

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

BONUS VOLUME 1

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance Collection

Bonus Volume 1

Introduction

The stories you are about to read celebrate love, sex and romance between men. They are a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and these anthologies are published as a gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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

Nearly 190 stories were submitted and have now been published as a twelve volume set, with two additional bonus volumes each featuring several longer stories, titled *Love Has No Boundaries*; this edition is Bonus Volume 1.

Written descriptions of the images that inspired these stories are provided along with the original request letters. If you'd like to view the photos, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

The stories in this collection may contain sexually explicit content and are **intended for adult readers**. They may also contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group*

strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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

Dedication

As you can imagine, coordinating nearly 190 authors, proofing their work and publishing it both online and in eprint involved hundreds of hours of volunteer work. Nearly two dozen members chipped-in to help; the M/M Romance Group would like to extend a special thanks to the volunteers of the event team for their unwavering commitment and enthusiasm.

Ebook Layout and Navigation

This ebook can be navigated through the Table of Contents which lists the authors, their story title and its overall genre or theme. Any time you see the words [\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#), you can click on the link and be transported back to the TOC.

The **story titles** link back to the original posts in Goodreads M/M Romance group. The **author names** also link back to their Goodreads author profiles.

The written description that inspired each story, along with the letter that inspired the tale is provided. If you would like to see the actual photo, you can view them at: www.goodreads.com/group/show/20149-m-m-romance.

Enjoy.

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Closure

S. H. Allan



A LOVE HAS NO BOUNDARIES NOVELLA

CLOSURE

By S. H. Allan

Photo Description

Two nude men sit on the floor. The larger one has his arms and knees around the other, his cheek pressed to the side of the other man's head. The smaller man's face is buried against the first man's chest. He's curled into a ball, shoulders hunched like he's hurting badly. One hand touches the larger man's side, as if he's trying to grasp hold but can't pull away from the pain that fills him.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

"It's okay." He whispered to me, his words were said from the heart but they did little to ease my racing heart and mind. God I love this man so much, and one of the few people who didn't understand is gone now, we'll never get to settle the argument that pushed us apart.

"No, it's not okay. He was one of the most understanding people in my life and yet he couldn't understand... couldn't approve of us, he's no longer here and yet he's still making me second guess everything I feel for you."

If possible he held me closer and the warmth and comfort I received from his embrace was immeasurable and his voice, when he spoke held more than just understanding it held love, "that doesn't mean you shouldn't say goodbye to him, I know you don't believe it but he loved you Derrick and I'm certain he wanted you to be happy. Tell him what you couldn't before I know he'll hear you and he'll understand trust me, know right now Derrick that I'll be with you every step of the way I'll always be here for you.

I rested my head against his chest and let the tears flow, what he said rang true but how can I make peace with who almost cost me the one I love the most?

I hope after this difficult moment in Derrick's life that there will be a HEA or HFN, a little flashback describing the difficult event that leads to this comforting moment would be nice if it's not too problematic to handle and also I wouldn't mind a couple of steamy yet romantic scenes between Derrick and his understanding and sweet lover.

I also wouldn't mind a few scenes here and there that go into how this wonderful couple came to be as strong and close as they seem to be in this photo. Oh and a few notes, contemporary romance please, no BDSM the photo doesn't really convey this to me anyway, and the guy on the right should be Derrick the one dealing the upsetting issue oh and he doesn't have to be Derrick I just liked the name and it popped into my head while I was writing the prompt.

There's a beautiful story waiting to be told here and I know someone in this wonderful group can do it justice.

Thanks so much!

Warm regards,

Gabrielle

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: law enforcement (corrections), dogs, grief, hurt/comfort, interracial, switch or versatile, occasional humor amid a lot of crying, PTSD

Content warnings: explicit sex

Word count: 56,426

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Dedication

To S. H., who was so much greater than he ever believed. I wish he could see the beautiful mark he left on me and the world. And to C. C. whose dedication and contributions toward improving the lives of children in foster care in Washington state touched so many lives. Both of you were incredible people—your legacies will live on—and I am privileged to have known you.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Allison, my beta reader, and my sister Renee, for keeping me from internally combusting. This story would never have been published if it weren't for you. I'm grateful to Gabrielle for creating this wonderful prompt. And of course, thank you to the M/M Romance group for giving me this opportunity, and the crew that worked so hard on the LHNB project. I couldn't be more appreciative.

Author's Note

The huge flag described in this story really existed. It hung on the side of [Prince of Peace Lutheran Church](#) in Shoreline, Washington for at least a year. Although I apparently grossly exaggerated it in my mind, it was still impressive at around ten feet high, and driving down that very busy road, impossible to miss.

CLOSURE

By S. H. Allan

CHAPTER 1

Now: Nigel

Nigel walks into the condo in good spirits. His day has gone well; all but two of the latest group of young adults finished the program, and he's had another success story—a young woman who started the program two years ago just started her first semester of college. Derrick is sitting at the kitchen table, staring at the phone in his hand, most likely texting another kid on his caseload. Nigel grins and deposits his things in a nearby chair before kissing his boyfriend on the top of his head.

“Today was so fantastic, I want to celebrate by taking you out to dinner, anywhere you want to go.” Nigel grabs a glass from a cabinet and fills it with ice and cold water from the dispenser in the refrigerator door. “Mercedes finished her second week at the UW and got a three point nine on her first test. We both knew she was smart and had it in her. Damn, Dare, you got through to another kid. I think they're going to have to put you in some kind of hall of fame. The program is great but getting the kids to participate and finish? I swear you're a freaking miracle worker.”

He takes a big drink from his glass. Derrick hasn't said anything yet, and Nigel mentally whacks himself in the head. “I am such an ass, I didn't even ask about your day. How was your meeting with Dante? Did he show up this time?”

Derrick remains silent and still.

“Sorry, rough day?” Nigel walks over, puts his hands on his lover's shoulders, and leans down to kiss him. He realizes Derrick is shaking. “Dare? What's wrong?” He moves to the side and leans around so he can see his boyfriend's face. “Derrick? Talk to me. What happened?” Derrick's face is blank. His eyes stare at the table, not acknowledging Nigel. “Oh my God, what's going on?” Worried, Nigel tries to pull his boyfriend into a hug

but is met with resistance. Derrick hands him the phone, otherwise not moving.

Nigel takes the device, and after another glance at Derrick's face, looks at the screen where there is a text from Derrick's foster sister, Marisol. *"DAD'S DEAD!!! STOP BEING A DICK AND GET YOUR ASS HOME NOW!!!!"* Nigel looks back at his boyfriend in horror. Not again, oh fuck, not again. "Oh, God, I'm so sorry!" He reaches for Derrick but his lover evades him and stands.

Derrick heads for the living room and Nigel quickly follows. "He's dead, Nigh. He's dead. I killed him." Derrick's voice is flat.

Nigel's chest constricts. How could Derrick think that? He reaches for his lover again. "No Dare, no. It's been over a year. However he died, it's not your fault."

Derrick's face is still stony. He moves stiffly but still eludes Nigel's grasp and walks toward the fireplace where he stares at a picture of his family that sits on the mantel. He repeats, "He's dead. I killed him."

At the words, Nigel's heart stutters. It's painful to see his love hurting. He moves closer and this time is able to grab Derrick's arms. He's still trembling. Nigel envelops him with his arms and holds tightly. "No. No you didn't. You did nothing wrong." He wants to take away the pain and sorrow but is helpless. "I'm so sorry. How can I help?" Derrick continues to shiver, otherwise not moving. The shaking is worsening.

Nigel is worried that Derrick isn't showing any emotion. He rocks his boyfriend as he rubs his back and shoulders. "Dare? It isn't your fault. We'll get through this."

Derrick's teeth are starting to chatter and his breathing is fast and shallow. Nigel realizes his boyfriend is in shock, and his first aid training kicks in. Thank Congress for the laws that require just about anyone working with kids in Washington state to have a valid First Aid and CPR card. "Dare, I need you to lie down." Derrick doesn't resist as he is lowered to the couch. Nigel swings his lover's legs up and puts a thick cushion underneath his feet. He covers Derrick with a warm lap blanket he retrieves

from a chest near the window, then leans down and brushes the hair out of his boyfriend's oblivious eyes. "Wait here. Try to take deep breaths, okay?"

Nigel doesn't wait for an answer, instead hurrying into the bathroom where he runs steaming hot water into the oversize tub, a feature that contributed to his decision to buy the condo. He pours some scented oil in, hoping the soothing aroma will help Derrick relax. After setting out a couple of soft towels, he lets the tub fill and returns to the sofa in the living room. He crouches beside it and tenderly brushes Derrick's cheek. His face is cold and clammy but his teeth have stopped chattering.

"Dare, please look at me." There's no reaction. It's as if his lover is in a trance. "Dare, I need you to look at me." No response. Derrick suffers from PTSD—many who grow up in foster care do—and Nigel has no idea how that's affected by shock. He hardens his voice and raises it a little bit. "Derrick. You're scaring me. I need to you to look at me or I'm going to call 911." At first there's no response, but then Derrick's dull eyes slowly move until he's looking at Nigel. There's very little recognition, but it's there nevertheless. Nigel lets out the breath he's been holding. He strokes Derrick's cheek. It's killing him to see his lover like this.

"Dare, please stay with me, all right? I know this is hard, but I'm here. It's just us; you don't have to worry about anything or anyone." Nigel leans in and gently touches his lips to Derrick's. "I love you. You're alive and I love you, and that's all that matters right now, okay?" The emotion when it comes, breaks Nigel's heart. Grief and regret pour into Derrick's features and his face crumples. The sorrow etched there cuts Nigel to his core. He pulls Derrick into his arms. "We'll get through this. Together," he whispers into his ear. Nigel doesn't say it's going to be okay because it won't, not really, certainly not for a very long time. The assertion would sound hollow now anyway. Instead, he again kisses this man he adores before leaving to check the bathwater.

The tub is over half full, and the water just under scalding. Nigel moves back to the living area and pulls the blankets off Derrick, who is stoic and emotionless once more. "Come on, I've run a bath." He helps his lover to his feet. There isn't any resistance when Nigel leads Derrick to the tub and

removes their clothes; his boyfriend just stands numbly, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings. Nigel carefully helps him into the water and lowers himself in behind his lover.

He wraps his arms around Derrick and leans back as the displaced water rises and submerges them. He turns off the tap with his toes. The scent of jasmine and sandalwood fills the steamy air. In his arms, Derrick's shivering slows as he warms up, and he soon stills. Nigel gently rubs his lover's chest, shoulders, arms, belly. Silky black hair tickles his nose as he nuzzles Derrick's neck and leaves a trail of kisses along his jaw. Slowly Derrick's body relaxes in his arms. Internally he is clearly still struggling, so Nigel doesn't try to talk; he just lets calm wash over them both. Derrick will get through this. Nigel will do everything he can to help the love of his life, and together, they will get through this.

Then: Nigel

Nigel leaned out of his office doorway. "Danica, I can't find any packets. Do we have any left?"

The young woman poked her head out of the cubicle outside his door. "You're just checking now? The kid's supposed to be here any minute."

"I know, I know. Just, are there any left?"

She sighed. "There's a stack of them on the bookshelf right next to you."

He looked over his shoulder at the stack of blue folders. "Oh. Whoops. Do you have the girl's application?"

Danica sighed again and looked at him. "Have you even read it?"

"Well, I meant to... Kidding!" Her look of horror had him ending the joke earlier than planned. "Yes, I read it yesterday, but I can't find it."

His assistant shook her head and stood up, bumping him purposely as she pushed past him. "Have you looked in the inbox on your desk?"

"That's the first place I tried." He was embarrassed that he'd lost the file and fought the urge to grouch.

The two spent a couple of minutes searching his office again until Danica called, “Aha!” holding the file above her head.

Relief flooded him; he would have been mortified to not have it fresh in his mind at the meeting. “Where was it?”

“Wedged between the couch arm and the cushion.” She looked annoyed. He winced.

“Sorry. I read it over there and must have forgotten to put it back on my desk.”

His assistant just shook her head and headed for the door.

“What am I going to do without you?”

“I haven’t gotten the job yet.”

Nigel laughed. “You think my sister won’t jump at the chance to steal you from me? She’s not stupid.”

Worry lines creased Danica’s face when she turned. “Program Manager is quite a step up from Program Assistant. I’m skipping the Program Specialist level entirely.”

Nigel smiled affectionately. “I brag about you practically every time we have a ‘power lunch’. She already knows you’re amazing. Besides, sibling rivalry and all.” He grinned.

“You two adore each other. You’re all one big happy annoying family and it makes me sick. You all irritate the hell out of me.” She was trying to hide a smile.

He smirked. “You wanted to work here. ‘Family foundation’ means a family runs it. I can’t help it if we’re all irresistible.”

Danica rolled her eyes. “You’re something all right.” The intercom on Nigel’s phone buzzed. “They’re here. I’ll go get them.” He thanked her retreating back.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door jamb. He looked up from the desk, which he’d been leaning on while updating himself on the girl’s file, and almost gasped. Standing there was the most gorgeous man he’d ever seen. Bright blue-green hazel eyes and a cocky smile lit up a face

of mixed heritage. The man was fairly short and small framed, well proportioned, and he looked to be toned and fit. A stylish but businesslike jacket paired with fitted jeans gave him a rakish look.

Nigel forced himself to stop staring and tried to regain his composure. “Come in, come in!” He finally noticed the teenager by the guy’s side. “You must be Mercedes.”

The girl looked unimpressed. “Uh huh. Who are you?”

Fair question. Usually he offered his name first. The hot guy was seriously affecting his cool. Cool was critical when working with teens. “I’m Gelly. Gelly Rutherford.”

The girl’s eyebrows rose and she blinked. Then she pursed her lips and looked skeptical. “Jelly? Seriously?” He nodded. She moved her head to one side and looked him up and down. “Damn white people and their stupid names.” Nigel laughed.

The handsome man laughed, too. “I’m Derrick Cole, Mercedes’s probation officer. Jelly? Really?” When Nigel nodded again, he said, “I’m so not calling you that.” Nigel felt his brows lift in surprise. “That’s mashed up fruit.”

Nigel considered it to be rather appropriate, actually, even if the spelling was wrong. Some days he did feel “mashed up,” and he certainly was a fruit. He smiled inwardly.

“What’s it short for?” Derrick continued.

“Nigel.”

“I’m not calling you that, either.” Derrick’s grin was infectious, and Nigel found it impossible to be offended, especially when he continued, “You are way too cool for that name.”

He thinks I’m cool? Nigel felt his heart skip a beat. Something sparked in him that he hadn’t felt in a long time. It was like he was in middle school and having his first big crush. Despite his embarrassment, he found himself smiling. “Well, what do you propose?”

Derrick narrowed his beautiful eyes and examined Nigel appraisingly, tapping his finger against his lips—his full, soft, incredibly kissable lips.

Mercedes impatiently stepped in. “Call him by his last name. Rutherford, you said, right? Old guys use last names like first names so he’s Rutherford. Hey, isn’t that the name of this place? What are you, like, the owner?”

Very observant of her, although he wasn’t old yet and wanted to protest that point. “Rutherford is right, but I’m not the owner. The foundation belongs to my parents.”

“So you’re rich.” Her disgust was apparent on her face. Damn, he was losing her already. She, for one, didn’t think he was cool. He had to get his head back on straight and stop drooling over the very hot guy standing only a few feet away.

“Well, my parents are.” He had to steer this conversation away from their differences. “Here, let’s sit down.” He gestured toward the sitting area. He sank into one of the armchairs and the other two sat on the sofa. Nigel had placed the packet folders on the coffee table and handed one to each of them now.

Mercedes took it carelessly and tossed it back on the table. Nigel studied her. According to her application, she was sixteen and had been in and out of juvenile detention several times now, with a string of convictions in her file. She was usually arrested for solicitation or petty theft, but so far, she had never tested positive for drugs at booking. With the lifestyle she led, though, it was almost inevitable that drug abuse would eventually become an issue.

Nigel felt a familiar roiling in his gut picturing this fresh faced, sharp girl ruined by a life on the streets. Kids like her were why he created this program, and why he wanted it to work. The foundation was established to fight poverty, homelessness, and hunger as much through prevention and education as possible. His focus was on stopping youth from continuing on a downward spiral and help them set and achieve their own goals. So far he wasn’t helping this one at all. Time to change that.

“So, Mercedes, how much do you know about the program?”

She shrugged and rolled her pretty brown eyes then stuck her jaw out as she sagged back into the cushions. Then she sighed loudly and pretended to

study her long, enameled acrylic nails, a look of boredom on her face. Suddenly, Derrick emitted an even louder sigh and flopped back on the couch, arms and legs sprawled. He sighed again and rolled his eyes exaggeratedly. The behavior looked silly on the skinny, brown skinned teenage girl. It was downright ridiculous on a built white guy who was probably nearing thirty years old.

The girl glanced at him out of the corner of her eye then took a deep breath like she was fortifying herself and sat up straighter. She crossed her legs, folded her hands in her lap, and managed a rather sweet smile. Derrick then sat up, too. He grinned.

Unsure of what he had just witnessed, Nigel ignored it and forged ahead. “I don’t want to waste your time going over stuff you already know. Help me out here?” He gave her a goofy grin, hoping to look harmless.

The girl’s body language may have changed but her attitude hadn’t. “I read that lame brochure Mr. Derrick gave me.” Mr. Derrick. Interesting. “It didn’t say nothing. Just some lame-ass pictures of dogs and freaks. So you’re like, gonna ‘save’ me by making me train some stupid dog?” She used air quotes when she said the word “save.”

“If it sounds lame, why are you here?” The question was sincere, and he made sure it sounded that way. The kids were supposed to fill out the application themselves, without assistance. Their doing so helped him get to know them through their own words while making sure they really wanted to participate. Had Derrick forced her into this?

She rolled her eyes again. “I gotta do some kind of fucking community service. This sounded easier than the other shit Mr. Derrick told me about.” She grunted and bobbed her head to the side and back again. Nigel half expected her to snap her fingers and say, “Mm-hmm,” like some gangbanger in a late night comedy sketch.

Derrick leapt into action again. He groaned loudly and rolled his eyes again. “Oh my GOD, I’m such a hard-ass!” He pursed his lips. “I *forced* her to choose something to do so she wouldn’t go to jail again. It’s so unfair! Expletive, expletive!” He moved with exaggerated motions, bobbing his own head side to side to the point that it looked like he might strain his

neck. "It's all my fault. I telepathically *made* her stand on that street corner and ask that cop if he wanted a quickie." Derrick looked at the girl. "I would tell her how to answer your question properly but Mercedes does *not* like to be told what to do, mmm-hm." His lips were pursed as he shook his head then bobbed it some more.

Mercedes growled, but she stopped rolling her eyes and bobbing her head. When she next spoke, it was politely if a bit clipped. "I gotta do community service because I got arrested. I ain't sitting in no jail again. Mr. Derrick told me about this program, and it sounded kinda cool. It'd be fun to work with dogs. I'm good with animals." She shrugged. "I kinda always wanted to do something like that." As if she had read Nigel's mind, she added, "I really do want to do this. Mr. Derrick didn't tell me what to write." She looked at her hands in her lap and again feigned interest in one of her nails. She picked at a rhinestone stuck to the abstract design. "I worked real hard on it. I don't write so good."

Nigel was speechless for a moment. What the hell was Derrick's deal with mocking her? And why did it work? He pushed that thought aside for a moment. "Your answers were really good, Mercedes. That's why I chose to talk to you. We have many more applicants than we can take. We only choose those who really want to be part of this and who like dogs."

"I love dogs," she said quickly and with more enthusiasm than he had seen since she had arrived.

He smiled. "Tibbs, come," he called. A moment later, a large yellow lab mix trotted over and sat at his side, tongue lolling in a big grin. Nigel noted the shocked looks on his guests' faces. "Meet Delbert Tibbs."

"Where the hell did he come from?" demanded Mercedes. She was already reaching a hand out to the dog.

"He's well trained. He was waiting quietly on his bed behind the desk until we were ready for him. If you work hard, the dog you train may one day be as well behaved as Tibbs here."

Mercedes beckoned the mixed breed. Tibbs looked at Nigel, and when he gave the release gesture, the animal trotted over to sit by the girl. Nigel noted that Mercedes held the back of her hand out loosely for the dog to

sniff before scratching his neck. Excellent. Nigel knew she was the right choice. “You get to have your dog at work?” she asked.

“That’s one of the advantages of working for Mom and Dad.” He smiled. “He’s essential to the program. He helps me decide who would be a good fit, and he’s a great judge of character. He likes you.” Mercedes’s fingers rubbed and scratched Tibbs’s chest when he rolled over on his back. “He also gets spoiled rotten by everyone who works here. He’s usually sniffing around the employee lounge hoping for a treat. I’m making him work today.”

“Tough job.” Her tone was sarcastic but she had only adoration in her eyes and hands as she played with the dog.

Derrick had been watching Mercedes. Now he turned to Nigel, a twinkle in his eye. “She’s really a softie at heart. Doesn’t want anyone to know she’s a good kid,” he said in a stage whisper.

Mercedes glared at him before looking at Nigel. “Yeah, well, he’s a fag, and he doesn’t want anyone to know that he’s really a hard-ass.” Her tone was meant to irritate, not judge. It was clear she respected the officer.

Nigel couldn’t suppress his grin. Derrick definitely had a fine hard ass. “That’s okay, I’m one, too, although I don’t know about the hard-ass part.” He watched Derrick’s face for a reaction and he got one. His easy smile turned sly and his eyes narrowed the tiniest bit. Oh God, could this beautiful stud of a man be attracted to him, too? How likely was that?

“Oh yeah? Bet on it.” He wasn’t sure if Derrick was referring to Nigel’s ass literally being hard or if he were trying to let Nigel know he was interested. Either was fine with Nigel. Or maybe he was just being sarcastic. “Tibbs? Like the song?” Derrick’s words pulled Nigel’s thoughts back out of the gutter.

“You know it?”

“Yeah. Who was it? Woody Guthrie? No, wait, Pete Seeger.” Derrick looked at Nigel with a soft smile. “My father listens to folk music sometimes, among other things. He has eclectic taste. I learned to appreciate a lot of different music because of him. Did you choose the name because of the death row reprieve?”

“Yes. Tibbs was a rescue from a high-kill shelter in Wenatchee where he had only a few hours left. I was looking for a dog to train as a service animal. He almost completed the training but was rejected near the end due to some minor health issues that have since been resolved. The health requirements for a service dog are very strict, and he could potentially have the same problem again. The agency offered him to me, and I jumped at the chance. Anyway, I wanted an apt name, and the song just jumped into my head. My parents were hippie wannabes. I grew up on that stuff.” And just like that there was a connection more than physical between them. They held each other’s eyes for a moment longer than men usually looked at each other.

Then Derrick cleared his throat and grinned again. “Your hippie parents named you Nigel?”

Nigel nodded his head, laughing. “Hippie wannabes remember? It’s a family name. They thought it sounded unique and went with it. I’ve been saddled with it my whole life. They were the ones who first started calling me Gelly. They thought it was cute. I’m just glad they didn’t name me after my dad. I would have been Egbert Buford Norbert Rutherford the third.”

“You’re making that up,” Mercedes cut in.

“No, I swear. Both my dad and granddad suffer with that name. Gelly is much better. One of the kids told me I sound badass.”

Derrick and Mercedes both burst out laughing. “No way.” “They was playing you.” They spoke simultaneously.

“Oh. Well, then I’ll stick with Nigel for now.”

Derrick was shaking his head. “Well that’s not great but the nickname is ridiculous. We have to work on that. We’ll come up with something.”

Nigel felt his throat constrict. *We? There was a “we”?* Time to change subjects. “So, Mercedes, tell me more about yourself. What do you want to be doing a year from now?”

The conversation moved on to safer topics. Mercedes told them about wanting to go to college. No one in her family had ever even graduated from high school. She talked about growing up in a seedy suburb south of

Seattle, the crappy neighborhood filled with drugs and violence. Sexual abuse and maltreatment were alluded to but she didn't go into detail. Instead, she praised her mother for sticking by her.

Mercedes also talked about her dream to become a veterinarian but said she knew she was stupid and that kids like her "didn't go nowhere"; all that she could hope for was to find a good man to take care of her. Nigel had to suppress his anger and despair at what this bright teenager had been led to believe was her lot. From everything he saw and heard from her, she was a strong, intelligent young woman who didn't need anyone to take care of her, as if any healthy grown woman did.

He and Derrick tried to reassure her that she was smart, and that anything was possible for someone who really wanted it. Nigel explained that Delbert Tibbs was an African American who was wrongly convicted of rape and murder. The all-white jury had sentenced him, and he sat on death row until finally he was exonerated after the key witness in the trial recanted and it came out that Tibbs's alibi had been ignored. Tibbs went on to be a poet and a civil rights activist.

"See, people can be in the lowest of places and come out on top," he finished.

"But he was innocent. It's not like he really did anything wrong."

"Sure, but sometimes being in jail changes a person. Sometimes it messes with his or her self-esteem. Sometimes it makes a person think that jail is where he, *or she*, belongs, whether the person was innocent, doing something really bad, or just making *really poor choices*." Nigel glanced at Derrick who was watching the girl, a finger rubbing his lip. Nigel had to fight the urge to jump over the table and suck that lip between his own. He turned back to Mercedes.

"I think you are a perfect fit for this program. The rest of the youth come from very similar situations. They have all been in juvie, none have any support in the community, and all have either dropped out of school or are failing. All of them want something better for themselves and are willing to work hard to get it. So what do you think?" The "work hard" part was key.

“What would I have to do?”

“You need to show up at French Lake Dog Park in Federal Way before three PM, Monday through Thursday, rain or shine. We’ll go by the Federal Way School District schedule if it snows.”

“I ain’t going out in no snow.” Mercedes raised one eyebrow at him as if she thought he was deficient. Both men laughed at that. Schools usually closed down if there was even a hint of white in the air, so it was unlikely that she would have to go out in it. The area was too hilly and too unused to snow for the cities to handle freezing temperatures and make it safe.

“On days it doesn’t snow, we’ll keep you busy until six, but you’ll have a short break in the middle during which we provide snacks and water.” Sometimes it was the only meal the kids got in a day, so the snacks were more like full meals. “You’ll be assigned a dog who will be counting on you to show up every day. As long as you arrive on time and participate, you’ll get community service credit.

“You are committing to complete the program, even if it goes longer than the community service hours you owe. If you do, you’ll get a gift card for a grocery store, and you will be eligible for one of our teaching assistant scholarships.” The goal was for the kids to use the cards for something they needed. In reality, most of them sold the cards for cash. “That means you would come back for the next session and work with the dogs whose trainers don’t show up or drop out. You would be paid for this, with half the money put into a fund to go toward educational costs. For instance, we would help pay for GED classes or materials for school, or you could save the money for college or a trade program.”

Mercedes affected a noncommittal look but her eyes were flashing. “Every day?”

“Every weekday except Fridays. The specifics are in the packet.” Nigel pointed to the folder in front of her. “I think you would be a great asset to the program. Are you interested?”

“What do you think, Mercedes?” Derrick asked. “It sounds kind of fun to me.” He turned back to Nigel. “Looking for instructors?” He pretended to be hopeful.

Nigel shook his head, feigning regret. Secretly he really was sorry because he would love to see this man every day. He usually only went once a week, but he could make an adjustment to his schedule for the right reason... or the right person.

“How would I get there? I live in Kent.” Mercedes looked worried now, like transportation was a major issue.

Nigel reassured her. “We provide bus tickets, and we have a shuttle leaving Kent Station at two thirty each day of the program. All you’ve got to do is show up.” He waited while she pretended to make up her mind. Looking too eager would make her vulnerable, but he knew he had her hooked.

She shrugged and continued to focus on Tibbs. “Yeah, I guess. Sounds okay.” She finally looked up. “When do I start?”

Nigel resisted an urge to jump up and shout, “Yes!” Instead, he pointed the girl to the schedule glued inside the folder and the bus ticket in the pocket. “You get two additional bus tickets at the end of each session, one to go home and one to come back. If you take the shuttle, you still get them in case you are coming from someplace else, but you only have two at a time. You only get new ones when you’ve used up the ones you have.” He went through a few more things she needed to know, such as what to wear.

When he was finished, she said she needed to use the bathroom. He called Danica in and asked her to accompany the girl. Trust was always an issue, and it went both ways. Mercedes hadn’t earned his yet. He had faith she would, but it would take time. When she was out of earshot, he turned to find Derrick staring at his chest. “Uh...” He stumbled over his words as he felt a thrill run through him. “So what’s with the mocking?”

Derrick looked up and he looked embarrassed, probably at being caught ogling Nigel’s body. Nigel hadn’t minded at all, and his pants were getting a little crowded. “Oh, that. Well, for some kids it works really well. When they’re being inappropriate, I remind them by showing them how ridiculous they look. Well, and then some. Most of the kids get attitude when I just tell them their behavior isn’t okay. It makes me another antagonistic authority figure. If I let it slide, then I’m just being one of their friends. Neither is

appropriate. I'm a support, I'm here to help, but I am not their friend. They need to learn that sometimes the people in charge are really there to help. For some kids, the mocking works. It's not the most mature way to do it, but it's damn funny, if I say so myself." Derrick smirked.

Nigel couldn't help smiling back. Derrick's grins were infectious. "What if it doesn't work?"

"Well, hopefully I don't get beaten up."

"Has that happened?" Nigel was shocked and somewhat distressed at the thought. What was that about?

"Not yet. I keep waiting. Some would say I have it coming." His grin was somewhat crooked, and Nigel thought it was totally hot. "Assuming I'm still in one piece, I resort to guilt trips, blackmail, bribes—all the mature grownup things."

"Does your boss know about this behavior?" Nigel asked with mock disapproval.

Derrick shrugged. "She cares about my success. I've currently got the lowest recidivism rate of all the juvenile probation officers in the greater Seattle area. I've got the second lowest of all P.O.s." He put his hand on his hip, stuck his jaw up and out, and turned to a semi-profile position. "I am Juvie Man," he said in a deep voice. He held the pose for a good ten seconds before Nigel couldn't help it anymore and burst out laughing. Derrick joined in.

Then he dropped the act. "Sorry for bragging. But seriously, I'll do anything that's not unethical to get through to these kids. Most of them just need someone to believe in them and an opportunity to believe in themselves." Derrick stepped closer. "I think your program is just the kind of opportunity these kids need."

Nigel felt himself being sucked into those sexy eyes. "I hope so. I believe in opportunities." He said the last sentence softly but his heart beat loudly in his ears. They held each other's gaze for a long moment. Derrick opened his mouth but they were interrupted by Mercedes. *Damn.* He wondered what Derrick had been about to say.

“Mr. Derrick! You gotta see their bathrooms! It’s like the Taj Mahal or something.” Mercedes face was flushed with excitement.

Derrick turned to her so his face was in profile. Even his ears were sexy. “Well, I hope not since the Taj Mahal is a crypt and doesn’t have toilets. But there are some beautiful restrooms in India. There’s one in The Imperial New Delhi Hotel where each stall is a separate room, and there are attendants who will go so far as to squirt scented soap into your hands and give you a heated wash cloth.” Nigel had been places in the US that did the same thing, but the foreign location made Derrick’s story more grand and exotic.

“There’s marble everywhere, and everything is gleaming. As a backpacker, I felt a little out of place. I am pretty sure it was obvious that I was just eating at the historic restaurant and not actually staying at the hotel.” As he continued his story, Derrick moved to meet Mercedes at the door and handed her one of the packets.

The girl listened wide-eyed as Derrick recounted his tale. Nigel was just as enchanted. This man was a world traveler, too? What other surprises did he have? Just outside the door, Derrick stopped for a moment and looked back at Nigel. “Thank you. I have another kid on my caseload who might be a good fit. If it’s not too late, I’ll submit the application.” Derrick looked expectant and maybe a little hopeful.

Nigel nodded. He’d make a space if it meant he could see this electrifying man again. “It’s not too late. It’s never too late.”

Derrick seemed to catch the implication and nodded, a small, almost bashful smile on his face. “No it isn’t, is it?” He turned and walked out the door.

No, Nigel thought. *It’s never too late*. He had hit the big three-oh but it wasn’t too late to find Mr. Right. He knew he was being stupid, and there was no rational reason to think it might be Derrick—he barely knew the guy, and he didn’t believe in love at first sight—but maybe he would get a chance to see him again, date him, maybe more. He would find the man to love the rest of his life, he would. And who knew, maybe Derrick, this guy with the beautiful eyes, was the one.

Belatedly he realized that Derrick had never told Nigel what his new nickname would be. He wanted to run after them and ask Derrick what he should be called since Gelly was too stupid and Nigel too uncool. It was suddenly the most important question he'd ever had. He hoped he would have the chance to ask it.

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CHAPTER 2

Now: Nigel

The water is cooling. Nigel turns Derrick's head gently and kisses his jaw. "Ready to get out now?"

Derrick nods slowly. They climb out. Nigel dries them both, wraps Derrick in a thick towel, and leads him to the bedroom. Although it's still early, Derrick is clearly exhausted. Nigel shepherds him into bed and tucks him under the covers. He quickly climbs in, too, and spoons up behind his lover, intending to keep Derrick warm with his body heat. They are both silent; Derrick will speak when he's ready. They lie there, Nigel holding him, just being there to show how much he loves him.

A long time later, Nigel is still awake and knows Derrick is, too. Nigel gently rubs his boyfriend's chest and buries his nose in his hair. He has thought of something. "Dare? Do you want me to call Marisol?"

Derrick doesn't reply immediately. "Yeah, I should probably at least text her so she knows I'm not a complete ass."

"You're not an ass *or* a dick, no matter what she says." Nigel climbs out of bed to retrieve the phone. When he returns, he slips between the sheets, sitting back against the headboard. "What do you want me to say?"

"Fuck, I don't know." Derrick turns over and faces him. Nigel is relieved to hear his boyfriend swearing. It's more liveliness than he's exhibited since Nigel got home.

"Do you think you want to see them? Do you want to go over there tonight? It's only seven thirty."

"I can't. I... I just can't tonight. I'll go tomorrow. Will you come with me?"

Nigel reaches down and pulls Derrick into his arms. "Of course, Dare, of course."

Then: Derrick

Derrick stared at the gate to the park, watching dogs chase each other in packs, tails wagging, ears flung back, tongues flying as the animals moved. He wiped his palms on his jeans and reached for the gate. He could do this. He was just checking on Mercedes and Demetrius, the other youth he got into the program. Nigel probably wasn't even there.

He stepped through the gate along with a woman clutching plastic bags in one hand and in the other, the leash of her huge dog, a young black and white Great Dane. They entered a little paddock with a gate on each side. The woman carefully closed the first gate and then took the leash off her youngster before opening the second gate. She must have noticed his confusion because she explained, "The gates prevent a dog from getting out when someone is coming or going. It's also a great way to get Panda's leash off before she gets pounced on by the others."

The moment the second gate was opened, he saw what she meant as the Great Dane plowed into a horde of dogs attempting to knock each other into the ground. Derrick stiffened for a moment, afraid a huge melee would break out, but he soon realized that the animals were having a great time, and the new dog just joined them in play. He smiled at the sheer joy in each wiggling body.

"Do you know where—"

"Around to the left and then to the right behind the pond," the woman cut in. "The training group is over there."

"How did you—"

"You don't have a dog with you." She smiled.

"Ah. Well thank you." As he followed her directions and headed toward the path, he noticed a tiny Chihuahua run toward the group of dogs. The Great Dane separated from the pack and ran to intercept the smaller dog. Fear froze him in place again. With the thought of that giant mouth on that tiny body, panic rose in his chest, but before he could shout, another woman moved toward the two, a wide grin on her face.

"Panda!" The first woman moved to meet the newcomer. "Hi, Sarah!

Goliath was getting downright snippy waiting for Panda to get here. I wasn't sure you were going to make it today."

"Sorry we're late, but we wouldn't miss it. Panda would eat my shoes if she didn't get play time with her best friend today." The women laughed and began walking in another direction. A Great Dane and a Chihuahua best friends? That was different. But as they moved off, Derrick smiled. Seeing the two dogs scamper and play was calming, and already he was feeling slightly less nervous about seeing Nigel.

Nigel. Derrick hadn't been able to think of much else since they had first met a few weeks before. Nigel had sounded interested, hadn't he? Derrick had replayed the meeting over and over in his mind. *I believe in opportunities*. What did that mean exactly? The opportunity to meet someone when you least expect it? The opportunity to take advantage of meeting someone you liked? The opportunity to make it more? The opportunity to switch from plastic to reusable bags? Or had Nigel just meant the program, the opportunity to help at-risk youth succeed? *It's not too late. It's never too late*. For what? To meet The One? To date? To save a child? To get a stain out of his shirt? What? Was he just being arrogant thinking that Nigel could have been talking about him?

Derrick was pulled from his reverie as he rounded the edge of the pond with its tall reeds and saw the little area in the corner of the park. The roped off space wasn't very big, much smaller than he expected, not more than thirty-five or forty square feet. Within were eleven teenagers, all holding the leash of a dog. The kids were watching Nigel's assistant in the center of the area—what was her name? Danielle? Danique? Back at that first meeting she had introduced herself at the door, but by the time she had taken them up to Nigel's office and he saw the man's smile, all rational thought had left him, and he'd forgotten everything that happened after he met Mercedes in front of the Rutherford Foundation's building.

Just outside the enclosure was a small table at which sat a tall, short-haired man. Nigel. Derrick sucked in a breath. Unlike the last time they had met, Nigel was dressed casually in jeans and a hoodie. He was leaning forward to stretch, and his sweatshirt was riding up and pants pulling down

so a small expanse of his lower back showed. Just seeing that bare flesh gave Derrick a jolt. He was thin but had some muscles, too, just Derrick's type. And that didn't even count his face.

Steeling himself, Derrick headed toward the table. In the enclosure, the kids were jumping up and down, yelling in voices that were probably supposed to be positive, pounding the ground, anything to get the dogs to come when called. Most of the dogs blatantly ignored their handlers and continued playing. Others looked confused, and at least one had lain down, clearly bored. Derrick chuckled. He wondered how that one had even qualified for the program.

"Derrick!" Nigel turned in his chair.

"Uh... Hi, Nigel." Derrick was suddenly at a loss for words for the first time in his life. Nigel had to be one of the handsomest men he had ever seen, with his strong features, warm brown eyes, and a light, open expression. His sleeves were pushed up, revealing strong forearms leading to large hands. Derrick shivered at the thought of what large hands meant, and what he could do with that. *Down boy.*

"Coming to check us out?" Nigel had a friendly—and beautiful—smile on his face.

Oh God, yes. Wait, he meant the kids. "Yep. Wanted to see what has my probationers actually acting eager about something and talking about animals instead of sex or how much they hate me. I figured you were dealing them drugs." He grinned.

"You found us out. We fill the water bottles with invisible, tasteless, odorless hallucinogens then seal them up afterward. Makes the kids think they're training dogs and that they love it. Wait, you don't see dogs here, do you? Some of it could have leaked out..." Nigel feigned concern as he pretended to search for an open bottle.

Derrick narrowed his eyes. "There aren't any dogs here? I was wondering why they all had purple fur and pink polka dots."

Nigel straightened and finally broke into his full smile. Derrick's heart skipped a beat. That mouth did him in the last time, and it hadn't been a

fluke. He was again staggered by how Nigel's upturned lips and white teeth lit up his face, taking him from good-looking to drop-dead gorgeous.

"Derrick?"

"Um, what?"

"I asked how you are, but you're kind of staring off into space." Nigel looked uncertain.

Derrick snorted. "My folks always said I was a bit spacey. I'm good, really good. How about you?"

The smile came back. "I'm very well, thank you for asking." Nigel turned toward the youth and their charges. "They're doing a great job, too, although it might not look like it at this particular moment."

Derrick followed his gaze and saw Demetrius stomping his foot. He was a tall gangly kid, with skin pale beneath his dyed black hair; facial piercings and huge gauges in his ears; skinny body adorned in black, vinyl, and chains; and thick eyeliner that said, "I'm a raccoon, and I'm going to destroy your trash cans!" Derrick often wondered if Demetrius was going for punk or emo. The boy looked absurd wringing his hands next to a dog who was ignoring him and licking the kind of parts that straight men didn't touch with their mouths. Well, neither would gay men if said parts belonged to a dog. The thought made him laugh. Fortunately, Nigel appeared to think he was laughing at Demetrius's futile attempts to get the dog's attention, and Derrick was saved from having to explain his perverse and convoluted way of thinking.

"I'm really glad to hear that." Derrick managed to speak at least semi-professionally. "The program is already working, I think. Both of my kids have more confidence. Mercedes actually asked how she could enroll in a high school completion program at Green River Community College. Now if I could only get her to wear clothes that don't make her look like a hooker..."

"Baby steps, my friend, baby steps." *My friend?* Did Nigel think he was a friend? That would be an excellent baby step. Derrick mentally chided himself. It was just an expression. "Here, have a seat." Nigel gestured to an

empty chair beside him. Derrick took it. “So how did you become a juvenile probation officer? That must be a tough job. I can’t imagine you get a lot of positive feedback from your kids.”

Derrick shook his head and laughed. “No, not so much. But I do get through to them sometimes, and even those few make it all worthwhile.”

“Oh, yes, you’re Juvie Man.”

Derrick felt the blood rise in his face and thanked his genetics for his tan, mixed-race skin that would hide the flush. “Yes, of course.” He forced himself to smile when he felt like crawling under the table. Why was he suddenly so embarrassed? He usually didn’t have any trouble bragging about his successes, because after all, they weren’t his achievements, they were his kids’.

“But to answer your question, it’s because I needed a program like this when I was their age.” The expression on Nigel’s face was not what he expected. Usually people looked pitying or embarrassed. Nigel, however, was both curious and smiling admiringly at him.

“You were one of these kids, and you pulled out of it and made something of yourself? And then you came back here to help others like you? That’s really cool.” Nigel slightly shook his head. “That is just—that’s a wonderful thing to do. I’ve known a couple of people who grew up in that kind of life, and all they wanted was to get the hell out. I think you’re—” Nigel blushed. His pale skin didn’t hide anything. “I mean, I think that is really noble. Wait, that doesn’t sound right. It’s virtuous? I mean... It’s not that it’s bad to come back, and therefore it’s amazing that you would. I mean, I’m not trying to be condescending. I just think that’s it shows what a great person—” he blushed again. Derrick couldn’t help but smirk at his discomfort but he decided to help Nigel off the hook he had caught himself on.

“I understand what you’re saying. Thank you. My dad raised me to give back to my community. I was taught that we are only as strong as we make ourselves, and that some people need the kind of support and love only someone who’s been there can provide. He saved me. I didn’t have your program, but I had him. He put me on the straight and narrow.”

Nigel looked confused but nodded. “He sounds like a great man. You had a—I thought—I mean, why would you have needed...” He trailed off.

“Sorry.” Derrick rolled his eyes. “I forget people can’t read my mind sometimes. It can be confusing enough in my head, let alone being outside looking in.” He smiled. “I’m talking about my foster father. He yanked me out of the system when I was fourteen and already had a record that stretched into the next state. I was young and angry and unloved. He and his wife, Celeste, took me in, sat me down, told me what was what, and turned me into a man.” He felt a warmth in his chest when he thought of what they’d done for him. “They are amazing people. I love Celeste, and she loves me like a son, but it’s Ronald who really made me who I am today.”

Again Nigel surprised him by not showing pity, just interest... intense interest. “You were in foster care. May I ask you about that?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. What do you want to know?”

“Well, maybe how you got into it?”

Derrick thought about what and how much Nigel would want to hear. “I went into foster care when I was six. My birth parents were both prostitutes. Apparently it’s true that many rent boys are straight.” He chuckled. “They were always leaving me alone or bringing tricks home.” He didn’t mention how he was drugged to keep him quiet or that there were twenty-two CPS reports before he was finally pulled out.

“That’s awful.” Again, Nigel looked sad and understanding, but there was no pity in his eyes nor judgment, just acknowledgment of an awful situation. “What was it like being in foster care?”

“I was lucky at first. I went straight from a receiving home into a loving foster family, the Bryants. I acted out a little but almost all foster kids do. It’s pretty traumatic being ripped out of your world and made to live with people you’ve never seen before. I was there for a year and a half, and they were planning to adopt me when I became legally free. But then there was a tragedy in their family, and they had to move to Dallas to take care of their nephews.” The memory still made him sad.

“They couldn’t take you with them?”

“The Bryants said they loved me and wanted to, but my birth father was still fighting to get me back. He didn’t have a chance, but there are all kinds of rules the state has to follow, and they couldn’t allow me to go until my father had relinquished his rights to me or the rights were terminated. I never believed the Bryants. I was seven and dumb as fuck.”

“You were just a little boy.” Nigel frowned.

“Yeah, well.” Derrick looked at the kids working with the dogs. Most of them had big grins while the dogs lay on the ground a few feet away. What was that, a down-stay? After Mercedes had agreed to the program, Derrick had checked out dog training books from the library. He wanted to be able to talk to the kids about it. He looked at Nigel. No, he was lying to himself. He wanted to learn about dog training to impress the guy with the gorgeous smile, the one who appeared to be fascinated by Derrick’s story. He found his mouth going dry just looking at Nigel. “Do you think I could have some of that invisibly, odorlessly, tastelessly drugged water?”

Nigel had been leaning forward and now jerked back. “Oh, of course, I should have... Sorry, I don’t always—they’re here somewhere—here, oh oops.” He had ripped the packaging and the bottles had scattered. “They aren’t chilled, I mean cold, I mean they’ve been sitting out so they’re warm... oh, but not hot uh... here’s one here, I mean, there are lots, but this one looks good—wait, I mean it doesn’t have grass on it, I mean, just a little, just let me wipe it off—oh is that gross? That’s gross. I can go to the car and get—”

Derrick was desperately trying to keep from showing his laughter. The poor man was really flustered. He wondered why. “It’s fine, that one looks perfect.”

Nigel handed Derrick the bottle.

The water felt good going down Derrick’s throat. “Oh, yeah, you said you reseal them after you add the drugs. Very smooth.” He grinned then faltered because Nigel was having some issues with being smooth right now.

“I’m all about the smooth, as I’m sure you can tell.” Nigel grinned and

Derrick really liked that the man didn't take himself too seriously. "So, you were left without a home, again? I'm sorry if this is too personal."

"No, it's fine. Yeah, not having a home anymore was what was really hard. I had trouble understanding why the children they had to go care for were more important than I was. It's a tough thing to get for a seven-year-old who's never really had a family."

"I can only imagine."

Derrick nodded. "I was moved to another foster home. They were fine, I suppose, but they weren't the Bryants, and I was even angrier than before, so I made life hell for them. I was moved to another foster home where I was... mistreated..." That was the understatement of the century. The things that happened there were the cause of much of his PTSD. "I then went to another foster home, and another, until I ran away for the first time when I was nine. After that, they couldn't keep me anywhere, even in those foster homes that were good. I was eventually put in a group home, but that didn't last, either. In this state, you can't keep children—probably anyone—against their will without a court order, although I'm sure there's a base age range. It's illegal to run away but it's also illegal to physically stop a kid from doing so, too."

"Really?" Nigel looked shocked.

