession. Which was why the brat had brought it up in the first place.

"It was nice to meet you," he said politely and headed for the door. Jude followed him.

Michael snagged his jacket from the hook and turned to glance at the neighbors as they busied themselves in the kitchen. He eyed the woman's long floral skirt and flat canvas sandals. "I feel like I've gone through a rabbit hole and landed in the sixties."

Then he glanced at Jude, afraid he'd offended the artist, but the other man grinned.

"It's the patchouli," he said. Standing close to Michael, he had to look up a little. The top of his head only came to Michael's nose. "Hippies used it to cover up the smell of pot smoke. I haven't done weed since I got out of college. But I like the patchouli."

"Yes, I can tell. It's a bit strong."

"I might have put on a little too much. I was feeling kind of down." He trailed a finger along the side of his neck. Probably the spot where he'd put the scent.

One of the wooden beads on his hemp necklace hung down like a pendant and nestled in the hollow of his throat. Jude stroked it and then played with the beads as he tilted his head a little to stare at Michael. The movement made that damn T-shirt slip right off his shoulder again.

Michael looked away and cleared his throat. "Well...I hope you're feeling better now."

"You know? I think I am."

Michael escaped before he could do something he would regret. Getting on the wrong side of his most influential client by having a fling with her precious grandson was the last thing he needed. Even if he had the time for a relationship, it seemed obvious he and Jude lived in different worlds. All there could ever be between them was a one-night stand, and he could get that anywhere. It would be beyond stupid to risk his business for a quickie.

His reasoning made perfect sense. So why couldn't he get rid of the image of that well-defined, graceful curve of neck and shoulder? Or the startling transformation of the dark eyes when a smile lit them?

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