"Really. Anyway, I got caught shoplifting for the first time when I was eight. By the time I was twelve, I'd been in juvie half a dozen times already and was drinking heavily. At thirteen, I was convicted of grand theft auto. I was high on Oxycontin."

"At thirteen? You could drive at thirteen?"

"Nope. That's how I got caught." He smirked, and Nigel grinned back. Derrick felt like he was floating every time he saw that smile. "By then I knew I was gay, and I had done it to impress a boy—a supposedly straight boy. When he found out I had a crush on him, he beat the crap out of me, and then we fucked. I lost my virginity over that car, and I can't say I'm entirely sorry I stole it."

This time Nigel laughed. "I wish I'd known you then."

He did? Was he trying to tell Derrick something? He knew he sometimes read too much into things. “Well, you would have hated me. I was an arrogant asshole. It was another year before I was rescued.”

“By your foster dad.”

“Yeah. I was sprung out of juvie and was told that my foster father had come to pick me up. I figured the group home had gotten sick of me and was just foisting me on another unsuspecting family. So imagine my shock when Mr. Bryant was standing there.”

Nigel was the one who looked surprised. “The dad from the first foster family?”

“Mm-hmm. By then, the last nephew had left for college, and the Bryants were able to finally move home. Anyway, Ronald was standing there when I was released, shaking his head like he was disappointed in me.” Derrick left out the part that really got to him. That was the first time he saw in Ronald’s eyes what he came to understand as love. He hadn’t seen that from anyone else before the Bryants, and that was the first time he understood what it was.

“I was still so angry with them, and I started shouting, telling him he was an asshole, describing all the horrible things I’d done because he’d left. I was even posturing with my chest puffed out, my hands in fists, threatening to hit him. But somehow I didn’t. Something stopped me from actually doing it. And he just stood there through the whole thing until I finally got tired. I’m amazed I wasn’t rearrested. I was in the basement of the courthouse outside the entrance to juvie, after all.”

“So what did your father do?”

“Nothing. He just stood there with his arms crossed. This part is kind of funny. When I finally stopped my rant, he said, ‘You done?’ It wasn’t what I was expecting. I was even madder at him for not getting angry. So I lashed out with the last thing I had left.” Even back then, part of Derrick knew it was kind of a test, pushing Ronald to see if he would leave him there, or maybe trying to make it happen so Derrick wouldn’t be hurt again.

“I yelled at him, right there in the basement of the courthouse, ‘I’m a fag! A fucking queer! I like sucking dick!’ He just looked bored. Bored!

Then he said, ‘Your point is?’ Again, not what I was expecting. So I said again, ‘There’s nothing I like better than a big fucking cock.’ And you know what he said to that?” Nigel shook his head. He was clearly trying not to laugh. “He said something along the lines of, ‘So do I, as long as it’s my own and has a matching set of big hairy balls.’”

Nigel couldn’t contain his laughter anymore. He managed to ask, “Seriously? You’re making that up.”

“No, I swear. But that isn’t all. He then said, and I quote, ‘I like big tits and a real big butt on a hot mama. Long as you don’t got a problem with that, we’re good.’ And then he just turned and headed for the stairs. I was floored. He was already on the third step before I could move and run to catch up.”

Nigel was wiping tears from his eyes. “Wow. You had your family back.” He sobered. “But it wasn’t that simple, was it?”

Wow, yourself. Nigel got it. He knew that the Bryants were Derrick’s family, not his birth parents. Like any foster kid, he did want his parents back, but they had never been a family, and he hated them as much as he loved them. The Bryants were the ones who had truly loved him back. “No, it wasn’t. It took me a long time to trust them again. I ran a couple of times, but they always took me back. They were usually the ones that found me. I couldn’t believe they actually went and searched. I pushed every button they had and railed against those boundaries they set up.” He had never pushed it too far, but he’d had to fight himself to not try to drive them away before they hurt him. He had been terrified they would leave him again. Anybody else would have. “But they took everything in stride.”

Derrick had been angry for a long time, and he was chagrined now to think how hard he had made their lives. They had explained to him again why they had to go. They didn’t apologize for leaving but told him how hard it was. They claimed they had kept track of his progress, and when he was legally free, they tried to start the adoption papers again. But the paperwork kept getting lost every time he switched social workers, which was a lot since he got a new one every time he went from group care to a foster home or vice versa. Then there was the turnover rate which was insane. But that’s how they knew he was in juvie.

Derrick looked to see if Nigel was still listening. He was, and he was chewing on his lower lip like he was concentrating really hard not to miss anything. Derrick thought that might have been the sexiest look he had ever seen. “So anyway, this story is getting too long. Basically they finally got through to me. I think it had a lot to do with them coming back. I don’t know if a brand new foster family could have turned me around like they did. I had lost so much trust. But them coming back for me? That made me think that maybe someone could love me.”

Derrick didn’t understand the look on Nigel’s face. Shock? Disgust? Confusion? “How could—I mean, how didn’t you know—Who put the fucking—” Nigel closed his eyes and swallowed before opening them again. “I’m sorry. It just infuriates me that what happened to you could leave you with the ridiculous idea that you couldn’t be loved. I want to strangle everyone who ever hurt you and left you thinking that.” He looked sincere. He looked angry and sad and something else that Derrick couldn’t figure out. But he did know, although he couldn’t say why, that Nigel didn’t just mean any kid—he meant Derrick. He couldn’t believe Derrick ever doubted he was loveable. The thought made his spine tingle.

They looked at each other a tad longer than people who barely knew each other usually did. For the first time, Derrick believed that maybe there was someone else out there who could love him, that the Bryants weren’t the only ones capable of feeling such affection for him. The sensation made him uncomfortable, and he pulled his eyes away.

“So how and why did you become a probation officer? I’m sorry, I asked that question before. If you don’t want to tell me, or wait, I mean, I’m not trying to imply that you wouldn’t, like it was something to be ashamed of, not that it would, I mean, it’s so great. That is, it’s just a normal job, well no, it’s a hard job, but—Damn.” Nigel was so adorable when he was flustered. Could Derrick be the cause of that? He didn’t recall Nigel being that way the first time. He supposed it was possible. He couldn’t believe how interested in his story Nigel seemed. No one had ever shown this kind of interest, not even past lovers, not that there had really been any; more like past fuck buddies.

“Well I finished high school, a bit late as could be expected given my time in juvie, and my grades were terrible.” That he finished high school at all was an achievement, and he had been very proud of himself at the time. More than forty percent of foster kids in Washington state never graduated. “I figured that was it for me. But there was Ronald again, convincing me that I could do more. So I went to community college, since I didn’t have the GPA for anything else, and then the U-dub.

“Then I wasn’t sure what to do, but I wanted to help kids who’d been where I had. Most of my probation officers were dicks, so I thought that would be a good place for me to reach those kids. I figured I could maybe not be a dick for once.” He laughed. “And then I had to go to school for like another hundred years, and then I was certified, got a job, and the rest is history.”

“That’s an amazing story. Thank you for sharing it with me.” Derrick was relieved that Nigel’s voice was respectful, not ingratiating, almost as if they’d just been discussing Derrick getting a special bonus at work, as if that would ever happen in a civil service job. If Nigel had shown obsequious sympathy, Derrick might have felt obligated to deck him. He was not used to sharing like that, not even with his kids (not that it would have been appropriate). He just didn’t want anyone that close. So why had he spilled his guts now? It was Nigel’s fault. Maybe there really were drugs in those water bottles. He realized he was now quite nervous.

“The kids are coming for snacks.” Derrick looked up to see the teenagers hurtling toward them. He jumped out of the way. The dogs had been given water and were off-leash in the enclosure chasing one another, their running and jumping legs sending bowls sloshing.

“Mr. Derrick!” Mercedes ran over. “You came! I told you Mr. Gelly was here every Thursday. You didn’t believe me.” Derrick blanched and looked at Nigel but he hadn’t heard. Derrick didn’t want the man knowing that he came that day because he knew Nigel would be there. That would just be too awkward.

“I did, I did.” Quickly, he jumped in to help Nigel and Danica—yeah, that was her name—hand each youth a large sandwich, chips, a soft drink,

and cookies. The rest of the break he spent talking to Mercedes and Demetrius, both of whom were eager to show him what they had learned. Danica came over and praised the kids as well. By the time the youth had returned to their training, Derrick's heart and mind had slowed enough that he could face talking with Nigel again.

They resumed their seats. Derrick figured it was time to turn the conversation toward something—someone—else. “So what made you start this program?”

Nigel chuckled. “I wish my story were in the slightest way interesting, but it's not. I feel guilty for having such an easy life. My family started the foundation when they got to the point that their millions of dollars in Microsoft stock wasn't doing anything but making them richer. They always believed in living socially responsible lives, even after they became wealthy. So they never spent any of it.

“We lived off their substantial incomes; they worked for Microsoft after all. They just lived like they always had and tried to teach us to appreciate our lifestyle and not take it for granted. I have no idea how what they said sank in. So many of my friends from high school are either rich assholes, drug addicts, or slackers living off their parents.”

“Why would a ri—well-to-do person become a drug addict?”

“Boredom usually. Sometimes it comes from the intense pressure to succeed. We were all expected to go to Ivy League schools, or MIT, or something equivalent, then get graduate degrees to become doctors, lawyers, dentists, engineers, or corporate executives.”

“Huh. I never thought of that. The media makes it sound like drug abuse is a problem that only poor people have.” That it wasn't that way had never occurred to Derrick. Sure, he saw films where rich folks snorted cocaine, but that was the movies.

“Well, it is primarily a poverty thing. When you have nothing, especially no one who cares about you, I imagine it's probably easier to face a bleak existence when you're high or stoned.”

Derrick agreed. “Yeah, it is.” Been there, done that. “Plus, when gang members are living in your neighborhood, drugs are everywhere, you've

been told you'll never be worth anything, and you're not treated equally in school—almost no one even admits that's the case—it's a lot easier to fall into using. Add racism and the issues minorities face that result in a greater percentage in poverty than white people, and it becomes an ethnic/cultural problem, too.

“It really saddens me that the percentage of the kids on my caseload who aren't white grossly over represents the percentages in the general population—despite Demetrius's presence here. Actually, he's part of this program because he was doing better than most of the others I work with. I can't help but think he is still benefitting from being a straight white male, although issues of poverty came into play for him as well.”

Nigel nodded then shook his head. “Probably. It's just not fair. Poverty sucks. I thank my lucky stars every day that I had breaks that so many other people didn't. I truly do. That's why I started this program.”

Derrick heaved an internal sigh of relief. How Nigel responded to that long diatribe had told him that he was actually date material. Derrick didn't care what color people were that he dated; he cared how they thought about those kinds of issues. “Did your parents make you work for the foundation?”

“Oh, no, not at all.” Nigel looked surprised. “We could do anything we wanted to with our lives. We were adults. But after college I didn't want to be a doctor or a lawyer or a dentist, and I really didn't want to go into the business world. I didn't get my parents' math/science gene so high tech was out. I mean, I could have worked in some other capacity but then it would be like any other business world. So I just stayed in school as long as I could. When my parents created the foundation, it was a no-brainer for me to work here, too. I was sick of academia and was eager to find something meaningful to do with my life; I wanted to give back to society.”

That was interesting. Derrick figured Nigel for having been in business somewhere. “What did you study in school?”

Nigel laughed. “Basket-weaving.” At Derrick's skeptical look, Nigel continued. “Anthropology, learning about how cultures live and work. Throughout time, most cultures have made baskets of some kind. My PhD thesis was on basket-weaving.”

Derrick snorted. “Really?”

“Sort of. It was a comparison of tribal designs in traditional basketry in two cultures, one in Australia and one in Canada, two cultures that could not have been in contact after the division of Pangea into the continents we have today. Yet there are incredible similarities between the designs made by these two groups of tribes that aren’t found in other tribal cultures.”

“Pangea?”

“The lost continent. Basically, it’s what scientists believe was the single continent that was over time broken up by earthquakes into the continents we have now. Continental drift and all.”

You learn something new every day. “So you became a doctor after all.” Derrick couldn’t stop himself from teasing. He hoped it was okay; that was really important, too.

Fortunately Nigel both grimaced and chuckled. “Just call me Doctor Who. Or rather, Doctor What?” Since Nigel was laughing, Derrick felt it was okay to join in. All that and a good sense of humor, too. “It wasn’t the most useful degree, so I was working as a waiter.”

“Doctor, I’d like a burger and fries. Be quick about it or we won’t tip you.”

More laughter. “Yep. It happens more often than you’d think. So obviously it was a no-brainer to work for the family foundation when it was created.”

That was the perfect opening to lead to what he really wanted to know. “Why did they start it?”

“Well, I told you we were raised to give back. They had all that money and more because they kept getting more options that kept increasing in value as the stock split. So my parents dedicated the foundation to combat poverty because they felt so lucky for what they had. They think it’s unfair they were paid so much for doing their jobs, even as hard as it was and as long the hours were, when plenty of other people who toil away working two or three jobs just to make it through another month get paid in magic beans.”

Here it was. “So why this? Why this program? Why these kids?”

“Oh, again, it’s not an interesting story. The foundation was set up to dole out money to other nonprofits. But I got tired of just sitting back and keeping my fingernails clean. I wanted to be more actively involved. I wasn’t sure at first what I wanted to do, but I read somewhere that recidivism in prison is greatly due to a lack of skills and not having a healthy support network. I learned that low self-esteem was a huge factor, and that most of those in jail have records all the way back to childhood. I figured that if I wanted to be proactive, I needed to start there. Then I saw this show about dog-training programs in prisons, and how well they worked for both the prisoners and the shelter dogs, lowering recidivism rates.”

“Is there a big problem with dogs going back to prison?” Derrick was relieved that Nigel laughed at that.

“HUGE problem. Those dogs just cannot get on the straight and narrow. I heard about one dog that was arrested eight times and never learned better. He died in an altercation with another inmate over a dog bone.”

“Tough world.”

“Yes it is.”

Derrick was grinning so hard it hurt. “Sorry, go on with your story.”

“Okay. So I thought, what if I worked with kids from juvie? I couldn’t do it with kids actually in detention because they just aren’t there long enough, and they often slip through the cracks as soon as they get out. So I figured that if I just work with kids that are at least trying a little, ones that are attempting to follow the probation rules, that maybe I had a chance there. Even that subset of the kids on juvenile probation has a huge recidivism rate, as you know. Although, perhaps I shouldn’t have bothered with Juvie Man’s kids.” He grinned. “So I did a bunch of research, talked with about a hundred thousand people, then built a program I thought could work. It has been an incredible experience.” Nigel looked to be assessing Derrick’s reaction. He was chewing on his lip again. God that was hot.

“So what you’re telling me is that you’ve lived the American dream of a perfect life with a perfect family, you have no need to work and no pressure

to do so, and yet you decided for no particular reason to help at-risk kids after watching a reality TV show.”

Nigel looked chagrined. “I like dogs?”

“Nigh, that’s the coolest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Nigel perked up. “Liking dogs?”

“No, dork. There is absolutely no reason for you to be doing this. You don’t have any connection here, you don’t have the sense of obligation that someone like me has. You just do it because you want to help. I can’t even tell you how awesome that is. Nigh, you’re totally rocking my world right now.” Fuck, had he actually said that out loud?

Apparently it hadn’t freaked Nigel out because he was beaming. “I am?”

“Uh, yeah. You are.”

It didn’t seem possible, but Nigel’s smile got even bigger and brighter. “That means a lot. It really does. Thank you.”

“For what? I mean why?” Oh crap. Did that sound like Derrick was fishing to see if it meant a lot because it came from Nigel? Did he even want to know? Did it matter? He was thinking it actually did because he liked this guy—a lot.

“Well, sometimes I feel like people don’t want me here, that the kids don’t trust me because I’m not part of their world. I don’t have any experiences to draw from. It’s just nice to know that someone who’s been there thinks it’s okay. To come from someone like you, who has been through so much and who is an amazing person, is just...” He trailed off. Their eyes met again, and this time the look lasted even longer. Derrick felt like his body was expanding, like he had taken the best drug in the world.

He thinks I’m amazing. Derrick decided there would be no better moment to put himself out there. He could always just leave if things didn’t go as he wanted them to. “Um, so, uh, do you think that—” He needed to get a grip; he never stammered. He prided himself on always appearing self-assured and easy-going and didn’t want to look like he was anxious. Then again, Nigel made it look sexy. It probably wouldn’t be sexy on Derrick, though. He took a deep breath. “Can I call you sometime?”

Nigel's beautiful smile never wavered. "Yes, please do. I'd like that."

They exchanged contact information, each entering it into the other's phone. Nigel put his away but Derrick kept his out and dialed a number. Nigel cocked his head a little but Derrick held his finger up in a "just a sec" gesture. He clicked the "call" button and put the phone to his ear, then covered the mouthpiece and leaned toward Nigel for a moment. "It's dialing." Nigel nodded and sat back, looking away politely.

A moment later, Nigel's phone rang. He seemed surprised but he pulled out the device. When he saw who was calling he started to laugh. "This is Nigel Rutherford. May I ask with whom I'm speaking?" Talking in a snooty voice, he enunciated each word carefully.

"Yo, Nigh, I is Derrick Cole. We be talking at the dog park like a minute ago?" Derrick was using his best boy-from-the-hood impression.

"I remember. How may I help you, sir?" He was straining not to laugh. Derrick could see muscles working beneath the translucent skin of Nigel's neck. Derrick wanted to feel them with his tongue.

"Hey bro, you wanna kick it? Like, you know, this weekend sometime. If you ain't got nuthin' better to do. I ain't got no shit going down." He was trying to suppress his own laugh. He sounded like an idiot.

"I might be able to fit you into my schedule," Nigel said stiffly with his nose in the air. He sniffed. "I believe I have some time tomorrow evening. Are you available around, say, seven o'clock?"

"Yo, that be tight. You wanna meet somewheres? Like where there ain't no po-po?" Derrick wasn't sure how up on current street slang Nigel was. He knew the kids would be making fun of Derrick if they could hear. He had been out of the game too long to sound right, which was a good thing.

"Certainly not where there will be police, good man. I have no desire to have the constabulary involved in our little *tête-à-tête*. Shall I have my car retrieve you at your place of residence?" He wasn't as square as Derrick thought. Nigel not only knew what "po-po" meant, he was willing to play along with one of Derrick's silly games. Excellent.

"Stay on the down low. I don't want my homies—" Homies? He knew that wasn't current but he was blanking on what was. "—be thinking I be

hangin' with the man." Geezus. He could never face his kids again. He'd turned into a nerd. The thought helped him keep his composure, unlike Nigel who was about to fall out of his chair.

"Very well," *snicker*, "I shall see you at seven o'clock tomorrow evening. Good day, sir."

"Later." They both hung up and collapsed into gales of laughter.

"Would you two keep it down over there? We're trying to learn," Mercedes yelled. Derrick looked over, sheepish. "Fuckin' fags." She turned but he didn't miss her wink and leer as she looked away. She was a great kid, although he needed to speak with her about her word choices.

When he caught his breath, Nigel turned to Derrick and asked, "Did you learn to speak like that on the streets?"

"Yeah, but that was terrible. I'm out of practice."

Nigel shook his head. "It sounded fine to me, annoying white man that I am."

"Well your impression of a rich snotty prick was right on."

"Thank God I have no experience with that." Nigel chuckled. They lapsed into a comfortable silence for a few minutes, just watching the kids who were now working on something involving cones. Mercedes told him they worked on a lot of different things each day to keep both the teens and the dogs from getting bored. They practiced each item until they got it right, but it could take days or even weeks for some of the training.

Derrick tried to think of something to say that wasn't so personal. He wanted to learn more about Nigel, but in a read-between-the-lines sort of way. Finally he just stuck to the typical boring dating questions. "So what's your favorite movie?" Shit, that was stupid. But he could learn a lot about a person from what they liked to watch.

"*Spirited Away*."

"I've never even heard of that."

"Most adults haven't. It's an animated kids' movie from Japan." Derrick's surprise must have shown on his face. "Yeah, I get that a lot,

surprisingly. It actually won an Oscar for best animated feature.” He went on to explain what it was about. Nigel was surprised at Derrick’s answer to the question: *Schindler’s List*, but understood when Derrick explained that similar things were still happening, and that the marginalization of minorities and extreme nationalism was where such things started. He didn’t think it was an impossibility that such a thing could happen in the US. Derrick worried that he was being too political and boring in what he talked about, but Nigel stayed right along with him.

They continued talking about movies, then music, then books, and basically spent the rest of the time chatting about nothing important and laughing a lot. When the kids were finished, Derrick helped them all break down the enclosure and pack it in the van. In the parking lot were several cars with dog crates and volunteers who loaded up the dogs. A few of the kids piled into cars, and the rest ambled off down the road, presumably to catch a bus. He wasn’t allowed to transport youth affiliated with his program, or he would have offered rides in his classic car. He loved cars. Instead he watched the vans pull out of the parking lot.

“The dogs all go to foster homes during the training. Those volunteers just transfer the dogs back and forth. When training is finished, the dogs will go to their forever families.” Nigel came to stand next to Derrick.

“That’s probably hard on these kids.”

Nigel nodded. “Yes. And not just because they’ll miss the dogs.” He looked at Derrick resignedly. Yeah, Nigel got it. He’d listened and understood. Loss was very hard for a lot of people from these situations. Derrick was one of the lucky ones. He had the Bryants, his true parents. He had Ronald, a great man who took a messed up kid and made him into a human being.

“So I’ll see you tomorrow at seven. You’ve got my address?”

“You put it in my phone yourself.” Nigel chuckled.

“Yeah, well, you can never be too sure. See you then, Nigh.” Derrick turned toward his truck.

“Is that what you’re going to call me?” Nigel looked at him expectantly.

“What?” Derrick turned back. He hadn’t even realized what he’d been saying.

“Nigh. Is that what you’re going to call me instead of Gelly?”

“Do you mind?”

That beautiful smile took Derrick’s breath away again. “No, Dare, I don’t mind at all.”

And in that moment, Derrick realized he was already falling.

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CHAPTER 3

Now: Nigel

Nigel isn't sure what woke him, but he's instantly alert. Although his back is to the rest of the bed, he can tell by the way the mattress dips and the coldness of the sheets that Derrick is not there with him. The sound of something breaking has him in the hall in an instant. He plunges into the living room, belatedly realizing if there is danger, he is naked with nothing to protect himself or his family. It may be a small household, but Derrick and Tibbs mean everything to him.

Immediately he sees that he doesn't need a weapon, he needs compassion. Derrick is hitting the edge of the fireplace with the poker. He hears his lover scream with rage, and he prepares himself to help Derrick come back from wherever he is. The PTSD has manifested before. He doesn't know if Ronald's death triggered it this time, but right now it doesn't matter.

“Dare?”

It appears Derrick doesn't hear him at first; he pounds the bricks again and howls.

“Dare, honey? It's me. I'm right here. Can you put the poker down?”

Derrick spins to face him, his eyes wild and shining with emotion. His chest heaves in giant panting breaths, and the poker remains aloft, ready to swing again.

“Dare, I'm here for you; I'm going to help you. I need you to put that down so I can come closer.” He smiles ruefully. “I don't want to accidentally get hit. I'm a big baby when it comes to pain.”

Derrick looks like he's processing what Nigel is saying, then he throws the implement away from himself in horror. He blinks and looks back at Nigel. “I'm sorry, I would never...” He takes a step forward.

Nigel nods in encouragement as he slowly moves toward his boyfriend. “I know, Dare, I know.” He holds his arms out to the side, careful not to spook Derrick in case he's still confused. “You would never hurt me.”

“Yes I would. You can’t trust me. I’m a pariah. I hurt everyone I love.”

“No, Dare, never.” Nigel shakes his head and moves closer.

Agony streaks Derrick’s face. “I hurt Ronald. I left him when he needed me, and I abandoned my sister and brother. I hurt them, too. He died because of me, and they are left alone because I’m a selfish prick.”

Nigel feels his heart constrict at Derrick’s anguish. “No, never. It’s not selfish to refuse to be manipulated into giving up true love.” His boyfriend appears to be listening, like he’s hoping to be absolved and terrified he won’t be. “Dare, you had to make a choice. Ronald forced you to make that choice. You’ve said all year that you can’t choose the one who forces the decision on you.” He steps forward again. “You still see Marisol. She’s said over and over again that you made the right choice. She’s just hurting and angry right now.”

“But Benji? What about Benji? I abandoned him, Nigh.”

“No, you left for a while. We never thought Ronald would keep this going so long. You’ve said yourself that while we were apart you checked out, you weren’t there at all. Getting your letters, telling him how happy you are and how much you miss him, that’s better, Derrick. He’s your brother, not your son. Would you rather show him how to be strong and stand up for who you love and what you believe in, or teach him how to be lonely, sad, and miserable? Marisol said he’s doing great. Dare, you made the right choice, you know that.”

Derrick’s eyes are unfocused as memories overlap in his head. Nigel continues, “I needed you then, and I need you now even more. I want you in my life, in my heart. Picturing anything else makes me ill. I’m here for you.”

Derrick’s eyes focus on him. Nigel jumps forward and catches him as he crumples. He lowers them both to the ground and wraps himself around the tight ball that is his lover. Derrick presses his forehead to Nigel’s chest and leans in closer. Nigel does his best to surround him—legs, arms, torso, head, all reaching and curving to enfold, trying to ease some of the grief with love. A tentative hand touches his side, and he knows he’s getting

through. Pressing his cheek to Derrick's temple, he closes his eyes, breathes him in, feeling Derrick within him as well as in his arms.

"Why didn't he love me enough to set me free? Why did he have to try to control me? I'm thirty years old now, and it was only a year ago. Why wasn't it okay for me to fall in love?"

Nigel kisses Derrick's temple. "He loved you. It was all about his love. Your father just wanted what was best for you. And he was scared of losing you."

"But he did lose me." Derrick's voice is muffled, but he isn't letting go.

The words bring fresh sorrow to his voice, and Nigel finds it difficult to bear. He somehow manages to hold himself steady. "I don't think he thought you would challenge him. He wasn't himself, and he was hurting from the loss of your mother. You've always said he's a lot like you, and you are stubborn to your core. I think he believed it was a contest, and he was too bullheaded to give in first."

Derrick shakes his head, his nose rubbing against Nigel's chest. "He was an idiot."

"Sometimes even the greatest men are."

Then: Nigel

"Oh my God that was so good!" Derrick scarfed down the last of his ice cream like he hadn't eaten in a week. Nigel knew for a fact that wasn't true because so far Derrick had eaten two orders of salmon and chips, several slices of hot-out-of-the-oven sourdough bread, a plate of oysters during which seemingly endless awkward teasing and innuendos ensued, two large Cokes, the biggest iced mocha Nigel had ever seen, and a sack of fresh saltwater taffy made right there. It was a wonder Derrick's teeth didn't fall out. Nigel thought it was adorable and longed to see what else the small man was willing to put in his mouth. So far the oyster talk had left him hopeful.

"I'm glad you like it." Nigel smiled. "I've never seen anyone love food so much. Did you know you hum when you eat?"

Derrick glanced at him. "I still do that?"

"Yes, you still do that." Nigel laughed. "It's charming." He laughed again at Derrick's scowl. Those beautiful eyes were bright, revealing that the expression was all in good fun.

"Are you going to finish that?" Derrick indicated the cone in Nigel's hand. The late November air on the Seattle waterfront was cold, but Derrick didn't seem to notice as he looked eagerly at the icy glob.

"Oh. No, want it?" He handed the dripping mess over.

"You didn't like it?" Derrick looked a little worried, as if he were afraid he had made a bad suggestion when he declared he wanted ice cream.

"I loved it. I'm just stuffed!"

Derrick seemed to accept that answer along with the ice cream, which he proceeded to stuff down as well. "Guess I'm getting there, too." He looked sideways at Nigel, and they both burst out laughing. "I guess I eat a lot."

"Well your body needs it because you don't have an ounce of fat on you."

Derrick ducked his head. "You haven't seen beneath my clothes."

"Not yet anyway." Their eyes met, and Nigel's heart fluttered. Derrick was striking. Every time Nigel looked at him, he found himself momentarily mute. When Derrick spoke, he often had to replay the words in his head before they registered.

"Have you ridden the Great Wheel yet?"

God that sounded romantic. "Not yet." Nigel felt stupid. He wasn't sure if Derrick wanted to ride the Ferris wheel or if he was just making conversation. The ride was pretty pricey. He had no idea how much Derrick made, probably not much working for the government.

Derrick turned and looked up at the giant ring above them. "You know, they're just copying London. They could have come up with something more original."

Nigel didn't look up, just gazed at those eyes. "I suppose, but I haven't ridden that one, either, despite having been to the city twice."

“Does that mean you’re too scared?” Derrick’s grin was teasing, and his eyes sparkled. Nigel swallowed at the sight.

“Er, no. I just didn’t have the opportunity.”

“Well, we’re all about providing opportunities, aren’t we? Want to go?” Did Derrick look a little nervous? He always seemed so self-assured.

“I’d love to.” He really did—anything to be closer to Derrick.

Derrick grinned. “Race you, slowpoke!” He took off down Alaskan Way, and Nigel had to strain to catch up, despite his longer legs. It took a while to get their tickets and board. The whole time, the two were pushed together by the crowd, and Nigel was hyperaware of Derrick’s body next to his. When they finally entered the gondola, six more people piled in after them, and the two were squished into a corner. Nigel didn’t mind at all. His side tingled where it touched Derrick’s, even through the cloth separating them.

The giant Ferris wheel began moving slowly. Derrick was sitting on the outside and had a better view over the water, but again, Nigel didn’t care. The only view he needed was the one of the man sitting right next to him. He had never been so attracted to someone before. Every moment with Derrick was like opening a present. He was fresh and vital, so full of life. Derrick didn’t seem to take anything for granted and reveled in each new sensation—humming when he was eating, commenting on how interesting everything was, eyes shining when looking at anything new, sometimes even bouncing with excitement at something others would find stupid.

“This is great! Isn’t this great?” Derrick was lightly bouncing in his seat now, looking out over the water, in at the other passengers, and then back to grin at Nigel.

Derrick took Nigel’s breath away. “Yes. It’s really, really great.” He knew he probably never stopped smiling when he was with Derrick, but he didn’t care if he looked like a giant goofball. Derrick was just so much fun to be with.

When they reached the top, people gasped as they hung there, nothing above or around them. Puget Sound was dark except where the wheel’s

lights speckled the surface. Derrick was looking back over the water, one hand pressed against the window. Nigel felt something press against his palm—Derrick's hand. He fought the urge to grab it and squeeze it hard enough that Derrick could never let go but he didn't. He gently took the hand and pretended like nothing out of the ordinary had happened instead of one of the most momentous occasions of his life. It was their first date, their third time meeting, and he was already in major lust with this man.

The next time they reached the top, Nigel looked out at the water and found Derrick's reflected eyes watching him. When Derrick noticed he'd been caught, he broke into a smile, and Nigel squeezed his hand lightly. He squeezed back, and they held the gaze for a long moment before Derrick turned his head to watch the view behind them.

When they disembarked, Nigel kept hold of Derrick's hand, and Derrick didn't try to pull away. They casually walked back to the street amid the throngs of tourists. No one bothered them, although Nigel was pretty sure an older couple took a picture of them. *Welcome to Seattle, folks. We're everywhere*, he thought. A moment later, he belatedly realized that they were surrounded by tourists, complete unknowns, possibly unfamiliar or uncomfortable with public displays of gay affection. He never minded before but suddenly he was worried for Derrick. He was a small man, and if some homophobic Luddite with a beef decided to start something...

Nigel forced himself to calm down. They were in public in Seattle. There were too many people here, too many vendors wanting to make all their customers feel welcome, too many tourists from places abroad where being gay was even more accepted than Seattle, too many urban denizens who had seen it all, too many Seattleites proud of their city's quirky and accepting nature, and just too many people period for anything to happen. Nevertheless, he took a step closer to Derrick. Even in Seattle, homophobia still thrived.

"Want to walk up to the sculpture park? It's too bad the streetcar was torn up for the viaduct removal."

Nigel missed the streetcar, too. It had been one of his favorite Seattle waterfront attractions, a repurposed old relic from Seattle's early days.

“Sure.” They began walking north along Alaskan Way toward the Olympic Sculpture Park, an outdoor extension of the Seattle Art Museum. They held hands as they walked and enjoyed being next to each other. Neither felt the need to speak. The population dwindled as they got further from the main piers, but Nigel didn’t feel a resurgence of his nervousness. He inexplicably felt safer with no one else close by.

When they reached the park they discovered it had officially closed just after dusk, but they were still able to see and even access many of the exhibits. They sat on each of the six benches shaped like eyes, and Nigel had a sudden desire to curve Derrick along the arc of an eyelid and make their bodies into one. It was so not the time or the place, and he quickly tamped down his libido. Instead they headed back down to the water and into Myrtle Edwards Park, which extended along the shore north of the piers. After a while, Derrick turned to lean on the railing overlooking the water, letting go of his hand. Nigel joined him.

“I love the smell of the sea,” Nigel said after a while.

“What, the smell of rotting fish and seaweed?” Derrick teased.

“Yep. Yummy.” Nigel turned sideways to face him. “But I like the company better.” God that was cheesy. Was that too cheesy?

Derrick turned toward him and grinned. “That was cheesy.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“But I like cheese.” Derrick moved closer. “It’s one of my favorites.”

Nigel felt a stirring and a sudden need to adjust his pants. “Is it now? What kind do you like best?”

Derrick took another step closer. Nigel could feel his breath brush the bottom of his face. Derrick placed one finger on Nigel’s chin to tilt his head down a bit. He fell into Derrick’s eyes. He had never before seen eyes quite that hue. The Caribbean Sea’s cerulean had nothing on that color. “All kinds. But I like the hot ones best.”

“Temperature hot or spicy hot?” Was that lame? That was lame. Nigel felt like his skin was too tight, all of him straining to touch Derrick, leaving no room for his brain to work.

“Both.” Nigel noticed Derrick’s breathing was a little faster. Good. It matched his own. It was his turn to move. He reached one hand up and cupped Derrick’s cheek, smooth skin with a light covering of coarse five o’clock shadow. His thumb traced a tapered cheekbone. They were close enough now that he had to look from one eye to the other to see both, but he couldn’t pull his gaze away.

He felt Derrick swallow under his palm. He realized Derrick was looking at his mouth. That gave him the strength to look down. When he saw a tongue slide along Derrick’s parted lips, he closed the distance. They met halfway, their lips just touching at first, then that sexy mouth opened, and Nigel felt a tongue gently slide along and around his own. Derrick made the tiniest sound, half a step above a hitch of his breath, and that was Nigel’s undoing.

He took Derrick’s head between his hands, tilting it slightly so the kiss could deepen and his tongue caressed Derrick’s cheeks from the inside. He pulled back and sucked on Derrick’s lower lip a moment before opening wide to dive back in. Derrick’s hands slipped around his waist and pulled him closer. Nigel turned and pressed Derrick between his own body and the railing. His arms moved to wrap around Derrick’s shoulders and he felt Derrick’s hips press against him, the hardness there mirroring his own arousal.

The kiss quickened and turned more intense as they plundered one another’s mouth, desperate to be closer. Derrick made the half moan sound again and pressed one leg between Nigel’s thighs. Nigel gasped and drew back. He touched their foreheads together as he got his breathing under control. He pulled away a little and looked at Derrick’s beautiful face, mouth canted to the side in a smirk.

“Told you I like cheese.”

Nigel laughed, although it was a little more like a pant. “Good thing. I am great at being cheesy.” He leaned in for another kiss but made it short. Derrick whimpered when he pulled away, but Nigel shook his head. “If we keep this up, I won’t be able to stop, and we’ll be arrested for public indecency. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t think it looks good for probation officers to get arrested.”

Derrick shoved him away. “We wouldn’t want that. I was hoping to get laid tonight!” He grinned mischievously.

“Anyone I know?” Derrick punched him lightly. “Okay then, ‘Your place or mine?’” Nigel hoped that was funny. Was that funny?

“Which is closer?” They turned to run to the car and almost bowled over an older couple sporting American flag hats, his and her matching clothes, and shopping bags with Space Needle logos. Both of them were gaping, and he got the impression they’d been watching for more than a mere few seconds. He ducked his head and mumbled an apology as Derrick laughed and dragged him forward. Nigel had time enough to notice that the tourist’s pants were tented and he couldn’t suppress a chortling snort as he passed.

“We just gave the tourists a peep show. I think they enjoyed it. A lot.”

Derrick turned to look at him. “Really? Well next time they have to pay. Your body is worth its weight in platinum, and as the new guardian of its flame, I decree that you don’t give out freebies.”

“Not even to you?” Nigel was having trouble maintaining the conversation as they raced along what was, in all likelihood, the only level road in Seattle.

Derrick gave him one last look with his eye quirked. “I don’t pay for what’s already mine.” He laughed to indicate it was a joke but deep down, Nigel didn’t mind the thought of belonging to Derrick at all. In fact, he quite liked the sound of it.

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CHAPTER 4

Now: Nigel

They sit entwined for a long while, until Nigel realizes how cold Derrick's back is. "Let's get you back to bed." He releases his lover and starts to stand.

Derrick reaches for him. "No, I can't. Nightmares. Please, I can't." His eyes are pleading, and his face so full of pain that Nigel is willing to do anything to take it away. He wishes he could absorb all of the hurt so that his lover could rest. But all he can do is be there for whatever Derrick needs.

"Okay. Let me get you something to wear. It's chilly." Derrick reluctantly lets go, and Nigel hurries into the bedroom to grab sleep pants and long sleeved tees for each of them. In the corner, Tibbs blinks at him sleepy-eyed then lays his head back down. "You slept through that noise? I have you trained too well. You're supposed to break the rules for that sort of thing and bark your head off." The dog sighs and closes his eyes.

On his way back to the living room, Nigel turns up the thermostat. He finds Derrick on the floor, back to the couch, leafing through photo albums arranged on the coffee table. Nigel forces him to get dressed and then sits down next to him, shoulders and thighs touching. Derrick is still agitated, and Nigel's goal is to calm his lover down.

Derrick points to a page in one of the binders. "This was the day I left for the month-long wilderness camp I told you about." The photos show a much younger and rather sullen Derrick in front of a school bus painted bright red. A water bottle is in his hand and a huge backpack lies beside him. Ronald has his arm across the teenager's shoulders. "I was so pissed off. Ronald kept reassuring me that I could do it, that I would be fine. At the time I thought he was full of shit. I had convinced myself I just didn't like the outdoors because I was a city boy. But after this picture was taken, on the bus to the site, I realized I was terrified."

"How old were you?"

“Sixteen. Ronald spent three weeks gearing me up for the trip but I still wasn’t prepared. We spent the first couple of days at a campsite learning basics before heading out, and I bribed one of the staff to let me use the phone to call home. I cried and begged for Ronald to come get me. He just repeated that he had faith in me, that he knew I could do it, that he didn’t have a doubt in the world that I was capable of finishing the program. He reminded me to take just one day or one hour or even one minute at a time. He said that I just needed to make it through one day out there on the trail and if I couldn’t do it, I could call him to come get me. He said he’d arranged it with the head guide.

“That’s what I did. Every time I felt like I couldn’t walk another yard or couldn’t climb another tree or couldn’t go out to gather food, I told myself ‘just fifteen more minutes.’ I didn’t want to disappoint him.”

Nigel rubs Derrick’s knee; his lover is still trembling. “And did you finish?”

Derrick nods. “I did.” He flips the page and shows his homecoming. In the photos, the same bus is behind him, but Derrick looks like he was raised by wolves: He is filthy. His hair is wild and matted. His clothes are ripped and caked with dirt. There are scratches on his face and a bandage around his wrist. But he is grinning, and this time, he has his arm over Ronald’s shoulders. Nigel feels a burst of pride knowing that his boyfriend survived several weeks in the wilderness with no amenities or outside food.

“After this picture was taken, I said goodbye to the guides and told the leader that I was glad I hadn’t had to use the phone. She had no idea what I was talking about and told me that there was no cell phone service out there, that in an emergency, someone would have had to hike out for help. There was no way I could have gotten out early. I was so angry, I didn’t speak to Ronald for a week. But in the end, I realized that without the belief that it was up to me when it ended, I wouldn’t have believed I could do it.”

Nigel smiles and kisses his lover. “I’m really impressed. I don’t think I could do it.”

“Be quiet. Of course you could.” They sit in silence as Derrick flips the pages, his erratic movements a sign that adrenaline is still rushing through his system.

“Why is there an expensive piece of furniture in your yard?” Nigel points to a photo of Derrick sitting cross-legged on top of a beautiful wooden desk resting on a tarp.

Derrick touches the photo. “I made that.”

“Really? That’s incredible. Seriously?”

“Yeah. This was while we were letting it air after the stain had dried. It smelled terrible.” Derrick’s fingers trace the lines of the desk. “One day I was trying to get out of doing my homework, and I told Ronald that the desk in my room was too small and unstable.” Derrick chuckles. “Kind of like me at the time. I said it was impossible to get anything done there and the rest of the house was too noisy. He told me to make it work or make a new desk. I laughed at him. He asked me what was so funny, and I realized that he was serious.

“As always, I was utterly convinced it was impossible. No way could I make a piece of furniture. But he dared me. He said he would buy the supplies, but I had to do the research. If I did it, not only would I have the desk, but he would let me sell the one in my room and keep the money. See, it was an antique and I’d royally offended Celeste by not liking it. But neither of them told me that. When I did finally sell it, I was shocked at how much money I got.

“But anyway, I went to the library and checked out books on how to make furniture. I bought some drafting paper and designed the desk. Ronald went to the store with me to pick out the kind of wood I wanted, the stain color, the drawer pulls, screws, etc. At least fifty times, I stopped building because I decided I couldn’t do it, and Ronald had to boost me up again until I was ready to continue. It took me almost a year, but the day I finished, I felt like I’d climbed Mt. Rainier.”

“Wow. That’s a gorgeous piece. All that detail.” A dozen photographs depict various angles of the desk and drawers. “Do you still have it?”

“It’s at the house.”

Nigel looks around the living room. “I think it would look really nice over there where that boring sideboard is.” He points to an alcove that

they've never found any real use for. "When things are less emotional, do you think we could bring it here?" The piece is lovely, and he genuinely means it, but he's also trying to calm Derrick and nothing is working.

Derrick smiles for the first time since Nigel came home. "Yeah. That'd be great."

They pore through the albums, Derrick occasionally explaining a photo or telling a story of how his foster father helped him build his self-esteem and belief in his own abilities. Until now, Nigel didn't know a lot about how Ronald helped Derrick turn around, only that he did. Since the rift when his father expelled him from his home, Derrick hasn't talked about his father at all. Nigel is glad to finally get to know a little about this man Derrick still idolizes.

"Thank you for sharing this with me." Derrick just nods, his leg still bouncing. Nigel pulls his lover into his arms, and they hold each other, thinking and remembering. Silence settles around them like a mantle. A long time passes before Derrick chuckles without humor. "It's ironic, isn't it? He made me who I am today through his love and tolerance. He understood me and what I went through and he didn't judge me. And yet, intolerance is what tore us apart."

He turns in Nigel's arms and kisses him deeply. "I almost lost you. I almost lost this." His throat works as he swallows several times. "I'm so angry with him. He didn't trust me in this, the most important thing of all. I had to leave. I had to, right?" He clings to Nigel. "You were the one thing that was missing in my life. I needed you to feel whole." His body shakes. "This is right. We're right. Right?"

Somehow Nigel manages to pull the quivering mess that is Derrick closer. "Don't second guess us, please don't. I'm here and I'm not going anywhere. We were meant to be together, you know that. I love you forever, don't ever doubt it."

Derrick punches the table. "The fucker did this, made me choose, and then went and died on me. Fuck. Fuck!"

Derrick looks like he's falling apart. Nigel can almost see pieces tumbling off his lover as he comes undone. He grasps Derrick's face

between his hands. “Dare, I’ve got you. I’m here. I will always be here. You won’t fall; I’ve got you.”

Derrick stills then lunges in for a frantic kiss. “Fuck me. Please fuck me so I can stop thinking for a little bit. I need you to surround me inside and out. I need you now, please. Fuck me hard.”

Nigel is more than ready to oblige. This is something he can do, something he is good at. He kisses Derrick deeply then pulls him to his feet.

Then: Derrick

“That our girl?” Ronald asked, watching a young woman enter the “arena”—a cordoned off portion of a soccer field—and direct her dog into a down-stay. The animal lay down on his belly and watched the small crowd.

“Yep. That’s Mercedes.” The young woman and her dog were the first ones to take the test. Nigel stepped out and introduced her and the dog, Spot Check, then left the field and the exam began.

“That dog’s sure cute. Girl looks like she’s handling him good.” The mutt in question looked like a long-haired Dalmatian with a black head. No one knew what his breed mix was.

Derrick beamed. “She’s doing great. Nigel says she’s the top of the class. Since she completed the full course and did so well, she’s been offered an internship for the next training session, and I think she’s going to take it.”

They watched the girl lead the dog through its routine, from walking on a leash without pulling, to staying in place while Mercedes walked twenty feet away and turned her back, to coming when called. The dog was required to sit patiently while being groomed and while being examined as if he were in a veterinarian’s office.

Derrick stole a glance off to the side where Nigel was watching, his lower lip between his teeth. He was nodding slowly, moving his head in minute motions as though he were the one leading the dog through his paces. Each time a task was completed successfully, which was always, his face lit up in that amazing grin, and he whooped and clapped. Derrick

couldn't take his eyes off his lover. That lip thing was so hot. Just looking at Nigel made him hard.

"That dog was so out of control it couldn't be adopted?" Ronald's voice pulled Derrick back to himself.

"Yep. Kind of like Mercedes—well not unadoptable, but out of control."

Ronald shook his head in disbelief. "How many times she in jail?"

Derrick laughed. "You know I can't tell you that. The only reason you even know she was in detention is that she's in this program and it's a requirement. You can ask her, though."

"Nah, it's fine. She's doing a real good job there, real good. That dog looks like it's never done anything wrong in its life." On the bleachers between the two men, his brother Benjamin was squirming.

"Can I go play with the dogs, Dad? Please?"

"Shush, boy. We got to watch them taking their tests first." Ronald squeezed Benji's shoulder and pulled him into his lap. The child was eight but emotionally about five, with the accompanying attention span.

"I don't like tests."

"Hey, Benji, Mercedes and Spot Check have a surprise at the end after the assessment is over. Just watch." Derrick tried to make it sound exciting.

"What is this test again?" Marisol asked, sounding bored. At sixteen, his foster sister found everything boring. He wasn't buying it, though. She had been bribed into coming but she was watching, not texting on her phone.

"The Canine Good Citizen test. See that woman in the tweed skirt and sturdy shoes standing next to Nigh?"

"The lesbian?"

Ronald sighed with annoyance, but Derrick hid a laugh. "Now let's not stereotype. I happen to know she's happily married to a rock star named Bad Boy."

Marisol stared at him wide-eyed for a moment, then pursed her lips. "You're making that up."

“Maybe.” He grinned. “But I made my point. Anyway, she’s from the American Kennel Club, a big organization devoted to purebred dogs. She’s administering the evaluations.”

“That is *not* a purebred dog.” Marisol was clearly repulsed. Beside her, Ronald mimicked her posture and disgust loudly and comically. She glared at him but straightened up.

“No, but any dog can take the CGC test.” Derrick wondered if he looked as ridiculous when he mocked his kids as Ronald did just now. He decided he didn’t care.

“Is there a ‘Merican Mutt Club?” Benjamin piped up. Ronald smiled and squeezed his shoulder.

Derrick shook his head. “I don’t think so, but it would be a good idea to have an organization promoting mixed breeds, huh?”

“Yeah. Mixed is best, like us.” Benjamin sat up proudly, his white teeth extra bright against his beautiful dark brown skin. He was part African American and part Lummi—a tribe close to the Washington–British Columbia border—and was very proud of his heritage.

Ronald smiled and scratched the boy’s head. “Well, people are people, Benji, you know that. Anyone can be best no matter their race or color. But it’s true that some of us mixed folks are pretty special, like the four of us, and they don’t always get the same chances. So maybe you could start a ‘Merican Mutt Club’ someday, Benji, for those mixed dogs that aren’t getting all the attention.” Ronald never missed a teaching opportunity. It was both wonderful and terribly annoying. Derrick hated that he was the same way but he couldn’t help it.

“A mixed dog club?”

His father nodded.

“That would be cool. Will you help me?”

Ronald smiled encouragingly. “I’ll help you figure out the best way to go about learning what you need to know about what needs to be done in order to start the program; but you don’t need my help. You’ll be just fine doing it yourself.”

Derrick flinched at the confusing sentence. It took him a moment to work out that Ronald was offering to help Benji determine where to start the process of figuring everything out before he actually began anything rather than Ronald starting the whole process with Benji. As always, Ronald didn't plan to actually help with the project at all, just guide his son in the right direction. Benji didn't look confused, though, so Derrick figured it was safe to move on.

"So anyway, passing the CGC test shows that the dog is well-trained and safe to be around. Being labeled Good Citizens makes the dogs easily adoptable."

"Oh." Marisol rolled her eyes but he could tell she was interested. "So what's the surprise?"

"You'll see. Wait, here's the fun part of the test." On the field in front of the bleachers, several of the other trainers had gathered in a loose group. At a signal from Danica, the teens began to make loud strange noises, flail their arms around, and move about randomly—distracting and unpredictable. Mercedes led her dog through the group. The animal moved out of the way once or twice when he was about to get stepped on, but other than that, paid no attention to the boisterous and bizarre teens. Derrick didn't think he could have done that himself; those kids were nuts. Mercedes had done a great job.

After the girl led Spot Check through the group three times, she had the dog sit. The audience applauded; Derrick and his family all shouted and cheered. Nigel was bouncing on his toes as he clapped, then he turned and looked up into the seats where his eyes met Derrick's. His grin turned into the huge open smile that always set Derrick's heart skipping, and Derrick smiled back. Danica was standing next to Nigel, and when she caught Derrick's eye, she pantomimed a giant wink so he could see it from where he sat. He rolled his eyes but he felt his face flush. Once again he thanked the universe for giving him naturally tan skin.

"That your man?"

"Duh, Dad. He's the only guy over there." Marisol sounded disgusted again.

Ronald ignored her. “It’s a good program he put together.”

Derrick’s smile never waned, nor did he take his eyes off Nigel. “It sure is. He’s a good man.”

“And fucking hot, too. Why the best ones always gotta be gay?” Marisol sighed.

“Marisol. No cussing.” Their father then leaned over a little. “She’s right though. You caught a handsome man.”

Derrick thought he might die of embarrassment, until he looked at Nigel again and a warm feeling spread in his chest. Yes, Nigel was definitely a good-looking guy, and he was Derrick’s.

They all turned to watch the last of the test. Mercedes had Spot Check allow himself to be petted by an overeager Demetrius in a wheelchair. The boy was pretending to be out of control of his limbs, flopping around, drooling, and making strange sounds.

“What’s he doing?” Benjamin was wiggling in imitation as he watched.

“He’s pretending to be a person who is a little different than the average Joe. Spot Check proved a minute ago that he can be calm around unpredictable behavior. Now he needs to show that he can be attentive and relaxed when he is introduced to and greeted by someone with special needs.”

“Oh. My. God. That’s Demetrius! He used to go to my school. He is such a jerk.”

Ronald nodded in agreement. “He’s kind of rude. Doesn’t seem very tolerant of disabled people.”

Derrick sighed. “Sensitivity is not one of Demetrius’s strong suits.” Below, Spot Check nosed the teen’s hand for more petting. Following that, Mercedes took the dog around the ring and then back to the center where she met Nigel and Tibbs. They talked for a moment while the dogs ignored one another, and then she continued on. Nigel returned to his position near Danica, Spot Check having shown that he could be calm around a strange dog.

“Gelly has a dog?” Benji exclaimed.

Ronald looked confused. “Jelly? Who’s Jelly?”

“That’s what the kids call Nigel,” Derrick explained.

“When did you meet Nigel, Benji?”

Benji wasn’t paying any attention to his father. Instead he was standing and waving to Nigel with his whole body. Below Nigel was laughing and waving back just as big.

“Last Thursday when his playdate was cancelled, I took Benji and Marisol to watch the dogs and meet Nigh.”

“Man’s called a lot of weird names. That’s probably your doing, Mr. Alias.” It was true. Derrick had a nickname for everyone except his parents. Their nicknames were “Mom” and “Dad” but for a long time, he hadn’t felt comfortable calling them that, and then it was too awkward to start.

Derrick looked down to where the last part of the test was happening. A jogger ran close by Mercedes and the dog as they walked placidly across the field. Spot Check ignored the woman, calm until two teens carried a ladder nearby and dropped it just as they drew abreast of the dog and handler. Spot Check jumped a little and looked at it but then kept walking. They returned to the center of the arena where Mercedes bowed and the dog kneeled on his forelegs.

“Yes!” Derrick jumped to his feet yelling and clapping. “Way to go, Mercedes!” He whistled. His family and the rest of the audience were on their feet, too. The other trainers were off to the side also whooping and cheering. Mercedes beamed. Nigel ran over and shook her hand hard, his own face bearing his radiant smile. Derrick thought his heart might explode.

“Mercedes Walters and Spot Check, everyone!” Nigel spoke into a microphone in his hand. Everyone cheered and clapped again. The woman from the AKC lightly tapped her hands together, a polite smile on her face.

Not a very emotional person, Derrick thought to himself. *Boring*. He looked back at his boyfriend whose feelings were plastered across his whole body. Nigel made his whole world sing.

“Now Mercedes and Spot Check have a special treat for you.” The onlookers sat. Nigel caught Mercedes’s eye, and when she nodded, he

signaled to Danica then hurried off the field. Mercedes and the dog stood side by side, the girl's hand on her hip. In a moment, music began piping through the microphone's speakers. There were a few catcalls as folks recognized the song, "Single Ladies" by Beyoncé.

Mercedes first tapped her foot for a few beats, her eyes meeting those of the dog. Then she twisted her left foot toward the right one a small bit and swung her hips to the right as well. The dog followed by moving his back left paw to the right, his hips moving as a result. Mercedes moved the foot back and then repeated the motion with her other leg. Spot Check followed suit. As the two continued in this manner, the crowd caught on and cheered. When Beyoncé told everyone to put their hands up, Mercedes kicked her right leg out and lifted her hands. Spot Check first kicked his right hind leg out and back, then reared up, batting at the air with his front paws. The crowd roared.

The two then moved their hips from side to side again. When the song mentioned "dipping," Mercedes bowed and the dog move his legs forward so his head was near the ground and his tail was up in the air. The two moved around in a circle as they continued their dancing. Behind them, the teens had all lined up and were imitating Beyoncé's moves from her video, too. By then the audience was on its feet again, clapping and singing along. Even Ronald mouthed a phrase or two.

"God, this song is so old. I was in middle school when this came out," complained Marisol, but even she was nodding her head to the beat. Girl and dog swung their heads and moved their hips to the music, never breaking eye contact. It was clear from Spot Check's wagging tail, bright eyes, and lolling grin that he was having as much fun as the young woman. The prancing "Egyptian style" bit had the crowd cheering again when Spot Check hopped along on his hind legs, his front right paw in the air and the left hanging downward.

Only a short portion of the song was used, but it was enough. When the music ended, Mercedes took a bow and the dog kneeled on his front legs. The cheers were deafening. Everyone was on his or her feet, even Marisol. Nigel was jumping up and down, and Derrick wanted to jump up and down on him, only in private and with their bodies horizontal. He put that thought

away the moment it came to him. It would not do to have to adjust himself here around his father and siblings.

Nigel hurried out to shake Mercedes hand again. “Mercedes and Spot Check!” He reminded the crowd of their names and held the girl’s hand up like he might a winning prizefighter’s. After the applause died down, Nigel continued. “Wasn’t that amazing? That’s called dog dancing. It’s very hard to do, and Mercedes had to work extra hours with Spot Check to train him to do it. Thank you to Spot Check’s foster family, the Carters,” he pointed to a large family taking up a good chunk of the bleachers, “for providing opportunities for the two to practice.

“We have more testing for you to watch, and more entertainment and surprises, so please stay. Afterward we’ll have a pizza party right here for the participants, audience, and volunteers. Please join us. Up next is Molly Ng.” Derrick watched him wave a plump girl with a small terrier mix over and then head for the sidelines again. He longed to join Nigel but he needed to play host. His family was doing him a favor by being here.

“Is it all going to be that fun?” asked Benjamin.

Derrick shrugged. “Depends on what you think is fun. Nigh wanted to start the event off with something special to keep people interested. But all the dogs are going to demonstrate something, and I do know a couple will be showing agility, and at the end, at least four, including Spot Check, will be playing a shortened version of flyball together. That’s really fun to watch.”

“What’s flyball?” Marisol’s pretense at boredom was failing miserably.

“Well, both agility and flyball are kind of like obstacle courses for dogs. The course in agility is varied and difficult, and the trainer leads the dog through it. In flyball, the course is lower and easier, but the dog has to grab a ball at one end and bring it back to his or her handler who remains at the start the whole time. It’s also a team sport. Both are really fun to watch. You’ll like it.”

They settled back to watch the rest of the show. All of the dogs passed the test, even Demetrius’s mutt which took every opportunity to lie down and try to sleep. Derrick had never seen a lazier dog. But he figured it was a

good match for the teen who suffered from ADHD and didn't need any more stimuli than he already got.

At the end, each youth was reintroduced with his or her dog. Both the handlers and dogs got a certificate, the handlers for completing the program, and the dogs for passing the tests. The CGC certificate was a fake for the awards ceremony only; the real certificates would come in the mail once the judge had turned in the results. Twelve teenagers had started the program and only eight finished, but that was one up from the first time the program ran and was incredible for such an unreliable and unstable population.

After the awards ceremony, most of the crowd gathered for pizza and soft drinks. Derrick knew that most of the adults were friends, social workers, volunteers, and supporters; very few were family. Nevertheless, Demetrius came up to him dragging an elderly woman who smelled of peanuts and citrus. The teen's demeanor was a little sullen and fit more closely with his whole emo look, but Derrick saw the happiness in his eyes as the young man introduced them.

"Derrick, this is my grandma. Grandma, this is my P.O."

The woman smiled and took one of Derrick's hands in both of hers. "Thank you, young man. You've worked a miracle with my grandson. He talks about you all the time."

"No I don't."

The woman turned and patted her grandson on the arm. "Oh, don't worry, dear. I don't care if you're gay."

"I'm not gay!"

She ignored him and turned back to Derrick. "He takes after his father. I did a terrible job with him, and I was at my wits' end with Demmy."

"I'm not gay!" Demetrius was still back a few sentences ago. Derrick heard Ronald snort.

"This program and your guidance have just done wonders for the boy."

"That's nice of you to say, Mrs. Nagle? Same surname as Demetrius?"

She nodded. "But I can't take credit. It's Nigel Rutherford's program, not mine, and it's your grandson who's done all the work."

"Derrick, I'm not gay." Behind Derrick, Marisol was snickering.

"Nonsense." The woman was still ignoring her grandson. "He has had lots of opportunities to do work, but this is the first time he's ever done any. You got him into this program, and you kept him in it." She nodded in agreement with herself.

"Grandma, just 'cause I wear eyeliner doesn't mean I'm gay." Demetrius turned to Marisol. "I'm not gay." Marisol burst out laughing and Benjamin joined in, although he clearly had no idea why he was laughing.

"All we did was make opportunities available. Demetrius did all the work," Derrick repeated.

"Humph. Well I couldn't do a thing with him, and I provided all sorts of opportunities."

Derrick suppressed an urge to hiss and swipe at her with his hands molded into claws. The fact that one of his paws was still trapped between the woman's helped. "Sometimes the right chance takes a while to show up."

"If anyone's listening, I'm not gay." The kid scowled.

Ms. Nagle sighed. "I suppose you're right. As I said, I didn't do a great job with his father, either. My daughters all turned out fine, but I guess I never knew how to parent boys."

Behind him, Marisol giggled.

Derrick wasn't sure what to say to that. "I'm sure you did your best."

"Oh my God. Grandma, tell her I'm not gay!"

"Don't patronize me young man," she said to Derrick gently. "But thank you. Now I've got to be going. It's almost time for *Jeopardy*." She verified that Demetrius had a way to get to work after the pizza party, said goodbye, and left.

"Derrick, tell your sister I'm not gay!"

"Marisol, Demetrius says he's not gay." That resulted in a new burst of laughter.

“Derrick!” Demetrius stomped his foot. “Marisol, I swear, I’m not—”

“Gay, I know.” She giggled. “I don’t care if you are. My brother’s gay.” She nudged Derrick with her shoulder.

“I know, but I want—I mean... Would...” Demetrius trailed off. “Never mind.” He turned to go.

Marisol calmed down a bit. “Maybe you could show me the dogs?”

Demetrius looked surprised and hopeful. “Yeah? I mean, yeah, come on.”

Marisol grabbed Benji’s hand. “Come on. Let’s look at the dogs. Dad and Derrick need to talk.” Derrick was surprised by that. He wasn’t sure what they needed to talk about. He’d actually forgotten his dad was there, he’d been so quiet.

Clearly having Benjamin tag along was not what Demetrius had in mind, but he went with it and grabbed Benji’s other hand. The three headed off toward the kennels where the volunteers and some of the teens were gathered with the dogs.

Derrick turned and was shocked to see his father’s jaw set, anger in his eyes. “What? What’d I do?”

“Nigel *Rutherford*?” Ronald gritted out through clenched teeth.

“Uh, yeah. I told you, he’s the head of the program.” Derrick was baffled.

“I thought he was just running the program or something. I didn’t know he owned the whole damn thing.” Ronald’s eyes narrowed in anger.

“Well, his parents do, but why? Is that a problem?” Derrick had no idea what was going on.

“So he’s rich.” Ronald’s expression made it clear he thought nothing more needed to be said. Derrick was even more confused. Nigel having money was the problem? He thought his father would be thrilled his boyfriend wasn’t sponging off Derrick like had happened in the past with a couple of those fuck buddies.

“Derrick?” He turned as Nigel walked up, face flushed, his wonderful smile lighting his face. Derrick immediately forgot the current conversation

and grinned back. His lover pulled him into a quick hug and kissed him lightly on the lips before letting him go. Derrick loved that Nigel was okay with touching him in public. "I'm so glad you came!" He then turned to Ronald and held out his hand. "You must be Mr. Bryant. I'm Nigel. Thank you for coming. We really appreciate the support."

Derrick's father ignored the hand. "I'm here for the kids."

Looking unsure, Nigel put his hand back down. Then his polite smile was back. "I know they appreciate it. So many of them don't have anyone here to cheer for them." He turned back to Derrick. "I'm sorry your mom couldn't make it. Did you see Mercedes's mom? I thought she would pop a blood vessel telling me how proud of her daughter she is. I hadn't met her before. She's very nice, just like her daughter told us."

Derrick was still at a loss as to his father's behavior, and part of him felt like mocking Ronald's rudeness, but he ignored it for now and instead tried to draw his father into the conversation. "No, we haven't talked to her yet. Ronald, Mercedes's mom is delightful. She's tried really hard with her daughter, but she's a single mom of three and has to work two jobs, and they're still struggling. She was just a kid herself when she had Mercedes, and she didn't have anyone to model good parenting. She's become a fine mother, but Mercedes rebelled with the wrong crowd and the kids' father was... Let's just say he wasn't a nice man." He moved to put an arm around Nigel's waist. "Your program was what she needed, Nigh. She's turned completely around."

Nigel kissed his cheek. "You're what she needed. She listened to you. You got her into the program and you kept her coming. The rest she did herself."

"If this annoying mutual admiration society is finished, I gotta take my kids home; it's late and they got school tomorrow." Derrick could almost see Ronald baring his teeth.

Nigel didn't react to the disrespect. "It was very nice to meet you, Mr. Bryant. Derrick's told me so many great things about you. He says you saved him. I want to thank you for that. He means the world to me." He squeezed Derrick's shoulder. Derrick felt like humming. Instead, he squeezed back.

“I didn’t do it for you.” Ronald turned. “Get the kids, Derrick.” He didn’t wait for an answer, just strode toward the car.

“What happened? Is he okay?” Derrick turned to find Nigel’s face shadowed with concern. His lover had just been treated like garbage, and yet he was worried about the person who insulted him. How did Derrick earn such a compassionate and kind boyfriend?

“I’m not sure. Don’t worry about it. I’ll talk to him. Can I meet you later?”

Nigel face relaxed into a sultry leer. “Depends on what you have in mind.”

“Depends on what you have to offer.”

“Oh, I have a number of things you might like.” Nigel spun so they were facing each other.

“Oh yeah? Why don’t I stop by and you can give me a demonstration.” Derrick slipped his fingers into the waistband of his lover’s jeans and tugged. Nigel hopped closer to keep from falling over.

He put his hands on Derrick’s chest. “I would love to show you right now, but I think a certain level of decorum is required of the program director.” Nigel looked at him wistfully.

Derrick shrugged and stepped back. “Your loss.” Nigel swiped at him but Derrick jumped easily out of the way. “Uh-uh. You have to wait.”

Nigel frowned. “I hate decorum.”

“Me, too. I’ll see you in a couple of hours.” He leaned forward for a kiss and then hurried after his dad.

“What was that about?” Derrick asked when he reached the parking lot. “You were really obnoxious!”

Ronald was leaning against the hood of the car. “Where’re the kids?”

“I’ll call Merry on her cell phone when we’re done talking. Tell me why you were so rude to my boyfriend!”

Ronald snarled. “He’s not your boyfriend. He isn’t worthy of you.”

Derrick pulled back. “Uh, yeah he is my boyfriend and has been for several months. I believe I’ve mentioned him a time or two.”

“Well you didn’t say he’s a Rutherford.”

Around them people were returning to their cars. Derrick lowered his voice a little, not wanting an audience for this family argument. “Why is that relevant?”

Ronald shook his head. “I love you, and you can do anything you set your mind to, but you’re an idiot.”

“Excuse me?” Derrick’s jaw fell open and his eyebrows jumped for the sky, he was so shocked. That was the first time his father had ever insulted him.

Ronald turned and headed around the car to the passenger side. “Call your sister. We’re leaving.”

“Ronald, I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what’s going on.”

He father put his hands on the car door. “What going on is your ‘boyfriend’ is just a rich playboy who’s using you, and you’re a fool to let him.”

Derrick took an unintentional step back. “What are you talking about?”

“He’s just fucking you. You think he’s gonna settle down with some ‘boy from the hood’?” Derrick could hear the quotes around the words. “He’s slumming it, playing around with the poor ‘trash’ until he gets bored and moves on to the next thing.”

Ronald was hitting on some of Derrick’s biggest insecurities, but he refused to let that show. “You’re wrong. You don’t know him at all. He loves me.”

“Oh really?” Ronald tilted his head. “How do you know? Because he said so? Men like him get anything they want, and they’ll say anything to get it.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ronald was pissing him off. “Nigel’s not like that.”

“Again, how do you know that? From what he told you? Tell me, boy, has he ever had to work for anything? Does he need this program to work

out 'cause he put his life's blood or everything he owns into it? Or is it just something to make all that white guilt go away? Did he spend his life working to make this happen, or did he just decide one day, 'Hey, maybe I'll go throw a shitload of money at a problem and see if it goes away'? How does he understand these kids at all?"

Derrick was getting that twisty feeling in his gut that he got when he was about to throw up. "He just wants to help."

"So does he want to help you, too? Does he pay for everything yet?"

"No! You know I wouldn't take his money!" Derrick was appalled his father had even suggested it. "He knows I don't love him for his money. He doesn't lord it over me. He really cares."

"Why? Other than that you're attractive with a nice ass. Is he even gay, or is that just something he's experimenting with, too?"

"Fuck you!" He didn't know whether to be irate, or disturbed that his father knew he had a good-looking butt. He decided to go with furious for now. "Of course he's gay! I have irrefutable proof he is. Men who are gay don't—Never mind. But I've got more to offer than a nice ass and a big dick." He was irritated when his father didn't react to his statement any more than he had to similar words when he pulled Derrick out of juvie. It was unfair his father could use shock tactics and he couldn't. At least Ronald didn't argue with the "big dick" part. That would have been particularly mortifying. "I can't believe you asked 'why'."

Ronald softened his expression and posture a little. "Son, that isn't what I meant. 'Course you're a catch. You're a really wonderful man. That old woman is right—you are rescuing these kids. I'm your biggest fan. But people like us are nothing to people like the Rutherfords. We're just something for them to buy. We only matter if we're useful to them. I just don't want to see you get hurt."

"I know what I'm doing," Derrick lied. He suddenly had no idea what he was doing.

Ronald came back around the car and put his hand on Derrick's shoulder. "Derrick, you're my son, and it doesn't matter what anyone might

think or say. You know I'd do any fool thing for you, and I'm not trying to get you upset. But I know that man is gonna hurt you far more than what I'm saying right now is. I'm telling you the truth."

"You only think that. You don't know." Derrick was disgusted to find his voice barely above a whisper.

"Aw, Son, you've got it bad, don't you? I'm sorry. I've just been around a lot longer than you, and I know what I'm saying is true. Please, do yourself a favor. Stop seeing that boy. I've never done wrong by you, have I?"

Derrick was finding it hard to speak at all. "No."

His father looked at him for a bit then told him to call his sister.

Derrick pulled out his phone and texted Marisol to come to the car right away. He knew it would take her a few minutes, time he really needed to get himself under control. "Ronald, I need to say goodbye to Mercedes. I'll be right back." He couldn't meet his father's eyes and was glad Ronald just grunted in return.

Derrick found the young trainer and her mother, and after a few pleasantries, he said his goodbyes. He caught up with Marisol, who was ignoring her phone in order to kick at the ground and chew on her lip. He noticed her hand clasped tightly with Demetrius's. A few months ago he wouldn't have wanted his sister anywhere near the boy. Now it was different because Demetrius was different. He started to smile but then remembered his conversation with Ronald, and he felt the sick twist in his gut again. He ordered her back to the car with Benjamin, who had to be dragged away from the dogs. He waited until they were well on their way before heading to intercept Nigel's beeline toward the pizza table.

"Hey, Nigh?"

Nigel turned in surprise and then smiled. As always, Derrick's heart flipped in his chest. He just wanted to bury himself within the other man's heart and stay there until the sun died. Instead, he stopped a few paces short. Nigel reached for him but Derrick remained out of touching distance. His lover's smile faltered.

“Look, I won’t be able to make it tonight after all.” He needed the time to think, but he didn’t plan on telling Nigel that.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay? Is your family okay?” His lover’s look of concern almost undid him, but Derrick managed to stay determined.

“Yeah, we’re fine. I just—” He almost said he forgot that he had stuff to do, but he wouldn’t lie to Nigel, not ever. “—I’m just tired and need some time to myself.” That was absolutely true. “I’m going to drop everyone off at my dad’s house and then go home and turn in early.”

Nigel relaxed a little. “Are you sure? Do you need anything?” Nigel wasn’t pushing or showing too much worry. He asked in a way that just said he was there if Derrick needed anything. It was the perfect response, as always, and Derrick’s gut twisted further.

He managed a smile. “I’m sure. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Have a good rest. You know you wouldn’t get any at my house.” Nigel grinned.

Oddly, that wasn’t exactly what Derrick wanted to hear. Maybe his father was right and Nigel just wanted his body. When Nigel reached to hug him, Derrick cut him off with a handshake and a clap to the shoulder. He tried to ignore the look of hurt and confusion on his lover’s face. It killed Derrick, knowing he put it there.

“Dare?”

Derrick tried to smile reassuringly. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” As he turned to go, he couldn’t miss Nigel’s forlorn expression. Derrick figured it probably matched his own.

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CHAPTER 5

Now: Derrick

Derrick urgently pushes his lover toward the bedroom while their mouths collide. He grabs his boyfriend's tee and yanks it up as far as he can. Even before his lover has started to take it off, Derrick is sucking a nipple, his hands exploring his Nigel's body. He is so aroused it hurts. He only stops long enough for another passionate kiss.

They continue to stumble along, mouths jammed together, tongues dancing around one another's. They rub against each other, sliding their cocks together, heat building. Nigel reaches to pull off Derrick's shirt, but they both are too impatient, and it rips in the process. Derrick desperately needs to be close to his lover, feel his life and vitality through his warm body. He badly wants to bury himself within his Nigel.

They separate long enough for Derrick to assert his need. "I've changed my mind. I want to hear you begging me to come inside you."

Nigel's breath catches. "Oh fuck, yes."

They reach the bed where Derrick shoves his lover back, and Nigel bounces a little when he lands. Nigel scoots toward the headboard, and Derrick crawls after him, falling on his boyfriend when he's close enough. He can't get enough of Nigel; he doesn't want to stop touching him long enough to get the rest of their clothes off.

Derrick feels the pleasure of his lover's hands slipping under his waistband to cup his ass. He arches into the touch. Nigel pulls him close to grind against him, and Derrick feels his already erect cock harden still more. They rub together, Nigel kneading his ass, and Derrick finds himself thrusting already. His hands caresses his lover's neatly shorn head, and he feels the bristles poking, like tiny pieces of Nigel reaching for him.

They continue their heady kissing. "Clothes off." Nigel's voice is muffled but insistent. Derrick slithers down and yanks Nigel's pajama pants out of the way. Before him lies his lover's beautiful, uncut penis. Usually Derrick takes his time to admire the jutting strength and soft skin, but

tonight he can't wait. He needs Nigel now. That fine cock bobs over his lover's balls, and Derrick dives right in. Hairs tickle his nose as he nips the stretched skin. Nigel sucks in a breath. Unable to resist, and not really wanting to, Derrick raises his head and takes in just the head of his lover's dick as he pulls the foreskin back with one hand. He uses his tongue to curl around and massage the corona, savoring the taste before sucking hard. Nigel gasps. Derrick looks up to see him watching, his eyes wide open with need.

Nigel is breathing heavily and his hips rock. His fingers weave through Derrick's hair. Derrick loves the feel of his lover's fingers fondling his scalp, but he is too fired up. The cock between his jaws demands his attention, and he takes it in as deeply as he can. The hardness fills his mouth as he pumps the shaft with his hand, adding a twist of his wrist to the movement. His other hand tweaks and scrapes Nigel's nipples one at a time.

"Shit, Dare! That's fucking hot."

Derrick is too wrapped up in his enjoyment to pay much attention. He devours and fists his lover's cock, lapping at the come seeping from the slit. His other hand makes its way down to fondle the sack hanging below. A moan escapes his own mouth as he digs his throbbing erection into the bed.

He must have more, and he pushes himself up to suck Nigel's collarbone until a mark begins to form. Then they are kissing again, hard enough that he feels his lip catch and tear on one of his lover's teeth. The pain reminds him he's alive and only goads him further, but Nigel pulls away looking concerned. "I taste blood."

"I cut myself. It doesn't hurt. I'm fine." Derrick quickly shows his lip to his lover and Nigel's look of concern touches him for a brief moment before he clasps their lips together again. He finds himself climbing Nigel, his feet scraping at his lover's ankles and calves.

But it isn't enough. Somehow his lover senses this and rolls Derrick onto his back. Nigel rocks his hips against Derrick and straddles his pulsing cock. He leans down and tilts Derrick's head back. Derrick feels his lover's hungry mouth ravishing his neck. They twine together, clutching shoulders, hips, thighs.

Derrick urgently wants more and growls. "I want to fuck your mouth." Nigel nods vigorously, eyes shining with anticipation. Derrick stands and his lover drops to his knees in front of him. He feels hot, moist heat engulf him as his boyfriend swallows him down. Nigel is vigorously pumping his own erection, and the sight makes Derrick groan.

"Fuck that feels good." Derrick's hips begin to move. Nigel repositions himself, and Derrick's cock slides in all the way. "Fuck!" He flexes, grasping his lover's head to hold him steady. Nigel makes choking sounds, but he doesn't try to pull away or put his hands on Derrick's wrists, the signal that he can't breathe. Instead, he opens wider and his lips edge around Derrick's scrotum.

It's still not enough, though; nothing is enough. Derrick has to be inside Nigel immediately. He slips out, grasps his lover under his arms, and hauls him upright. "I need to fuck you right now."

"Fuck yes. Where do you want me?"

In answer, Derrick bends his boyfriend over the bed, grabbing a couple of pillows and slipping them under Nigel to prop him up a bit. The lube is on the nightstand and Derrick grabs it, grateful they don't have to use condoms anymore. He is sure that in his urgency, he would rip it trying to get it on.

"Ready?" He tries to consider Nigel's comfort even though he feels like he's vibrating and on the verge of shattering.

"Yes, yes, hurry."

Derrick sticks his slicked thumb inside his lover's hole and moves it around briefly before drawing back and replacing it with two fingers. He scissors them quickly and firmly. When he brushes against the gland, Nigel jolts and gasps.

"Holy shit. Hurry up, I'm loose enough; take me."

Derrick knows his lover isn't quite there but he is too revved up to worry about it. He pulls his fingers out, quickly coats his cock with more gel, then moves into position. The beautiful white ass awaits him. "You are so fucking hot."

“Less talking, more fucking!” A groan of frustration from Nigel is unneeded as Derrick is already rubbing the head of his penis against his lover’s hole, slicking the entrance and tantalizing both of them. It’s momentary, though, because he just can’t wait any longer. He lines himself up and pushes just the tip of his cock in past the muscle. Beneath him Nigel makes a sharp sound and spreads his legs farther. Derrick grasps his lover’s hips and sinks agonizingly slowly into the tight hole. Before he is even halfway in, Nigel shoves backward, slamming into him and shoving Derrick’s cock in all the way.

Derrick cries out as the moist heat envelops him. A whimper clues him in that this was not painless for his lover. “Nigh? Are you okay?” He can barely speak, all he wants is to move, but he doesn’t want to hurt Nigel.

“Wonderful,” Nigel insists, but Derrick hears the words through what are clearly gritted teeth.

Derrick gently caresses his boyfriend’s back while he works desperately to keep himself still. He listens to his lover’s stilted breathing until it is almost even again.

“I’m okay. Move.” Nigel sounds less pained.

Derrick puts an arm around his lover’s chest and yanks him backward. With his other hand, he tilts Nigel’s head so he can kiss him hard and bruising, relishing his lover’s lips, just as hungry as his own. Nigel gasps into Derrick’s mouth and it spurs him; he wants to feel his lover’s heat grabbing his cock as it slides in and out. He rears back and plunges back in. Nigel moans. The sound of his usually quiet boyfriend’s feral pleasure is a strong aphrodisiac, and Derrick jerks out so he can ram right in again. Another moan, and he can’t stop himself; he pounds into Nigel without pausing, swinging his hips back and forth, eliciting a cry with each thrust. His own grunts provide harmony to his lover’s chorus.

“Harder!” The word goads him. He puts one of his legs on the bed and turns slightly to get into a better position. Now his cock goes deeper with each stroke, and the better angle strikes Nigel’s gland each time. “Oh fuck, right there.” His lover gasps the words out, his voice straining to hold steady.

“This isn’t right. I need to see your face when you come.” Derrick draws back and yanks Nigel to his feet. He mashes their mouths together, his hands roving over his lover’s body, trying to be everywhere at once. His boyfriend’s hands are busy, too, first twisting Derrick’s nipples then scraping his back. Derrick spins them and rams Nigel against a wall. He lifts one of his lover’s legs in the crook of his elbow taking a little of Nigel’s weight. Even with his built muscles, Derrick isn’t a big man and he finds his lover heavy and unwieldy, but for some reason, it adds to the intensity.

He aligns his dick again and slides in. Almost immediately he resumes the fast pace, hammering into his lover’s hole. Nigel’s head is thrown back, and Derrick attempts to mark his neck. But the fucking is too hard and fast; he can’t move slowly enough to make it work. Kissing is a major turn on so Derrick stills long enough to seal his mouth on the alabaster skin of Nigel’s throat. He sucks hard until a bruise begins to form, then braces himself and begins thrusting again.

The position makes it hard to see Nigel’s face, though. He lifts Nigel and practically tosses him onto the bed, the adrenaline from his panicked outburst earlier still spiking his strength. His lover’s eyes grow wide, but he is able to straighten out just before Derrick’s pounce lands him between Nigel’s knees.

“Fuck, that was hot, Dare.”

Derrick spares a glance at that stunning face and body that make his world spin, but he’s almost unraveling with desire and doesn’t linger. He tilts his boyfriend’s legs so far back, Nigel’s shoulder blades are supporting his weight and his knees hug Derrick’s neck. Realigning his cock takes Derrick just a moment, then he drives back in and all thoughts leave his mind.

Multiple sensations infuse his body: friction, moist warmth, smooth pressure, and velvety softness along his cock; roughness and tickling from hair on Nigel’s legs along his shoulders. Inside his chest, deep emotions like passion and want whirl and churn. Nigel’s fingers have found his and they are tangled together, the grip tight and strong. Sounds of pleasure and

lust fill his ears. But the best sensation of all is the sight of the writhing body, flushed face, and wide smile of this man who makes all his senses chime.

Nigel is furiously pumping his own dick. He's not usually vocal in bed, but his groans are louder than Derrick's. His lower lip is caught between his teeth, which has always been one of the sexiest things Derrick has ever seen, and tonight is no exception. He feels his balls drawing up as he approaches climax.

"Dare, I'm close. Can we come together?"

Derrick nods and manages to utter the word, "Ten." Together they clench and unclench their hands together in a silent countdown. It's a code they established long ago, intimate and familiar, the two of them allying toward the promise of simultaneous release.

Three. Two. One. Derrick lets himself go, and the upwelling of his orgasm thunders through him. He cries out, a long breathy moan of pleasure. In his arms, Nigel's body contorts. A shout escapes his lover as a powerful climax surges through Nigel's body, and he gasps an emotionally charged, "Dare!" Derrick feels like it's his own seed spilling as Nigel shoots between them. At this moment, he feels like they are one person, seamlessly united.

He collapses atop his lover, still inside him. Nigel moves his legs and wraps them around Derrick's waist. His arms drape around Derrick's back who in turn cups his lover's face. Gently they kiss, lingering, drawing out the sweet contact. Derrick's adrenal high is finally waning, to be replaced by exhaustion.

They hold each other closely. Derrick feels his sadness welling again, and he tries to shake the pain out of his head. Nigel uses the sixth sense he seems to have and tightens his grip.

"I've got you, Dare."

How many times has his boyfriend said this over the two years they've been together? Derrick feels like he's constantly falling, and Nigel is always there to catch him. He wonders if his lover ever gets tired of it.

“Stop thinking. I’m not going anywhere. You don’t have to bear this alone. I am here for you, always.”

“I’m trying.” How he won Nigel’s heart he doesn’t know, but this man is a gift he’s still attempting to earn. “I love you so much.”

His lover graces him with one of his wonderful smiles that always lift Derrick’s heart, if only for a moment this time. “My heart is yours, Dare.”

Derrick slips out of his lover who then reaches in a drawer for wipes to clean them up. When he’s finished, Nigel pulls the comforter out from under them. He nestles in the bed and pulls Derrick close. His boyfriend’s chest is warm against Derrick’s back, and he snuggles in when Nigel pulls the covers over them. He lies in his lover’s arms, emotions churning.

“Dare, please stop thinking. You need to sleep.”

“I can’t just shut it off.” Derrick rubs his eyes.

“Want me to sing to you?”

Nigel’s tenor is beautiful and soothing, and might actually help. “Yeah, that would be... I would love that.”

Nigel begins a song Derrick doesn’t know, but it’s calming, and he lets the melody drift through him. He concentrates on the words rather than the turmoil in his head. A particular passage catches him as it floats past, the lyrics talking about how the singer will always be there to pick him up if he falls. Another part of the song makes it clear that Nigel needs Derrick, too. He knows his lover chose this song because the words express Nigel’s own feelings toward Derrick.

When the song is finished, he clutches Nigel’s hand. “That was... That’s intense. What’s it called?”

“‘The Adventure’ by Angels & Airwaves. I always think of you when I hear it.”

“It was nice. I... It’s... I want to sing that to you.”

“Oh God, Dare, can you just speak the lyrics instead? Spoken word is good.” Nigel’s voice is teasing.

It makes Derrick laugh. He’s been told that Nigel is always on key, but he doesn’t know from experience. He’s pretty close to tone-deaf, and he’s

been told by more than one person that his singing is painful. “You’ve said I can do anything I set my mind to.”

Nigel coughs and his breath ruffles Derrick’s hair. “Uh, yeah, well, except sing. You’re great at talking, really amazing at that, not like I am, but singing? Not so much.” Nigel laughs against Derrick’s head. It’s been said many times before and undoubtedly will be repeated many times again. Derrick doesn’t mind. Nigel’s voice is what he wants to hear.

“Fine. Then you keep singing. I think we’ll both find it more soothing.”

“Good choice.” There’s a pause, presumably so Nigel can think of what to sing. Soon he’s crooning “Simple Song” by The Shins, a tune Derrick recognizes. The lyrics seem to be a metaphor for how Nigel felt stranded and alone until he found Derrick. He smiles at how Nigel changes the word “girl” in the lyrics to “Dare.” His lover sings other songs he doesn’t recognize and Derrick asks what they are. One of these, The Apples in Stereo’s “Sunndal Song”, describes how Nigel will always be there to show Derrick how wonderful he is. He decides he loves the song, and maybe he’ll speak the lyrics to Nigel one day. No need to torture the guy.

One song slips into the next, and Derrick’s eyes finally grow heavy. His last coherent thought is that his lover has taken a lot of hard and/or loud music and made it into lullabies. Nigel is singing Muse’s “I Belong to You”, and the beauty of the French part, which Derrick doesn’t understand, is enough to tip him over into sleep, nestled in the arms of his one true love.

Then: Derrick

Derrick didn’t go straight home. Instead, he got on the freeway heading north and just drove and thought. He and Nigel had only been dating a few months but they had been the happiest of his life. He had never met a kinder, gentler, more compassionate man. Nigel didn’t just talk about things that were wrong in the world, he dedicated his life to making change, and not just with his job. He also was politically involved, frequently writing his congressional representatives, and staying current on issues.

Nigel volunteered at a food bank, donated his personal money to a spay and neuter project, tried to protect the environment not just with his car but

by recycling everything he could and carrying reusable bags to the grocery store even before the disposable kind became basically illegal in Seattle. He even regularly checked the Human Rights Campaign's Buyer's Guide to make sure he was only patronizing corporations that treated gay people fairly.

His Nigel was fun, too. He was always willing to try something he hadn't done before, which was good because Derrick thrived on new experiences. Nigel was refined but also adventurous if guided, and he was spontaneous. Twice he had collected Derrick from work and whisked him off on an unplanned weekend away. They liked many of the same things and had introduced each other to pleasures the other hadn't yet appreciated. They weren't the same, and they didn't enjoy all of the same things, but that would be boring. Instead, they complemented each other perfectly. Derrick never felt as alive as he did when he was with Nigel.

But Nigel's passion and strength were what really attracted Derrick. He felt Nigel was capable of anything, and he felt safe in his arms. Nigel was the hottest, sexiest man Derrick had ever touched let alone slept with. When they were making love, he sometimes felt like the universe was exploding. Nigel was skilled and attentive in bed. He made Derrick feel like he was the most attractive man on the planet. Every time together was a new adventure. He didn't like remembering how cold life was before Nigel. He felt sick just thinking about living without him.

But did he mean as much to Nigel as Nigel meant to him? What did Derrick have to offer someone like that? Nigel was intelligent and well-read, sophisticated and mannerly, more world-traveled and educated than Derrick was—he had been to India once, but Nigel had lived abroad and traveled the globe and had a doctorate to Derrick's own MA. Why would Nigel want to be with a man who had spent much of his adolescence in jail and on the streets, using drugs, stealing, and sleeping with older men just to have a dry place to spend the night? Was his father right and Nigel was just slumming it for kicks?

Derrick thought back to the time he and Nigel first met. There were sparks there before Nigel knew anything about him, before he knew

Derrick's background. They both had been attracted to one another. Rerunning their first real conversation through his head—the one they had that day at the dog park when Derrick visited the program ostensibly to check on his probationers—he couldn't remember anything being said that would have indicated that Derrick's past was arousing or exciting for him. No, Nigel had been interested and his emotions fitting, not pitying, condescending, or indicative of inappropriate arousal.

Derrick thought again about sex. Nigel was as excited by their lovemaking as was Derrick. His boyfriend enjoyed what Derrick did to him. He came explosively every time, occasionally twice. There was no doubt that Nigel was attracted to his body. Derrick wouldn't hazard a guess as to why, but he really didn't believe that his past influenced his own allure.

He began to get angry. Why was he second-guessing himself? Nigel told him every day how much Derrick meant to him. The time or two Derrick had let his insecurities show, Nigel acted surprised and was quick to reassure him. His boyfriend had been the first to say the L-word, and the sincerity when he said it wasn't an act. No, his father was wrong. Nigel did really love him, and for the person he was, not his past. He was not just a notch on Nigel's proverbial bedpost.

"You're being an idiot," Derrick told himself out loud. He took the next exit, somewhere in Everett, turned the car around and got right back on the freeway heading south. He was going back where he belonged: to Nigel.

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CHAPTER 6

Now: Derrick

Derrick stares at the phone in his hand. He can do this, he can.

“Dare? Is there something I can do to make this easier?” Nigel’s face is drawn and worried.

“No. I just need to suck it up.” Derrick forces his fingers to press the quick dial button for Marisol. He listens to it ring.

When the phone is answered, the band restricting his heart gets tighter. “Derrick?”

“Yeah, Merry, it’s me.”

“Dad’s dead.” Her voice is so sad; it breaks his heart.

“I know; I got your message.”

“I’m sorry I told you that you were being a dick.”

Derrick chuckles. “It’s okay. I kind of am.”

“I was just mad and was screaming at everyone. You know I’m on your side about you leaving.”

“I know. Are you at home?”

“Yeah.” She sighs. “I’m hiding in my room. Some of the people from church are here. Auntie says more are coming. They’re nice, but I just don’t want to be sweet and friendly.”

“You don’t have to be. No one expects you to have a smile on.” It’s a terrible thing for a child to lose a parent. So far Marisol has lost four: First, the father that walked out when she was born, followed by her birth mother who abused and then abandoned her. Then Celeste passed away last year, and now Ronald was dead. It’s hard enough for him and he’s thirty. Although he knew similar loss when he was very young, the death of her adoptive parents is undoubtedly more traumatic at her age than his. Then there’s Benji... He can’t think about Benjamin, not yet.

“I don’t know if I can do this.” She begins to cry. Each sob is like ice water injected into his veins. Nigel’s hands rub his shoulders, and he leans

into the touch. Marisol doesn't have a Nigel. She doesn't have parents. All she has is their aunt who is nice enough, but not exactly the hugging sort.

"Merry, it's okay. We'll get through this together. Is it okay if I come over?" He tenses in case she says no. He realizes he wants to be there, needs to be there.

"Please?" She blows her nose. "Can you come soon?"

"We'll leave in five." The car keys are on a hook by the door. His signal to Nigel is unnecessary; his lover is already grabbing them.

"Is Nigel coming, too?"

"Yes. Is that okay with you?"

"Of course, but Auntie may not like it." She doesn't sound like she cares.

"Fuck Aunt Edwina." It's probably not the best choice of words, but Marisol laughs. "We're a package deal. I need him there. I'll see you soon, Sis. I love you." The occasion calls for more sap than he's used to with his sister.

"Love you, too, Derry. Hurry." They hang up.

After grabbing his coat from the closet, Derrick reaches for the keys. "I need to drive. I need to do something to deal with this nervous energy."

"Whatever you need, Dare, you've got."

Then: Derrick

Derrick was pacing in front of Nigel's fireplace, still fuming about Ronald's behavior.

"It's okay, Dare. He's just trying to protect you." Nigel sat in the chair-and-a-half that Derrick had convinced him to buy. It was huge and perfect for snuggling, but Derrick was not in the mood.

"I'm twenty-eight. I don't need my father's protection anymore."

Nigel hoped his smile was reflected in his voice. "I'm two and a half years older than you and my father still worries. He'll be worrying about

me on his deathbed.” He modified his voice to a caricature of that of an elderly man. ““Never mind that I’m dying, Son, did you remember to wear your mittens?””

Despite himself, Derrick had to smile. “Still, he’s wrong about this, and besides, he had no right to be rude about it.” He was upset again and sped up his steps as he wore a path in the Kashmiri carpet he’d brought back from India and later given to Nigel.

“Is that really what you’re upset about?” Nigel asked gently.

Derrick stopped and turned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I’m wondering if maybe you’re worried that he’s right.”

“What?” Derrick asked, perhaps a bit more forcefully than necessary. Nigel just looked at him wearing his soft smile and loving gaze. “I mean...” Derrick thought about whether he should admit it. “Okay, yeah, you’re right. He did hit some buttons for me.” He tilted his head down. He couldn’t face Nigel. “It’s still hard to understand what you see in me. What do I have that you can’t get from some rich debutante?”

“Besides a penis?” Derrick didn’t respond, just kept looking at his shoes. “I’ve told you this before, and I will tell you again until you get it. You can ask me as often as you want, and I will never get tired of telling you how smart, strong, brave, loyal, loving, kind, funny, interesting, and gorgeous you are for starters. You have the biggest heart of anyone I’ve ever known. You’re the hottest guy I’ve ever seen let alone taken to bed. I’m the one who should be wondering what you see in me. I know you don’t care about the money.”

Derrick lifted his eyes to meet Nigel’s gaze. “Are you kidding me? You just listed everything I see in you. You doubt I love you for you?”

“No, I don’t. I believe and trust you when you say you love me. How can I make you understand that I love you unconditionally?”

Derrick felt ashamed. “It’s not that I don’t trust you. It’s just... Fuck. It’s hard when I’ve spent most of my life without love. When I wasn’t with the Bryants, there wasn’t anyone in the world who gave a damn what happened to me, let alone loved me. I made sure of it.”

“That’s not true.” Nigel’s voice was soft and his eyes so full of affection, Derrick had to swallow.

“How would you know?” He tried for playful but his voice came out raw.

“Come here, Dare.” Nigel reached for him, and Derrick let his lover pull him into the chair. Nigel shifted and wrapped as much of his body as he could around Derrick. “I know because I have loved you always.”

Derrick tried for a laugh. “That’s ridiculous.”

“No it isn’t. Let me tell you my coming out story. When I was little, around two and a half—note that’s how much older than you I am—I suddenly decided I wanted a brother. I don’t remember this but the family does. Apparently I kept pointing to my mother’s stomach and shouting, ‘Baby!’ and ‘Boy!’ My mother always replied no, I already had an older sister, and that’s all the children she had a right to. They’ve always been big into population control, one descendent per adult. My sister insists I never used the word brother, and my parents don’t remember for sure, but I believe my sister. You never argue with my sister—she’s always right, as you know.”

Derrick nodded, managing a small smile. “I don’t dare mess with her.”

“I know. Anyway, the family thought it was a cute phase, but it lasted nearly a year. Finally, I stopped bugging my mom and started bothering everyone else. I’d see a baby and ask if it was a boy. If the person said yes, I’d ask if—sometimes insist that—the baby was mine. It became embarrassing for my parents so they bought me a male baby doll.”

Derrick raised his eyebrows. “Your parents gave a boy a doll?”

Nigel smiled. “Most boys have dolls at some point. They’re called action figures and G.I. Joes. But as for the baby doll, my parents have always been very liberal as you know. I was raised on *Free To Be You And Me* and the 70s had already passed. ‘William wants a doll’ and all. My parents were belated hippies at that point.

“I loved that doll and took it everywhere. I refused to name him and just called him ‘my baby’. When I was six, I handed the doll to my mom and

said I didn't need it anymore. She said something like, 'Yes, you're a big boy now and don't need a baby.' I remember this part. I replied, 'No, I don't. The real one is out there waiting for me, and I'm going to find him.'"

Derrick felt like he was losing his connection with the universe. He clung to Nigel's torso like it was the only thing keeping him in place.

"That talk became my coming out because my mom asked if I meant a real baby. I replied, and again I remember the exact words, 'No, Mom, geez. He's not a baby anymore. I'll find him when we're all grown up. I love him now, though.' We talked some more until she was certain I was talking about a boyfriend. I told her I was going to marry him. She didn't want to out me to myself. She admitted later that she already knew but didn't want to force the issue so I could figure it out at my own speed. I was a young kid. It was never a big deal in my family as I told you. Everyone just always knew.

"You came out when you were six?"

"Pretty much, although I didn't really quite get what it meant, just that I wanted to marry a boy not a girl. Not like most boys who say things like that because they think girls are icky. I mean, I thought girls were icky, too, but it was different, I liked boys. I mean, not as friends like other boys like boys. No, I mean I had friends who were boys, but I liked boys in other ways, too. Wait, I didn't mean I did anything different with boys... Shit."

Derrick was used to Nigel tripping over his words when he second-guessed something he'd just said. It was adorable and he smiled.

Nigel took a deep breath. "The point is that I knew not just that I was gay, but that there was a certain boy out there that was mine. I just had to find him. When I first saw you, something about you felt familiar. As we got to know each other, it felt more and more like I'd known you my whole life, and that you were meant to be with me. When I finally remembered what I said to my mom when I gave up my doll, I realized that you're the one I've waited for all my life. I've always loved you and always will. Even if you decide I'm not the one for you, always know that you are loved and cherished."

Derrick didn't know what to say. Instead, he just snuggled closer and breathed in the scent of his man. Finally he said shakily, "That's kind of

creepy.” They both laughed. “But it’s the sweetest and most romantic thing I’ve ever heard. Geez, I’m turning into a teenage girl. I don’t know if you made that up or if it’s true but I don’t want to know.”

“It’s—”

“Shh, I really don’t want to know. But thank you. I keep falling, and you keep catching me.” He pulled back to look in Nigel’s eyes. “I don’t know if I’m worthy of that love. But I hope to spend—” He gulped. “—um, the rest of my life showing you how much that means to me, and how much I love you, too.” Admitting, let alone expressing, attachment was still hard for him, but he found once he voiced his eternal devotion, it was suddenly easy. He would think about that later.

Instead, he stopped any response from Nigel by leaning in and pressing their lips together. He deepened the kiss, and he felt Nigel’s body responding. He slid one hand under Nigel’s shirt and the other cupped his lover’s cheek before Derrick pulled back long enough to whisper, “Let me start right now.” Then he leaned into his lover and got to it.

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CHAPTER 7

Now: Derrick

The house looks smaller than Derrick remembers. Smaller and older, dilapidated. It's only been a year but it feels like so much longer. The driveway is filled, and the road lined with cars. He had no idea his father had so many friends. He suddenly feels unsure about his decision to come. He watches the front door, people moving in and out, smokers congregating on the lawn near the curb.

"Dare?" He turns to find Nigel watching him. "Do you want to go in? It's not too late to leave if that's what you want." Derrick turns back to watch the house again, trying to make up his mind. Nigel gives him a minute or two then adds, "We're parked far enough away that no one will know you were ever here."

"What do you think I should do, Nigh?" He's aware his voice quavers, but he isn't worried about being manly at the moment. A shaking voice is a lot less embarrassing than the scream he is desperately trying to hold inside.

Nigel pauses before answering. "Do you think anything that might happen in there could make you hurt more than you already do right now?"

Good question. He thinks about it. "No. I already feel rejected by my family and guilty for leaving. If Benji came at me with an axe, I think I would actually be relieved."

"Now you're just being maudlin. That's the grief talking. I've never heard you feel sorry for yourself before. You know you are wonderful."

That stopped Derrick mid-thought. "I'm not really, you're the one who's awesome, but you're right. This isn't me, nor is it about me. I'm being self-absorbed. My thoughts are just spinning too fast. God I suck. I'm sorry for being an ass here; you don't deserve that."

"Dare..." Nigel pulls him close and holds him tightly. Derrick feels his lover's breath in his hair when Nigel rests his cheek there. "I hate that you think that about yourself. You're being silly. You don't have to apologize for your emotions. I'm just trying to help you not sink too far under."

“Shit. Benji hasn’t seen me in over a year. It’s easy to see Merry, she’s an independent teenager, but does Benji understand why it’s been impossible to sneak behind Ronald’s back to see him? That even if I had, I would have put him in a horrible position to either lie to his dad or get in trouble for seeing me?”

“He will one day, even if he doesn’t now.”

Derrick fervently hopes that’s true but he doubts it. “Fuck, I’m still being a coward. Let’s go.” He pulls away from Nigel and climbs out of the car. The door to the house seems miles away, and he feels exposed walking toward it with people around. He is sure they are all watching and judging him.

Derrick feels a hand on his lower back. “No one is looking at you. You’re doing fine.” How does Nigel always seem to know what he is thinking?

“Thank you for being here. I couldn’t do this without you.”

“This wouldn’t have been so hard if I weren’t in the picture. I don’t regret loving you or our being together, but I’m sorry that it cost you so much.”

Derrick stops to look into Nigel’s eyes. “I know. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” The words and Nigel’s smile are what he needed to keep going. He turns and steps up onto the porch and into the house.

Then: Nigel

When Derrick’s mouth touched his, the intensity of Nigel’s response had Nigel pushing into his lover. Derrick’s mouth parted, and Nigel felt his lover’s tongue touch his own. He pulled it in and sucked it, then slid his own into Derrick’s mouth. The kiss was slow and sultry, gentle but passionate. He opened his mouth wider and tilted his head to deepen the kiss. He felt his lover’s arms tighten around his shoulders. Fuck Ronald. Nigel’s love for Derrick was real. He would have to talk to Ronald about it sometime, but right now, Nigel was going to spend his evening convincing

Derrick. After all, his lover's feelings were what were important. He wasn't in love with Derrick's father.

Their tongues moved faster, and the kiss grew more urgent. Derrick moaned against his mouth, and he felt himself hardening. He lingered a moment longer then pulled away. Derrick buried his nose against the skin of his neck, and Nigel rubbed a cheek against his head. For a moment they stayed there, the intensity of their emotions holding them still.

Eventually Nigel led his lover into the bedroom where he gently lowered him onto the blankets. He untied and removed his boyfriend's shoes and socks. "Lie down and relax. I'm going to take care of you; you don't have to do anything. I'll be right back." Derrick sank into the pillows and closed his eyes, and Nigel slipped out of the room. In the bathroom, he took a very quick shower but cleaned himself thoroughly as he wasn't sure whether Derrick would want to top or bottom. He returned to the bedroom naked where he found his lover sprawled, sound asleep.

It was too early for bed, and he wanted to finish what they started. He was pretty sure Derrick would want to as well. It was time to wake his lover, and he was going to do it right. Nigel very carefully slipped up the bed between Derrick's legs, careful not to touch him. Using only his fingers, he gently lifted the bottom of the thin tee blocking access to the perfect body he needed to have. When enough flesh was showing, he carefully touched his lips to the taut skin. He kissed another spot close to the first. His made his way across Derrick's abdomen, caressing him with his mouth as he went. He peeked over the fabric to see his lover's eyes still closed, so he changed tactics.

He carefully lowered the shirt, then slowly unfastened the fly on his lover's jeans. The zipper was silent as he lowered it, revealing white jersey boxer shorts. His next kiss was to the cloth halfway between Derrick's full bulge and his waistband. Nigel felt his own dick hardening. At his second kiss, he heard Derrick's breathing quicken. He looked up and saw his lover watching him with hooded eyes. Neither said anything, and Nigel went back to his ministrations. Apparently Derrick didn't remember that Nigel said he would do everything because he reached for Nigel's head.

“Don’t move or I’ll stop.” Nigel grinned at his lover wickedly and was rewarded with a groan.

“You suck.”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves. There’s time for everything.”

“Bite me.”

“Okay.” Still smirking, he nipped Derrick’s flesh below his navel, then Nigel slowly worked his way back up his lover’s body. He was careful to only touch with his mouth, lifting the shirt as he went, kissing and nipping as much flesh as he could. When his lips closed over a nipple, he heard a sharp intake of breath, and he smiled around the hardening flesh. His tongue helped the process along, and above him he heard panting. The other nipple firmed even faster, so he soon continued upward until he had pushed the shirt up to Derrick’s neck.

“Nigh, I need this off. Now.” Derrick pulled at the cloth, and Nigel helped him remove it. Derrick lifted only long enough for the shirt to be removed then tried again to touch Nigel, who simply batted his arms away. Derrick lay back again. His eyes were bright with lust, his breathing labored, but he didn’t move. Nigel loved the feeling of being the one doing everything. He lived to make Derrick happy.

Nigel’s mouth worked its way up his lover’s neck and down his jaw after pausing to nip and tug at an earlobe in passing. He covered Derrick’s face with gentled kisses, avoiding his lips until Nigel had covered every inch of skin. Finally, he dove in, hungrily devouring his lover’s mouth. Derrick responded just as passionately, soft moans and gasps the soundtrack to their lovemaking.

After a short while, he pulled away. Derrick whimpered but stayed where he was. Nigel made his way back down the center of his lover’s chest with only a quick stop to lick the erect nipples. The kisses were more urgent now, with his mouth open wide, tongue swirling and stroking the skin. Soon he reached Derrick’s underwear again, and Nigel pressed his lips to the bulging fabric.

“Fuck!” Derrick’s body arched, no longer able to stay still. Nigel finally touched Derrick with his hands, pushing his lover’s hips back down. He

held him there and opened his mouth to suck the swelling through the fabric. Derrick reached for him yet again, but Nigel pulled away until his lover clenched his fists and moved his hands back where they were. Derrick's deep groan showed how hard he was finding it to stay still. Nigel chuckled and opened his mouth as wide as possible, and through the cloth, sucked in as much of his lover as he could.

Derrick gasped and pulled at Nigel's shoulders. "Please, Nigh."

Nigel took pity on him and stood to yank Derrick's pants off. When he moved back to the bed, he stopped short as his gaze fell on the beauty spread before him. He felt a rush of blood to his cock; he worshiped his boyfriend's body. He felt the tan skin calling to him, inviting him down, so he again lowered his face to his lover's groin. For a moment, he just breathed Derrick in, reveling in the unique and intricate combination of scents that he loved so much. The shaft he admired was hard, and Nigel lowered his face to it and blew the hair curling around its base.

"Mmm..." A quick glance showed his lover's tongue poking out ever so slightly. It was Nigel's turn to gasp as he watched it glide along Derrick's upper lip. God, how he loved that mouth; those kissable lips were one of the first things he had noticed about this man who became the love of his life.

"Nigh..."

He laughed softly. "Sorry. I was distracted by your magnificence." Derrick rolled his eyes. Seeing his lover's hands twisted in the blanket, knuckles white from exertion, Nigel chuckled again. "Someone's enjoying himself."

"Stop talking and do something better with that mouth."

Nigel obliged and, one at a time, took in each of his lover's balls, rolling them around and puckering his cheeks to caress them from all sides. Then he took in both at once and Derrick cried out. He enjoyed them a bit then let the sack slide out. He opened his mouth wider and turned his head sideways to wrap his lips around the base of his lover's shaft. He made his way up slowly, sucking and licking as he went.

"Oh, fuck."

“Not yet.” Nigel continued until he was just below the head where he used his tip of his tongue to rapidly flick the sensitive spot just below it. Derrick gasped and curled up to grab for him. Nigel pushed his lover’s hands away, then let his mouth slip over the crown just briefly teasing before repeating his movements down the other side.

“God, Nigh, you’re killing me.”

“I’m not even close to done,” he replied. The answering groan made him smile. “But I’ll take pity and give you a present.” He moved back to the head where he let his tongue lap at the leaking fluid for a moment before opening wide and taking his lover in as far as he could. Derrick was whimpering now, and when his lover tried to touch him, Nigel let the hands stay.

He worked his mouth up and down, twisting his head as he went to stimulate even further. One hand massaged Derrick’s balls, working his fingers around them to increase sensation. Nigel’s tongue lapped and he hummed, allowing the vibrations to add to the effect of what he was doing. He felt his lover harden even more, like a skin-covered baton, just as dangerous but in an entirely different way. He smiled inwardly.

Derrick was sweating now, and Nigel could smell the tang in the air. He pulled off and moved down the delectable expanse of skin stretching from Derrick’s sack to his hole below. He spread his lover’s legs up and out to give himself more room to maneuver. With one hand holding a leg in place and the other stroking Derrick’s belly, he worked his lips along his lover’s taint until he got to his opening. Nigel gently blew on it, seeing the muscles contract. Watching Derrick’s body respond to his attentions was one of his favorite things ever. A moan from above reminded him that he was there for a purpose, and he lowered his head to brush his lips against the pink skin before circling the opening with his tongue.

“Fuck, Nigh!”

“Soon.” He stopped teasing and let his tongue penetrate his lover’s hole. Derrick tried to heave upward but Nigel held him in place by pushing down on Derrick’s stomach. He continued to probe with his tongue, prodding the muscle to loosen it. Moans proved they were both enjoying Nigel’s play,

and he poked in further. After a loop around just inside the tight ring, he pulled out and circled the entry again before pushing back in. The intimacy was intoxicating.

“Nigh, please; I can’t stand it.”

He hated to disappoint his lover, so he rose back up and wrapped his arms around Derrick, letting their legs entangle. Their lips touched and soon they were both moaning as they rubbed their erections together, mouths frantic to become united. Their pre-come allowed a smooth glide as they rubbed against one another. Nigel reached into the nightstand and pulled out a large bottle of lube. The gel was cold on his fingers, and he knew it would be icy for his lover, so he forced himself to take a moment and warm some in his palm. He then slathered the gel on his fingers and pushed Derrick’s legs up again before placing his fingers against his lover’s hole.

“Are you ready, Dare?”

“Fuck yeah, get to it.”

He slipped one finger in and moved it in circles.

“Hurry up. Another.”

Nigel complied, letting a second finger join the first. He scissored them until the surrounding muscle gave more easily. When he reached the sweet spot, Derrick cried out and his body shook. Soon Nigel had three digits inside, and he began wriggling them, feeling the warm walls stretching. He was aching with his own arousal and flushed with the heat of it.

“Come here, Nigh. Let me get you ready, too.”

“I am ready, Dare. Just touching you has me close to coming.” He twisted his hips around anyway to let Derrick stroke him. What he felt, though, was wet heat enveloping him and he gasped. His lover was an expert with his tongue. Nigel let himself fall back as the talented mouth worked him. He quickly realized his mistake. “Stop if you still want me to fuck you, because I’m about to blow.”

“Maybe I want to fuck you instead.” Nigel knew Derrick’s words were merely a feeble attempt at humor.

“I think if that were the case, you would have stopped me much earlier. But if you really want to.” Nigel lay back on the bed, spread his legs, and stared at the ceiling.

Derrick grabbed for him, panic in his voice. “No! No, no, get back here. I need you inside me. I want to feel you as you come in me. Please.”

Nigel chuckled. “If you insist.” He quickly spread lube along his cock then shifted around so they were facing the same direction. He glanced up and saw that Derrick’s eyes were wild with lust. He moved to kneel between his lover’s legs which were already up, ass cheeks spread. Derrick was trembling and moved his hands to clutch Nigel’s wrists as if to ground himself. His whimpers made Nigel’s spine vibrate; the sounds Derrick made aroused Nigel even more than his lover’s touch. He paused and stilled so he could get a grip and make this last. Coming too soon would be unfair and disappointing to Derrick, which was the last thing Nigel wanted.

After a few moments, he let his penis slip along the cleft between Derrick’s buttocks a few times before lining himself up and pushing inside. He stopped with just the head of his cock past the ring of muscle. Derrick’s loud moan morphed into pleas, so Nigel relented and pushed in until he was completely seated. Again he stilled, giving his lover time to adjust.

Beneath him, Derrick gasped and panted. “Don’t wait. Move; move now. Right now!”

“As you wish.” The *Princess Bride* reference was lost in Derrick’s sounds as Nigel rocked in and out again. Derrick’s body shuddered beneath him, and he moved faster.

“You feel so good, Nigh. You’ve ruined me for anyone else.” Derrick turned to reach for him, and Nigel pulled out to let Derrick move onto his back. Nigel slid inside his lover again, then leaned forward for a passionate kiss, his own body producing noises he had never shared with anyone else. His love for Derrick filled his heart, filled his soul. He just wanted to crawl inside him and never leave. Derrick pulled back and looked him in the eyes, a wealth of emotions churning there. “I love you with all that I am.”

Being deeply buried inside his lover was Nigel’s favorite position. He didn’t mind staying there awhile as he drank in his lover’s words and tried

to come up with a reply that expressed everything he felt for his wonderful man. The cruelty of Ronald's attempt to separate them had only brought them closer together. Like Derrick, Nigel wanted to express his love. "Cheesiness makes me happy. You make me whole."

Derrick's smile lit the room. "Then stop talking and fuck me through this mattress."

Exhilarated, Nigel pushed up to brace himself on his arms then drew out and bore back in. Just a couple more rounds had Derrick making beautiful sounds again. Nigel increased his speed, each thrust accompanied by a louder moan, until his lover was crying out as Nigel drove into him over and over. Within a short time, Nigel found himself grunting, his face warm, sweat drenching his forehead. He paused to reposition Derrick and plunged in again.

This time his lover howled as Nigel hit his prostate. "Fuck. There, right there. Do that again." He complied, hitting his lover's gland each time he swung his hips and entered. Nigel almost lost his rhythm when he looked up and saw the euphoria on his lover's face. Although improbable, Derrick was even more gorgeous when he was excited and nearing orgasm. The sight took Nigel's breath away.

Derrick met Nigel's eyes. "Oh God, I think I'm going to explode." Nigel pounded in again, and his lover threw his head back and cried out. Every time Nigel buried himself within that sexy body, his lover moaned and hollered. Under him, Derrick writhed and quivered, his head twisting about, his fingers digging into Nigel's thighs. The motions brought Nigel to the brink.

He moved his weight to one arm so he could use the hand on the other side to wrap around his lover's rock hard cock. "Dare, come for me; let me watch you. I want to see you enjoy this." He used the copious amount of pre-come to slick Derrick's shaft then slid his hand along its length.

"Oh God. Oh fuck. I'm going to come." Derrick's words were slurred together.

He couldn't explain why those words filled his heart with joy, but they did. He pumped his hands a few more times as he resumed pounding into his lover.

“I’m coming, I’m coming.”

“I’ve got you. Come.”

“Nigel!” Derrick reared up and silky strands of white spurted out of him and over their torsos, tremors and cries wracking his body as he shot. Nigel watched his lover’s agile body buck and thrash. Derrick’s muscles tightened around him, and the feeling tipped Nigel over the edge. He was usually quiet but he, too, shouted as he crested, calling out his lover’s name again and again. His orgasm went on and on, and he felt another stream spill out, as if he were somehow marking his lover from inside.

Nigel finally finished and pulled out, and Derrick cleaned them up. They kissed for a while until sleep overtook them. Nigel’s last thought was how lucky he was to have this man, and how grateful he was that Derrick believed in them. Nigel was in this until the end of time.

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CHAPTER 8

Now: Derrick

When they walk in, nothing happens. Derrick isn't sure what he expected, but this isn't it. People continue to talk in small groups, or place casseroles and salads on the overflowing dining room table, which he can see through the archway on the right. To his left, a cluster of women in florals and heels hover around the sofa near the fireplace. That's where he needs to be.

The sea of bodies parts before him, and to his surprise, hands touch his shoulders, cheeks, arms. Voices murmur condolences to him. The eyes he meets are full of sympathy and sorrow, not a judgmental glare among them. He is confused, but all thoughts leave his head when he reaches the couch and sees his sister and aunt sitting there. Sitting isn't quite the right word; they are existing, bodies that stop from sinking to the floor only through the support of the furniture. He saw his sister grieving when their mother died, but it was no comparison to this. He realizes she is an orphan at eighteen, no parents to guide her through leaving home and setting out in the world. He will have to stand in for them. He is her brother and he will do whatever he can for her.

For the first time since he received Marisol's text, he feels tears sting his eyes. In seconds he is blinded by them, and sinks beside his family both in body and in spirit. He was wrong when he told Nigel it couldn't hurt more. It does. Seeing his sister in such pain cuts him so deeply he isn't sure he can live through it.

He reaches for her and she finally looks up. "You fucking asshole..." She says the words softly, finding refuge in sibling banter, but her heart isn't in it. Unable to keep up the pretense, she melts into his arms and sobs. Their aunt opens her mouth to admonish Marisol for her language, but Derrick cuts her off with a glare. She remains silent.

The siblings cry together for a long time. Around them, Derrick hears gasps of sympathetic grief, then people moving away. Even in times of

deep sadness, emotional displays of sorrow are still difficult to watch. Derrick feels Nigel's presence, a warmth behind him from where his boyfriend perches on the sofa arm. If Nigel is uncomfortable with the intensity of the moment, there is no indication. His body is still. Nigel doesn't reach for him, and Derrick appreciates it. This is something between Marisol and himself. Nigel's being there is enough.

Tissues are pressed into Derrick's hands. He wipes his sister's face, blows his nose, and they cry some more. Eventually they pull apart. Derrick brushes Marisol's hair out of her eyes. "Tell me what happened." Behind her, Edwina rubs his sister's back, glaring at him all the while. He tries to ignore her.

Marisol dabs her nose. "He's been so sad. Since Mom died, he just hasn't been the same, you know?" He nods; he does know, even though her death was such a short time before Ronald kicked him out and his world fell apart. "Then you were gone and he just, just kind of stopped. He stopped living. Benji went and stayed with Auntie a lot because Dad couldn't really take care of him."

"That was your job, Derrick." His aunt's voice is harsh and unwelcome.

He wants her to go away but she is right "Thank you for stepping in, Edwina. I'm sure Ronald is—was—very grateful. Go on, Merry."

"He drinks a lot. He never went back to work. I think he got unemployment or something. I'm not sure what." Her confusing tense, from present to past and back again, is normal. She still hasn't fully accepted her father is gone. "Anyway, he drove drunk all the time. I told him to stop. I tried hiding his keys, but he's so angry all the time... I was afraid."

Derrick feels the words trickle down to his gut and freeze his insides. He should have been there. He reaches over and rubs his sister's upper arm. Before he can offer inane words of comfort, his aunt steps in. "Isn't your fault, dear. Can't expect a young girl to watch out for her papa. Needed your brother to step up and be a man for a change."

The words have been said before. Edwina believes homosexuality is a sin, although she has never said the words in front of him. She loved her

brother Ronald, and respected him enough to keep her silence. But she also made it clear that once Derrick became a man, he needed to stop doing sinful childish things and take care of his “kinfolk.” She never explicitly said what those childish things were; everyone knew. She undoubtedly blames him for choosing Nigel over his family. But they have always gotten along all right, and her words sting.

Still, he doesn’t want a fight so he remains silent. Instead, he catches his sister’s eye and nods for her to continue. Her look of discomfort changes to gratitude. “Last night—no, I guess it was the night before last, now—I was spending the night at Ellie’s house. Doing nothing. We were doing nothing. I should have been here.” She starts crying again, and Derrick put his arms around her once more. After a moment, she pushes him back. “He called to tell me he was going to the grocery store, but it was probably just to buy more booze.” She shook her head. “I did all the grocery shopping.”

Derrick feels like screaming. Marisol is only a kid. She just turned eighteen and is starting her senior year in high school. She should be having the time of her life, looking forward to all the fun the final year of high school offers, with the anticipation of what is to come. Instead, she’s been doing the shopping and undoubtedly cleaning, doing laundry, and cooking for a man who lost his reason for living. Derrick doesn’t think he has ever hated himself more than he does at that moment.

Behind him Nigel shifts slightly, and Derrick feels his lover’s scent wash over and inside him, calming and soothing him just by being there. He knows Nigel moved so that Derrick was aware of his presence, but his lover can’t have known how his unique aroma stills Derrick’s torment. He wishes he had a way to show Nigel how he makes Derrick feel, how he stays Derrick’s demons.

“He told me he loved me.” Marisol looks up from the tissue she is shredding. “He wanted to make sure I knew that he loved me, that he loved us, all of us. Even you.” She swallows. “Especially you. I should have known something was wrong when he said that. I should have known.” A new fit of crying has his shoulder wet and his heart aching again. “His car ran into a cement wall. He missed some exit up in Everett and hit the barrier

instead. The police said there isn't any sign that he braked at all, and he was going over eighty miles an hour. Why was he going so fast? What was he doing up there? Why couldn't he just take the next exit? It's like he had a death wish."

Derrick can't say anything she would want to hear. He is grateful her cheek is pressed to his shoulder and he doesn't have to look her in the eye. They will never know for sure, but he is fairly confident he knows what happened, and there is no way it will bring her peace.

"Marisol, dear, only God can help now, and we mustn't question the path that he has set for any of us. We need to trust in Him now, to guide us. We are not worthy to know His plan. May God rest your father's soul." Derrick bristles at his aunt's words and has to force himself to relax. He has no love for Christianity and doesn't want it here in this private place. But if it brings his sister solace, he will keep his feelings at bay.

He doesn't need to, though. "Shut up, Auntie! I'm sick of all this bullshit!" Marisol jumps up. "I don't care about God's plan or whatever. I want my father back!" She pushes through the crowd of well-wishers and runs toward the back of the house.

"Merry!" Derrick jumps up to follow.

"Don't you go filling that girl's head with your atheist rants. She needs God right now."

He whirls to glare at Edwina. "I'm not filling her head with anything. You're the one trying to brush away her pain with useless platitudes. What the hell has gotten into you? You didn't used to be like this, so fucking cold." He runs after his sister.

He catches up with her in the kitchen where he finds her hugging a woman in her late fifties, Reverend Angelica Hernback. Derrick skids to a stop. The minister is from his family's church, not his aunt's. His sister is clearly turning to the woman for help and has stopped crying, so he steps back to give her room. Nigel's hand is now on Derrick's waist, and he leans into the support of his lover's body. When his boyfriend begins to pull away, Derrick stops him. "It's okay, Nigh. She's not homophobic." Nigel is

still stiff behind him, but he leaves his hand where it is. Derrick doesn't blame him for being worried about the intimate touch in front of the minister. There are still far more clergy who disapprove of their love than who accept it.

"Yeah, I get why you're angry with God right now," the pastor is saying. "What do you think you'd say to Him if He were standing right here?" Derrick thinks it is a ridiculous question—Christians believe God is everywhere, right?

But his sister apparently doesn't think it's dumb. "I'd tell him he's a motherfucker for taking both of my parents when I'm not really a grown-up yet." Her fury is trapped in the creases in her scrunched up face. "He left us fucking orphans. Again! Because I guess having one set of parents disappear from your life forever isn't enough. No one should have to fucking lose four parents." Angelica watches Marisol as she rages but doesn't say anything. "I'd tell him how angry I am for taking my family from me." Something punches Derrick in the gut and he's pretty sure it's his conscience. "For taking them both. For letting Dad hurt that way." Tears fill her eyes. "For letting *me* hurt this way." His sister stands there for a moment, looking like a little girl for the first time in years, and then she crumples into the Reverend's arms. "Why did He do it? Why did He take them?"

"I don't know, honey. Sometimes it's hard to know why God allows things to happen. It's hard not to be angry with Him." The older woman doesn't try to placate Marisol or deny her grief. She is simply there as a support for his sister to lean on. "I just try to remember that He loves us. Sometimes love is all we have."

Derrick backs away and takes Nigel with him. The last sentence stays with him. He still doesn't find his parents' religion in the slightest bit appeasing, mostly because he doesn't find any of it even remotely believable. But he also knows he has to let the people in his family deal with their grief in their own ways. It isn't up to him to make those decisions for them; he can only offer his support. He turns to his boyfriend. "Did that make you uncomfortable?"

Nigel pauses, probably to gauge how he should answer, but he finally says, “Yes. Truthfully, that religion stuff is harder for me to deal with than the grief.”

“Me, too. But if that’s what Merry believes, then I’m going to support her no matter what, because right now it’s not hurting anybody.” He laughs. “Angelica said her faith is about love. Love’s never wrong, right?”

“Yes. Real love, not abuse masquerading as love, is never wrong.” Derrick thinks about his aunt, and something niggles at the back of his mind, some connection he needs to make. He lets it go for the moment. “I’ve got to find Benji.” He steels himself for whatever reaction he will receive from his brother.

Benjamin is in the backyard throwing a football around with a few other children. When he catches sight of Derrick, he freezes and the ball bounces off his shoulder. He barely acknowledges the hit. Then he bursts into motion, runs across the grass, and flings himself in Derrick’s arms. “Derry! You came back!”

Derrick lifts his brother and holds him tightly. He can’t speak for a moment. He finally manages, “I’ve missed you so much, Benji.” Tears gather in his eyes again, and he presses his nose into his brother’s tight little curls.

“I miss you, too. Daddy said you wouldn’t be back for a while. You musta fixed all those kids quick!”

Derrick pulls back to look at Benjamin’s face. “What?”

His brother’s eyes shine with excitement. “You made all those kids better, right?”

Derrick is baffled. “What did Ronald say to you?”

Benji rolls his eyes. “Dad says that you and Uncle Nigel had to go away and help a lot of big kids so they wouldn’t go back to jail. He says that when you’re done, and the dogs are all trained, you’ll come back. I don’t know why you can’t help kids here, but Dad says it’s a grown-up thing.” Derrick hasn’t thought about what his father would think was appropriate to

tell an eight- then nine-year-old. He supposes that story is as good as any. “Are you back now for good?” Benji eagerly awaits an answer.

“Yes, Benji. I’m back for good.” Derrick isn’t sure how to react to Benjamin’s simple acceptance of the lost time. He decides he doesn’t need to think about it right now; he should just be glad he doesn’t have to deal with his brother hating him on top of everything else. “Did you get my letters?”

“Yep. Dad read them all to me.” Ronald must have left out the parts that interfered with the lie. Derrick is selfishly grateful Benjamin is behind in school due to being in foster care, and thus his skills are not at the point where he could read the letters himself. The boy squirms and Derrick puts him down. “I can do a handstand, wanna see?” Benjamin’s grin is contagious.

“Uh, sure.” Derrick watches. His brother does more of an elongated forward roll than a handstand, but Derrick praises him anyway.

Beside him Nigel claps. “Great job, Benji!”

“Thanks Uncle Nigel. Wanna see me do it again?” Benjamin tries a few more times.

Nigel moves closer to his boyfriend. “Uncle Nigel?”

Derrick shakes his head, as perplexed as his boyfriend. “He’s said it twice now. I have no idea. Maybe Merry told him to say that? No way would Ronald.”

Nigel shrugs. “Benji seems rather chipper for someone who just lost his father.”

With the words, Derrick feels the heaviness weigh him down again. “I know. He was the same way after Celeste died. His therapist is working on it with him, but it has to do with his inability to face his grief. He was only two years old when he first went into foster care. He wasn’t adopted until he was four or so, but he was too young to remember his birth parents. He doesn’t talk about them—Celeste and Ronald were his real mom and dad. Everyone thinks that losing the only mother he’s ever known has been too traumatic to face. He still talks about her as if she were alive.”

“I noticed he did that when talking about your father, too.”

“Yeah.” Derrick doesn’t realize how cold he is despite the warm day until Nigel’s arms go around him. He feels his lover’s cheek against his temple.

“I’m right here, Dare. I’ve got you.”

Derrick leans into his lover, trying to relax for a minute, but he doesn’t succeed. He appreciates that Nigel isn’t a macho he-man who can’t show affection in public. He needs to be touched. After a while, he pulls away and takes Nigel’s hand instead. “I wonder what story he told the church people. That’s who are here, by the way. These are almost all family friends from the congregation.”

“He may not have told them anything. You never went to church so why did they need to know?” Nigel is always so logical.

“Good point.” They watch for a while as Benjamin plays with the other children. “Oh shit! What the fuck is going to happen to Benji and Merry?” He lets go of Nigel’s hand and races inside. He finds Edwina where he left her, women from the church having closed in to fill the spots vacated by him and his sister.

“Edwina, can I talk to you for a sec?”

His aunt looks up and narrows her eyes. She then shoos the other women away and indicates he should sit next to her on the couch. “What is it?”

“Has anyone thought about—Do you have any idea what’s going to happen to Benji and Merry? Where they’re going to go?”

Edwina looks disgusted. “Of course. They’ll come live with us. Benjamin basically already does now.” She hesitates, and something passes over her face that he doesn’t understand. Then her expression hardens. “Ronald’s will hadn’t been changed in years. It just said that he wanted his children to stay together if possible. At that point, you were still a minor.” She doesn’t say anything else, just sets her jaw and waits for Derrick to speak.

He has no idea what she is bracing herself for, and he turns to look at his boyfriend for help. Nigel squats beside him. “You figure out what’s best for

the kids. We'll make it work if that's what you decide. If we have to move, we'll move. We're a family, and I love your sister and brother as if they were my own. I've probably missed them almost as much as you have. Whatever they need, they'll get."

Derrick blinks at him before he realizes what Nigel is saying. Then he blanches. *Holy shit*. He looks back at his aunt. "You're afraid I'm going to take them from you." For the first time he sees weakness in her, but she says nothing. "This is too soon to be making final decisions. But it seems to me that Benji's living with you already. He belongs there. Did Merry stay with you last night?"

Edwina shakes her head. "She stayed with a friend."

"She may need her friends right now more than she needs us. It's sad but true. At her age, she's closer to her peers than her family and can talk to them about things she can't discuss with us. I want the kids with me, but I don't think change is good for them right now. Merry is legally an adult, and I think we need to talk to her about what she wants, but Benji needs to stay with you. Everything else can wait until after the memorial service. Have you figured when it will be?"

"Saturday."

"Okay. Right now, let Merry stay where she wants, and let us bury our father. Everything else can wait a little while." Derrick is surprised to see the tension ebb from his aunt's shoulders. "Edwina, I don't know what's going on in your head, but I'm not trying to hurt you or pull this family apart. I want what you want: what's best for Merry and Benji. They've been through enough."

Edwina purses her lips for a moment, then softens. "How could you choose that man over your own family? After everything Ronald did for you?" She glances at Nigel then quickly looks away. She has the decency to look uncomfortable, seeming to recognize how hurtful she is being.

Derrick feels anger stab him behind the eyes. Nigel takes his hand and their eyes meet. His lover's gaze holds all the love and understanding it always has, and rather than alleviating Derrick's rage, the gentleness only

stokes it. He moves toward his aunt slightly to give him room to haul Nigel up from his crouch to sit on the sofa behind him. Derrick pulls his boyfriend's arms around his waist and allows the touch to soothe him. His aunt only recoils a little.

"That man is the love of my life. If your father had forced you to choose between your family and your husband, which would you have chosen?"

"It's not the same thing."

"It's not?"

She looks appalled. "Of course not. Our love is sanctioned by God. It's what is natural. A man is biologically designed to be with a woman, not another man. Almost everyone knows that love is only between a man and a woman."

Derrick barely suppresses the urge to roll his eyes. "That's actually not what multiple polls say." He sighs. She will never understand how he and Nigel fit together like a split piece of wood rendered whole again. He has to suppress his juvenile and inappropriate reaction to the apt metaphor. At that moment, what he has been trying to piece together ever since he and Nigel were in the backyard talking about love always being right, solidifies in his mind.

"In the kitchen, I heard Reverend Hernback telling Merry about God's love, how thinking about His love for her is what got her through the tough times. Is that true for you?"

Edwina narrows her eyes but answers right away. "I wouldn't put it that way—my church is a bit more traditional—but yes. It is through God's grace that we are strengthened. His grace is His kindness, His good favor, His compassion. Essentially that is love."

"Well the majority of the world is not Christian. They do not know your god's love. Two-thirds of the people alive do not know the love that you feel. Does that mean you condemn their lives?"

"That's not the same, either."

"Isn't it? In many places around the world it is illegal or dangerous or socially unacceptable to be Christian. Can you imagine life like that?" His

aunt doesn't say anything but she is visibly upset. "Would that stop you from loving your god?"

"No," Edwina's eyes are blazing. "Of course not."

"If you were forced to choose between your home and your god, which would you choose?"

Edwina doesn't say anything for a minute. "You've made your point. I still don't agree that it's the same, but I suppose that doesn't matter from your perspective—apparently to you it is." Shocked, Derrick can only nod. "If you feel that your love for this—" She eyes Nigel over Derrick's shoulder, and purses her lips. "—for Nigel is as powerful as my love for God, then perhaps I can see why you might make the choice you did. I still think it's a sin, but maybe I understand you a little bit better." Then she softened. "You could have called... or written..."

"I did. Well, maybe not to you. I'm sorry about that. But I see and talk to Merry all the time. I wrote letters and sent cards to Benji every week or two. I didn't know if they got through because I never heard back, but just now he told me Ronald read them to him."

Edwina cocks her head to the side. At that angle she is nearly an exact likeness of Ronald only with her lustrous skin a few shades darker. They didn't share the same father, so their mixed heritage is different. Her paternal grandparents got custody when she was still a baby. She had the proper childhood her brother never did; it shows through her speech, her perfect teeth, her flawless skin not rutted by years of meth use and poor sanitation, unlike Ronald's pitted and scarred flesh. Derrick is reminded that he has always thought his aunt was breathtakingly beautiful, not just on the outside but within as well. He is saddened that his sexual orientation has come between them.

"I imagine if Benji wrote you back, Ronald wouldn't have sent the letters. He was trying to wait you out. He wanted to make you come crawling home, and I know he was hoping that you missing your siblings would be the crushing blow, so to speak."

Derrick nods. "I bet you're right." They talk for a few more minutes, filling each other in on the major events of the past year, a truce of sorts

having been reached. Eventually he stands and makes the rounds, saying hello to family friends, all of whom express their condolences, and not one of whom gives any indication they know of the family rift. He wonders for a moment how Benjamin hasn't given the ruse away with his improbable story, but then he remembers how little his brother talks about his personal life with others. For the first and probably only time, Derrick is glad of that fact.

He and Nigel both spend some time with Merry in her room. Nigel offers to leave them alone to talk but Merry asks him to stay. She missed him, too. Afterward they play with Benjamin for a while before the strain of keeping himself in control becomes too much for Derrick. He says his goodbyes and they leave. His knees give out as he is climbing into the car, and Nigel takes his elbow to steady him. They drive away in silence, Derrick lost in his thoughts, processing all that has happened. The afternoon didn't go at all like he expected. It was both better and worse, but he is glad he went.

When Nigel asks him how he's doing, he has to think about it. "I'm not sure," he says honestly. "Take me home and fuck me through the floor, then maybe I'll know." He reaches over and places a hand on his lover's knee. "Or let me do the fucking. Either works for me."

Nigel glances at him, his eyebrow raised. "Not what I thought you'd say, but I can do that." He chuckles. "I am *always* willing to help in that way." He interlaces his fingers with Derrick's.

Derrick sighs and leans his head back against the headrest. "Thank fuck. At least that's one thing I can count on. Everything else is just too fucking weird." He closes his eyes and tries to make his mind go blank. "You were amazing in there. Thank you."

He feels Nigel squeeze his hand. "I will always be there for you, Dare. Always. In any way you need me."

"Are we passing a fondue restaurant or something? I'm getting a whiff of something cheesy."

"Shush." Nigel strokes Derrick's fingers. "Rest awhile. You need to get your energy back in order to fully enjoy my fucking you into next week. That is, if you think you can handle it."

Derrick hears the smirk in his boyfriend's voice. It reassures him. He loves the cheese, but it scares him sometimes, too. It's easier to take snarkiness. "I can't wait, Nigh. It's all I dream about. That and Ellen DeGeneres making pancakes in the shape of wiener dogs while convincing me to take up billiards."

Nigel snorts. "You would be terrible at that. You'd need too much patience."

"That's why the dream is a nightmare. Ellen is usually so nice, but she has it out for me when I'm sleeping. I'm thinking of keeping a spatula under my pillow for safety." Derrick opens his eyes long enough to meet Nigel's eyes and grin, then closes them again. "Wake me when we get home." He sinks down and lets the car's movement lull him to sleep.

Then: Nigel

It was Derrick's turn to decide where to go for their day out, and Nigel was anticipating fun. Derrick always came up with something original. It had become a tradition: on the monthly anniversary of their first date, they chose someplace special to go, usually somewhere the two hadn't been before. Now, it had been nine months and Nigel knew Derrick had struggled to find something they hadn't yet done together. He had announced this morning, though, that he had come up with the perfect idea.

"Are we there yet?" Nigel whined and then grinned. Over his shoulder, Tibbs sniffed at air coming in through the open window. Nigel could smell horses and hay. Who knew what the dog was inhaling with his tens of millions of olfactory cells. He shuddered. "Ick, Tibbs! Drool! So very not cool."

"Almost." Derrick signaled to turn left at the stoplight.

"We're in the middle of nowhere. I think I see Grandpa Jed's tractor over there." Nigel pointed to a pile of rust next to a railway crossing. He still had no clue where Derrick was taking them, and the anticipation was making him uncharacteristically antsy.

"I don't even understand that reference, old man."

“*Beverly Hillbillies*. I’ve never seen the show, so I could have the character name wrong. I really don’t even know if they drove a tractor. I have a vague impression of a bunch of people piled on some farm machinery in some publicity still.”

“It was a 1921 Oldsmobile Roadster.” Derrick made the turn and swung around a curve onto a two lane road winding through cornfields.

“Now who’s old? How do you know that? You like *The Beverly Hillbillies*?” Nigel was surprised, and a little disturbed.

“I like old cars.”

“Oh. I knew that.” Derrick was driving Nigel’s car, an environmentally sound Toyota Prius. Derrick’s 1966 Alfa Romeo 2600 Spider was still a work very much in progress and wouldn’t really have been comfortable for the forty-five minutes they had already been on the road.

Derrick turned and grinned at him. “Of course you did. You know everything about me. Everything important, at least.”

Nigel raised his eyebrows suggestively and reached over to cup Derrick between his legs. “Oh yes, I know all the important stuff.”

Derrick batted his hand away. “Stop that. That’s for later. We’re here.” Tibbs was whining and showing very bad manners by pawing at Derrick’s head.

Nigel looked up. They were pulling into a parking lot with a small building decorated to look like an old time general store. The porch was lined with ancient harvesting gear, a crooked straw scarecrow, and barrels of apples, stalks of corn, and piles of pumpkins. Lots of pumpkins. There were pumpkins everywhere, and behind the building stretched a large field full of even more of the things.

“A pumpkin patch?”

“Well it’s October, isn’t it?”

Nigel nodded. “That it is. Lead on.”

The place was packed. A woman in an orange jacket directed Derrick to a parking spot about ten miles from the building, or perhaps only a few

hundred feet. It seemed farther. A big sign said “support animals only.” Although he was a retired service dog, Tibbs was now used for therapy in hospitals, detention centers, nursing homes, and so forth. Nigel hadn’t been able to visit any of the institutions recently, and Tibbs needed to stay current on his skills. He slipped the little yellow vest on the dog and clipped on a leash. A big outdoorsy place like this, where people not comfortable with animals could easily avoid them, was perfect.

The three headed for a building that had a big sign saying, “Buy Tickits Here” in what looked like erratic hand-painted lettering. “Do you think they misspelled it on purpose?” Derrick asked.

Nigel looked more closely and saw that both letter “T”s were identical. The sign was professionally made. “Yes, of course. I guess they think all farmers are illiterate. I hate stereotypes.”

They waited in line quite a while to buy tickets for the corn maze and hayride. Several children came over to pet Tibbs, most of them actually asking Nigel if they could pet his dog before doing so, which was great. He always said yes but reminded the children that service dogs should not be distracted while working. He explained that Tibbs was a support animal, though, which was different, and was not working but practicing. The kids were full of questions about what Tibbs could do. The attention helped the time pass quickly.

Once they had their tickets, the men waited for the next hay wagon. “Speaking of tractors...” Derrick pointed to a huge Ford vehicle approaching them, pulling a fifteen-foot wagon lined with hay bales.

“Just call me Jed.” Nigel directed Tibbs to stand.

“I thought we clarified that it was a car.” Derrick shook his head in mock disgust.

“Weren’t they farmers? They had to have had a tractor.”

“How would I know? You’re the one fascinated by the show.”

“Shush.” Nigel glanced around and then squeezed one of his boyfriend’s ass cheeks when no one was looking.

“Don’t look but I think some guy is feeling me up,” Derrick whispered.

“Feeling you down, more likely.”

“Either way, you might have some competition.” Derrick pretended to look for the culprit as they climbed into the wagon and sat on a bale of hay. Tibbs settled at their feet, leaning against their legs, out of the way of the other people climbing aboard. He put his head on Nigel’s knee.

Nigel petted the dog then leaned closer to Derrick. “You wish. Actually, your mom’s paying me to date you. She thought you were too perfect and wanted to be able to yell at you about something.”

Derrick burst into laughter and bumped shoulders with Nigel. “I love you.”

Nigel’s heart swelled. Those three words were the elixir of life to him. “I love you more.”

Derrick rolled his eyes. “Good grief, not that again. I love you infinity. There, I win.”

Nigel smirked. “I win, actually, because I get to have you loving me that much.”

Derrick groaned. “You are such a little girl.”

“On our first date you told me you love cheese. I’m just aiming to please.”

Derrick grimaced. “You have enough cheese to feed sandwiches to all the nine-year-olds in Washington state for a year.”

“Only the nine-year-olds?”

“Give it time. You’re still young.” Nigel felt Derrick’s hand squeeze his thigh. The simple touch sent shivers up his spine. “We’re here.”

They hopped out of the wagon and walked the two dozen yards or so to the entrance of the corn maze. The fake hand-lettered sign hanging nearby read, “Corn Maize.” They both groaned and looked at each other. Nigel loved that he knew exactly what Derrick was complaining about. He had never known anyone as well as he knew Derrick, not even his own family, and Derrick knew him that well, too. That closeness was something he had never had before and didn’t ever want to give up. The look in Derrick’s

eyes seemed to say the same thing. Nigel grabbed Derrick's hand and pulled him to the maze entrance before Nigel did something really awkward and embarrassing.

Another orange jacketed employee handed them a map of the maze with key spots marked on it. "Hey, the maze is shaped like a witch on a broom!" Derrick pointed at the paper.

"I wish we had a broom of our own so we could fly up and look at it from above." There were several paths to choose from, and they randomly chose one to head down. "Seems a little pointless to make it that complicated when no one can see it."

Derrick pretended to ponder this. "Maybe it's a signal warning off aliens: 'Beware of witches. Don't land here.'"

"Curtis would be very offended if he heard you say that." Curtis was one of Derrick's friends they sometimes played soccer with. He also happened to be Wiccan and loved to regale his friends with stories of dancing naked under the moon at midnight. They both figured he did it to get laid; all the witches in his coven were gay men.

"Curtis is offended by the very idea of a witch as a scary creature."

Derrick rolled his eyes. "Curtis *is* a scary creature."

"True. Oh, here's the first tag puncher thingy." They stepped into a little alcove off the main track. A post with a sign depicting a cat had a little orange hole punch hanging from it. Nigel used the tool to mark the cat image on the map. "One down, twenty-three to go."

They headed back down the path. A minute later they reached an intersection. "Which way, Mr. Sulu?"

Derrick looked up from the map. "Checkov was the navigator."

"You're just filled with trivia today."

"I spent about a billion years in school. Learning something was inevitable." Derrick turned the map to orient it in the direction they were walking.

"You didn't learn about Star Trek characters in college."

“Like hell I didn’t. At two AM there aren’t a lot of options. I needed something to occupy my mind while studying.”

Nigel nearly choked trying not to laugh. He knew Derrick was actually serious. “And cramming wasn’t doing it for you.”

Derrick looked at Nigel like he was turning into an alien biomimetic life form. “Duh.” He turned back to the map. “I think we go this way.” They soon found the next mark, which had a picture of a ghost. Nigel used the punch to indicate they had found the figure, and they moved on.

They continued to trudge through the thickest mud Nigel had ever encountered. The day was dry so far, but autumn in the Puget Sound area was more about rain than about sun. By the time their map was half punched, their boots and pants were caked with muck, and the poor dog’s legs were no longer gold but brown. “I like the color, Tibbs, but next time try dye. It will last longer and be more comfortable,” teased Derrick.

“I think we’re lost, Dare. We keep passing this same area.” They were standing at the terminus of a dead end. “Let me see the map.” Nigel moved up behind Derrick to look over his lover’s shoulder. “I think the path we thought was this one”—Nigel reached beneath Derrick’s arm to indicate a spot on the map—“isn’t really part of the maze but just a wide break in the corn that people have trampled.

“That could be.” Derrick pointed to a line on the diagram. “That would mean we haven’t reached here yet, so we’ve been turning too early.”

“Right. I also don’t think we went about this the right way. We’re way over here on the upper left, and we have all the punches from the left hand side. We’re going to have to backtrack to get to the rest of them.”

“Hmm. Well I think it’s time for a break, then.” Derrick leaned back against Nigel and rubbed his ass cheeks against him.

Nigel felt himself begin to harden at the friction. “Don’t start something you can’t finish.”

Derrick pushed back harder and wiggled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Nigel groaned. “You’re a cock tease.”

Derrick twisted his head to look up Nigel. “Just giving you a little taste of what to expect when we get—” Nigel interrupted him with a hard and passionate kiss. He moved his hands to the top of Derrick’s waistband and slid the tips of his fingers inside. His lover’s body did things to him that sent reason flying away.

Derrick grabbed Nigel’s wrist before anything untoward happened. “Uh-uh-uh.” He turned around to place his hands on Nigel’s chest, his thumbs rubbing Nigel’s nipples through his thin sweater. “No touching until later.”

Nigel moaned. “What do you call that?” Not waiting for an answer, he bent to suck Derrick’s lip between his teeth. He let go and kissed along his lover’s jaw to his ear, where he nibbled on Derrick’s ear lobe. “You’re killing me here.”

“Glad to return the favor. I’ve been watching that hot ass of yours for an hour now, and I don’t know how much longer I can stand it.” Derrick took Nigel’s hand and placed it against his crotch for a few seconds before pushing it away again. “See?”

Nigel forced himself to take a deep breath. “Do we have to keep wandering around this corn patch?”

“You don’t want to finish?”

“I want to finish you more.”

Derrick mock grumbled and pulled away. “I’ve had enough cheese for today.” He grinned, to Nigel’s relief, and they headed back out to the path. “Well I’d like to keep going. Doing the maze, that is. I always finish what I start.” Derrick leered at him, a look which went straight to Nigel’s crotch.

“That’s fine, let’s just do it quickly. We still have pumpkins to pick.” He reached for Derrick’s hand and rushed back the way they had come. At the junction with the main track, he slipped and his arms cartwheeled for a moment before he caught his balance. When he looked back at Derrick, his lover had a terrified look on his face, one leg extended out in midair and his arms were pinwheeling around in an exaggerated motion.

“Are you mocking me?”

“Yes.”

“Just checking.”

When Derrick stilled, Nigel kissed him on his forehead. “You’re a dork.”

“But I’m your dork.”

“At the risk of being sued by Wisconsin for unlawful cheesiness, I have to say that you’re the only dork I’ll ever want.” Tibbs sneezed. Nigel thought the dog might be showing disapproval.

Derrick just shook his head. “I’ll let it go this time. Try to stay vertical please.” He headed down the track, and Nigel quickly followed.

They finished the maze as fast as they could, then rode the hay wagon back to the pumpkin patch. “You know, I’ve always pictured a hayride as a cart filled with loose hay with people sprawled on top,” Derrick said as they disembarked.

“I doubt that would be very comfortable.”

“It would if you were next to me.”

It was Nigel’s turn to roll his eyes. “Now who’s being cheesy?”

“I figure I owe you a few hundred thousand cheesy comments. I’ll stop if you stop.”

“No promises.”

“Fine. Let’s pick out some pumpkins so we can get home, and you can finish what you started.” Derrick set off toward the field where the pumpkins lay mired in mud.

“I believe you were the one who started it.” They reached the field and began rooting through the muck.

“Well, I’ll take it back if you want me to.”

Nigel jerked up and looked at his boyfriend in horror. “Don’t you, Dare!”

Derrick covered his face with his hands. “Puns now, too?”

Nigel laughed and reached for a white version of the squash. “This is

cool. We could do something different with one that's not orange." He looked back at Derrick. "We are going to carve them, aren't we?"

"Hell yeah! Carving pumpkins is a highly skilled art form. We're having a contest at one of the service centers I work out of. I've never even placed. With your artistic skills, I'm sure we can win this time."

"I have artistic skills?" Nigel ruled the pumpkin too lopsided to stand up well and put it back down.

"Well, compared to me." Derrick shrugged and picked up a big, orange, elongated globe. "This one is pretty smooth."

"That does look good. Help me find one that has some interesting lumps. I have an idea for a witch that looks like Curtis but with warts."

Derrick cracked up. "I cannot wait to see the look on his face when he finds out it's him. I'll get us a wheelbarrow. I think we're going to need lots of practice."

An hour later, they paid for their nine pumpkins and sixteen small gourds. Neither of them wanted to limit their choices at that point. That and they were having too much fun picking them out. At a store behind the ticket booth, they spent an exorbitant amount of money on autumn foods like fresh pressed apple cider and pumpkin bread. With anyone else, Nigel would think the food would last several months. With Derrick, the food would probably be consumed within several days. Just thinking about his lover eating all of that had Nigel hot and bothered. At the car, they wiped themselves and Tibbs down as best they could. Soon they were in the Prius and heading back toward Seattle.

They stopped at Marymoor Park in Issaquah to let Tibbs run around the huge off-leash dog area. Derrick loved to watch all the dogs romp around. Nigel loved to watch Derrick. It was a win/win situation, and worth putting up with Tibbs's legs getting muddy again. Nigel tried to rub the gunk off, but this time gave up. Dogs got dirty, and he loved Tibbs. He could put up with a little muck. They finally just drove to the other side of the park where the picnic area was.

"How many people were you expecting?" Nigel watched Derrick unloading the lunch he had packed. A large bag of grapes joined a pile of

sandwiches, chips, three different kinds of salad, two desserts, and several jugs of various drinks.

“Too much?” Derrick surveyed the spread.

Nigel laughed. “For me, yeah. You? Probably not. I have no idea where you put all that food in that little body of yours.”

Derrick glared at him. “I’m not little. Want to go a few rounds with me so I can show you?”

Nigel threw up his hands. “Hell no! We both know you could take me three times out of three. I just meant that you eat like a linebacker.”

Derrick shrugged. “Just lucky I guess.” Nigel wasn’t sure it was luck—it was expensive and time consuming to eat that much—but he enjoyed watching Derrick ingest his food. He made eating an art form.

Nigel moved behind Derrick and put his arms around his lover’s waist. “This looks delicious. Did you make it all?”

“Most of it. I bought the grapes.”

Nigel chuckled. “Lazy man.” He licked Derrick’s neck. “Let’s eat quickly so I can move from here,” he lapped at his lover’s neck again, “to here.” He briefly squeezed the bulge in Derrick’s jeans. His boyfriend trembled beneath him.

“Fuck yes. Sit! Sit! Now!”

Nigel laughed and pulled away. He moved to the other side of the table and sat, taking the plate Derrick proffered. He loaded it up and dug in.

Fifteen minutes later, he was stuffed, and Derrick was working on his third plate of food. More than half the feast remained. “Hurry up, Dare, you’ve got a lot left to go.”

Derrick shrugged and swallowed. “I’m doing my best.” Nigel smiled and indicated Derrick should keep going. He sat, watched, and listened as Derrick hummed and moved his body unconsciously, thoroughly enjoying his meal. Nigel thought Derrick eating was incredibly sexy. He thought Derrick everything was sexy.

Another fifteen minutes passed before Derrick was done, and they packed up the leftovers. They moved to the grass where they spread a

blanket on the ground and sat to watch a group of college students play Ultimate Frisbee. Derrick sat with his back pressed to Nigel's chest. The air was chilly and smelled of pending frost, but Derrick was warm, and Nigel relaxed with his arms around his boyfriend. The game players took a break, but the two of them stayed seated and watched the people in the park. They played "who's compensating for a small penis" for a while, but there just weren't enough candidates.

They switched to "who's closeted" and had a lot more people to choose from. The game concluded when both agreed on a winner: A nervous looking older man wearing a bright yellow sweater sporting rhinestone-collared cats was holding the hand of a slightly younger woman who made Janet Reno look like Barbie. Every minute or so, he glanced at Derrick and Nigel, and when he saw them watching, he quickly turned his head. What clinched it was that each time he looked, he licked his lips. "No contest," they said in unison.

They sat in silence, just people watching and enjoying their closeness. Nigel felt immeasurable joy sitting there with the love of his life in his arms, their dog stretched alongside them, their bellies full, his heart bursting with love. In a little while, he would get to take his boyfriend home and make passionate love with him. Their one year anniversary was only a couple of months away, and he had finally gotten up the nerve to ask Derrick to move in with him. The thought of waking up next to Derrick every morning—with the accompanying wood, no less—sent a blaze of heat up his spine.

Nearby a man was wearing a signboard reading, "THE END IS NIGH! REPENT NOW!" He accompanied the message with exaggerated gestures and loud vocal repetitions of his message.

"He's wrong you, know." Derrick turned to look back at Nigel.

"Good thing. I'm not done with you yet." He squeezed Derrick's chest and moved a little to see his lover's face better.

Derrick smiled and Nigel's heart danced. "Likewise. The end is forever away. It's the future that is nigh."

He nodded and pulled Derrick closer. "The future is right in front of us."

Derrick turned around so he was completely facing Nigel. He was breathing faster. He looked intense as he took Nigel's hands in his own. "The future is *Nigh*." He seemed to be trying to explain something that Nigel apparently wasn't getting. He listened as Derrick again said, "My future is *Nigh*. My future is *Nigh*."

Then he finally got it. For a moment he couldn't breathe. This beautiful, wonderful man thought Nigel was his future? Some days Nigel was scared that his boyfriend would know how beneath him Nigel was and fly away. But now Derrick was telling him that his future was with Nigel. He struggled with his emotions. He pulled Derrick as close as he could, wrapping his arms around him, and burying his nose against his lover's neck.

He was shaking, and he appreciated that Derrick didn't say anything, just gave him a minute to get himself under control. Finally he turned his head and brushed his lips against Derrick's ear. No words could convey what he felt but he tried. They came out in a whisper. "The future is us, together. I love you so much. I keep pinching myself to see if I'm dreaming."

Derrick pulled back to meet his eyes. "I love you, too, Nigel, more than I could ever explain." Then he laughed.

Nigel smiled. "What?"

"This." Derrick leaned back and opened his arms to take in Nigel and everything around them. "This is perfect. Life is perfect. I'm so happy right now." He laughed again and Nigel joined in. Soon they were howling so hard they fell over, and Tibbs was jumping around them trying to play.

They almost didn't hear the phone ringing, but it fell out of Derrick's pocket. Without the cloth to muffle the sound, the ringtone blared. Derrick fumbled to answer, his hoots turning to chuckles. "Hello?"

Nigel sat up and tried to still his own laughter. He gazed at Derrick and was filled again with his love for this man. He was watching when Derrick's face fell. It was like slow motion, seeing his grinning, happy, loving, full of life Derrick morph into an unmoving rictus of agony and despair. He felt his heart fall out of his chest and roll away. That had to be

what happened in order for him to feel this kind of pain, watching his lover fade away in front of his eyes.

Derrick wasn't saying anything except an occasional, "Okay." He mostly just listened. It killed Nigel not to scream, "What's wrong?! Tell me what's wrong so I can fix it!" but he didn't. Nothing that could make Derrick look that way was something he could simply patch up. He cursed whatever powers that might be that their perfect moment had been shattered.

He took Derrick's hand. It was like picking up a dead fish: heavy, lifeless, and unresponsive. Cold. Clammy. He rubbed the palm trying to warm it up. Derrick ended the call and continued to stare at nothing.

"Dare?" He whispered the words. Derrick didn't say anything. "Dare? Please. Tell me what's wrong." Just looking at his lover in so much pain was making Nigel fall apart inside.

Finally Derrick turned to him, his eyes dimmed with grief. "Cel—" He had to swallow and start again. "Celeste's—Celeste is dead. My mother's dead."

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CHAPTER 9

Now: Derrick

This week has been hard, busy but not enough so. Relief flooded Edwina's face when Derrick told her he would take care of everything, including Ronald's memorial service, the will, and the estate. He gained a lot of experience when Celeste died only a little over a year ago. He is glad he is able to help. His father was surprisingly prepared and set up a lot of the funeral arrangements in advance. Derrick refuses to think about what that means. He isn't ready to face it, although it's confusing that Ronald didn't change his will. Maybe he didn't have time or the money to see an attorney. But Derrick found that when he completed the small number of things left to do, he felt empty, aching for another task to keep him occupied. He hasn't really found anything else.

Days have been spent either at the house, on the phone, or exercising. Bereavement leave has given him too much time to think, and he has tried to keep his mind clear by exhausting himself. At night, Nigel makes love to him, sometimes hard and dirty, sometimes soft and sweet. Derrick clings to his lover like a barnacle. If he lets go, he will float away and drown. It's a mixed metaphor, but it fits as he struggles to keep his head above the murky despair dragging him down.

Now the day Derrick's been dreading, the time for his father's funeral, is here. They decide to take the Prius again. The other car is too flashy in its way, too fun. He has to pull the seat forward to adjust for his shorter legs. It reminds him that he's not the one who usually drives this car, and he feels comforted cradled by a seat molded over time to fit his lover. Next to him, his boyfriend fiddles with the radio and finds a blues station. Nigel doesn't like this genre of music but Derrick does, and he's grateful for the consideration. The music is exactly what he needs right now.

Muddy Water's soulful voice croons from the speakers. A memory of Celeste playing an old vinyl record on an ancient console stereo drifts into focus. He'd forgotten that old behemoth. The look on her face whenever she closed her eyes and let the music fill her is one of his fondest memories.

She listened to rhythm and blues, soul and funk, and a lot of other sounds his friends thought were stupid. He secretly loved it and would hide behind the door to the den and watch her sway to the music, the beautiful voices filling his heart, too.

The memory reminds him that not that long ago, he was attending another funeral, and his heart grows heavy again. No one likes memorial services, but the ones for the people that mean the most are the hardest. He rubs his chest as if he could dispel the ache there. He is thankful for the billionth time that day that Nigel is there beside him, tethering him to the moment. He remembers what someone in juvie once told him when he was starting to panic from PTSD; *“There’s only one thing you need to do right now: breathe. Concentrate on just that. Breathe in, breathe out. Focus on one step at a time. Breathe in, breathe out.”* He can do that. He does.

Then: Derrick

“Ronald, I—” He what? He had no idea what to say. What was there that would help a man cope with the death of his wife of thirty-seven years? Derrick had lost the only mother he had ever really known, but he was grown, twenty-nine years old in a couple of weeks. Ronald had lost the love of his life, the woman that made everything else matter. “Dad...”

Ronald laughed without humor. “You never called me ‘Dad’ before.” He swallowed the rest of his whiskey sour in one gulp and signaled the bartender for another. “You tell people I’m your father, but you never actually called me ‘Dad’ or anything like it.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Derrick toyed with his ginger ale. He was queasy, and this high-end bottled brand had a lot of real ginger in it which was supposed to help. He didn’t think anything would help this kind of nausea. It had been over a month since Celeste’s sudden tragic death from a coronary, and he still found it hard to function sometimes. He couldn’t imagine what it was like for Ronald. Except, he could. Although they had only known each other about a year, he thought that if Nigel perished, when they were so in love and happy together, he would die. He didn’t think he could bear the pain. He shook his head to clear those thoughts away—he

had enough grief. "I should have called you Dad like Benji and Merry do. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Word sounds weird coming out of your mouth. Too soft." The bartender placed a new glass in front of Ronald, and Derrick told her to put it on his own tab. "Don't fall in love, Son. It'll kill you every time. Wait, I don't mean that. I wouldn't have traded my life with your mama for anything in the world."

Derrick could tell his father was barely holding on. He had moved home to help Ronald with the kids, and his father was like a hologram of who he had been. He ached for his dad, but he had no idea how to help. He would do anything to make Ronald's pain go away.

"I keep hoping you'll find the man of your dreams, the one who stays there forever. And I pray he outlives you so you don't ever know this kind of pain."

Derrick put his hand on his father's arm. "You don't have to worry; I have found him. And I know that if he does die first, it will still be worth the time we have together."

Ronald spluttered. "That lily white boy? He's not the one. He's just a thing you're going through."

Derrick was hurt until he reminded himself that Ronald was lashing out because of his own pain. "Let's not talk about him right now, okay?"

"Why not? You won't listen to me anyways so why does it matter if I talk about it?" Ronald drained his drink once more and signaled for a refill. "You haven't got any idea what it's like to be in love."

Derrick knew it was wrong to engage his father, but he just couldn't let that slip by. "That's not true at all. I've been with enough guys to know that what Nigel and I have is truly love." He ignored Ronald's snort. "I'm sorry you don't like him, but he's not going anywhere."

His father shook his head. "You just think you're in love. You haven't got what Celeste and I do... did." His father closed his eyes a minute before continuing. "Even if you're head over heels, that man isn't. You know he's just slumming it. You're just a new play toy." He accepted his fresh drink from the bartender.

“Why do you keep saying that? Nigel has never been that way. You’re just reaffirming the stereotype of the rich playboy. Nigel’s not like that.” Derrick felt himself getting heated, but he was sick of these comments. “His family’s not like that. He wasn’t born rich, at least not what most people think of as wealthy. His parents were with Bill Gates when he first moved Microsoft here in 1979, and they didn’t make more than a good salary until the company went public a few years later. Nigel was in grade school when his family went from well off to affluent.”

“His family has always had more money than you’ll ever see.”

“That’s not the point. Nigel was born middle class—”

“Upper middle class.” Ronald’s third glass was nearing empty, and he was already waving for another. Derrick narrowed his eyes. Ronald needed to slow down.

“Okay, upper middle class, and he has the same values of hard work and education that you do. He isn’t who you make him out to be. He dedicates his life to helping the same kids I do! You’ve said you respect my work.” Derrick took a deep breath to calm himself. His father was grieving and drunk; Derrick should have left this conversation ages ago.

“I do. You’re good at it partially because you know what it’s like to be one of these kids. He’s just doing it because of his white guilt. White people don’t get it.”

Derrick growled, “You’re judging him because of the way a lot of rich folks treat people who don’t have money. But Nigel is different. You need to stop talking about him that way. I know you’re hurting, but you are being downright offensive. It’s not all right to talk about anyone the way you do about him, and you know it.” He leaned forward, “But it is especially not okay to talk that way about the man who shares my heart.”

Ronald just rolled his eyes and shook his head.

Derrick growled, “Are you trying to lie and say you don’t like him because he’s white? That’s bullshit and you know it. Our family has almost as much white blood as it does black or Latino or anything else.”

The barkeep put another whiskey sour in front of Ronald, and his father quickly gulped half of it down. “Not that kind of white. I mean whiter than

white, like white rich folks who don't even know any black people except the guy who empties their office trash. If it isn't white guilt, then it's to keep streets safe for him and his white friends."

"Ronald..." Derrick tried to reason with him. Reasoning with a drunk was always a bad idea. "Nigel does what he does because, like me, he cares about these kids. He does it because, also like me, he believes in proactive rather than reactive solutions. He does it because he's an optimist and a caring person. At his core, he is radiant. I am in love with his very essence, just like you were in love with Celeste's soul."

"Don't you talk such shit around me. He isn't anything like your mama. He'll never be like her." Ronald was snarling now.

"Of course he won't; he's himself. But he is to me what Celeste was to you."

Ronald swallowed the last of his drink and then swiveled to face his son. "I'm not gonna let that happen. You can't see that boy no more. You'll thank me later."

Derrick barked out a laugh. "You forbid me? I'm twenty-eight, twenty-nine in two weeks. I'm a big boy now."

Ronald wore a look Derrick didn't like. "You aren't going to see that boy, or you aren't going to see your family no more. Which it gonna be? Him or us?"

"Ronald, don't be foolish. You need me. You asked me to live with you to help with Benjamin and Marisol. It's the drink talking. Let me take you home, and we'll talk tomorrow." He beckoned for the bill.

"It isn't the drink. Been thinking about this a long time now. I gotta stop you before you make the biggest mistake of your life. He's only gonna hurt you, and you are too precious to me. I'm not gonna allow you to get hurt."

"Why do you keep saying that? Why do you hate him so much? You're usually so tolerant."

Ronald smacked his glass down. "'Cause it's folks like him who fuck people up. You know how many of these foster kids get moved around the system 'cause rich whites think they gonna save some little boy then soon

as the kid shows any spirit, they kick him to the curb. How many times it happen to you?”

“I don’t think—”

“Yeah, you aren’t thinking at all. Rich folks set up those foundations to give away their money ’cause they’re too good to get their hands dirty. They think if they throw enough money at it, the problem will go way.”

“Nigel doesn’t just throw—”

Ronald growled. “Rich white boys sleep with poor folks just ’cause they can. Decide they’re gonna have some fun with a pretty young plaything, then they get bored and go back to their diamonds and champagne, and all they leave behind is just a broken heart in the dirt.”

Derrick’s irritation had changed to confusion. “What are you talking about? Nigel’s not—”

His words were ignored. “That’s where the word comes from you know: slumming it. Like I said: Rich college boys come home for the summer just to play with some poor girl they meet. Lie to her, tell her what she wants to hear, promise her a future all bright and shiny. Then come fall, they go back to Harvard, and she don’t ever see them again.”

“Nigel went to Berkeley.” Derrick knew the fact wasn’t particularly relevant, but then none of this made any sense.

“I don’t want that for you. He’s gonna hurt you; he’s gonna leave you rotting in the gutter when he gets tired of your life.”

Derrick was getting seriously pissed off. His father was insulting both him and his lover now. “Ronald, stop it. I’m not some poor, ignorant, street kid anymore. I’ve got a Master’s degree myself, remember? You convinced me I could do it because you knew I was smart enough. So why are you treating me like an idiot? I know what I’m doing. And FYI, I doubt Nigel has ever even touched a diamond. He’s too distressed about the horrors of blood diamonds.”

“I know his type!” His father’s voice was rising, and people were starting to stare.

“How? How do you know his ‘type’? This isn’t some Hollywood B-flick where everyone is a cookie-cutter caricature.”

“‘Cause I’ve seen what he leaves behind!” Ronald shouted. The silence that ensued was nerve-racking after the loud outburst. Derrick was horribly embarrassed and ducked his head while his father had another sip.

Slowly, the noise level rose again as the other customers went back to their drinks. Derrick held up a hand to show the bartender he had it under control. He waited for his father to say more, but he didn’t. Finally Derrick asked, “This happened to you?”

“God, no. I’ve never been that naïve.” Ronald scowled. “Your mama. When she was barely legal, some rich dickhead white boy from Harvard got some kind of internship or something in Dallas and met her at a festival. She thought she was in love. He said he loved her, too, and would marry her soon as he finished his education. When summer ended, he went back to school, and she never heard from him again. He never returned her calls or replied to her letters. She worried about him until she talked to his roommate, who laughed at her and called her nasty things. He told her the asshole never liked her and didn’t want to see her anymore.

“Even then she didn’t believe it. She kept trying until she got a certified letter from his attorney threatening a harassment suit. It took her a long time to fix what he broke. She was such a mess when I met her. Years later she found him on the Internet. He had been a lawyer for some foundation until he became a congressman, and at the time he was running for senator. Fucking prick ended up marrying a woman he was already seeing when he met your mama. Everything he said was a lie, and he broke her heart.”

“Shit. That’s horrific. Fuck, who could do that to Celeste? She didn’t deserve that.”

Ronald finally looked at him. “No, she didn’t, and you don’t, either.”

“You’re right, I don’t, and it isn’t going to happen. I keep telling you, Nigel isn’t like that.”

“How do you really know? You suddenly learn to read minds, boy? Whole world thinks he’s too good for a low-class boy like you, and he knows it. You’re a fool.”

Derrick didn’t know whether to laugh or hit something. Part of him believed his father was right; who was he to deserve the perfection that was

Nigel? But he couldn't let himself think about that right now because this was ridiculous. He grabbed Ronald's arm. "Let's go home before I kick your ass."

Ronald wrested his arm free. "You aren't in love with this boy. You said you've never been in love before."

"I am now. Head over heels."

"I told you: You don't even know what love is." His words slurred a little. "I'm finally drunk enough to tell you what I've been trying to get the balls to say for a while now. It's gotta be him or us. You best figure it out."

"You don't want him to betray me so you're going to hurt me instead? You want me to choose between my family and the man I love? I'm not doing that. You're being ridiculous."

"Decide, or I'll have the locks changed while you're at work tomorrow. You'll find your shit outside." Ronald's face was hard.

"You're drunk."

"Maybe, but I'm finally done with this shit. Decide. Now."

Derrick felt the blood drain from his face. "You're serious." Ronald's expression didn't change. "You're fucking kidding me. Don't do this, don't ask this of me. You're being an ass."

Ronald shrugged. "Choose."

Fear warred with fury inside Derrick. "Fuck! Knock it off, Ronald. Who I love is none of your damn business, and you don't have control over it. Don't you fucking dare tell me I have to choose." Ronald's face remained stoic, and he kept drinking. How could this be happening? "God fucking dammit to hell and back. I can't make such a choice, and I won't. I love both of you!" Derrick was shaking. He tried to calm down and try a different approach. "Please, Ronald... uh, Dad. Be reasonable."

"It's too late for 'Dad' now. You do what you think you gotta do, but my mind is made up. I'm not gonna change it. I'm gonna catch a cab. You choose him, don't be bothering to come home tonight. I won't watch you destroy yourself." He turned and headed for the door.

Derrick started after him. “Ronald... Ronald!”

His father waved him off. “Decide, boy. You best be home by morning. You tell him you aren’t gonna see him anymore or say goodbye to me now. I’m finished with his games.” Ronald stumbled out the door.

Derrick staggered back to lean on his stool. Choose? How could he choose? He clutched his stomach and ran for the restroom. The ginger ale definitely couldn’t handle this kind of sick.

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CHAPTER 10

Now: Derrick

On their way to I-5, Tully's Coffee beckons, and Derrick swings into the drive-thru. Reading the names of the frou-frou coffee drinks on the posted menu makes his stomach churn. He needs the caffeine, but anything other than black coffee is too much.

"Want anything?" He reaches for his wallet.

"I've got it." Nigel hands him a twenty he's already pulled from his billfold. "Just a black Americano."

The box squawks, and Derrick orders two of the watered-down espresso drinks made for American sensibilities. He declines the voice's suggestion of a pastry and pulls forward. "Did you know Patrick Dempsey bought Tully's?" It's useless trivia, and he doesn't really care, but it's something to talk about besides death. He can't face any more silence.

"The hot guy from *Grey's Anatomy*?" It's obvious from his body language that Nigel has no more interest in the subject than Derrick, but he, too, needs a distraction.

"Yeah. He beat out Starbucks."

"It's always good to prevent a monopoly. Does Dorjee still work there?" Nigel names a friend from their soccer team.

The car reaches the window. Derrick pays and put the drinks in the car's cup holders. "Where, Starbucks? Yeah, I think so."

There is nothing more to say on that topic. Derrick steers the car back into traffic, and the silence descends again, a painful reminder of where they're headed. A hand touches his knee and he takes it; Nigel says so much without words. They hold hands and drive on.

Then: Nigel

Someone was hammering on the door. "I'm coming, I'm coming!" The pounding was so insistent, Nigel felt panic well up. Something was horribly wrong.

When the door opened, Derrick's fist was on the downswing, so he lost his balance and tumbled into Nigel's arms.

"Whoa, easy. What's wrong?" Nigel held his boyfriend up and closed the door. He then pulled Derrick toward the living room. "Sit down. I'll get you some—"

"No, don't leave me, not yet!" Derrick wouldn't let go. He was shaking and cold to the touch.

Nigel felt his throat closing. He was terrified. "Derrick, talk to me. What's wrong? What happened?" He reached for the blanket he had been curled up in reading and wrapped it around his shivering lover before dropping into the enormous armchair and holding Derrick's face to his chest. His boyfriend's breath was coming in gasps, and Nigel realized his lover was sobbing. Shit. He held Derrick tightly and put his legs around him, too. Although he was having trouble breathing through his own constricted chest, Nigel rocked his lover, kissing his head and rubbing his back until the crying eased a little. "Dare, please tell me what's wrong."

Derrick finally looked up and met his gaze. The agony Nigel saw there cut through his heart, and he swallowed the lump threatening to choke him. Derrick had to start three times before he could speak clearly enough to be understood. "Ronald... Ronald..." He hung his head shaking it. "That bastard is making me choose." He lifted his head, tears still streaming. "He's making me choose between you. He told me it's either my family or you."

Nigel felt like someone stabbed him. He only thought he couldn't breathe before. Now his lungs refused to work. "Ronald said you have to choose whether to date me or not? And if you do choose me, he won't let you live or hang out there anymore?"

Derrick shook his head, and his look stilled any hope Nigel had left. "I have to tell you I'm never going to see you again, or they're lost to me forever. Or until Ronald dies, if he hasn't poisoned the kids against me by then."

"Why is he doing this?" Nigel couldn't imagine having to choose between Derrick and his family. The very thought was horrifying.

“He says he’s trying to protect me for my own good. He says you’re just using me, and I’ll be horribly hurt when you decide to move on.”

Nigel gasped in shock. “I would never—”

“I know you wouldn’t.” Nigel wondered if that were true, if Derrick really knew that. “I wish he were dead.” Derrick blurted out the words, but he didn’t take them back.

It killed Nigel to see Derrick going through this. “No you don’t. You’re just angry and hurt. He’ll come around.”

“No he won’t, and you know it.” Unfortunately, Nigel agreed that Ronald was unlikely to change his mind. “What am I going to do, Nigh? I can’t lose you. But I can’t lose them, either.”

Nigel couldn’t bear the despair he saw on his lover’s face. He would do anything to take it away. “Derrick, I love you, you know that, right?” His boyfriend nodded. “I will always love you. It’s torture to tell you this, but you need me to say it.” He took a deep breath. “You never had a family until the Bryants. You told me you didn’t think anyone had ever loved you until they came into your life. All you ever wanted was a family. They’ve been that for you. You’ve had them for well over a decade, something like fourteen years, right?” Derrick nodded, uncertain. “You’ve known me less than one. You can’t give up your family. No one should ever have to. Family is everything.” The words were like shards of glass coming out of his mouth.

Derrick pulled back, his face reflecting an amalgam of concern, fear, and confusion. “Are you saying you don’t want me anymore?”

Nigel choked and pulled Derrick close again. He couldn’t bear that anguish. “No, oh God no, not at all.” He had to swallow several times before he could continue. “I love you. I ache just thinking about losing you.” He closed his eyes. This was so hard. “It’s just that you have what most sexual minorities dream of.” Sexual minorities? He really was a twit. He brushed that off. It wasn’t important now. “You have a family who loves you and accepts you for who you are. They don’t simply tolerate your sexual orientation—” *twit, twit, twit* “—they honor it.” He was crying now, too.

“You have said over and over that Ronald rescued you, made you who you are. I know you’re the one who did that, but I agree that Ronald made the way available to you. He showed you what you were capable of.” Nigel gathered the strength to remove the despair on his face and keep only his adoration there. He pushed Derrick back so he could look at him again. He brushed the hair out of Derrick’s eyes. “He’s the person you most admire. He’s everything to you. I can’t be the one to make you give that up. I can’t ask that of you.”

Derrick grabbed the front of Nigel’s T-shirt. “You’re not asking it of me; he is. Fucking asshole!”

Tightly grasping Derrick’s hands in his, Nigel looked into those beautiful but tormented eyes. “True, but I’m not going to be like him and demand you choose me. You can’t do that. I’m not worth you giving up your family.” He kissed Derrick’s forehead.

“If anyone is, it’s you. I can’t fucking believe this. I can’t make this kind of decision! This is fucking evil.”

Nigel had to ease the pain he was witnessing. “You don’t have to decide. It’s a no-brainer. Your family needs you right now. I’m going to miss you so fucking much. You are the most amazing person I’ve ever known, the only one I’ve ever truly loved, the only one I *will* ever love. I have always and will always love you. Remember that.”

“Me, too. I don’t deserve you.” Derrick was crying again.

The statement was appalling. That Derrick believed it was even worse. “Dare, you deserve the best that’s out there. I want that to be me, but you deserve so much more, including a family. Your father is right about that.”

Derrick wiped the tears from his face with his jacket. “My father isn’t right about anything. I hate that you’re right about my family needing me. Will you make love to me one last time?”

Nigel answered by standing, still holding his precious Derrick. His lover wrapped his arms and legs around him. Nigel would make this the best sex he could and leave Derrick with something to remember him by. He carried his lover to the bedroom, and they fell into the pile of blankets together. They kissed and their hands roamed, trying to touch everywhere at once.

Nigel pulled back long enough to say, “You... I won’t forget...” The sentence dangled in the air, unfinished. They both knew that what they had would be gone come morning. Nigel fought the tears that threatened.

“Don’t cry, Nigh. Not yet. Make love to me. I want you.”

The words gave Nigel the fortitude he needed. This was their last night together and he was damn well going to spend every minute enjoying the beautiful man he loved. They hurriedly undressed. Nigel took a moment to drink in the sight of his lover. Derrick was always gorgeous but naked, he took Nigel’s breath away.

“I need you inside me this time, Dare. I need you to fill the emptiness I’m feeling.”

Derrick nodded and they both fell onto the bed. Their sex was frenzied. They rolled back and forth, each trying to get closer to the other, wanting to touch everything at once. The kissing was like fire on a fuse, everything rushing toward a great explosion. When Derrick reached for the lube, Nigel’s heart skipped a beat, and as soon as the bottle was in his lover’s hand, he quickly pulled Derrick back to him.

“Dare, hurry, I want you inside me. Now.”

The prep was rushed, and when Derrick entered him, the pain was crushing. But Nigel didn’t care. It matched the pain in his heart. Derrick paused to let Nigel adjust. He leaned forward and held Nigel like his very existence depended on it.

“You are so fucking hot. I want to stay right in this moment forever.”

“Hell, no—if you don’t move right now, I’m going to explode in the wrong way. Move. Move!”

Derrick smiled a bit then moved.

As Derrick thrust, Nigel pushed back. Their intercourse was ruthless and demanding. He would hurt badly tomorrow, but he welcomed it. It would be his last gift to Derrick, the memory of incredible lovemaking. They both screamed as they came. Nigel let the pain in his heart erupt, hidden in the cry of pleasure.

When the spasms ended, Derrick fell to cover Nigel, his weight a comforting presence. They were both breathing heavily.

You own my heart. Nigel felt like he was sinking. *How can I let you go?* They kissed again, gently this time, ending the powerful experience with tenderness and a different kind of intimacy.

Finally, Derrick slid off and turned Nigel's head to cup his cheek, rubbing his thumb along Nigel's temple. Nigel twisted to kiss his lover's palm.

"I don't know if I'm going to survive this." Derrick sounded like he was choking. "The pain of losing you is already eating me alive."

Nigel rolled to his side and pulled his lover into his arms. He was going to be strong for Derrick. Anything for Derrick. "You're tough. You've been through so much and not only survived, but came out on top. You can do anything. You can do this." *No, don't do this.* "I need you to be okay. I'll make it through if I know that you will, too." *I hope.* "Tell me you're going to be all right."

Tears streaked down Derrick's cheeks as he shook his head. Even frowning he was beautiful. "I don't know how but I will. I know that life is about ups and downs, but losing you... The loneliness is going to devour me."

"No, you are stronger than that. I feel the same way, but I believe in you."

Derrick wiped his face with one hand. "I'll live. I can promise you I won't hurt myself or anything drastic like that. We're not playing out some sick Romeo and Julius fantasy. It's just going to take me a very long time, if ever, to heal from losing you. I need to know that you're going to be okay, too."

Neither of them made jokes about cheese this time; Nigel knew it was all too real for both of them, their hearts too raw. "I'll make it. I'll eventually be okay. I'll just miss you forever." He pressed his forehead against Derrick's, and they lay there for a few minutes. Finally Nigel moved and grabbed the box of baby wipes from the nightstand, using the cloths to wipe away the traces of their lovemaking.

Then they lay together under the covers, Derrick's back snug against him, Nigel's arms around his lover, his nose buried in Derrick's hair. Lover. Not for much longer. Anguish cut his heart. He tried to ignore it. They fell asleep that way, entwined, sadness weighing them down.

During the night, Nigel awoke to caresses and kisses. This time it was his turn to fill his lover, both of them on their sides with Derrick's leg over his hip. When Nigel came, he made sure to appreciate the intense pleasure. He didn't clean them off right away, instead smearing the spunk over their chests, reveling in the intimacy.

"I'll love you forever, Nigh."

"I'll love you always, Dare." Nigel curled in Derrick's arms, bodies again pressed tightly together.

Sleep took a while coming this time, and when it did, Nigel's dreams were filled with visions of Derrick dying or killing him. But he dreaded the dawn when his lover would head for home, leaving a broken and bleeding heart behind. He wanted to scream at Derrick, tell him not to go, tell him that they were meant to be together until the end of time. But he didn't. Instead, when morning came, he put all his love into their final kiss. He clung to Derrick, holding him one last time, and then he let go and let the only man he would ever love walk out his door.

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CHAPTER 11

Now: Derrick

“I don’t know if I can do this.” Their exit is approaching, and Derrick signals for the turn off the freeway. “There will be so many more people than have been at the house.”

“They’re just people, Dare. Everyone knows you’ll be there. Are you afraid of something specific?”

“No. Yes. Sort of. I don’t know. I don’t know if I belong there. I mean, I know Ronald’s not really there, but this is his memorial service. He was so angry with me. I can’t help but think this is disrespectful.”

Nigel brushes his fingers against Derrick’s cheek. “Funerals are for the living, not for the dead. You need to say goodbye. Your sister and brother want you there.”

Derrick is swallowing to stop his tears before they gush.

“He loved you, Derrick, you know he did. All he wanted was for you to be happy. If he knew how good we are together, if he knew how much I love and cherish you, I know he would have supported you in this. He was just a stubborn man who couldn’t face the possibility he was wrong.” Nigel brushes the hair off of Derrick’s face and strokes his head. “This is for you, not for him. I’ll be right beside you the whole time.”

Tears still threaten to escape, but Derrick holds them at bay. “What if I fall?”

“Then I’ll pick you up and carry you. You’re not in this alone, Dare. I’m there with you. I will always be there.”

Then: Nigel

Nigel sat in front of the fireplace staring at the immaculate interior. That had been Derrick’s doing. He had come in and cleaned and straightened Nigel’s fireplace, his kitchen, his home, his life. Nigel had been a mess before Derrick. He hadn’t realized it, hadn’t understood how lonely and

boring his life was until a nutty man with beautiful eyes and a goofy grin strode in and shook it all up. He still couldn't believe that what Ronald had said in a drunken stupor, the man was still holding everyone to a month later. Nigel had come to accept a couple of weeks ago that Derrick's father wasn't ever going to change his mind, and it was killing Nigel, slowly but very surely.

He felt empty now. He missed the smirk on Derrick's face when he pulled one over on Nigel. He missed the deep soulful eyes when his boyfriend told him he loved him. He missed his lover's warmth when they snuggled on pillows in front of the fireplace. He missed the weight of Derrick's hard body as he filled Nigel and made him scream. Most of all, he missed having him to call when he just needed someone to talk to, someone who knew him inside and out, someone who he loved unconditionally who loved him back. Someone he would give his life to save if it came to it. Someone who he was sure felt all the same things for him. He missed when Derrick needed him and he could be there to support the incredible man he loved. He loved being able to do things for Derrick, making sure his true love was happy, and his life full of joy. Nigel would find a way to stop the tides if that's what Derrick needed.

He stopped mid-thought. He was willing to do anything for Derrick, anything. He knew his lover would do anything for him, too. If he had left Derrick because his family forced him, would Derrick have just accepted it? No. Derrick would have fought Nigel's family and their injustice—fought for Nigel—until his dying breath. Derrick was the love of his life, and yet Nigel had just let him go. He was an idiot. Derrick was his, and he was Derrick's.

Nigel jumped up and grabbed his jacket, wallet, keys, and a leash. "Come on, Tibbs. Let's go get our man." He hooked the lead onto the dog's collar. "And no, you can't drive."

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CHAPTER 12

Now: Nigel

“What is that?” Nigel stares up at the side of the church ablaze with color as Derrick pulls into a parking spot.

“I would think you would know what that was by now.”

Nigel sticks his head over the dashboard to see the other end of the rainbow flag hanging from the eaves of the building. “That thing has to be the size of our condo.”

Derrick leans forward over the steering wheel to see better. “I think you’re exaggerating.”

“That’s got to be a three or four story wall. The flag covers two-thirds of it. Is this a gay church or something?”

“Hardly.” Derrick smiles. “It’s my family’s church. They put that up when they voted as a congregation to be a Welcoming Church a year and a half ago. That means that they specifically welcome gay and lesbian families to be part of the congregation. And it’s a two and a half story wall on this side. The flag is something like sixteen by twenty-two.”

“That’s still enormous.” Nigel sits back and looks at Derrick. “This is your family’s church.” His lover nods. “So it really and truly wasn’t about me being a man—a gay man?”

Derrick frowns. “You doubted that?”

Nigel is embarrassed. “It’s hard not to. I guess I just don’t want to accept that it all was a class thing. I don’t want to believe the US is like that. That’s for countries with caste systems like India, or societies in history like Ancient Rome. I mean, there are the snobby uber-rich who have old money, but that’s not the rest of us.”

His lover shakes his head. “Believe it. It’s a much stronger line than you folks with money know.” That hurts Nigel, and he isn’t completely successful in suppressing his reaction.

“Oh, Nigh. I’m sorry. You know I don’t think you’re different. I didn’t mean to make a class judgment. I just was repeating the idea people have,

and it came out wrong. My only residual feelings of that sort are my insecurities about not being good enough for you.”

Nigel pulls his boyfriend into his arms. He kisses and nibbles along Derrick’s cheek and then whispers in his ear, “Stop. Just stop.” He reaches down and lightly brushes his fingers over the zipper in his lover’s pants. “*He* knows how much I love you.” Said body part wriggles to concur. “For once, it’s right to listen to your little head.” That gets a laugh, and something inside Nigel loosens somewhat, allowing him to breathe a little easier. All he cares about right now is helping Derrick through this. Everything else can wait.

Then: Derrick

Dinner was awful. Not just the food, although it was bad, too—his sister was a terrible cook and it had been her turn—but the atmosphere. Derrick didn’t feel like talking. He didn’t feel like smiling. He didn’t even feel like eating. He just pushed the food around on his plate. Nineteen days, eleven hours, and—he looked at his watch—sixteen minutes since he’d said goodbye to the best thing that had ever happened to him.

“Got somewhere you got to go?” Ronald was clearly annoyed.

Derrick remembered how he used to have somewhere to be. He just shook his head. Marisol asked him to pass the green beans, and he did so without looking at her. Benjamin started kicking a table leg, making the plates vibrate.

“Benji, knock it off.” His sister slammed her hand down on the table next to Benji’s plate.

“Daaaad, Marisol is bossing me around!”

“Am not, you were being—”

“Stop it, you hear me?” Their father waited until they were quiet. “Marisol, you’re seventeen years old. Stop acting like you’re five. Benjamin, stop kicking the table.” He sighed. “Everyone needs to say something nice for a change. You all tell me something good about today.” Derrick curled his lip. Nothing good had happened since he’d walked out

on Nigel. Even his birthday a few days ago had been agonizing. He was sure he would never have a happy day again.

“I got a gold star for my story about the robot that beat the monster and then went to the moon and then had grilled cheese and chocolate cake and then never went to bed.” Benji giggled and showed the food in his mouth.

“Dad!”

“That sounds like a good story, Benjamin. I’d love you to read it to me tonight. Chew with your mouth closed. Marisol?”

Marisol slouched in her chair. “This is stupid.” Derrick agreed but didn’t bother to say anything. He just didn’t care enough.

“There isn’t anything stupid about looking at the good side of things. Sit up.”

She rolled her eyes but straightened. “Umm... Oh, yeah, according to Laticia, Marcus told Luanda that Jorge said he likes me! I told Laticia to tell Luanda to tell Marcus that I like Jorge, too, so he’ll ask me to prom.” A month ago, Derrick would have laughed and teased her about such a convoluted way of asking someone out.

Ronald grimaced but smiled. “That’s real nice, Marisol. Who is this Jorge?”

“Oh my God, Dad, you never like anyone I’m interested in!” *Or that I am*, thought Derrick.

“I didn’t say that. I just want to learn something about him. I like to know who is looking at my little girl.”

Marisol looked only somewhat mollified. “Um, well, he’s really musical. He’s on the hip-hop team and in choir, and he’s got his own band.”

Her father nodded, a forced smile on his face. “Uh huh. And what is he learning in school?” Derrick resisted the urge to snort in derision.

“Geez, Dad. We’re not in college. He’s learning what everyone else is: math, English, social studies. You know.” She rolled her eyes again, then focused on Derrick. “It’s Derrick’s turn. Why don’t you bug him?” Marisol smirked.

“That’s a good idea. Derrick? What’s a good thing that happened today?”

Derrick mumbled, “My day sucked.”

“I’m sure there was something posi—”

“There wasn’t.” Derrick glared at his meatloaf.

His father sighed and put down his fork. “Son, you need to stop your moping. Mary Harper at the church told me about this speed dating thing—”

“Are you for real?” Derrick looked at his father this time.

“They got one for gays. I got all the info, and I wrote it down for you. Mary said her cousin went, and he found himself a good man. It would be good for you to go. Find someone. Get out there again at least.”

Derrick put down his fork carefully and turned to face his father. “Ronald, I don’t want to ‘find someone’. There isn’t anyone out there for me. There is only one man I want, and you forced me to throw him away.” Derrick felt like he was going to vomit. Why did he give up the love of his life? How could he?

“Now, Son, I know you’re hurting, but the best way to get over a crush is to move on.”

“Are you kidding me?!” Derrick picked up his silverware again and threw it onto the plate, making a loud clatter. “He’s not a ‘crush’ I need to ‘get over’. He’s the man of my dreams, and I can’t believe I let you talk me into leaving him.”

Ronald was starting to get riled. “I didn’t make you do nothing.”

“You told me if I didn’t leave him, you would never talk to me again, nor let me near my sister and brother. You made me choose between you!”

“You know as well as I do: he isn’t the one for you. He was only us—”

“He was what? Using me?” Derrick stood and threw his napkin on top of his fork and knife. “For what? To treat with respect and love? To hold me in the middle of the night when my PTSD overwhelms me, and I’m a puddle of fear? To make love to me—”

“Gross!” Marisol looked horrified.

“What does ‘make love’ mean?” Benjamin asked at the same time.

Ronald shook his head. “You don’t got to be such a drama queen.”

Distantly Derrick heard the doorbell ring, but he was too upset to pay any attention. “Drama queen? You think this is me being a drama queen?” Derrick realized he was yelling.

“Yeah, you’re confusing puppy love with something real.”

Derrick was incredulous. “Puppy love? *Puppy love*?” He heard his voice getting even louder. “Are you kidding me? I’m twenty-nine years old! I know what real love is.”

The doorbell sounded again. “I’ll get it!” Benji jumped up and headed for the door.

“Benjamin! You can’t answer the door, especially at night.” Marisol stood. “Don’t mind me, I’m just the slave around here.” She hurried after her brother.

Now his father stood. “You don’t got any idea what real love is. I do.”

“Don’t you dare bring Celeste into this. I only moved home to help you with the kids. Don’t you even try to use my mother to manipulate me.” Ronald started to speak, but Derrick cut him off. “No, I don’t want to hear it. I made a mistake when I chose you over him. He is my Celeste, my one true love. You have no right to tell me who to give my heart to. You’re as bad as the homophobes out there. I don’t care what you say, I’m going to try to get him back whether you approve or not. I just hope it’s not too late. I told him this once, and I’m going to tell him again: I love him with everything that I am.”

“Dare?”

Derrick froze. He knew that voice. He loved that voice. He slowly turned. “Nigel?”

“Yeah.” Nigel was standing there, an unsure smile frantically trying to overcome the sorrow on his face.

“What are you doing here?” Derrick tried to fight the tears that welled.

He felt like he couldn't breathe. He fought the hope that bubbled within him.

"I told you that family was more important than anything and has to come first. You hold fast to them and don't let go." Derrick didn't like the sound of that. What was Nigel doing here? "Well, the thing is, you and I? We are family. You're my family, and I'm not letting you go without a fight." His chest heaved. "Please come home."

Home. He let the tears fall. Didn't some Roman philosopher once say, "Home is where the heart is"? Yeah, he was going home, all right. "Nigh!" He sprinted toward his one true love and jumped into his outstretched arms. Derrick wrapped himself around Nigel and squeezed him as though he would disappear if Derrick let go. He buried his face against Nigel's neck.

"I'm here, Derrick, I've got you." Nigel's voice was thick with emotion. He hugged Derrick back just as tightly, kissing his neck, his warm breath ruffling Derrick's hair.

"Please take me back. I'm so stupid; I made the wrong choice. I never wanted to hurt you—I love you." Behind him, he heard his father yelling, but Derrick ignored him. He didn't care what Ronald had to say.

Nigel leaned back so their eyes could meet. "You are never stupid. You just love too much. It was a horrible decision you were forced to make. I, too, love you with everything I am. Please don't leave me again."

Derrick shook his head. "Never again." He leaned in and their mouths met in a long overdue kiss.

"Out of my house, both of you! I never want to see either of you again!" Ronald's voice cut through their moment. Nigel finally set Derrick back on his feet. Derrick loved that Nigel could hold him up like that and hated being put down.

Sorrow still filled Derrick's heart. "Ronald, I love you, but I don't know who you are anymore. Merry, Benji, I love you guys, and I'm not leaving you. You can call me anytime, and I'll be there. I will try to see you—"

"Like hell you will!" Their father roared. "GET OUT!"

“Fine. Goodbye Ronald.” He turned back to Nigel. “Let’s go get my stuff and get out of here.” He grabbed Nigel’s hand and pulled him toward the stairs. “Then we’re going home.”

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CHAPTER 13

Now: Nigel

They get out of the car and head into the building. Inside the door, Nigel pauses and has to take a deep breath.

“Nigh? You don’t need to worry. You saw that the congregation is okay with us. And at the house, no one knew about the argument and my leaving.”

That is true, but churches never make him comfortable. Growing up, religion didn’t exist. It just wasn’t part of their lives. His exposure has almost exclusively been homophobic rants in the media. He has never needed religion, and it makes him uncomfortable. But he’s agreed to come for the memorial service to support his lover. Now, though, what Derrick said in the car has come flooding back. Nigel swallows as he looks around and realizes he is so far out of his element he isn’t even in the same country.

The people milling around the community room are primarily working class. He can tell from the style of dress, the mannerisms, the word usage and grammar. These are the people who work their asses off to make enough money to survive until the next paycheck, the ones whose occupations aren’t valued as highly as those that pay more, despite how vital the jobs are to the economy and community. He feels what Ronald would call “white guilt,” and he now understands what Derrick’s father must have meant by that. It really isn’t any better to know that Ronald didn’t hate him for his skin color or being gay. He feels sick.

Nigel works almost exclusively with very poor kids. He’s used to being judged—they’re teenagers after all—but now he’s aware that he stands out here, from the cut and fabric of his clothing to his expensive haircut. While he doesn’t spend a large amount of money on these things—he certainly doesn’t buy Armani—he does pay more than these people can afford, and he is embarrassed by his ostentation. He wonders if there is time to run to the Fred Meyer around the corner and buy something that wouldn’t stand out so much.

Before he can make up his mind, Derrick is pulling him through the crowd toward a couple of tables lining the back wall. An array of cookies, cakes, and pies are flanked by huge coffee and hot water urns. Despite the enormous Americanos they have both already consumed, Derrick is pulling a tap and filling a mug with dark liquid. The realization hits Nigel that, on the way here, they spent enough money caffeinating themselves to fund the coffee in these tanks, with cash left over for several more urns' worth. He feels guilty and is glad he left the remainder of his drink in its logoed paper sheath in the car.

"Nigh, are you okay? Is something wrong? You're staring off into space."

"Nothing's wrong." He smiles. "I'm fine."

"Knock it off. I can't deal with you sparing me right now. I need you to be one hundred percent here with me, and that means being honest."

Sheepish, Nigel kisses Derrick's forehead. "I'm sorry. My issues are stupid and inappropriate."

"Tell me."

"It's just that I'm suddenly aware of how much I must stick out. I feel like a jerk shouting 'I have money, neener, neener, neener.'"

Derrick genuinely laughs. "Is that insecurity I hear coming out of the never-ruffled mouth of Nigel Rutherford?"

"I'm plenty insecure, but I try not to let it run my life. Usually I do okay. Anyway, it's all trivial compared to my fear of losing you. I think that's where this is coming from. Why didn't you tell me I was dressing inappropriately?"

Shaking his head, Derrick says, "There is so much wrong with that statement, I don't even know where to begin. But let's start with the weirdest. I gave up my family for you. How can you think I'd leave you?"

They move away from the table so others can fill their cups. Nigel tries to find the right words. "You second guess yourself all the time. You're always—Shit. This isn't important right now; we're burying your father. This isn't the time or place. I'm sorry I—"

“Finish what you were going to say. Everything about us is important. Now is fine.” Derrick’s look is penetrating, but Nigel isn’t sure what the emotion is.

Nigel moves them to a corner behind a partition covered in photos and mementos of Ronald. “Well, ever since you chose me over Ronald, you’ve talked about how you don’t know if you made the right decision. It’s been worse the past few days, and that makes sense. But I’ve been worried all along that one day you’ll convince yourself you made the wrong choice again and leave me for good to return to your dad. I—” He chokes up for a moment and is grateful Derrick gives him a few moments to get himself back under control.

Nigel begins again. “I’ve been uneasy the past few days, knowing this is a very emotional time for you; you’re processing a lot, and nothing is clear anymore. I’ll give you anything you need to get through this, and if you need me to step back for a while so that you can reunite with your family and work through this, I will. But it scares me that if I do let you go, it might become permanent now that you have your family back.”

Nigel is opening and closing his hands in his distress, but he forces himself to maintain eye contact. It’s hard when his soul is reflected back at him. “When you told me in the car about the class/money thing, I got a horrible feeling. Walking in that door, I realized that I’m out of place here. I’m terrified that you’re going to realize that these are the people you want to be around, and that I just don’t fit into your life anymore. I can’t—”

He swallows repeatedly but he can’t stop tears from welling up in his eyes. He should be embarrassed—guys don’t cry—but right now he doesn’t care. “I can’t lose you. I love you so much. You’re my everything.” The teardrops fall, and he doesn’t wipe them away; his fingernails digging into his palms are what is keeping him from disintegrating. He didn’t realize how emotional he is. His guilt intertwines with his fears; putting this on Derrick now is not right.

Derrick’s eyes are filled, too. Interestingly, Nigel never questions his lover’s virility when he sees him crying. “Nigh, you are what I need to get through this. You’re what I need period. I am so sorry that it never occurred

to me how my neuroses affect you. I questioned my decision, but I never questioned us. It was always about what I could have done to have both, and whether I deserved you, whether I was what you wanted and needed. I can't lose you, either, and I won't. I can't believe you ever doubted that, and I am so sorry I let that happen. You are my everything, too, just the way you are. I'm going to reconnect with my family. We've been split apart too long. You were the one who pointed out that you and I are family, too. I will bring all of us back together, including you. Don't you dare step back."

And then they are hugging and crying and holding so tightly to one another Nigel can feel Derrick's heart beating against his chest. Derrick kisses his throat, and Nigel rubs their cheeks together. They stand there for several minutes before his lover pulls back.

Still holding Nigel, Derrick looks at him and says, "I love you, Nigh, but you're an idiot sometimes. Moving on to the second thing wrong with your sentence: Do you realize that you are the one making class judgments now? No one here cares what you're wearing, or who you are, or how much money you have. There's a guy over there somewhere named Ted. You'll probably notice him because he's wearing ratty jeans and a monster truck T-shirt to the funeral. He owns several car lots and is rolling in money. He has to wear a suit all the time, and he hates it. He says that he shows respect by being himself, by not putting up some fake image someone tells him to.

"The money thing? That was my dad's issue, and it came from a specific incident. These are people. You're a person. They will judge you on how you treat others, nothing more, nothing less." He moves forward to rub against Nigel again. "I think you look amazing, and that's why I didn't suggest you wear something else, never mind the fact that it's your business what you wear and no one else's. When we get home, I'll show you how much. But right now, I have to go mingle or people really will start to talk. Thank God they'll think our crying is just grief." Nigel laughs at that.

Derrick kisses him one more time then pulls away. Nigel follows him a few feet before they are accosted by a large woman wearing the biggest hat Nigel has ever seen. The bright yellow contrasts beautifully with her dark skin. She leans in to kiss his boyfriend on the cheek, and he can't believe she doesn't topple over from the weight of the thing.

“Derrick, darling, I was so sorry to hear about your father. He was such a good man. You poor, poor thing.” She rubs the side of Derrick’s head with her thumb, then rests her hand on his shoulder. “How are you holding up?” Her accent is Southern, maybe Georgia. Who moves from sunny Georgia to overcast Seattle? Nigel loves the weather, but he’s in the minority.

“I’m doing okay, Millie. It’s hard but we’re getting through it.”

“He was so proud of you, my boy. He talked about you all the time; he constantly bragged about your success with those poor children. ‘Millie,’ he’d say, ‘that boy of mine has the best success rate on the West Coast.’ He’d go on and on.”

Derrick looks uncomfortable. “He was exaggerating a tad.”

“Oh go on, you. Too modest. Just like your father.” She turns to Nigel and her face lights up. “Oh, you must be Nigel! I’ve heard so much about you. Benjamin’s always talking about his Uncle Nigel.” She leans in and kisses him on the cheek. She’s wearing a lot of perfume, and he fights off the urge to sneeze. He is confused and exchanges a glance with Derrick, who appears to be as baffled as he is. Was she confusing Nigel with someone else? “Ronald told me all about that great program you started with the dogs.” So, not someone else.

His smile is half grimace as he says the first trite words that come to mind. “All good, I hope?”

The woman’s eyes get big. “Oh yes! Of course! He thought it was the greatest thing since sliced bread.” They never buy sliced bread preferring Artisan loaves or Whole Grain Goodness from Great Harvest Bakery, but he gets the point. It’s okay that they buy a few hoity-toity things—Derrick says Nigel’s okay just as he is, right? And he loves hearty handcrafted bread. He knows he’s going to have to keep reminding himself that he’s being too insecure. He brings his attention back to the conversation. “The stories he told about what those dogs can do. That dancing dog thing? That had my nephew in stitches. What a brilliant idea, helping kids and animals at the same time. I am so impressed.”

She turns back to Derrick. “He said that’s how you two met? You got the kids to the program, and Nigel got them training the dogs? That’s so

romantic. What did he call you again? Oh yeah. He said you were like peanut butter and chocolate: ‘good apart, great together: perfect.’”

The world shifts beneath Nigel’s feet. He wonders if he just crossed over into an alternate universe. He can’t say anything because all he can think of is, “Two great tastes that taste great together,” and he figures that wouldn’t be appropriate. Fortunately, Millie continues without him. “My, Ronald went on and on about how many kids y’all saved. He was so proud.” She looks like she’s proud, too. “Oh listen to me go on. This room is full of other people who want to talk to you.” She kisses them both again then moves off.

They stare at one another for a moment, eyes wide with shock. “Did she say—” Derrick is interrupted by an elderly gentleman and a college-aged young woman who is introduced as his granddaughter. Nigel and Derrick listen to a repeat of Millie’s story except in different words and with other participants.

“I was totally hoping I’d get to see you both today. Mr. Bryant showed me a picture of you two together and I about died. You two are, like, the cutest couple, ever!” The girl is practically bouncing. Apparently the Valley never left Seattle.

After the pair move on, Nigel looks at Derrick to see his mouth gaping, his eyes narrowed, and his brow furrowed. He is pretty sure the expression mirrors his own. They blink at each other. Derrick looks like he’s about to say something, but his mouth opens and closes as though he’s about to say something and deciding it’s not right. Nigel chews on his cheek.

More people descend on them, expressing their condolences, regaling the men with stories of Ronald’s great deeds, and telling them how proud Ronald was of their work. It sounds almost like all Ronald did was brag about Derrick and Nigel. The two are still reeling when everyone is called into the chapel for the service.

Then: Derrick

Nigel unlocked the door and swung it open. Derrick started to walk through, but his lover’s gentle touch stopped him. He waited nervously for

the words telling him the timeframe before he had to find his own place, the rules for living there, maybe that Nigel had changed his mind and wanted Derrick to go back home.

“I know this was forced upon us since you’ve been kicked out of your home, but I’ve been meaning to bring this up for a while. It’s time, I think. Dare, will you move in with me?”

Derrick laughed in relief. “God you’re slow. I wanted you to ask ages ago. I couldn’t very well invite you to live with me in my rooming house, or later when I was living at my father’s. I thought it would be a bit presumptuous to suggest it when I didn’t have a place of my own.”

“Is that a yes, then?”

Nigel grunted as Derrick’s elbow hit his ribcage. “Duh. Yes. Please. God yes, already, take me home, I’m yours. Does that answer your question?”

Nigel’s response was unexpected. He scooped Derrick up in his arms and carried him across the threshold.

“Careful or you’ll rip my veil. My daughter will be expecting to use it one day.”

“Veils are sexist and out of style. The wedding is off.” Nigel kicked the door closed behind them.

Derrick found something close to a giggle threatening to emerge and was mortified. He forced it down. “I think you have the procedure backwards. You’re supposed to marry me, and then carry me through the door. Also, Celeste wore a veil, and she was always incredible. But as long as you agree to have your way with me tonight, we’re good.”

“Been there, done that.” Derrick found himself in the bedroom, still in his lover’s arms. Nigel deposited him on the bed. “I need to bring your stuff in.” He turned to go.

“I can help with that. I’m short, not weak.”

“No kidding. But stay there where you belong: in my bed.” The twinkle in his lover’s eye assured Derrick that Nigel was teasing. Two could play at that game, or three or four, depending on the fantasy.

“Well then, big man, hurry it up. My biological clock is ticking.”

Nigel fell against the door jamb, laughing.

“I’m waiting.” Derrick managed to keep his emotions off his face as he tried for a bored expression.

“Mustn’t keep the diva waiting. The luggage can wait.” The bed groaned as Nigel launched himself across the floor and landed atop Derrick with a thud.

“Oof!”

“Change your mind? Am I’m too much man for you?”

“Let me see.” Derrick rolled him onto his back and shoved his hands down Nigel’s pants. He groped around, feeling his lover swelling to his touch. He shook his head. “I think I can handle it. Am I too much for you?”

“Never.” Nigel flipped Derrick back over and began stripping off their clothes. “Ready for the time of your life?”

Derrick smirked. “Bring it on.” Nigel did; he so very much did.

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CHAPTER 14

Now: Derrick

In front of the pulpit, a table stands draped with thick green velvet and a hand embroidered white on white cotton tapestry. The cloth is simple and understated, the needlework more about texture than visual effect. Atop sits an unassuming wooden urn. Derrick has learned from several parishioners that it was made by a good friend of his father's, a church member who is a wood artisan. The vessel is made from reclaimed lumber native to the dense forests of Washington state. Many differently hued woods were layered together creating a slight gradient of color, then the subsequent block of wood lathe-turned into a globe and hollowed out. The result is both simple and rich, a basic shape made up of an intricate yet effortless variety. Both it and the tapestry fit the complex man that was Ronald.

Another churchgoer who is a professional photographer has taken pictures of the display, which she will send to each member of the family. The urn itself will be interred in a vault in a nearby mausoleum. Derrick doesn't really care about any of it. The gifts are a kindness, but Ronald is gone. His father would have hated for such elaborate work to be wasted on something that would only be seen for a few hours. But as Nigel said, this was for the ones left behind, not the deceased. This part, the simple altar and its presentation, was all done by the church community who loved him. This was for them, and for his siblings, who would get the tapestry.

He remembers Reverend Angelica's sermon at Celeste's service as being just the right length and tone. He is relieved that she again delivers a very short sermon on love, life after death, and Ronald's impact on the community. She then invites people to share their memories of his father. Most of what is said mirrors what Nigel and Derrick have been hearing all afternoon. Ronald bragged about Benjamin and Marisol, too, and the stories about the family together throughout the years are both heartwarming and painful.

Derrick is even more confused than ever, and he's comforted by Nigel's arm around his shoulders. He feels his boyfriend's reassuring warmth

against his thigh, hip, and side, and he grasps Nigel's other hand, holding on to this anchor in his emotional storm. As the words wash over him, he is reminded of his boyfriend's admission earlier. That Nigel might be insecure about their relationship has never occurred to him. He berates himself for taking his lover for granted and vows to spend more time reassuring Nigel of his love and desire.

But he is also secretly relieved. He realizes it's a little twisted to think so, but knowing Nigel is actually worried about losing him to the point of insecurity almost eradicates his own fear of losing Nigel. All he needed to know was that Nigel truly needs him as badly as he needs Nigel, and instantly he felt more secure.

The testimonials are winding down, and finally, the minister leads them all in prayer. The congregation files out, and just he, his lover, his siblings, his aunt, and her husband Carlo remain. He had never met the man before this week—it's his aunt's fourth try at marriage—but he's been gentle and kind so far, and if Carlo has a problem with homosexuality, it hasn't shown.

Edwina says a prayer, and Derrick pretends to follow along. Nigel squeezes his hand, and he returns the gesture. When they are finished, his aunt places a rose on the table in front of the urn. Marisol and Benjamin move up to the makeshift altar. His brother acts bored but Marisol is crying. Derrick stands and hugs them both then steps back. He isn't yet ready. His sister places her rose next to the other, and Benjamin follows suit.

Carlo leads the children away, but his aunt stops and turns to Derrick. "What all those people said is true. Ronald was very proud of you. He blamed himself for you leaving. He just couldn't face you. He was terribly afraid you would reject him, and he would lose you forever." She sighs. "By not dealing with it, he could say it was just a fight that would be resolved soon, and he wouldn't have to face the possibility that you wouldn't forgive him." She looks at her feet for a moment and then back at Derrick. "I am the only one who blamed you. The only one. And I am sorry." She nods once, then moves to catch up with the others.

Derrick is in shock. He wonders if maybe he has gone crazy and is in a padded room somewhere hallucinating all of this. The tenderest of kisses

brushes his nape and gentle arms encircle his waist. His eyes close as he leans back against the solid reassurance of this man who owns Derrick's heart and soul. As Nigel gently turns him, the kisses continue, soft and loving, tracing his jaw, temple, forehead, chin. Soon Nigel is in front of him, and Derrick slips further into his lover's arms.

He rests his head against Nigel's chest. "Will you sing to me? Just for a minute?"

If Nigel is confused by the request, his voice doesn't betray him. "What would you like me to sing?"

"Whatever. Something vaguely appropriate."

A long moment passes, then Nigel's sweet tenor begins,

"Swing low, sweet chariot,

Coming for to carry me home,

Swing low, sweet chariot,

Coming for to carry me home."

Derrick smiles and closes his eyes. Nigel still isn't fond of much of Derrick's music, although he's sweet enough that he tries to pretend he does. Etta James rendition of this song in 2000 is beautiful, but it is the version sung in 1960 by his childhood crush Harry Belafonte that's his favorite. Derrick put it on an MP3 playlist of music he listens to when he is relaxing and Nigel is doing something else. He is surprised and touched that Nigel thought of the song; he couldn't have heard it very often. Nigel sings the rest of the song and finishes with a kiss.

Derrick tilts his head up to look into his lover's eyes. "I am so completely in love with you."

Nigel smiles back. "I love you, too, Dare."

It is time. Derrick turns and takes a step toward the urn, in his hand the rose his aunt gave him before the service.

"This is a moment between the two of you." It's both a statement and a question. Derrick turns back, looks at Nigel's loving face, and nods. "I'll be just outside the chapel, Dare."

Derrick watches him go, then steps up to the table. It is strange to look down upon his father's physical remains.

There are no right or wrong words, so he just opens his mouth and lets his heart out. "Ronald... Dad... You fucking asshole. Why didn't you reach out? Why didn't you tell me it was okay? I sent you letters telling you I was willing to talk whenever you were. I texted you. Why didn't you just pick up the phone?" The words are almost a wail. He closes his eyes and calms himself. "I never wanted this to happen. Maybe, like you, I was too afraid that you would reject me, so I didn't try harder." He opens his eyes and reaches to finger the tapestry. "I miss you so much. You were the greatest man I've ever known. You are my hero. I don't know if I ever thanked you for everything you did for me. Without you, I wouldn't be where I am today; I'd be nothing."

He laughs. "I can hear you now saying, 'Son, I just helped you figure out what you could be.'" He imitates Ronald's voice, but it comes out as a caricature, and he laughs again. "But I needed that. Maybe it seemed like a small thing to you, but no one had ever believed in me before. I swear I didn't mean it when I said I wished you were dead." Derrick has to take another moment to get himself under control again.

"I must say this afternoon has been quite a shock. I wish you could have gotten to know Nigel personally, but I'm so glad you understood our bond after all. He's the other greatest man I've ever known. You brought me to where I am, and he's taking it from here." Words fail him for a moment. He rubs his face. "Nigel is helping me soar. I love him more than anything, and it means more than you could have ever known how much your... your blessing means to me."

Derrick touches the urn this time and strokes its smooth surface. It really is a work of art. "I don't know what I would have said, or how I would have felt, if I hadn't had the opportunity to talk to these people, to finally know that you didn't hate Nigel, that you saw how good we are together. I'm just sad I had to hear it from them."

With his other hand, he places the rose on top of the others. The red flowers, white embroidery, and green velvet remind him of Christmas, a

happy time. He smiles. “Goodbye, Dad. I love you.” He turns and heads back up the aisle.

Nigel is waiting at the doors, his eyes moist.

“Nigh, what’s wrong?”

His lover swallows. “It hurts to see you in pain.”

Derrick smiles for Nigel. “I’m better now. I think I’ve finally gotten closure.” He pulls Nigel closer. He thinks about how much they’ve held each other this week, and how he’s ready for an embrace about something other than pain. “Take me home and show me just how much you love me like you said you would.”

Nigel pulls back and grins. “There is nothing I want more right now.”

They turn, and arm in arm, they leave the chapel, Ronald’s ashes, and the worst of the sorrow behind.

THE END

Author Bio

S. H. Allan has been a therapeutic foster parent for almost fourteen years, focusing on teenagers—which is a lot like herding cats, but a lot more rewarding. Dogs make her happy, and the senior dogs for which she provides hospice have to tolerate a giddy younger pup or three. Whenever possible, she ignores them all in favor of reading smutty gay love stories. S. H. knew writing was her destiny when her classic, Mr. Cuke and Mrs. Tomato, was put in the school library in third grade (coincidentally, along with the stories written by all her classmates). Politically active and socially conscious, with a useless M.A. and over twenty-five years working in high tech, S. H. fits in well in her beloved Pacific Northwest, except for that healthy eating silliness. Tofurkey is one thing, but she says, “Seriously, no donuts?”

Contact & Media Info

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[Email](#) | [Facebook](#)

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Complicated

J.J. Cassidy



COMPLICATED

By J.J. Cassidy

Photo Description

Two men, both with short, dark hair, lie together on a striped sofa or daybed. The one on the bottom, acting as a pillow and a living mattress, embraces the other man with what seems to be easy affection. The man on top sprawls face down, his head tucked into the space between his lover's neck and shoulder, hiding his face from view.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I don't actually have any plot pre-reqs. (That's not to say the plot isn't important, though. I don't want something that's complete PWP or Excuse Plot. I'd like something that has a rather light tone overall, but still has depth and something meaningful to it. Elements of darkness are okay and, in fact, may even be encouraged, as my profile would attest to. I just don't want it to turn out to be a darkfic.)

I just want adorable cat-shifter-kitty-petting/cuddling. Maybe the shifter retains some cat-like characteristics even when human/in his human form. It doesn't necessarily have to be a housecat. It could be a big cat of some sort. Just, you know, with petting and cuddling and adorableness (in human and cat forms if you can fit it). And maybe some playing with the tail (not tail sex. just playing with the tail).

If you want to include an anthropomorphic/half-and-half form or something visually similar to the Loveless (kind of) cat-people of some sorts (the latter would actually be preferable), that would be okay too ^^

Sincerely,

Ayanna

Story Info

Genre: paranormal

Tags: feline shifters, other species, family drama, geeks, pets, piercing, mechanic/blue collar

Word count: 50,745

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COMPLICATED

By J.J. Cassidy

CHAPTER ONE

May, 2023

Reiner's car started making funny noises after he turned off the Interstate, and the noises got stranger and louder once he hit the first hill. He gripped the wheel a little tighter and pushed at it, as if that was going to help. He really didn't know shit about cars, even if they did have little computers inside them. He knew where to put the fuel; and when the oil light came on, he took the car over to whatever oil-changing place was nearby and let them deal with it. At the moment, nothing was lit up on the dashboard, and the temperature thingy was—oh shit. It shouldn't be *that* high, should it?

He crested the hill, and something splashed under the car—that couldn't be good—and steam billowed out from under the hood. Definitely not good. Gritting his teeth, he slipped the gearshift into neutral and let the car coast down the road, hoping like hell it wouldn't—damn. With a cough and a rattle, the engine died. Reiner hauled on the wheel to keep the car headed for the shoulder, and wondered how the hell anybody drove without power steering.

The car coasted to a stop a mile later, as far off to the right as Reiner could manage without putting it in the drainage ditch. He checked the navigation app on his phone, and there were still thirty-five long miles between him and Stone Mountain. He could leave everything, lock the car and start walking, which would take about three hours.

Or he could take advantage of technology.

He had the number for Stone Mountain Security saved to his Contacts, so he hit dial and waited. Three rings, and a crisp female voice said, "Stone Mountain."

"Um, my name is Reiner Martin. Mr. DaSilva hired me? I was on my way to you, and my car... died."

“I know who you are, Mr. Martin. Do you have any idea where you are right now?”

He checked his phone. “I can give the latitude and longitude, if that helps. Oh—I’m about thirty-five miles southeast.”

“Very good. I’m going to transfer you to the garage. Give your information to Mr. Forester or Mr. DaSilva, and they’ll send a flatbed to pick you up. If the call gets dropped—” She gave him the number for the garage, repeated it so he could write it on his hand. The line went silent for one second, two, three... and maybe he should hang up and just dial the garage directly?

“Mr. Martin?” Reiner twitched when a deep male voice vibrated in his ear. “I hear you’re stranded.”

“Yeah.” Reiner shivered, not quite sure why. “I don’t know what happened—there was a lot of steam, and it just *stopped*. I’m about thirty-five miles southeast, according to my GPS.”

“I have a pretty good idea where you are. Give us about forty minutes or so. Don’t wander off.” The male on the other end disconnected, and Reiner hunched his shoulders to make the hairs along his spine go down.

He hit the window button twice before it even occurred to him why it didn’t work. His mother always said Reiner was hopeless with anything other than computers. Growling at himself under his breath, he got out of the car before it turned into an oven and baked his brain any further. The North Carolina mid-May sun had enough oomph to make standing on the side of the road uncomfortable, so he hopped the ditch and sat down under a tree.

It would be all too easy to fall asleep, so he played Sudoku on his phone for fifteen minutes—he checked—and had to stop when the battery warning flashed on the screen. Bad enough he’d had to call for help before he even started his new job, a dead phone might make Blais DaSilva rethink hiring him. Then again, the DaSilvas—or more accurately, Stone Mountain—paid for Reiner’s college degree. Degrees, plural. Bachelor’s and master’s. Plus a stipend for books, money for rent, and an allowance for food; all told, they’d laid out more money than Reiner or his family would ever be able to repay.

Not one car passed him, not in either direction. The only things out this way were Stone Mountain State Park and the small community of the same name, and he figured May was early for the park to be crowded with visitors. Or so he'd read on the Internet. The only *other* thing out here was the main office for Stone Mountain Security. He had no idea what to expect, no clue where he was going to live, was absolutely clueless about everything except that he had a job with a fat salary right out of grad school. In his chosen field, too.

He'd taken a few days after graduation and headed home, cleaned out his stuff from the cramped bedroom he'd shared with his two younger brothers. Not that there was much left, just some books he'd forgotten about and the clothes he kept there for when he did come home. The last time had been Winter Break, which hadn't been much of a break at all; he spent the entire week ripping out two broken windows and installing new ones, and then trolling the Internet for a good used washer to replace the ancient one leaking all over the utility room before it rotted the floor clean through. His older sister was pregnant, so they needed a reliable washer—and god only knew his useless brothers wouldn't stir themselves to help. He did make them do most of the heavy lifting, since they had a truck and he didn't.

He hadn't planned on sending money home, but after these last few days... he couldn't bring himself to be that selfish. Granted, he wouldn't have stayed at home much longer anyway; most of his male cousins were gone, spread out to wherever they could find work. Females stayed put, males drifted around—that's how things worked. For his species, anyway. Eventually, males settled somewhere when they got older, sometimes near the females they'd fathered offspring on, sometimes not. Mostly not. Absentee fathers were the rule, not the exception.

Reiner gave in and dozed a little, figuring it was so damn quiet, he'd hear a tow truck coming from a long ways off. Birds, bugs, bunnies—that was all he detected when he let his mind open up and drift. The bugs were tiny noises he heard more than sensed, and the birds were little blips of static to the part of him that noticed potential prey. The rabbits were bigger blips, and he knew they were close to the ground without knowing *how* he knew. You practiced, and learned to tell the difference between rabbits and

deer and sheep and cows and humans. Not that humans were ever more than just bigger pools of static energy—their brains and his weren't compatible that way.

And over there, right on the edge of his range, he touched something bigger, a dog or a coyote, maybe, and—

Reiner bolted awake, heart hammering high in his chest, frozen in place under the tree. *Don't run, don't run, don't run*—his skin itched and burned, adrenaline fueling the urge to shift because four legs were faster than two and oh god, what *was* that?

He tried to focus, tamp down the instinctive need to put more space between him and whatever-the-fuck was coming his way. *Water*, that's what it felt like, a never-ending waterfall, a roaring curtain that would flatten anything that tried to get through. And with it, near it, a flickering wall of restless movement that took longer to put a name to in his head. Bamboo, or something like it, a dense stand of vertical... trunks? Stalks? His breathing slowed; the wall of bamboo was a hell of a lot less scary than the water for some reason. His own kind; but he'd never sensed anyone from that kind of distance.

Less than a minute later he heard a big diesel engine, and sun winked off chrome far down the road. Reiner got up, brushing off his jeans and willing his hands and his knees to not shake. By the time he crossed the ditch and reached the gravel shoulder, the truck was slowing, swinging wide to make a U-turn. It was a flatbed, not a tow truck, and the driver got it turned around in two moves, a neat trick on the narrow road. The flatbed pulled ahead of his poor dead Toyota and stopped, engine idling.

The driver's door opened, and Reiner didn't even know he'd backed up until the Toyota's fender hit his thighs. He should be embarrassed, but his other half wanted to put as much space between him and the other male as possible. Big, over six feet, and moving with loose-hipped grace despite a slight limp *and* despite being twice Reiner's age, easy. And oh fuck, were his eyes *blue*? Reiner almost bolted then and there, except another male stepped in between them, projecting *calm* like their lives depended on it. They probably did.

“Dad?” The slightly smaller male kept his eyes—a perfectly normal hazel—pinned to Reiner’s, holding him in place. “Could you dial it down? You’re scaring the fuck out of him.” Silently, he added, *I knew I should’ve done this myself*, his mental voice laced with rueful amusement.

Reiner blinked. That voice rubbed up against every hot spot he had; not-too-deep and a little hoarse, smoky Southern honey with a touch of sand. It also completely distracted him from the death on two legs watching him from less than ten feet away.

“Reiner, right?” The hazel eyes never blinked, and Reiner could see green flecks close to the pupils. “It would really help if you could maybe breathe a little?” The male smiled, and his pupils dilated, sending a trickle of heat through Reiner’s frozen body. “I’m Trey. And I don’t know if you’ll get the reference, but this is definitely a *come with me if you want to live* moment, understand?”

“Don’t be dramatic.” The big male’s voice sounded like gravel sliding out of a truck in the middle of the night, and Reiner flinched. He couldn’t help it. The other male huffed when Trey flipped a hand at him, and growled, “I’m fine.”

Trey raised his dark eyebrows, still looking at Reiner. “That’s what you always say, right before things go to hell.”

The male Reiner assumed was Trey’s father—and how weird was that?—laughed, and the tension bleeding off him in waves ramped down to a less-than-ball-shriveling level. “All right,” he rumbled, nodding at Reiner. “Let’s try this again. I’m Aidan, and I promise not to hurt you if you stay out of my way while we get your car on the flatbed.”

“Oh yeah,” Trey drawled. “That’s so much better. Don’t mind him,” he said to Reiner. “He’s actually pretty safe out in public.” He ducked the cuff Aidan aimed at his head and grinned, showing a lot of white teeth. “Just, you know, do what he said. Stay out of his way.”

Reiner grinned back, helpless not to in the face of Trey’s laid-back confidence. “I can do that.” He crossed the road to avoid backing up in front of Aidan, and ambled around to the front of the flatbed, out of sight for the moment. He’d never seen one of his kind with blue eyes before, or

that tall. Reiner was only a hair over five ten, and he was the tallest of his brothers and his male cousins.

Aidan and Trey worked together easily, Aidan working the controls to tip the bed up and drop it to ground level, and Trey walking up the bed to unhook the winch cable. Trey was also the one who got down under Reiner's car to attach the tow hook, and Reiner definitely appreciated the view. Long legs, long torso, nice ass—he caught a ripple of amusement from both Trey and Aidan, and tried to firm up his mental shields. Not something he was good at, and he was out of practice.

“If you need anything out of the car, say so now,” Trey called out. Reiner shook his head, after patting his pocket to make sure he had his phone, and Trey gave Aidan a thumbs-up. As the flatbed screeched and groaned, Trey came up next to Reiner. He wasn't as tall as Reiner thought, maybe he had an inch of height advantage, but he had broader shoulders and hips—not to mention the nice ass.

Trey's mouth quirked, and he tilted his head, radiating good humor. “You're not so bad yourself. So... rumor is, you're the new head geek for that fancy computer on the second floor.”

“The new server, yeah.” Reiner tried to wrap his head around the idea that Trey had just flirted with him. Or had he?

The muscled shoulders rose in a shrug, straining the dark blue T-shirt. “Once you hit town, I figure there'll be a line. Best take advantage of seeing you first.”

Reiner growled without thinking. “Do you mind? Back home, that's real rude.”

“Then you should get your shields up. And I'd suggest you do it right quick, like before we reach Stone Mountain.” Trey waved a hand at the road ahead of the truck. “'Cause 'tween the DaSilvas and the Foresters? They'll eat you alive.”

The truck rocked as the bed settled back in the horizontal position with the Toyota on top, and chains rattled as Aidan fastened them down to the back of the bed. Trey walked away shaking his head, and ran the controls

while Aidan checked to make sure the Toyota was secure front and back. Without saying a word, Aidan climbed into the driver's side of the cab, and Trey yanked open the other door.

"You sit on the outside," he told Reiner, and got in.

The truck cab was already warm, and with three males crammed in the seat, it got warmer fast, even with the windows down. Trey was solid muscle over hard bones, and Reiner scrunched up against the door to avoid too much contact.

Give it up, Trey told him, and bumped him in the shoulder. *Relax*.

Reiner took a deep breath, inhaling the tang of sweat off all three of them and the overwhelming black peppercorn scent of male jaguars. Laid over that were their individual scents, and it took him a couple seconds to sort out who was who. Aidan smelled like smoke and apples, an oddly pleasant combination, and Trey reminded him of birch roots, or maybe sassafras—Reiner recognized that from smelling it all the time at home.

Trey turned his head, and his breath tickled Reiner's cheek. He inhaled, and let it out on a faint purr. "Orange peel," he whispered, and ran his nose behind Reiner's ear. "Nice." And then, in a totally different voice, "Get your damn shields up."

Reiner huffed, and moved as far from Trey as possible. "Fuck off."

Aidan rumbled, nearly a growl, and Trey patted his knee. "We'll play nice." He leaned the other way, against Aidan, giving Reiner more room. Fifteen minutes passed, and the throaty vibration of the diesel engine put Reiner in a doze.

"Your settlement is pretty small, isn't it?"

"Whuh?" Reiner jerked awake, half from the words out loud and half from the light brush of Aidan's mind on his. He rubbed his eyes and sat up straight. "Yes, sir. There's twenty of us all together, now that I'm gone." When Aidan sent him a wave of approval tinged with slight humor for the *yes sir*, Reiner added, "My mother and her three sisters, my grandmother and her sister—she has two daughters—plus my sister and two female cousins. Other than me, my mother has two other sons. Then there's my two uncles, and five male cousins."

“So what did you do about—” Trey grunted, probably because Aidan elbowed him. Even Reiner felt it.

“I asked,” Aidan said smoothly, “because Stone Mountain has a much larger population, and it may be a bit... *startling*, if you’re not used to it.”

“I know that everyone who works for SMS lives locally, so, a hundred?” Reiner made a guess based on what he’d seen on the company website, not that it gave out a whole lot.

Trey coughed, and Aidan leaned forward to glance around him at Reiner. “A bit more than that. Three hundred eighty-something.”

Three... Reiner had trouble breathing for a few heartbeats. “But you’re only—”

“A hundred miles from the Tuscarora Preserve?” Aidan said dryly. “We’re well aware of that.”

Reiner shivered, the hair on his neck rising. The Preserve was the monster in the closet, the thing under the bed, home of the Pax Program—his species biggest enemy.

Growing up, Pax had been the ultimate parental threat: *If you keep that up, I’ll sell you to Pax—don’t think I won’t.* And it worked, because Pax was real, an honest-to-goodness government agency—entity? whatever—and Pax would, without a doubt, pay good cash money for a jaguar child, even a badly behaved one.

Way before Reiner was born, in the 1950s, an accident on a foggy road landed sixteen members of his species in a human hospital—where they disappeared. And not long after that, a dozen more males—all members of the US Army—also disappeared. Within a year, the US government built a secure facility on what used to be national parkland, and the Pax Program was born, named for a Mayan month associated with a jaguar god.

It took years for his species to piece together what happened, their worst nightmare come to life; five hundred years of hiding what they were wiped out by a truck and some too-curious doctors. Still, when Pax didn’t immediately start sweeping the country looking for them, life slowly went back to normal. The jaguars justified not trying to free their captive cousins

by adopting a *few-versus-many* viewpoint: the Pax jaguars kept the rest of them safe.

Around 1970—still way before Reiner was born—the United States government stunned the world by unveiling their newest weapon: teams of soldiers paired with jaguars, the perfect jungle fighting force. No mention was made of the big cats being anything other than what they appeared—highly intelligent, highly trained animals—and Reiner’s species breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Before driving down here, Reiner had thought about how much it would bother him to live this close to the Preserve, a hundred miles from scientists who’d love to have some fresh genetic material to play with. He’d heard stories—

Aidan’s sigh had a touch of a growl under it. “I’m sure you have,” he said in that same dry tone. “And some of them are probably true.”

It occurred to Reiner that Aidan’s clipped, precise diction didn’t match up at all with the grease-stained jeans and the dark green work shirt. And his accent was odd, nothing like Trey’s Southern drawl. On the heels of that, he remembered two males from Colorado who’d come courting his female cousins, and the stories *they’d* told.

“Some of them are pretty crazy,” Reiner ventured. “Like the one about Pax trying to turn humans into one of us.”

“They did.” Aidan shrugged, hands flexing on the steering wheel. “Or tried to, anyway. More than once. They developed their own type of gene therapy years ahead of civilian scientists.”

Aidan and Trey shared a look, and it was Trey’s turn to sigh. Aidan shook his head and glanced over at Reiner. “I was one of their experiments. One that worked, out of maybe two dozen spectacular failures.”

“It’s not a secret,” Trey said. “The blue eyes are kind of a dead giveaway, you know?”

Reiner tried, he really did, but couldn’t get past *I was one of their experiments*. “But you’re not human.” His voice came out higher than normal.

“I was born human.” The one blue eye Reiner could see crinkled at the corner, and Aidan’s mouth twitched up. “That was the next question, right?” He huffed at Reiner’s mumble of agreement, and Trey rubbed his shoulder into Aidan, breathing out on a purr. Aidan downshifted through a sweeping turn, and when he spoke again, the growl from earlier was back. “Yes, it was gene therapy, and no, it wasn’t done with my full knowledge and consent. Twenty years, and the US military still swears I misread the fine print.”

Reiner blinked and breathed, trying to process. The first thing that wanted to come out was, “That is so fucked up,” followed by, “Why did it work with you?”

Aidan laughed, surprising Reiner no end. “Totally fucked up, yes. And the short explanation is that I was a close genetic match to begin with.”

Trey nudged Reiner with his elbow. “Welcome to Stone Mountain and the DaSilva-Foresters. The family motto is *Sumus contortum*.”

“I don’t get it.” Reiner shook his head “Is that Latin?”

“Bad Latin,” Aidan said, back to sounding dryly amused. “Family joke. Translated, it’s *we’re complicated*.”

Another sweeping turn, and now Trey growled at Reiner. “Get ready.”

Oh... *fuck*. Reiner had no words for the sensation of—literally—hundreds of minds prickling the edge of his. Not static, oh no—*awareness*, an enormous web of it, mind after mind after mind, like a living parabolic antenna nestled in Middle of Nowhere, North Carolina. He shuddered at the *wrongness* of it, and only heard his whimper after the fact.

“It’s all right.” Trey murmured the words into Reiner’s ear. He turned in the seat and his left hand—broad, warm palm and blunt fingers—slid around Reiner’s wrist and up his forearm, rough fingertips stroking the smoother skin on the underside. Reiner shuddered for an entirely different reason as Trey pressed closer, tucking his right shoulder behind Reiner and breathing in along his neck. “Not wrong.” His lips tickled, they were so close. “Sort of an early warning system. And...” He sighed, a gust of humid air. “Let me in, Reiner. Or you’ll have one motherfucker of a headache in a few hours.”

“Very smooth,” Aidan said under his breath.

The idea of Trey flirting with him right in front of Trey’s father had Reiner contorting in the seat to put space between them. Back home, while nobody thought anything of what males got up to with one another, doing stuff where anybody could see just wasn’t done. And yeah, he’d spent enough time around humans to be sensitive about being seen with another male in public. Western Pennsylvania still wasn’t that progressive a place, not even in 2023.

He lost his train of thought when Trey leaned in again. “Come on,” Trey said, lowering his voice. “Give me thirty seconds and I’ll fix ’em.”

“Fix what? I’m *fine*.” Reiner met Trey’s eyes and then couldn’t look away. Mistake.

“Your shields suck.” Trey’s eyelids drooped and his mouth curved. “It won’t hurt. I promise. Thirty seconds.”

Reiner couldn’t resist. “That’s not really much of a recommendation.”

“Very funny. You have *seen* jaguar sex, haven’t you?”

Reiner’s neck flushed because, no, he hadn’t. Not on four legs, or two. Sure, he understood the general idea—his uncles had explained things when he was still young enough for sex to be theoretical. As for females... no. That’s why males left home—every female there was related somehow and off-limits. And there were no females of his species at the Penn State Erie campus—no males either—so he’d gotten very proficient with both hands. Sometimes at the same time. The stuff he’d done back home with his cousins to blow off steam didn’t count—that wasn’t sex, that was just... fooling around.

Trey’s eyes widened and he licked his lips. “So...”

Somebody’s cell phone whistled, and Aidan pulled his out from somewhere and handed it to Trey. “Check that.”

“It’s Papi. He says the doctor called, and your appointment is set for tomorrow, not Monday.”

“*Goddammit*. Fuck.” It sounded like Aidan growled between clenched teeth. “Tell him we’re almost back.”

The road leveled out while Trey typed the reply, and Reiner got his first look at the town of Stone Mountain. There wasn't much: a diner, a good-sized package store and two other non-descript buildings on one side of the road, and a shit-load of trees on the other. When they got closer, he realized the trees were a screen for a huge stone-and-glass building, all of it a kind of bronzy-greenish-gray. *That* must be Stone Mountain Security. His new workplace.

They rolled past the driveway for SMS, past all the trees, past another, smaller driveway or road. After that, a two-story stucco building had a sign for "Major Repair," and maybe a dozen yards beyond that Reiner now saw an older three-story wooden building with a wraparound porch, all of it painted white with green trim. Aidan made a left across the opposite lane and pulled up in front of Major Repair. One double bay was open, with a black, sleek, low-slung, four-door something parked in front of the closed doors to the other bay. It was a Porsche—Reiner recognized the badge on the hood.

Aidan shut off the truck and got out, and Trey nudged Reiner. "Out. I'll find somebody to help you with your shields later."

"They're fine," Reiner snapped, sliding to the ground with Trey right behind him.

"Maybe around humans, or back home, but not here, all right? Every little thing that pops into your head is right there, up front, and you're just gonna piss everybody off bein' all loud like that." Trey huffed, shaking his head. Out in the sun, his short, dark hair lit up with copper sparks, and his eyes were more burnished gold than hazel.

An older male got out of the Porsche, unfolding until he was almost as tall as Aidan. He wore a charcoal-gray suit that even Reiner knew for custom-tailored and expensive as hell. His almost-black hair had a fashionably shaggy look, falling to collar length in perfect layers. He took his sunglasses off and tossed them in the car, followed by his jacket, revealing a pale pink dress shirt that hugged the lines of his lean torso. The only thing out of place was the crumpled, loosened silk tie.

Aidan stopped less than an arm's length away from him, hands on hips,

head tilted to one side. Reiner couldn't see his face, but caught a hint of equal parts annoyance and affection from both of them.

"*Cálmate, querido*," the suit said, the Spanish rolling off his tongue like it had been born there.

Well. Now Reiner knew who *he* was: Blais DaSilva. Head honcho and front man for Stone Mountain Security, and former private soldier with the company's military arm, Arrowhead. The male who had laid out one hundred and sixty thousand dollars, give or take a few thousand, to put Reiner through school. He stepped closer to get a better look.

Blais tilted his head to mirror Aidan. "It's better this way. You'll have the whole weekend to recover. They scheduled the procedure for nine a.m., so we'll leave in a couple of hours and head down to Fayetteville, stay the night. Come back Saturday or Sunday, depending on how you feel." His mouth curved in a wicked smile. "Flat on your back for days, *querido. Que triste.*"

Aidan snorted, and rubbed the back of his neck. "I'd better go change."

Blais dangled a set of keys, pulling his hand back when Aidan reached for them. "I need to talk to my new geek here. You go change and do the daddy thing and I'll meet you up there. You do know Emery's coming, too," he added, gliding sideways as Aidan snatched for the keys, keeping them out of reach.

Aidan huffed and walked away, back over to Trey. "Take care of them for me," he rumbled. He ran a hand over Trey's short hair, and pulled him into a hug. "Be careful. And don't worry about the shop—you hear?" When he let go of Trey, Aidan nodded at Reiner, and his blue eyes now had a gold corona around each pupil. "Don't let him push you around, all right?"

"Yes sir," Reiner said automatically, relaxing a fraction when Aidan's nod was followed by a warm wash of approval.

When he got near Blais again, Aidan didn't try for the keys—he grabbed Blais's tie instead, yanking him forward. His teeth flashed, and then he kissed Blais, right there in the open where anybody could see him—them—do it. Wide-open mouths, and enough force to make the muscles in

Aidan's neck and shoulders tense. They parted with every appearance of reluctance, and Aidan made a show of twirling the keys around his index finger. "You are so easy."

Blais raised one dark eyebrow, eyes fixed on Aidan's mouth. "What would be the point of playing hard to get?" He reached over and cupped the bulge in Aidan's jeans for a second, thumb stroking across. "Good luck driving."

Aidan brushed past him to get in the open driver's door, trailing his left hand across Blais as he went. He did something Reiner couldn't see, something that made Blais inhale sharply. "Good luck thinking." He handed the sunglasses and jacket out to Blais before he closed the door, the engine of the over-sized Porsche purring as he drove away.

Blais put the sunglasses on top of his head and slung the jacket over his right arm. His eyes were pale, bright hazel, and he studied Reiner for a split second, unsmiling. "Reiner Martin. Nice to finally meet you." He held out a hand when he got close enough, and Reiner shook it automatically.

Then Reiner held very, *very* still, painfully aware of the predator gazing at him from inches away. Blais only had an inch of height on him, and maybe twenty pounds, but he also had at least twenty years and a... a... there wasn't a word for it. Reiner wanted to bow his head, avoid eye contact, and maybe get as far from Blais as possible, all at the same time.

"You're as bad as Dad, scaring the crap out of him," Trey said. He bumped Reiner gently with his hip as he said it, and his light tone was oddly reassuring.

"Just making things clear." Blais let go of Reiner's hand, his mental aura washed with feral good humor. If Aidan was water, and Trey a thicket of bamboo, Blais was stone, a dizzying wall of granite or something like it. Impervious and solid, and if he tried, he could crush Reiner with no effort.

God, didn't anybody here have normal mental shields?

Blais studied Reiner, unblinking. "Define normal. What works just fine in a small group is an epic fail when you put nearly four hundred of us in one place." The hint of a Spanish accent disappeared, replaced by the same

honey-and-sand as Trey's voice. Blais slung the jacket over his shoulder, keeping one finger hooked in the collar, and the predator receded a little. "Trey will help you get your shields straightened out over the weekend. You don't need to report to Personnel until Monday morning—do that whether I'm back by then or not. We have a furnished room for you down the road; it's yours until we work out permanent housing." His mouth quirked. "Stop at the reception desk tomorrow morning—there'll be an envelope for you with a debit card and some forms to fill out. If you're planning on sending part of your pay home every month, we can handle that for you automatically. Anything else you need to know before Monday, ask Trey."

Reiner nodded, and tried to keep all his thoughts to himself for once. Blais nodded at Trey. "You're playing *loco parentis* for the weekend." His mouth twisted and Reiner understood that was some kind of joke. "Stay at the house, all right? We're leaving as soon as Aidan is ready." He growled softly, and just like that, the predator was back. "Be careful, yes?"

"*Sí, Papi,*" Trey said, confusing the absolute shit out of Reiner. He and Blais hugged, and Blais ran his hand over Trey's hair as he brushed noses with him.

"I'll see you on Monday," Blais told Reiner. "Enjoy your weekend." To Trey, he added, "Make sure he has what he needs." Trey grunted, almost a laugh, and Blais gave him a sharp look. Then he smirked, shaking his head. "Play nice." With that, he walked off, sliding his sunglasses back over his eyes.

Reiner really, truly, needed to sit. Everybody he knew had a "scary boss" story, he'd interned under a couple of winners. Blais... oh god. Thank fuck Reiner wouldn't have to work directly with him or this would be impossible.

Trey laid a warm hand on Reiner's shoulder, right at the curve of his neck, and squeezed. He rocked into Reiner, chest bumping Reiner's upper back, and exhaled a purr into Reiner's ear. At the same time, he blanketed Reiner's mind with an image—full color, surround-sound, even scent: *Sunlight filtering down through green leaves, a faint breeze, rich, funky leaf mold cool under his paws. Forest life rustling and twittering everywhere.*

Warm air moving past his whiskers, carrying a hundred fascinating scents, and warmer sun on his back. And then Trey, warmer even than that, next to him, fur gliding on fur. Shoulders rubbing, then a long slide; Trey coming around to nuzzle his ear, a fast swipe of a tongue along his jaw, into his ear—

Reiner spun away, uncomfortably—startlingly—aroused, and not just a little. “That’s... not... what I...” *want*, should have been the next word, but he couldn’t say it. Trey stared at him, no expression at all on his face, and whatever he felt tucked out of sight behind his screen of bamboo.

Finally, Trey sighed, and Reiner caught a whiff of regret. “Let’s get your car on the ground and I’ll take you over to the Inn.” Trey stepped back, eyes lingering on Reiner’s face, before he spun and headed for the flatbed.

Reiner got out of the way, leaning on the warm painted concrete wall of the garage while Trey worked the controls on the flatbed. He honestly didn’t understand what was going on here between them. He had a mirror. He looked like a lot of males of his species: thick dark hair, average build, faint year-round tan. Straight nose, not particularly narrow—most of them could pass for a half dozen nationalities with no problem. His green eyes with the gold flecks were courtesy of his father, according to his mother, most Martins had them. Trey, on the other hand, looked like...

Well for one thing, he didn’t look like Aidan, which made Reiner curious about the “dad” thing. If anything, Trey looked like Blais—they had the same eyes and hair—and he’d called Blais “papi”. Same build; shoulders not much wider than his hips, although both of them were too lean to be considered stocky. Trey just sort of oozed *power*, but not the indefinable thing Blais had. This was more physical, and fuck him if it wasn’t attractive as hell.

Reiner’s unfortunate Toyota Camry rolled onto the blacktopped apron in front of the garage, still dripping fluids from underneath, and Trey finished unhooking it. Reiner took the opportunity to watch Trey some more, still not sure if he understood where the flirting was coming from. He didn’t have much experience either way. Wasn’t much sense in flirting with his cousins—they were more a case of convenience than actual preference.

And humans were right out, for males, anyway. Past a certain point, your body twigged to the lack of proper pheromones and lost interest. Most males tried, at least once, just in case it turned out biology had handed them a free pass. He'd heard some horror stories—funny, but still awful—like the one about...

Trey's sigh had a lot of growl in it as he stripped off his work gloves, tossing them back in the truck cab through the open window. "You wanna get your stuff?" he asked, voice flat.

"How far is it to where I'm staying?" Reiner pulled his bulging messenger bag out of the front passenger seat, and opened the back door to grab the biggest duffel.

Trey opened the other back door and hoisted the other two duffels onto his shoulders. "That way. Forty feet." He jerked his chin at the road, toward the older building Reiner had seen. "Let's go."

"What's your last name?" Reiner asked, as their eyes met over the roof of the car.

"DaSilva." Trey came around the front of the Toyota, carrying both duffels like they weighed nothing.

Reiner blocked him, blurting the first question that made it through the dozen or so crowding his head. "So why did you call Aidan 'Dad' before?" He held his ground when Trey glared.

"We gonna play twenty questions?" Trey dropped the duffels and put his hands on his hips. "Fine. Because he raised me. Anybody in town will be more than happy to tell you the story. My mother dumped me here with Blais—my biological father—when I was three. I got handed around a lot for a couple of years—Blais had his own shit to deal with—and then Aidan and his wife took me in. Raised me with their own. So, yeah, I call him 'Dad'. Have since I was five or six."

"Wife?" That one word stuck out. Their species did not, as a rule, get married. And Aidan and Blais were—obviously—lovers.

"Yup. Legal and everything." Trey narrowed his eyes, and his mouth curled. "They would have included Blais, too, but human law frowns on

that sort of thing.” He laughed at whatever he saw on Reiner’s face. “That fit your idea of the perverse DaSilvas a little better?”

“I didn’t say anything,” Reiner protested. True, he had thought it.

“Yeah, but you thought it. Everybody does. Didn’t stop your mother and your uncle from asking for money, did it? So what did Blais lay out for your fancy degrees? Two hundred grand?”

“Not that much.” In the face of Trey’s sneer, Reiner’s lip curled in a silent snarl. “And I’m here, right? The deal was I come work for SMS after I graduated, so I did. And my family can’t—couldn’t—afford the tuition. Bet he paid for yours.”

“I didn’t go to college.” Trey picked up one duffel and slung the strap over his shoulder. “And I didn’t finish high school.” He hefted the other duffel. “Much as I’d like to finish answering all your questions, I need to get you settled and get over to day care in a little while.”

“Day care?” God, he sounded like a total dumbass. Reiner flushed when Trey raised his eyebrows and shook his head. Trey started walking, and Reiner stretched his legs to keep pace.

“You heard the part about Aidan and Blais heading to Fayetteville. And Emery—Aidan’s wife—too. So I need to pick up their two youngest at day care and stay with them until they get back. And no, I don’t have any offspring. I get stuck taking care of the DaSilva-Forester horde too much to want any of my own right now.”

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CHAPTER TWO

Trey really, truly, and sincerely wished he'd taken those thirty seconds and tweaked Reiner's goddamn shields. Not that Reiner was *loud*, but it was like having somebody muttering over in a corner—hard *not* to listen. For a geek, this guy had one disorganized head. Or maybe that came with the territory? Trey rolled his shoulders. The idea of being that... *open* made him itchy. Then again, he grew up with the DaSilva-Forester horde, and around them you learned early on that the best offense was a good defense. Literally.

Maybe that's what he should do: take Reiner up to the house and let one of them handle it. They were way better at stuff like that than him. *Right*. Probably not going to happen, not now. God, he'd thought he was better at flirting than this. Granted, he'd never tried doing it where Aidan could hear or see. Trey hadn't figured on Aidan throwing him off so badly—it was a little embarrassing.

Trey also wished he had an excuse for Reiner to walk ahead of him; he'd like a better look at Reiner's butt, thanks. And his back. He didn't know what it was; but, damn, he wanted some more time around Reiner to figure it out. Reiner hung back during the walk over to the Stone Mountain Inn, and Trey could hear him taking it all in—the restaurant and bakery on the ground floor, with all the good smells from both kitchens. There were furnished rooms to let on the other two floors, up an outside stairway. Not to humans—they'd have to drive all the way to Wilkesboro to find a hotel.

Trey walked along the porch, past everything, to the office door on the side, with Reiner trailing a few feet behind. Caroline, who ran the place with her sister, Joanna, and her cousin, Billy, came out before Trey reached the door, radiating vague distress. “We thought y’all didn’t need the room until Monday.”

Of course they did. Trey did *not* sigh, did *not* growl, just slipped the straps off his shoulders and let the duffels down. “S’all right. We can make do till then. Everything okay?” He sent her a wave of reassurance, accompanied by a slow blink.

Caroline launched into an explanation—the roof leaked over the winter so that room needed repairs, they hadn't finished painting, the new mattress was being delivered on Monday—and Trey nodded and let her go through the list.

“Don't worry about it,” he told her once she wound down. “We'll come back on Monday, maybe Tuesday, all right?”

“Thank you, Trey.” Caroline gave Reiner a fast once-over. “You must be Reiner.” She said it funny, *Ray-ner*, and Trey wondered if *he'd* gotten it wrong.

Reiner nodded. “Nice to meet you. And it's Reiner, rhymes with *finer*.” He waved a hand when she got flustered. “Don't worry, everybody does it.”

“Are you related to Bella Chase?” Caroline asked, eyes narrowing, and Trey almost laughed at the resigned look on Reiner's face.

“Yes, ma'am. She's my grandmother.”

Caroline hummed thoughtfully, probably already making a list of compatible bloodlines. By tonight, most of the town would know exactly who Reiner was and was not related to, and in what degree.

Just to mess with her—because Blais would've given her grief about the room, and Trey had let her off easy—he said, “Maybe we'll all come by for dinner over the weekend.” And made sure she knew who he meant by *we*. She stiffened a little, and he smiled, a quick flash of teeth. Him and the horde at the Inn for dinner? That would be interesting. “See you then.” He hefted the bags again, and headed back for the garage.

They made it about twenty feet before Reiner said anything. “Now what?” His brain had gone quiet, or maybe Trey was getting used to the constant nattering of competing thoughts.

“You can stay at my place. I'm gonna be staying at my parents' house for the weekend, anyway, so it's no big deal. Monday we'll get you settled over at the Inn. There's not much else vacant right now, so until somebody relocates, that's what's available. Maybe... I don't know, maybe come fall a few males will head out and a place will open up.”

“You sure?” Reiner didn't look at him, eyes on the ground. He'd managed a half-assed kind of mind-barrier; the equivalent of one of those

flimsy wooden fences with the pointy pickets. Trey could get past it with zero effort, if he wanted to. Made him wonder how Reiner's family managed, if they were all so... he didn't know what to call it. Oblivious? Did they all just practice selective mind-deafness? What a pain in the ass that would be.

And oddly, now that he couldn't see what was going on in Reiner's head, Trey wanted to know what he was thinking. "Unless you wanna sleep in your car?"

Reiner snorted. "That's okay. Where... where do you live, exactly?"

Trey stopped at the foot of the staircase running up the side of the garage. "Up here." He led the way, and popped the door with his shoulder—no matter what he did, it always stuck.

Reiner walked past Trey into the center of the room, and the pleased surprise on his face both warmed and annoyed Trey equally. True, he was proud of the place—he'd done the renovations himself, a winter of wood shavings and plaster dust up his nose plus countless trips to home improvement stores. Not to mention the hours he'd spent re-doing the stuff he messed up the first time. Engines he knew, taping and plastering not so much.

Trey dropped the duffels and rolled his shoulders. "There's two bedrooms, but only one bed. Bathroom in between, everything else?" He waved a hand. "Right here."

"This is *really* nice." Reiner smiled, his green eyes with the faint gold starburst around the pupils wide and warm when they met Trey's. He put down the messenger bag and the duffel with twin thumps. "And I totally appreciate you doing this." He breathed out, a funny, sharp sigh, and tilted his head off to one side. "I don't know if—could I take you for lunch? Dinner? To say thank you?"

You could take me to bed was the very first thing that popped into Trey's head, because, yeah, he'd been thinking that from the first moment, at the side of the road. Or if not the bed, the sofa would do just fine. Or the floor. Or the wall, for that matter. He just wanted a taste of that skin, wanted to know what kinds of noises...

Reiner stared at him, lips parted, and the scent of sweat and—*oh yes thank you*—arousal thickened the air. “I don’t get it,” he said, after a pause that went on way too long. And then his eyes flicked over to the big blue-and-white-striped sofa and he licked his lips, frowning a little.

“I want you,” Trey said, going for broke, and getting a startled inhale from Reiner. “If you’re not interested, that’s okay, just... say so, and I’ll back off.”

The frown returned, and Reiner wrinkled his nose a little. “It’s not that I’m... *not* interested. It’s just... I feel a little off balance. I’m not saying no, okay?” His smile struck Trey as kind of shy, and charmed the absolute shit out of him. Damn.

Trey took one step forward, not to do anything—well, maybe—and his phone vibrated, playing “Born to be Wild” loud and clear from inside his pocket. He fished it out and read the text. “Shit.” He closed his eyes and indulged in a low growl. “Look, I gotta go. Help yourself to whatever’s in the fridge, or the diner’s good, too. They’re open twenty-four seven. Use the TV, Wi-Fi—um—*crap*. I’ll come by later and get you set up, okay? I swear.” He backed out the door during that rapid-fire speech, closing it behind him, and bounded down the stairs, Reiner’s bewilderment following him the whole way.

I want you.

Reiner closed his eyes. Opened them. Stared at the door. He didn’t think he fucked that up too badly—he wanted to be honest, and Trey knew he was turned on, so lying about it would have been pointless. And would have sent the wrong message. On top of that, he wasn’t good at lying. To his own species, anyway; humans were easy to fool. Look sincere, don’t blink a lot, steady eye contact, and don’t fidget. Easy.

He’d just gotten here, though. Wasn’t even unpacked. And when you got right down to it, Trey was the boss’s son—cliché, much? Then again... *We’re complicated*. Right. He hated complicated, outside of code, and even then he preferred simple—less chance to fuck things up.

Speaking of which—Reiner grunted in annoyance and pulled out his cellphone. He swiped the screen, selected HOME, and waited.

“Hello?” His mother *never* checked Caller ID.

“It’s Reiner. I made it here. Mostly.”

His mother’s sigh was loud even through the phone. “The car?”

“Yeah. Right outside of town.” To avoid the *I-told-you-so* lecture, he changed the subject. “I met Blais DaSilva, for about a minute. And his son—”

“Simon? The lawyer?”

Reiner raised his eyebrows. Trey had a brother? “No. Trey.”

That bought him two seconds of silence. Then: “You be careful around them, Reiner. All those DaSilvas are twisted inside. I wish... well, don’t let them pull you into anything stupid. If you need to quit, that’s just fine. Just come home. There was all those companies looking to hire you, you’d find another job quick.”

Sure. And then he’d spend how many years paying back the hundred and sixty grand? Not like his family offered to mortgage their land to pay for his education, had they? Not even part of it. He’d had this argument already, more than once, and as he’d pointed out then, his mother and uncles should have objected to him working for Blais DaSilva before they went and asked for the tuition money.

“I hear you, Mom. I bet I can transfer to the California office if things get too strange here.” Reiner regretted the twinge of homesickness that prompted him to make this call—he should have just emailed. Or texted. “I’ve gotta unpack now, and get something to eat. I’ll call again when I get settled. Say hi to everybody and let them know I made it here okay.”

“I will. Talk to you soon.” His mother disconnected, and Reiner pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead. Wonderful, now he had a headache. His stomach gurgled, and that reminded him of how long it had been since he ate anything. A burger and fries somewhere in West Virginia, around noon... he looked up, and the clock over the sink told him it was nearly five. He needed food.

He opened the tallest cabinet door, one that went almost from floor to ceiling, and found a compact washer and dryer stacked on top of one another, with storage on top. The narrower tall cabinet next to it had boxes of cereal, and staples like coffee and sugar, but nothing he wanted to eat, and the cabinets over the sink held dishes and mugs.

The refrigerator door bristled with notes and magnets. The magnet for the local middle school caught his eye—the school’s sports teams were called the Jaguars. Coincidence? He didn’t think so, and the idea of... *exposure* like that made the hair on his spine stand up. There was also a magnet for the garage, and one for the package store, and a sheet from a brochure listing the hours and opening dates for Stone Mountain State Park. Next to that, a printout outlined the dates for the local hunting season. Reiner shivered, and opened the refrigerator door.

He picked out a beer, a local microbrew by the unfamiliar label, the leftover half of a roasted chicken, and something dark green and leafy with garlic and oil. Taking a guess, he stuck the green leafy stuff in the microwave, and put the rest on the table. The kitchen area only had four drawers, and he found a knife and fork without much trouble.

He also found a gun. A handgun, matte black, and he’d watched enough TV and movies to recognize extra ammunition clips. Five of them. He had no idea how many bullets were in each one, but five clips seemed... excessive. He shut the drawer, the gulf between where he’d grown up in western Pennsylvania and Stone Mountain yawning wider by the second.

He took his beer and his food over to the table. The denim jacket on the back of one chair told him where Trey usually sat—facing the door. That, combined with the gun, seemed ominous somehow. Wasn’t that where you were supposed to sit to prevent someone surprising you? Or shooting you in the back?

Reiner sat in the other chair, and drank half the beer in one long swallow because his mouth had gone bone-dry. His uncles had rifles, although Reiner didn’t recall them ever using them. Hunting rifles, in a metal locker in the pantry, right next to the washer, with a big combination lock on the hasp. No handguns, though, and certainly not in the kitchen drawers.

He stuffed a piece of chicken in his mouth and chewed, barely tasting it. He'd known going into this about Stone Mountain's ties to Arrowhead. Their military contracts brought in millions every year, money that got used for everything from supporting females and their offspring—keeping them off the social services radar—to paying tuition. His species had lawyers of their own now, and doctors, and dentists, plus almost a dozen certified midwives; layers of safety that wouldn't exist without the DaSilvas.

Reiner finished his beer and got up for a second one. He'd heard the stories all his life; how DaSilva arrogance revealed their existence in the first place—although no one ever said exactly how that happened—how the DaSilvas bullied and coerced other families into working for them, into organizing their small businesses into corporations, establishing a network of communication—all in the name of *safety*. Some families, like the Chases and the Woodwards, resisted; they kept to themselves and had minimal contact with the rest of their species.

Reiner took in Trey's bright, clean apartment—the warm pale-yellow color on the walls, and the gleaming bamboo floor—nothing fancy, but so far removed from the aging, cheap, pre-fab house he'd grown up in that it wasn't funny. Maybe the DaSilvas *were* arrogant, but they had money to pay for college educations and midwives. How was that bad?

He'd finished all the food by this time, and realized he hadn't tasted any of it. He'd wanted out and away from his own settlement his entire life. His mother thought it was the usual male itchy feet, and never understood his love for computers and the elegance of programming—and the need for a college education to do anything useful with that love.

And now here he was, with a Bachelor's degree *and* a Master's, the first male in his family to finish high school, much less go to college. He got up and put the dirty plate and containers in the dishwasher—his mother would sneer, but he'd bet she wouldn't turn down owning one—and took out a third beer. On second thought... he put it back, thinking he'd rather take a shower before drinking any more.

He dragged both duffels closer to the bedrooms, away from the door, and found a pair of sweats and a T-shirt without too much digging. The first

room he looked in had no bed, just a freestanding wooden closet, some half-empty bookshelves, and a plain wooden desk with an idling laptop. Reiner checked out the wireless modem next to it, shaking his head at the index card taped to the desk with Trey's Wi-Fi password written in block letters.

Trey's bedroom smelled like him, sassafras roots and black pepper with a faint overlay of musk, and was reassuringly lived-in. The blankets and top sheet trailed off the queen-size bed onto the floor, and laundry filled the wicker basket in the corner, the overflow piled next to it. A skylight let the early evening sun suffuse the room with gold, and a breeze riffled the sheer white curtains on both big windows.

He could actually see himself sleeping in here, in this bright, pleasant room. On impulse, he decided to make the bed and straighten up a bit. He could even do the laundry as a thank you. He pulled the blankets the rest of the way off, and tweaked the top sheet into place, re-tucking the bottom corners. He picked one pillow off the floor, and lifted the other one, revealing a large, shiny knife.

What the fuck? Seriously. Who slept with a knife under their damn pillow? That was just... no. He picked it up and put it on the low dresser next to the bed. A gun in the kitchen drawer, a knife in the bed—god, what next? Grenades in the medicine cabinet? C4 under the toilet tank lid? Trey worked in a garage—why did he need this shit?

On cue, somebody knocked on the door, and then Trey said, "Hey, Reiner?" A moment later he filled the bedroom doorway. "Oh," he said. "I forgot about that—sorry." Trey must've showered, because he smelled of minty, herb-y soap, and he had on different clothes, a thin, clingy pair of blue sweats, a faded gray T-shirt, and flip-flops.

"You sleep with a knife. And there's a gun in the kitchen. In a drawer." Reiner thought he sounded pretty calm.

"Yeah, I do. There is." Trey tilted his head, studying Reiner. "Habit, I guess. Look, I wanted to apologize for running out of here like that earlier. The twins have been monsters at day care lately, and I needed to get them out of there. Did you eat?"

“I found stuff in the fridge. What do you mean, ‘habit’?”

Trey shrugged. “I was with Arrowhead for two and a half... three years.”

“You were a *mercenary*?” Reiner should have had that third beer.

“Yeah.” Trey’s mouth quirked. “Um, that would be private military contractor, thank you very much. I kinda had no choice, you know?” Trey leaned his shoulder against the doorframe. “Do you want to go over to the diner for pie and coffee?”

Reiner laced his hands on top of his head, not sure if he was aggravated or charmed. Trey’s admiring perusal tipped the scales further to *charmed*, and Reiner shook his head. “I don’t understand being so casual about it.”

“Coffee and pie?” Trey asked, widening his eyes, a faint smile curving his lips.

Reiner resisted the urge to smile in response. “The gun. The... military thing. I don’t even think I’ve seen a handgun before this, not for real.”

“We *are* predators.” Trey slouched a little in the doorway, eyebrows rising. “That’s what we do best. Half the males here”—he waved a hand to indicate the town, such as it was—“have worked for Arrowhead.” He shrugged. “Most of us sucked at school, anyway.”

“That’s such bullshit,” Reiner growled. “The whole *males can’t finish school* thing is bullshit. They can, they just need to control themselves a little better.” How many times had he heard this same stupid speech? Adolescent males were too touchy, too prone to violence, to make it through high school, so they dropped out, did physical labor for a few years until their hormones leveled off, maybe got their GED at some point. “It’s an *excuse*. My cousins could have finished high school, they just took the easy way out.” Not to mention his two idiot brothers.

Trey straightened up, the bamboo thicket in his head acquiring an ominous darkness. “That what you think? That it’s *easier*?” He glided closer to Reiner, no humor on his face or in his eyes at all. “I started taking valerian the beginning of sophomore year. For the bus ride. Because being stuck in an enclosed space with thirty or so humans was more than I could

handle. It wasn't enough, so I tried to buy some Ritalin off a couple of kids. That... didn't go so well." He smiled grimly. "*Papi*—Blais—figured out about the drugs right away, and yanked me out of school. To make a long story short, he shipped me off to Mexico, to my grandfather." He paused, like Reiner should have a clue who that was, and when Reiner didn't say anything, Trey continued. "*Abuelo* runs Arrowhead. Him and his partner. I stayed with them until late last year, then I came back home."

He took a deep breath, and Reiner caught the edge of a thought that left him tasting burnt coffee and the sourness of wet ashes, both things together translating into a sort of wistful regret. Trey took a step back. "My cell number is on the fridge, call me if you need anything, or can't find something. I'll be at the shop tomorrow morning around eight thirty to open up. If you go out, don't worry about locking the door—nobody does."

He turned around, and Reiner finally figured out what he wanted to say. "I wasn't saying no—to the pie and coffee."

That was how they ended up at the diner twenty minutes later, after Reiner took the fastest shower ever.

Trey ordered cherry pie and Reiner picked apple, and it turned out they both took their coffee the same way, black with sugar. Reiner commented on the pie, Trey asked why he didn't get it with vanilla ice cream... and once they started talking, they didn't stop, not for two hours. The diner was mostly empty—it was a Thursday night, after all—and for all Trey knew or cared, it was just them. After the second cup of coffee, Trey paid the check, pointing out that he had done the inviting.

"Like a date?" Reiner teased, and Trey immediately thought of all the things *date* implied. For humans, at least. Not that this was a date, in that sense, except... Reiner had spent a lot more time around humans than Trey ever had, so maybe Trey should just go with it.

"Yeah. If you want." Trey slid out of the booth, wishing he'd worn jeans. The thin sweats weren't hiding anything. He held the door for Reiner, manners that Aidan had reinforced from day one, and Reiner gave him a strange look.

“You were serious about the date thing, huh?”

No would be the wrong answer, so he just shrugged and bumped his shoulder into Reiner’s, trying to keep this light. “My dad drilled us all on human-style polite stuff. Living here, it’s not so big a deal, but we go to Winston-Salem and Greensboro all the time. Makes us stand out less.”

“Makes sense.”

They fell into step easily, brushing against each other as they went, Trey very aware of the body heat barely an inch away. He walked with Reiner all the way to the garage, around to the stairs, wondering if he should try and follow him up. Reiner paused, hand on the railing, before facing Trey. His mouth turned up in a one-sided smile, showing a hint of teeth in a silent laugh. “I had a very lovely time, thank you,” he said, pitching his voice up half an octave. His eyes caught the light from across the street, and gold flashed deep inside his pupils.

Trey stepped in, close enough to make it clear he was half-hard and rising fast. “I don’t want a female,” he said quietly. “I want *this*.” He rolled his hips, rubbed himself on a muscled thigh. Reiner inhaled, and Trey settled both hands on his waist, lining them up. He breathed in along Reiner’s neck, shoulder to ear, then went back down and repeated the motion with his tongue.

Oh fuck, that was good. Reiner had used Trey’s soap, and smelling it on his skin tripped a whole bank of switches. Trey palmed Reiner’s lower back, pulling him closer until their cocks mashed together. Reiner grunted, almost a groan, and let go of the railing to grab Trey’s hip with one hand, pushing him back. His other got busy between them, a fast twitch and a nudge until they both pointed up. That was *much* better, and Trey nipped along Reiner’s jawline while they humped slowly, trying things out.

Reiner was the one to initiate the kiss, angling his head and capturing Trey’s mouth. His tongue slid inside, accompanied by a low-frequency groan that ran right down through Trey and lodged in his balls. They couldn’t get any closer, but Trey tried anyway, grinding his hard-on into Reiner’s belly and grabbing his ass.

Reiner broke their kiss, muttering, biting at Trey's chin. "Up..."

Upstairs? Trey asked, not sure why Reiner shuddered. *Yes.*

Trey tried to bite Reiner's ass on the way up the stairs, and stumbled out of his flip-flops when Reiner smacked his head and hissed at him. They staggered through the door, and Trey shoved it closed with one foot. Reiner watched him, unblinking, a small smile playing over his mouth.

Trey slid his bare foot on the wood floor, anticipation making the hairs on his neck prickle. There was nothing he liked better than some seriously rough play—except maybe the sex afterwards. He didn't even care which one of them got to do the roughing up; it was all good. Another gliding step to the right, mirrored by Reiner. Trey breathed out and did it again, half a step, both of them angling closer now. His smile grew when he caught a fleeting impression of ears going sideways, and Reiner tensed, thighs bunching. Trey led with his shoulder, catching Reiner in his center of mass and taking both of them to the floor.

Trey twisted so he hit first, and damn, the rug wasn't much of a cushion. He went with the motion, rolling until Reiner landed on top again. Trey surged up, intending a kiss, and Reiner surprised him by falling sideways. Trey lunged after him, intent on that kiss, and ended up facedown with Reiner straddling his thighs. Trey pulled his knees in, tilting his ass up, growling happily when a hard dick pushed right along his crack. Reiner bit his shoulder, not as hard as Trey would have liked, but still good. His own dick protested the angle and being pressed into the floor, so Trey shoved with both hands up onto all fours.

Reiner took it further, hooked an arm around Trey's throat and dragged him onto his knees, humping Trey's ass and growling in his ear. "Too many clothes."

There was an easy fix for that. Trey reached for the hem of his shirt, and Reiner let him go long enough for both of them to get naked from the waist up. Trey sucked in air as Reiner flattened his hands on Trey's abs, and arched into the touch, his whole body bowing as he welcomed those curious fingers on his skin. Reiner bit his neck again when he reached Trey's chest, and went still when he discovered the tiny barbells through both nipples.

For one awful second, the backwash of surprise seemed a whole lot like distaste, or maybe repelled fascination—Trey wasn't sure. Then he got a crystal clear image of himself, on his knees, bent back onto the sofa while Reiner licked up Trey's stomach on his way to those shiny, silvery balls.

Yes. God, yes.

Reiner shoved him in the direction of the sofa, hooking a hand into the back of Trey's sweats and pulling them down. Trey crawled out of them as he went, knee-walking until he had his back to the sofa. He straightened up, and it was his turn to freeze at the sight of an entirely naked Reiner, on his feet. Lots of lean muscle on a narrow frame, with just enough bulk in his shoulders and thighs to be interesting. He had more body hair than Trey, which was kind of a turn-on, actually, a dark, silky arrow from his navel to his very, *very* nice cock, and the same fine, black hair coated his balls.

Trey palmed his dick, pressing it to his belly because it ached—god, did it ever—and maybe he should take the edge off so he could enjoy the next part without the throb in his balls and low down in his belly as a distraction.

“Only if I can watch.” Reiner licked his lips, the gold in his eyes making the green brighter, spring leaves glowing through an early morning fog on the mountain... and Trey suddenly, desperately, needed to know what Reiner would look like when he shifted, what color his eyes would be then. *Later*, he promised, and his other half submerged, grumbling.

Trey wrapped his fingers around his own erection and squeezed, groaning softly. “Or I could suck you while I get off.”

Reiner's body clearly approved of that plan, and Trey swallowed a rush of saliva as Reiner's foreskin slid back to expose his wet crown. He closed his eyes as the scent overwhelmed him, salt and *male*, the heady combination his body recognized as simply *desire*; and he opened his mouth and leaned toward the source, a plaintive whine escaping.

Reiner jerked against Trey's lips at the first touch, and two hands settled on Trey's skull, not holding him or urging—not yet—just *there*, another point of contact. Trey inhaled, relaxing his tongue, dizzy when the pheromones hit his palate and his body's goal narrowed and focused. Reiner filled his mouth, soft skin over iron, over rock; the musk and the salt making Trey greedy for more. He wrapped his hand even more firmly

around himself and tugged, squeezing almost enough to hurt, and did it again, swallowing Reiner to the back of his throat at the same time.

Reiner moaned, fingers flexing, and on the next downward stroke, Trey changed his grip on his own cock, a little less foreskin, now back up, and... *fuck*.

His instinctive reaction was to bite down, and his eyes nearly rolled up in his head trying not to do just that. He tried it again, hips bucking helplessly as the tiny barbs around the underside of his glans caught the leading edge of his fingers, whining around the cock filling his mouth at the indescribable, gut-twisting, perfect pleasure. Trey used his free hand to hold Reiner steady so he could lick all around the underside of Reiner's cock-head, deliberately flicking the barbs there, and enjoying the way they dragged on his tongue.

Reiner sounded like he was hyperventilating, and his hands squeezed Trey's skull. His mind gave off nothing but white noise, overloading, and Trey fed him everything he felt, all of it, and Reiner's hips stuttered as he groaned, wordlessly begging for more. So Trey sucked him in, all the way to the back of his tongue before he backed off, wrapping his fingers around the shaft and squeezing, sliding on spit. He tightened his lips and used his teeth to scrape the barbs at the same time he wriggled his tongue in the slit.

Short fingernails bit into his scalp, and Reiner groaned so deeply Trey felt the vibration on his lips. He managed one more tug on his own dick, enough to tip him over; mind blanking as his entire body clenched, struggling to breathe through his own orgasm as Reiner pumped into his throat.

He pulled off when Reiner's knees wobbled, and gave him a shove toward the sofa. Reiner went down like a felled tree, then rolled onto his back with a pained hiss. Trey made it to his feet and laid down on top of him, careful about where he put his knees. He tucked his face into the crook of Reiner's neck and sighed, shivering happily at the slow body rush from another noseful of pheromones.

Round two, coming right up.

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CHAPTER THREE

Reiner woke up to sun-warmth on his back and an aching head. He pushed upright and sat on the edge of the unfamiliar—and empty—bed, rubbing his hands over his hair and wanting coffee in the worst way. He also needed to piss, and drew a complete blank about where the hell the bathroom was. Yawning, he shuffled to the bedroom door and, yup, tile and porcelain one room over.

A damp towel hung on the back of the door, not the one he'd used earlier last night, so Trey must've showered before he left. Actually, showering would be a wonderful idea; his skin itched with sweat and come. Once he finished, he found a pair of sweatpants and went to make coffee.

The coffeemaker was already set up, all he had to do was press the button and wait. Propped against a big stoneware mug on the counter was a piece of paper with a phone number and "Trey" in neat all-caps. He'd sort of expected Trey to be here, especially after they'd collapsed into bed around two, two-thirty and curled up together.

He hummed to himself, rubbing a hand down his abs to counter the ripple of gooseflesh. They'd gone for hours, first on the floor, then the sofa, then the floor again. Not as long as with a female in season—or so Reiner had heard—but definitely longer than a human male could manage. The running joke was that their species could have sex more than one hundred times in twenty-four hours... but only for fifteen seconds at a time. Do the math, and it only added up to maybe thirty minutes, total. Not all that impressive.

The way he understood it, with two males, relying solely on friction meant it took longer to come, although the recovery time was still almost immediate. One of the advantages of not relying entirely on hydraulics—Reiner had watched some human porn in college, enough to appreciate his own biological quirks.

Now that he thought about it, he was kind of surprised that Trey let him take the lead the way he had. Sure, Reiner was used to being the aggressor

with his cousins, but Trey—god, he'd expected it to be the other way around. Not that Trey had been all passive. That trick Trey had, using his tongue—and his teeth—on the barbs? That was heart-attack-territory good. And he knew how to use his teeth. Oh yeah.

A thundering, thumping, ratcheting from downstairs made him jump, and vibrated the mug on the counter. It happened again, and he realized it must be the garage doors of the shop rolling up. He looked around for a clock, and saw it was almost eight thirty. Crap. He wanted to be over at SMS by nine so he didn't look like a complete slacker. No time for coffee, then.

He wasted ten minutes trying to find a pair of chinos that weren't hopelessly wrinkled before settling on one of his nicer pairs of jeans. A long-sleeved polo shirt, his good sneakers, and he was ready to go. Wallet, cellphone, keys—no, didn't need those—he bolted out the door and down the stairs.

“Hey.” Trey stepped out from inside the dark interior of the garage, squinting at Reiner. “What's the rush?”

Trey, neck arched, elbows on the floor so he could press up to meet Reiner's mouth. He hissed when Reiner teased and bit his nipples, exploring the barbells with his tongue and teeth, and—

Reiner reminded himself to breathe. “I didn't hear you leave.” Oh, nice—how lame was that?

Trey ducked his head and shrugged, watching Reiner with eyes that had a lot of gold in them. “I had to get back. I promised Eva I'd only be a few hours, and...” He shrugged again, mouth curving in a smile. Reiner had a very clear image of that mouth sucking him in down to the root, and his jeans shrank to just this side of uncomfortable. Trey raised his head, pupils wide even in the sun. “I would've liked to wake up with you, all warm in the sun and all.” He swallowed, and his smile changed, went almost shy. “We were gonna go out in the woods tonight, hunt something, spend the night. Would you like to come with us? We usually have a pretty good time.”

Reiner blinked. *We?*

Trey nodded. “Me, Eva, Sophie and Ethan, Marcus, Dean, and Eliza. We’ll head out around five thirty and come back tomorrow morning. I’d really like it if you’d come with us.”

Reiner said, “Okay,” responding more to the almost-but-not-quite yearning coloring Trey’s thoughts. Hunt what? He’d never gone after anything bigger than a turkey.

“Great.” Trey closed the distance between them, and before Reiner knew what he was going to do, Trey kissed him. Nothing crazy, a simple brush of lips, but Reiner’s entire body heated. Trey laughed as he withdrew, not teasing or anything, a happy sound. He rubbed his nose on Reiner’s cheek and backed away, eyes alight and a slight flush on his cheekbones. “See you later,” he promised, and disappeared into the garage.

Reiner walked down the road, trying to get his body under control. He didn’t quite get why Trey got him so hot and bothered; it wasn’t like Reiner hadn’t done any of this before. Well, not all of it. None of his cousins were pierced anywhere, and damn, those barbells were fun to play with.

Reiner huffed. *Not* helping.

Up close, the SMS building was huge, and looked like it grew out of the surrounding earth; the bronze-green glass and matching stone blending into the greenery around it. He went through a huge wooden door in a metal frame into a tiled lobby with a reception desk at the far end. The area was dim and cool, and his steps slowed as he noticed the carvings on the walls. No, not carvings, the designs were painted. Were they?

“Cool, huh?” The male who’d spoken grinned when Reiner twitched. “Sorry. I did the same thing. It’s wallpaper.” He was shorter than Reiner by at least three inches, and wiry, with longish dark blond hair and green eyes. He stuck out a hand. “Gus Black. It’s really August, but nobody ever calls me that.”

“Reiner Martin.”

Gus nodded, his hair sliding into his face. “I know. We’ve been waiting for you to show up.” Reiner’s eyebrows rose, and Gus waved a hand. “Not,

you know, like you're late or anything. But me and Joel have been here for like almost a week, and we're not supposed to start anything until all of us are here. Did you just get here?" Reiner opened his mouth—not fast enough, though. "We have rooms over at the Inn. They're *really* small, so I'm glad we don't have to share. Not that I figure we'll be there much, 'cause, y'know, we'll probably be here most of the time, anyway."

A second male joined them from a room Reiner hadn't even noticed, the doorway screened by a palm or something. He was as tall as Reiner but skinny, no muscle to him at all. And messy. In general, Reiner didn't pay much attention to his hair; every other month he got it cut short and that was it, the shorter the better. This male looked like somebody hacked at his dark hair with dull scissors—or maybe he'd chopped off the front to keep it out of his eyes. It made Reiner twitchy to look at it.

"Joel Lund," the new male said, not meeting Reiner's eyes. The hair on Reiner's neck bristled at the evasion. "You're the hardware guy, right?"

"I do both." Reiner didn't quite get why these two made him want to growl. He'd never gotten like this with his cousins or his brothers.

Joel nodded, and something about the set of his shoulders eased the prickle down Reiner's spine.

"So when did you get here?" Gus almost bounced on the balls of his feet.

"Yesterday afternoon. My car broke down, and the garage had to come and pick me up." Reiner frowned as Gus and Joel exchanged an *oh shit* look. "What?"

Gus and Joel stared at him, wide-eyed. "Did you see him?" Gus whispered. "Aidan?"

"Yeah. He was driving the flatbed." Reiner shrugged. "Why?"

"God, I would've freaked," Gus muttered. "Look, why don't you get checked in and we can all go for coffee or something. I mean, we're gonna be working together, right? Might as well get properly introduced."

The female behind the reception desk—who was both young and pretty—looked up as Reiner approached. He got a clear impression of *ears*

and whiskers forward—polite curiosity—as she tilted her head, light brown eyes bright and friendly. Her nostrils flared, and she smiled at him, a flash of white teeth and some serious dimples.

“You must be Reiner Martin,” she said, her accent pure southern girl all the way. “Welcome to Stone Mountain. Mr. DaSilva left an envelope for you.” She handed Reiner a manila envelope. “There are instructions inside, and papers you need to sign. You can bring them back on Monday and leave them with Personnel.”

“Thank you.” Reiner smiled back automatically, wondering if there was anything else he was supposed to do.

She shook her head, a spark of humor in her eyes now. “If you have any questions, I’ll be here until three. Otherwise, you can ask Trey.”

Heat crept along the back of Reiner’s neck, and he stepped back from the desk, fighting an embarrassed smile. “Thank you,” he repeated, wondering if he needed a second shower. He didn’t *think* he smelled like sex. Or Trey. Did he?

He rejoined Gus and Joel, and they all went outside. The day was heating up, and he pushed his sleeves up to bare his forearms.

“Her name is Lily,” Joel said, looking at his sneakers. “The receptionist. She’s a Cole. I have to check with my mother, but I think we’re related.” He scuffed through the gravel at the edge of the road. “I didn’t figure on having any relations here.” Joel finally looked up, revealing eyes so dark they were nearly black.

Gus punched him lightly on the arm. “Give it a break. Seriously. I’ll bet there are dozens of females here who aren’t related to you.”

The three of them finished crossing the road, angling across to the diner, and Joel picked up the thread of conversation. “She just smells good. I don’t know about you guys, but I was hoping to meet some nice females here.” He offered a small smile. “I have six sisters, so I’m kinda wishin’ I throw females.”

“That would be cool,” Reiner agreed. Overall, there were always more males than females; the ratio was about three to one. Females did the

choosing when it came to sex, and a male who consistently produced female offspring was always popular, to put it mildly.

They went inside, and Reiner headed for a booth in the back, far from the door. A different waitress than the night before offered them menus. They ordered coffee all around, plus a breakfast special each. The coffees appeared instantly, and Reiner picked up a sugar packet.

“So where are you staying?” Gus asked, dumping three sugars into his coffee, and following that with milk.

“Um. My room wasn’t ready at the Inn.” Reiner stirred his coffee and took a cautious sip, wrinkling his nose at the heat. “I’m staying over the garage for the weekend.”

“Aren’t you...” Gus frowned, and looked at Joel for help. “I don’t know. Nervous?”

Nervous? Reiner had a vision of Trey, skin gleaming with sweat, braced over Reiner while their hips ground together. Joel yelped as hot coffee went up his nose, and Gus’s eyes opened as wide as they could go.

“Fuck,” Gus breathed, nearly reverent. “That was Trey DaSilva, right?”

“You just got here,” Joel said, scowling. “How did you manage *that*?”

“It just sort of... happened.” For hours. “He flirted, and I figured...” Reiner trailed off, not sure how much he wanted to say. “It was just some fun.”

Gus and Joel both snorted. “You know about the DaSilvas, right?” Gus asked. “I mean, I’m from Colorado, right?”

“Okay.” Reiner had no idea where this was going.

“So, about twenty years ago, maybe a couple more, Blais DaSilva made a few trips to our settlement. He had one son from way before that, then he fathered another one, and then Trey. But it was like—he doesn’t *like* females.”

Joel and Reiner stared at him. “What do you mean?” Joel asked, frowning a little. “He’s got four, five offspring.”

“Yeah, but he never has sex with a female *unless* she’s in season.” Gus raised his eyebrows.

“So?” Reiner said slowly. “That’s true of lots of males, right? I don’t get it.” He remembered then the way Trey rubbed against him, the way he said “I don’t want a female,” and it took on a whole other meaning. “So you’re saying he *prefers* males? What’s the big deal?”

“Really.” Joel shrugged. “Females are crazy. Yeah, the sex is great, but there’s a reason we don’t... you know, pair off and shit like that. Males are tons easier to get along with.”

“I’m just sayin’ that DaSilvas are weird, is all.” Gus threw his balled-up empty sugar packet at Joel. “Most of ’em prefer males—pretty much exclusively—and they like pain. That’s why most them are pierced.” He hunched his shoulders, but their meals came before he could say anything else.

After that, Reiner made it a point to keep the conversation on work, or at least on what they’d be working on come Monday. Once they all got going with the geek-talk, it was easy to not think about Trey, or what they’d done. Might do. Much.

When Reiner headed back to Trey’s apartment, Trey was nowhere to be seen, and the garage was closed up tight. Reiner’s car sat off to the side; Trey must have rolled it back, out of the way. At the top of the stairs, a note was stuck in the door.

Took a look at your car. Water pump is shot. Ordered the parts. See you later.

Trey

Reiner shoved at the upstairs door to get it open; Trey had to do the same thing last night. He left the note on the table, and debated setting up his laptop and spending some time catching up on his email. He yawned, and scratched his belly under his shirt. A nap would be nice. A couple of hours, then he’d see what Wi-Fi was like out here. He shrugged out of his shirt and toed off his sneakers next to the bed, lying down in just his jeans. The pillows and sheets smelled like both of them: black pepper, saffron, and orange peel. It made a nice combination in his nose. Reiner curled up around a pillow and dropped off to sleep.

At five o'clock, Reiner changed into a ratty pair of jeans and a T-shirt he'd had since high school, figuring he'd be naked in a little while anyway. If he had to stash his clothes someplace while they ran around in the woods, he certainly wasn't wearing anything nice. He slipped on his old sneakers, the ones he'd had for years and couldn't part with, and sat at the bottom of the stairs outside to wait.

At five twenty-five, something shiny and black came grumbling down the road next to the garage, something with a big engine. He didn't know for sure, but he'd guess it was older than he was by maybe thirty years. It *looked* like a car, but had an open bed in the back like a pickup truck. A bed filled with six young jaguars of varying ages, all wearing pretty much the same as Reiner. And Trey was driving. Reiner got up and walked over to the idling vehicle.

Trey put the car—truck?—in Park and got out, leaving the engine running. "Behold," he said, waving a hand, TV-presenter style. "The Chevy El Camino. The world's most useless vehicle."

"I don't know." A teenage female, lithe and lean, hopped out of the back. Her sable hair almost reached her waist, and the only word Reiner had for her was *exotic*. She didn't look anything like his female relatives, who were rounded and soft in comparison. Eva was sleek, and moved like there was plenty of muscle underneath her clothes. "Dad says the civilian version of the Hummer is the world's most useless vehicle." She stalked over to Reiner and gave him a once-over—mind and body. Her mental touch was almost electrical, with the promise of a nasty shock if you ventured too close. He bristled at the intrusion in his head, and her amber eyes gleamed, accompanied by a friendly show of teeth. "Don't get your fur all ruffled. Trey says you need your shields fixed—we can help you with that." She stuck her hands in her jeans' pockets and rocked on the balls of her feet. "I'm Eva."

Reiner's jaw loosened, because along with her name, she gave him a strange cluster of images, a little mental data packet, a zip file of personal information. He knew her full name was Eva Jameson, she was sixteen, and she was no relation to Trey at all even if they had grown up as siblings. And, although she called Aidan "dad", same as Trey, she was, in fact,

Aidan's sister-in-law, not his daughter. She huffed at his confusion. *Yeah, we're complicated.*

"How did you do that?" Reiner blurted. "And can you teach me how?"

Eva nodded. "Think so, unless you're completely stupid." Reiner growled, and she grinned, unafraid. "Just 'cause you went to college doesn't make you smart. Not that way, anyway. 'Sides, Trey likes 'em smart *and* pretty." Now Trey growled, and she wrinkled her nose at him. "Well, you do."

A younger male sidled up to her, lighter-haired and green-eyed, and she put an arm around his shoulders. "This is Marcus—" *age eleven, Aidan and Emery's son. Plays soccer and loves video games.* His mental aura was bubbly water, a less-scary version of Aidan's cascading waterfall.

Two more teens jumped out of the El Camino, a male and a female, followed by two five-or-six-year-olds. The teens were Ethan, dark-haired and amber-eyed—*Aidan and Emery's oldest son, fourteen, better at video games than Marcus—*

"Who whipped who at Ultimate Halo?" Marcus sneered, as only a pre-teen could. Eva shook him by the scruff, accompanied by a light mental slap. Reiner knew his mouth was open and shut it.

—and Sophie, who smiled at Reiner while she sent him *fourteen, Ethan's fraternal twin, and video games are for geeks.* Her eyes, amber like her brother's, widened, and her mouth made an O. *Sorry.* Sophie struck Reiner as a softer version of Eva, in fact, both she and Ethan reminded him of Aidan a little in the shape of their faces.

Ethan and Sophie's mental barriers were also variations on water, swirls and froth, with a touch of fog. "We get that from Mom," Sophie informed him. "The fog part."

Some stray fact tumbled through Reiner's head, disappearing the instant he focused on it, leaving an odd disquiet behind. Where had that come from? He could almost see the... *words*, that was it, a huge whiteboard in a chilly classroom and the professor writing in red—

"And last, and certainly the most terrifying—" Trey scooped up the two little ones, who settled themselves on each hip with their arms around his

neck, giggling at his put-on growly voice. “Eliza and Dean.” *Five, fraternal twins, Emery’s children.*

At first, Reiner thought they had no shields—the two of them were perfect blanks—and the hair on his neck rose as he realized that *was* their shield. The only way he could tell them apart was by their eyes: Dean’s were the same amber as Eva’s and the older twins, Eliza’s were hazel. Their dark hair was the same length, and the clothes—jeans and a T-shirt—were unisex.

“Don’t be fooled,” Trey told him. Reiner had to shut his mouth again, and Trey gave him a small, strange smile. “Like Eva said—”

“*Sumus contortum?*” Reiner offered, and Trey’s smile grew to include his eyes.

“Yeah,” he murmured, and Reiner’s heart hitched, an odd sensation.

Eva nodded. “Right. Now that we’ve got that over with, can we all get back in the car?” She tilted her head, the same way Trey did sometimes, and squinted at Reiner. “I’m thinking we can work on your shields when we get out in the woods, if that’s okay? Better to do it before we all shift.”

“Okay.” *We who?*

“I think this is gonna be a group effort.” Trey deposited the five-year-olds in the back of the El Camino. The others piled in, too, and Trey opened the driver’s door. “You get to ride up front with me.” He laughed when the six younger jaguars all made kissy noises, and Reiner hoped his flush wasn’t visible as he slid into the warm interior.

No, but we can all feel it, Eva told him, snickering. *Trey and Reiner sitting in a tree...*

The rest of them picked up the sing-song chant, out loud: “K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes sex, then comes grooming—”

“I am *really* sorry about this,” Trey muttered, covering his eyes with one hand.

“—then comes Reiner with a lot of bruising.”

“How come *I’m* the one with the bruises?” Reiner protested, half-laughing.

Because Trey doesn't scan, Eva said. Although you did leave some nice bite-marks.

I think 'carnage' would work better than 'grooming', Ethan said. Or maybe 'damage'.

Yeah, but what rhymes with damage? Eva countered.

Bandage? Marcus suggested.

Eva hummed thoughtfully. *Then comes Reiner with a... big old bandage? That sucks.*

Ethan snickered. *I bet Reiner—Ow! Hey.* A thump from the back of the car was followed by growling, and more thumping.

Trey laughed out loud and put the car in drive, easing out onto the blacktop. *Try not to fall out.*

"Are they always like this?" Reiner kept his voice low.

We can still hear you, Sophie told him. This is us being nice. Just wait till we get to know you better.

Reiner slumped down, the vinyl seat squeaking under him, and sighed. Trey reached over and patted his knee before signaling a turn.

There isn't a car for miles, Ethan pointed out.

"And when you're old enough to drive, don't signal. I'm signaling." Trey made a right, into the woods, onto another paved road.

Reiner sat up, realizing there were houses on both sides of them. He'd half wondered where everybody lived, but didn't expect *this*. The road—two narrow lanes, no center markings—wound aimlessly, a lazy, swooping serpentine with offshoots that curved off and disappeared. No street signs, no house numbers, and no mailboxes. And the houses were all *old*, with different kinds of wood siding and lots of multi-paned windows. It made him think of a movie set, fake suburbia from the early twentieth century filled with gingerbread houses.

"Close," Trey said, waving to a male with a weed-trimmer at the side of the road. "The oldest one is from about 1910, and the newest is 1940. There's some newer houses further back, but most of them are like this. They're kit houses."

“What, like pre-fab?” The house he’d grown up in was *nothing* like these.

“Yeah, but these are from Sears.”

“Like, what? You mean the store?” Reiner laughed. “You’re shitting me.”

“No, really. Sears sold, like, tens of thousands of these. They had, I don’t know, something like three hundred models. You picked one out from a catalogue, and they shipped it to you in a boxcar.”

“Holy shit.” Reiner stuck his head out of the window to get a better look. Now he could see that some of them had additions tacked on, or newer roofs, and one or two had aluminum siding.

“That’s how Stone Mountain Construction started. The males learned carpentry and stuff by building these.” Trey slowed down and made another right, and gravel thudded underneath the car. This road, oddly enough, was nearly straight, although just wide enough for the car. The gravel stopped after a couple of car lengths, and the road changed to plain dirt ruts, with tall grass running between them.

Trey rolled the car along at a sedate ten miles an hour, and finally crept over a simple wooden bridge spanning a dry creek bed. The woods were pushed back here, making a clearing, and the road made a left into the woods and disappeared. Trey pulled over and parked, turning off the engine.

The car rocked as the passengers in the back scrambled out, and Reiner smirked at Trey. “Are we there yet?”

Trey smirked back, twisting sideways, and slid a slightly damp palm over Reiner’s shoulder and around the back of his neck. He leaned over, and Reiner met him halfway, his mouth finding Trey’s with no hesitation. Their tongues met and slid, poor imitation of what Reiner could imagine them doing naked, although maybe not in the front seat of a car. Trey’s fingers tightened, and the kiss turned hungry for a breathless few seconds.

Trey pulled back, panting, nuzzling Reiner’s neck and ear. “You’d be surprised.” He drew in a shaky breath, and rested his forehead in the curve of Reiner’s shoulder. Reiner trailed his hand over Trey’s hair and down his

neck, over his strong back, then did it again, waiting for his own breathing to slow. The thudding pulse in his groin echoed his heartbeat—he didn't remember anybody working him up this fast, not ever.

Trey huffed, and licked Reiner's neck before sitting up. They kissed again, heated and slow, a promise of more to come. "Not tonight, though," Trey sighed into Reiner's ear, and they both shivered. "Come on."

Reiner's whole body protested getting out of the car; walking wouldn't be easy for a couple of minutes, that's for sure. The others were nowhere to be seen. Nice of them to give him and Trey a couple minutes of privacy.

Trey barked out a laugh, pulling a limp backpack from behind the front seat. "They're just impatient. Trust me, if they weren't distracted, they'd all be here watching."

Reiner let Trey lead the way out of the clearing and onto a barely-there path. A few yards in, his knees wobbled, and he threw out a hand for balance. Trey grabbed his arm as another wave of vertigo ran through him, and Reiner gritted his teeth against the static charge building in his joints. The next wave was worse, and his knees gave out as the staticky prickle amped up into an outright burn. *Fuck. Oh... fuck.*

Don't fight it. Trey tugged at Reiner's shirt, sliding it over one arm while Reiner swayed; even kneeling Reiner had to work to stay upright. *Go.*

Reiner held on long enough to wriggle out of his pants, pushing his sneakers off at the same time. He let the charge build, buzzing in his ears, trickling along his tendons until there was nothing but that sizzling energy coiling up, higher and hotter; exactly like the instant before orgasm, the same biting promise of pleasure. The ground was warm under his palms and his knees, his only points of reference in the physical world; then those disappeared, wiped out as his whole focus turned inward, coiling even further and tighter. He resisted, dammed it all up, until the bite threatened to rip him apart... and he let it.

Energy roared through him, tumbled him, and he rode the surge, right into the darkness—three heartbeats of nothing, a black lacuna of sensation—and shot out the other side, whole again.

He blinked the world into washed-out focus, rolling onto his elbows and belly while his senses sorted out the woods... and found Trey. Reiner exhaled on a purr, stretching his chin out so Trey could use his whole hand to scratch under it instead of just his fingertips. He rubbed his cheek on Trey's hand, rose to his feet to reach the rest of him, leaning his shoulder into Trey and nearly knocking him on his ass.

Trey's hands were *everywhere*, and he knew all the good spots, digging his fingers through Reiner's fur to the muscle underneath, easing the lingering aches of shifting. Reiner wanted *more*; he shoved into Trey and laid him out flat, nosing under his T-shirt to scent-mark his abs, ears sideways and eyes closed in bliss. Trey's scent filled his nose and coated his tongue, spicy and strange and familiar all at once. He licked Trey's ear, and Trey scrunched his shoulder to keep him from doing it again, laughing and pushing Reiner off him.

God, Reiner loved that sound, and how it made Trey's interior forest of bamboo glow with warmth.

Trey got to his feet, brushing leaves and dirt off his jeans and still managing to leave a hand free to explore Reiner's ears. Trey picked up his backpack, now full of Reiner's clothes and shoes, and started down the path again, one hand on Reiner's head to keep him close.

The path opened into a clearing, and all of Trey's sunniness evaporated. Everyone else had shifted already, and Trey crossed the clearing in three fast strides, snarling at the two smallest jaguars. Reiner's dorsal fur went up, but he knew better than to interfere.

The black cub—Reiner knew it was Eliza—hissed at Trey, and he snatched her by the scruff, lifting her forepaws off the ground. Dean—cinnamon and cream, with dark rosettes—made himself small when Trey hissed at him.

“Apologize,” Trey growled at both of them. “Apologize *right* this fucking second. You *know* better—that was rude and you know it.” He dropped Eliza, and she flattened her ears and her whiskers, tail fluffed. She hissed at him again, and Trey crouched in front of her, elbows on his knees. His growl was almost silky with menace. “I know where you go when you

run away from day care. Think about *that*.” Trey stood, dusting imaginary debris off his thighs, eyes locked on Eliza.

Dean radiated dismay even through his perfectly opaque shield, and it occurred to Reiner how really weird it was for a cub that young to have that kind of control. And, right on the heels of that thought, was that even the adults he knew couldn’t trigger a shift in another jaguar. Damn.

Then Dean slunk—there was no other word—over to Reiner, curling his tail around one haunch when he got close. He blinked at Reiner, slow and deliberate, whiskers quivering and not quite flat. *Sorry. We won’t do it again. But you need better shields.* His ears dipped when Trey growled. *He does. You said so, too.*

Eliza came over, low, but not slinking as much, and offered Reiner a nose touch. She was sorry, he got that, and he rubbed his cheek over her head, mingling their scents. Dean joined them, and Reiner pinned him with a paw and groomed his ear with rough strokes. *Apology accepted.*

Me, Eliza demanded, butting his shoulder. *Groom me, too.* Young as she was, Eliza tasted of female—a kind of new-leather-richness—and something warm he had no name for. *Nutmeg*, she told him, closing her eyes as he licked her forehead. And showed him a wrinkly light-brown nut-thing, almost like a very small walnut shell. *Mami puts them on mushrooms. You grate them.*

God, it was like a little movie in his head. He saw a female, an older version of Eva, near a huge stove, using a tool that looked like something from wood shop to grate the nutmeg-thing over a steaming pan, sending a drift of tan powder over the food. An HD movie, to boot. With smells. Jesus.

He thinks like Daddy, Eliza announced. *Slippery. Not straight lines. Your fence is stupid.*

Before Reiner could ask her to clarify that truly strange non sequitur, Eliza was *in* his head, fluid and cool. He stiffened, claws digging into the dirt, and she bathed him in warmth, aided by Dean.

Watch. To his complete amazement, his interior privacy fence disassembled itself and melted, multiplied and resolved into a series of staggered barriers that looked solid but sort of weren't. Then she showed him how it looked from *outside* his head: the entrance to a maze.

Oh. He explored the construct, running over it almost the way you ran your tongue along the inside of your teeth. It... *fit*, and god, the *elegance* of it, like code.

Better. Eliza licked his jaw, and Reiner reciprocated, washing her ears until she purred.

Not much of a weapon, Sophie pointed out. *What is he going to do? Confuse somebody into a stupor?*

Ethan yawned, showing a lot of teeth and pink tongue. *Ooh. Somebody reached S in the dictionary.* Sophie swatted him, ears sideways.

"Are we done fixing him?" Trey asked. He sat cross-legged a few feet from Reiner, elbows on his knees. He gave Reiner a slow blink, eyes warm and very gold. "And not everybody needs to be a weapon, Soph." He unfolded his legs as he stood, shrugging his T-shirt over his head and slipping off his flip-flops at the same time. The barbells winked in the dying light, and Reiner licked his own nose, remembering the feel of them on his tongue. Trey shucked his jeans, standing there naked while he folded his shirt and jeans and stuffed everything in the backpack. He straightened, rolling his shoulders, bulkier without the disguise of clothing. Then he took a breath, chest expanding, and sank gracefully to his knees.

Their species didn't have a lot of rules, but not watching while somebody shifted was basic. For the first minute, though, Reiner *couldn't* look away.

Trey was gorgeous at that moment, muscles standing out in sharp relief and a fine sheen of sweat breaking out all over. His cock rose halfway and his balls lifted, the burn of the impending shift translating into another kind of desire. Reiner understood then that the barbells acted both as amplifiers and focus, a way to fuel a faster shift. Trey didn't resist—or even ignore—the accelerating pain, he *embraced* it. Rode it. *Used* it.

Every young jaguar timed their shift at one point or another, competing to see who could do it the fastest—or delay it the longest. If he pushed, Reiner could shift in seven minutes, start to finish, although every part of him hurt like a son of a bitch for about a half hour afterward.

Trey managed it in five.

When he rose to his paws, shaking his fur into place, he was panting, and humming with adrenaline. His eyes shone a brassy gold with a green rim, almost the reverse of Reiner's green-into-copper. And his coat... Reiner got up, too, leaving Eliza and Dean, and sniffed at Trey's muzzle, closing his eyes to process better. Trey rubbed his cheek against Reiner's, and that turned into a long glide, shoulders bumping, leaning into each other for maximum contact as they exchanged personal scents. They did it again on the opposite sides, and then Trey swatted him, hooking a foreleg over Reiner so he could gnaw on his ear, purring deeply.

Their coats were a close match, copper shading into cream, although the rosettes down Trey's spine were nearly solid blocks of black. Beautiful.

God, you're pretty, Reiner told him, bouncing away and laughing when Trey pinned his ears. *You are.*

Bite me, Trey growled, more invitation than threat.

Is the love-fest over? Eva said tartly, sitting down and wrapping her tail around her forefeet. Like Eliza, her coat was black, and her rosettes appeared and disappeared as she moved. *'Cause we're losing the light.*

Fine. Trey gave a fast shake to settle his fur again, and sat down to groom one paw. *Where do you wanna head?*

North, Ethan suggested. *Over near the little cave, the overhang one.*

Sounds good. Trey blinked at Reiner. *You ready?* They fell in next to one another as Eva led the way out of the clearing, all of them slipping through a screen of rhododendrons and into the dim woods.

So how does this work? Reiner had never hunted anything bigger than a turkey, although he'd chased deer once or twice for fun. Strictly speaking, jaguars weren't built for running. *We split up, and whoever gets a deer shares it?*

What fun would that be? Marcus circled back, coming close enough for Reiner to catch his scent, apples and black pepper, without the deeper edge of sexual maturity.

Really. That's no fun at all. Ethan flicked his tail.

We stay together, Trey explained. *Spread out, though, in a big flat V.* He showed Reiner what he meant, a line of them sweeping through the woods at a jog.

But we're... It seemed stupid to state the obvious, but Reiner did it anyway. *We're ambush predators. Not... pack animals.*

Right. Trey bounded forward, used the momentum to run up a tree and tag a low-hanging branch with a paw. *You go sit there and wait for a deer to come by, and we'll let you know when we catch one.* He landed easily, and flattened his ears at Reiner. *You got the predator part right, but we're not animals.*

Reiner hissed, on general principle, and Trey rushed him. Reiner went with it, rolling under Trey and coming up behind him, raking his paws down Trey's sides, claws half out. Trey twisted, supple as a snake, and his hind paws shoved Reiner, lifting him clean off the ground.

Claws, Reiner snarled, wrapping his forelegs around Trey and biting high up on his chest. Trey bit his ear and then licked it, swiping his rough tongue inside and making Reiner shudder. They rolled apart, tails lashing, dorsal fur spiky with excitement.

Males, Eva drawled, sauntering between them, her black tail describing a lazy sideways sine wave. Trey chuffed at her, and Reiner leaned over to sniff her flank. Lemony-minty-leather, very nice, very—he caught himself when Trey growled at him.

Eva chuffed back, whiskers bristling. *Mom is right. All balls, no brains.*

Mom never said that. Trey sounded scandalized, much to Eva's obvious amusement.

No, what she said was that you're all dumb as rocks most of the time. You can both go piss on stuff later—can we hunt now?

Trey yawned elaborately and licked his whiskers. *Sure. Ethan?*

Ethan's ears pricked, and he cocked his head.

You be the center, 'kay? Me and Eva will take the ends. Trey stretched, digging into the loam with his claws, then brushed his muzzle along Reiner's jaw. *You know the thing you felt coming into town? You called it an antenna or something. Well, we need to do that now.*

Reiner tilted his head, not hiding his confusion. *Why?*

'Cause that's how we hunt. Just—give us a second? Trey looked at Ethan. *Go ahead.*

Reiner never thought all that much about the group sense that existed between members of his species—it just... *was*, there on the edge of awareness, running quietly in the background. He'd never used it for anything, not really. But Ethan... Ethan sent out a—Reiner saw it as a slender glowing cable—to each one of them, one after the other. Reiner did what everyone else did, let it snug up against his shields, and then the cables *multiplied*, becoming a bright connecting web.

That's so cool. Reiner could feel them all, networked together. Like... a LAN. Or an Intranet.

Wow. Sophie laughed, but not in a mean way. *Geek, much? Let's go.*

Ethan slipped off the path, jogging off into the twilight dimness, and the others followed, fanning out in his wake. Reiner had a moment of concern for the twins; they were maybe a third the size of the older jaguars.

This isn't their first hunt, Trey told him, falling in off to Reiner's left and moving out several yards. *They know to stay back if it's something big. We're after deer, but if you smell feral pig, let everybody know. Dad and Papi will go after it.*

Reiner's comment on the wisdom of purposely hunting a feral pig was cut off as the connecting web went *live* somehow, and he tripped over his own paws at the overload of information. *What the fuck is that?* He cursed some more as he got his balance; seeing the woods from multiple viewpoints made him dizzy. Everybody caught his unease and dialed back the flood of images, the other jaguars coming to a halt when he did.

Trey loped over and bumped shoulders with him. *You okay?*

No. Reiner tried closing his eyes; it didn't help. *You coulda warned me.* Eliza came to his rescue, tugging at the invisible connections, turning seven conflicting inputs into... Reiner blinked, but the image in his head stayed steady. *Like a video game?*

Yes, she told him. *Daddy calls it a heads-up array. Does that work?*

I think so. He shook his fur smooth and gave Eliza a slow blink, full of warmth. *This'll work just fine.*

Reiner got lost for a bit, trying to figure out the mechanics of the web-thing, then had to concentrate as the whole line of them picked up speed, angling into a V. He bounced over a log, using all four sets of claws to propel his body, and god, he'd forgotten how much fun running in the woods could be. Around where he grew up, it was a lot of farmland with woods scattered here and there, and hunting season of one kind or another made running around shifted dangerous most of the year.

There's hunting here, Eva said. *This is state game lands, and over that way—*Reiner saw a flash of bare granite slopes in his head—*is the state park. Maybe twenty thousand acres all together.*

We keep track of who comes in, and we'll hear a human from a good ways off, Ethan added. *None of us come over here during deer season, though. Humans shoot first, check what it is later.*

All of them caught the deer scent at the same time, and Reiner's whiskers bristled forward. The other arm of the V, anchored by Eva, flattened out as they all changed direction. Off in the woods, maybe a half dozen yards ahead, Reiner caught a flash of white.

Turning, Trey snarled, echoed by Eva. *Turning, it's turning—go, go—shit, move!*

Down a slope now, and Reiner let gravity do its thing and help him accelerate. Loam turned to dirt, then sandy silt and pebbles—the deer leapt the stream in one bound, with Marcus hot on its heels.

Marcus stretched, swiped; the deer's hindquarters bobbled and it put on a burst of speed. Sophie lunged, and the buck darted out of reach. Reiner

shoved with his hind legs, completely misjudging how much traction he'd get, and the deer veered again, right into his trajectory. Reiner twisted in midair—no thought required—collided with two hundred or so pounds of *Odocoileus virginianus*, and flew sideways in a tangle of flailing hooves and spotted fur.

He let the momentum roll them both and came out on top, front claws hanging on to the buck's shoulders as it tried to lurch to its feet. Reiner heaved his body forward, claws digging in even further, jaws opening, and bit down. Fluids exploded on his tongue, hot and salt and copper and sweet—*oh my*—and his mind blanked at the exquisite combination. The deer jerked and his jaws closed almost all the way in reflex, skull and vertebrae crunching marvelously under his teeth. A live current of unbearable, fabulous excitement ran through his core, and he pulled back, just to feel the pressure on his jaws.

Reiner rode the deer as it dropped and slid, and backed off the carcass with an effort, licking his whiskers to taste the blood on them, his fur fluffed from the adrenaline rush. He wanted to do it again, experience the visceral shock of biting down and the frantic power of the deer between his jaws. God, yes. He snarled at Trey and Eva, ears flattening, blocking them from getting anywhere near the kill.

Trey crouched, lowering his belly until it brushed the ground, and blinked at Reiner, slow and deliberate. Eva hung back, and when Trey blinked again, adding a purr, Reiner blinked back, relaxing. *Share*, Trey sent him, and crept close enough to touch noses. He licked Reiner's jaw, eyes closing, and Reiner let him, shivering in pleasure.

Reiner returned the favor, and Eva approached to offer a nose touch. *Let's eat*, he told them.

They dragged the carcass farther from the stream, and between the eight of them, turned it into nothing but scraps by the time they were all full. Reiner heaved himself onto his paws and padded down to the stream for a drink, dabbling his front paws in the flowing water. No matter how much you groomed, you could never get them clean enough, in his opinion. Trey joined him, lapping at the cold water.

We need to move before we all fall asleep, Trey said. *I don't want to sleep here.*

Reiner sat down and groomed a paw, working one claw with his teeth. *Not like there's anything bigger than us out here.*

Yeah, but there's lots of smaller critters who'll want the leftovers. They won't come around with us here.

The others were all on their feet now, and after they'd all gotten a drink, Marcus led them up away from the stream, climbing a low ridge. They followed it for a ways, before heading into a dip in the terrain. There were a lot of rocks here, pushing up from the earth, and something had dug a broad, shallow cave underneath a rocky overhang.

They all crowded into the space, leaving Trey and Reiner closest to the front. Reiner flopped down, and Trey sprawled half on top of him, hooking a foreleg across Reiner's shoulders. He groomed Reiner's ear, his rough tongue pleasantly warm, and Reiner closed his eyes. Trey was thorough, finding all the blood and deer bits and washing him clean.

Reiner leaned into the pressure, sighing at the soothing strokes. He'd forgotten how nice it was to let somebody do this, get the parts you couldn't lick for yourself. Soothing, yeah, but more than that, it felt *good*. Not sex-good, but close-good; the way he remembered from being little, when he'd sleep in a pile with his cousins—four legs or two, it didn't matter much—for warmth and comfort. When had they stopped doing that? Puberty? When sex started to become less theoretical and more possible? He had no idea, hadn't even known how much he missed it until right now.

Sometimes, Trey mused, *once they switched and Reiner was licking Trey's muzzle, we all sleep together in the big bed.* He sent Reiner an image of an enormous bed, easily bigger than a king. *In the winter, mostly, but sometimes during big storms. Mom—Emery—that's how she was raised, and she misses the others, even after...* He trailed off.

After what? Reiner asked.

They died, and it was just her and Aidan left. Trey shivered, and Reiner saw—a huge helicopter? He thought that's what it was—burning and wrecked. It reminded him of war movies.

Was she a mercenary? He didn't think females joined Arrowhead, but he wasn't sure.

A current ran through all of them, a thought too slippery and quick for Reiner to follow, more picture than words. Trey tipped his chin up so Reiner could wash his neck. *No*, Trey said, after a pause. *She was born on the Preserve.*

Reiner paused mid-lick. *But—How did she get out?* Come to think of it, how did Aidan? He pulled his tongue in, spitting out some hair.

They had help, from inside the Preserve, and they got lucky—I promise I'll tell you the whole thing, okay? Just... it's a really long story. Trey rubbed his head against Reiner's, cheek to cheek. *And that's just the parts I know—they don't like to talk about it. Lots of bad stuff happened to both of them.* He shivered, and Reiner moved, curling around Trey until they made a yin-yang symbol, and rested his chin on Trey's hip. Trey sighed and did the same, and Reiner...

Something moved, deep inside him, clicked into place and completed some essential circuit. Made a connection. Reiner breathed in, and their scents were mingled, tangled, one complex scent instead of two distinct signatures. Mostly it was the grooming, true, but Reiner still liked it, a lot, and drifted off with a sigh of his own.

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CHAPTER FOUR

They slept almost straight through the night, although once it got chilly they piled closer, one ball of fur. Trey woke up first—his side was cold because he'd ended up in the very front of the cave somehow. He lifted his head and tested the air, sorting the smell-taste and checking for danger. Not that anything out here was a threat, except maybe bears, and not too many of them wanted to share the mountain with the jaguars. He'd never seen nor scented a cougar, and compared to most of the South, their county was almost free of feral hogs. Trey had absolutely no desire to mess with one of those; he left that kind of craziness to Blais and Aidan, who hunted them for the pure joy of it. No thanks.

Trey eased away from Reiner and padded a few feet away, stretching to warm up. He shook, fluffing his coat against the chill, and headed off into the predawn to find a tree. They had maybe an hour, hour and a half before the sun came up, and he wanted all of them back at the car, shifted and dressed, by sunrise at the latest.

He was scuffing his hind feet in the dirt and debating if he should use his claws to mark another tree when Reiner found him.

Cold, Reiner said, and bumped shoulders with Trey. He swatted Trey's hip, claw tips only, and Trey tried to bite his tail. Reiner twitched it out of the way, and managed to pin Trey's tail for a split second, nipping the very tip before letting go. *Gotcha*.

Trey lunged, tried bowling Reiner over and didn't quite manage it, although he did get a nip of his own in. Reiner ran, and Trey chased him in a circle, their breath puffing in the gray light. They played tail-tag, swatting at each other until Reiner changed direction and they slammed together, going down with an audible thud. They were evenly matched, both in weight and in reach, which made this all the more fun. Trey finally got both forepaws on Reiner's tail and nibbled the length of it, deliberately reminding Reiner of doing something similar somewhere else. A little spark of excitement jumped between them, and Trey growled happily as their

play acquired an edge, claws coming out a bit farther, neither of them being so careful.

Reiner bit his shoulder, a nice sting, and Trey twisted to bite Reiner's chest, fast and hard. They rolled apart in a flurry of fur and legs, and Reiner dove back in, low, aiming for Trey's belly. Trey flopped sideways, rabbit-kicking with his hind legs, and froze when Reiner sprang away, hissing in surprise.

Did I get you? Trey stood up, shaking off leaf litter and settling his fur.

Reiner's eyes were wide and he licked his nose, ears out sideways. *I didn't think—they're still there.*

What? Oh. Trey sneezed and sat on his haunches, moving one foreleg out of the way to groom his upper belly. The barbells winked silver through his fur. *What did you think happened to them? Not like I took them out.*

I don't know what I thought. I don't know anybody else who's pierced like that. Reiner sat down and curled his tail around his paws, tilting his head as he watched Trey.

*Some piercings work better than others. Ears, not so much. Navel works sometimes, but not always. I know a male with a guiche—*Trey showed Reiner an image, and Reiner flinched—*that pretty much stays in place, but it's still tricky. Nipples are the best, though, if you want to be pierced anywhere.*

I don't think so. Reiner yawned widely, showing a nice set of strong white teeth. *I like yours, though. Fun.*

Trey agreed, laughing inside his head, and strolled over to press his head into Reiner's warm neck. *Yeah, they are. Let's go get the others—we need to get going soon.*

They shifted back in the same clearing as the day before. Eva, Sophie and Eliza went first, followed by everybody but Trey, who stood guard. After he shifted and got dressed, the younger jaguars ran ahead to the car; Trey snagged Reiner's arm and held him back.

“Did you have a good time?” Trey asked him.

“Yeah. I did.” Reiner leaned over and kissed him, a little surprised by the impulse. Trey’s mouth was warm, parting invitingly, and now Reiner wanted more than a simple kiss. He heard the backpack hit the ground right before Trey’s arms went around him, and they both moaned softly. Reiner managed to get his hand down the back of Trey’s jeans, gripping one bare ass cheek, and Trey arched his back and opened his mouth wider for Reiner’s tongue. Trey moved, walking Reiner backwards until they got to a tree, and the bark bit through Reiner’s shirt, a minor thing compared to the way Trey panted and rubbed against him, almost frantic. Reiner used his free hand to unbutton Trey’s fly, but Trey stopped him from lowering the zipper.

“No,” he gasped. “I want to, but we don’t have enough time.” Reiner groaned in heartfelt protest, pushing his own erection into Trey’s thigh. “Later,” Trey promised. “I have to open the garage at noon—we’ll find a way before then. *Goddamn.*” He shuddered, fingers tensing on Reiner’s hips. “You get me crazy, the way you feel.” He sucked a kiss on the side of Reiner’s neck, wet and hot. “Way you taste. Fuck.” He laughed, breath puffing on damp skin, and now Reiner shuddered. “Not the way to calm down.”

Reiner breathed out, slowly, willing his body back from the edge. It wouldn’t have taken much, not with the hard feel of Trey’s body or the heat under his scent, and that surprised the shit out of him. “Yeah,” he agreed. “And I’d rather not have to ride back all sticky and smelling like come.”

Trey smirked, raising his eyebrows, and hummed under his breath. “I’d lick you clean.”

Reiner laughed and shoved Trey away, shaking his head. “*Not* helping.”

Trey scooped up the empty backpack and slung it over one shoulder, and they walked out of the clearing side-by-side, arms brushing. Reiner knew his surface thoughts radiated a ridiculously sappy kind of arousal, desire and affection in equal parts. He *liked* Trey, for all kinds of reasons, half of which he couldn’t put a name to.

Eva and Ethan made a show out of sniffing the air when Trey and Reiner reached the car, and Trey gave them the finger—but he was grinning. Reiner slid into the front seat, yipping a little at the cold vinyl.

“Pussy,” Trey said, under his breath, and Reiner punched him in the upper thigh, snorting.

The car turned onto the main road just as when the sun lit the trees with gold and made the lingering fog glow silver. Instead of stopping at the garage, Trey made a right, and went up the one lane drive around the side of the SMS building. The drive curved, slowly rising three stories, and ended in a paved parking pad tucked under a broad wooden deck attached to the back of the building. Trey pulled in next to a passenger van and the Porsche that Reiner had seen the other day.

The passengers in the back of the El Camino scrambled out in a wave of excitement.

“They’re back,” Trey said to Reiner, nodding at the two cars. “I know they took the Porsche. I wonder what happened.”

Reiner hesitated as the rest of them ran up a set of wooden stairs to the deck. “I should go back to the garage.”

Trey stopped and stared at him. “Why? I want you to meet Emery.” He tilted his head. “I thought—”

Reiner caught the tail end of the thought, and stepped closer without thinking. “No. I mean, *yes*—I like being with you. But I don’t want to—to—presume, okay?”

“Okay.” Trey smiled, and the warmth in his voice and his eyes pulled at an invisible space in Reiner’s chest. “Come meet my mom.” He led the way up the stairs and onto the deck, over to a pair of French doors about two-thirds of the way down the side of the building. He held one open for Reiner, motioning him inside.

Reiner had no idea what to expect, which made feeling surprised all the more odd. The house—apartment? What would you call it? He had no

clue—occupied the entire top floor of the SMS building. The enormous open room served as living room, entertainment area, and dining room, if the sofas, TVs, and the long, wooden table with twelve chairs were anything to go by. God, the house he'd grown up in would fit inside this room with about an acre of floor space left over.

The windows and skylights filled the room with natural light, and the artwork on the white walls glowed—Reiner caught himself staring at a huge painting that hung all by itself, flanked by tall bookcases crowded with books and DVD cases. It looked like stuff he'd seen on a museum trip in middle school or in books, maybe Mayan, and depicted an upright human-looking jaguar holding curling vines that ended in some kind of water lily. The dots and rosettes in the jaguar's coat, done in matte black, stood out against the metallic coppery-gold body, and the eyes were—and this was really strange—blue.

He turned around, intending to ask Trey about the painting, and froze, heat crawling up his neck. Blais sat at the kitchen island, and his ancient jeans, equally ancient T-shirt, and bare feet were miles away from the expensive custom suit of the other afternoon. Next to him stood a female who had to be Trey's mother. Except she wasn't, not biologically, so—

“Stick with *mother*,” Blais said. “It's less confusing.” He nodded at Trey, standing over by one of the sofas. “Nice job on his shields.”

“Wasn't me,” Trey admitted. “Eliza did them.”

“Very brave of you,” Blais told Reiner, and picked up a mug. “She scares the crap out of me half the time. I have no clue why I thought having a daughter was a good idea.”

Wait. What? Reiner tried to remember what Trey and Eva said about the two youngest jaguars. *Emery's children*, that's what they called them, not *Aidan and Emery's* like the others. Twins, yeah, although Eliza's coat was black and Dean's wasn't. Which didn't make *any* sense, even if they were fraternal twins. That was the kind of thing you learned growing up, no biology class required. If you carried the recessive gene for a black coat, you only got offspring with black coats if the other parent also carried the gene.

Eva was Emery's sister—and had a black coat, therefore Emery carried the gene. Sophie, Ethan and Marcus were all regular colored, so Aidan *didn't* carry the gene. Basic stuff, if you grew up with it. So that meant that Emery... and Blais... *Oh*. But Dean *couldn't* have been fathered by Blais, then, so... oh god, both of them? Blais and Aidan? At the same—*shit*.

Emery laughed at him, and the sound—low and dark—raised the hairs on Reiner's neck. She was barefoot, too, wearing a plain brown V-neck T-shirt and faded jeans, and in no way looked old enough to have five offspring. She fixed her amber eyes, exactly like Eva's, on Reiner, and he locked his knees so he wouldn't back up. Her mental aura was a rippling curtain of flame, fire to Aidan's water, and Reiner wanted to brush up against it just as much as he wanted to curl into a ball and hide.

"I'm not so bad as all that," she chided. "And I'd suggest you call me Emery—even less confusing."

"Yes, ma'am," Reiner said, and winced at the backwash of startled humor from Blais and Emery.

Trey groaned, and came over to ruffle Reiner's hair. "Dude, no fair setting the bar that high, you know?" Trey laughed when Emery wrinkled her nose at them. "So how did it go? We didn't expect you back until tomorrow."

Blais hissed, softly, and banged his forehead—gently—on the granite countertop. Emery pointed to two mugs on the counter, then the coffeemaker. "Coffee first," she said. "Reiner? Help yourself. Sugar there, milk in the fridge."

"That bad?" Trey poured for himself and Reiner, adding sugar to both mugs before handing Reiner one.

Reiner took a seat next to Trey at the island, trying not to stare at Emery. She really was an older version of Eva, maybe mid-thirties. Their species aged slowly, so maybe he was off a bit. Blais and Aidan were in their forties, late forties, probably, so how much younger could she be?

A lot, Emery told him, apparently amused and not offended at all.

Trey patted Reiner's knee under the counter with his free hand and leaned around him to talk to Blais. "So what happened?"

Blais glanced at Trey and shook his head. “The orthopedist wanted to do an MRI—”

“Oh fuck.”

“Yeah. Oh fuck. We *told* them it was bad idea, and nobody listened until he snapped at the nurse. Literally. If Em didn’t shove her out of the way, he would’ve nailed her for sure.”

Reiner blinked. “He tried to *bite* the nurse?”

“Oh yeah,” Blais said. “Aidan and hospitals? Not a good combination. But the VA was the only place with security clearance high enough in case something went wrong.” He rubbed his face. “The injection part was dead simple compared to that. Thank fuck we don’t have to go back for six months.”

“Dad messed up his knee a long time ago,” Trey explained to Reiner. “It’s a given that he can’t have a knee replacement, and as a rule, he won’t take drugs—so injecting his knee was the best option. He’s been putting it off for almost a year.”

Eva came bouncing down a staircase Reiner hadn’t even noticed was there. Her hair was wet, and she had on sweatpants and a T-shirt. When she stood next to Emery, the resemblance was startling. She went to the fridge and took out a bottle of water. “Marcus, Eliza, and Dean are in bed with Dad, taking a nap. The other two are in their rooms. Dad didn’t *really* bite the nurse, did he?”

“Almost,” Blais said, and Emery exhaled on what might have been a laugh.

“Not for lack of trying,” she muttered. She leaned back against the counter and folded her arms. “We’ll have to wait and see if the injection helps at all. I don’t see the point of going through that again if he’s not any better.” She shivered, and Blais pointed a finger at her.

“*You* weren’t helping.”

Emery narrowed her eyes and growled at Blais, and Reiner instinctively held very, very still. You did not mess with pissed-off females. Not ever.

Blais sighed. “*Querida*. I know you hate hospitals. But maybe next time—” Another sigh, and he spread his hands, palms up. “Maybe next time, we have the doctor come here. Or maybe we take the other doctor’s advice and try it with Aidan shifted.”

“No.” Emery and Eva said it at the same time. All the hair on Reiner’s arms rose at the flash-fire of alarm from both of them.

Blais growled and slipped out of the chair, planting both hands on the island countertop. “We need to try. Whether this works or not, we should try it the other way, just in case.” He blinked at them, slow and deliberate, and both females stopped bristling. “We all pushed him to do this—now we need to *ask* him what he wants.” He tilted his head and caught Reiner’s eye, his mouth curving in a faint smile. “We aren’t always so much of a *telenovela*. I hope the drama doesn’t scare you off.” The smirk Blais directed at Trey made Reiner’s cheeks heat.

“*Papi*,” Trey protested. “We’re just—”

Blais waved a hand at him, and started for the stairs. “You need to lie better than that, *gatito*.”

Trey hissed between his teeth, and Reiner figured they were both blushing equally. He slipped his hand onto Trey’s knee, curling his fingers around to the inside. Trey leaned their shoulders together, and his hand covered Reiner’s.

Reiner bent his neck to look at Trey. “We’re not just...” He shrugged. “Are we?”

“I don’t know.” Trey swallowed. “I want—” He paused, and Reiner remembered they had an audience. *Oh god*. His ears had to be glowing, they were so hot. He and Trey looked up at the same time, to matching interested looks from Emery and Eva.

Trey pushed his mug away and slipped off the chair after patting Reiner’s knee. “We’re gonna go now,” he announced, and Emery’s mouth twitched.

Reiner took the hint and stood up next to Trey. “It was very nice meeting you,” he told Emery. “Thank you for the coffee.”

“You’re very welcome.” She tilted her head, and sent a hint of warmth his way. “Make sure Trey brings you for dinner soon.”

“Yes ma’am, I—” The rest got cut off as Trey dragged him out of the house by one arm. “Hey,” Reiner continued once they were halfway down the stairs from the deck. “I was being polite. You don’t—”

Trey kissed him, one hand on the railing and the other behind Reiner’s neck, pulling him down. When he let Reiner go, they were both panting. “I love my family,” Trey said, still holding onto Reiner. “But they don’t need to be—This is between you and me. Private.”

Reiner had no idea where the dismay came from, and he wasn’t quick enough to hide it, either. Trey blinked at him, eyes flat. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and bounced down the rest of the steps, taking long strides once he reached the ground. Reiner ran to catch him, sneakers skidding on the gravel as he slid to block Trey.

“Why are you mad?” Reiner demanded, because the anger hung there in the forefront of Trey’s thoughts, tinting everything a sullen gray.

“I’m not.” Trey’s jaw bunched before he burst out, “I’m... I don’t know, okay? I thought maybe we were, you know, starting something.”

“I thought we were, too. I just don’t...” Reiner tried to make sense out of the lead weight in his gut. “When you said ‘private’, what did you mean?”

“What did you think I meant?” Trey raised his eyebrows. “*Private*. As in, none of their business. They don’t need to know everything we say, all right? That’s... *us*.”

“Oh.” Reiner swallowed. “I thought you meant...” He waved a hand, shrugging. “Private, like not being together where anybody could see.”

“What would be the point?” Trey tipped his head to one side, radiating confusion. “If I was embarrassed to be with you, why would I want you to meet Emery? Or go hunting with us?” He blinked and shook his head. “See, this is why living around humans is bad. It totally fucks up your head.” He aimed a friendly cuff at Reiner’s head, and Reiner swatted his hand away. Trey started walking, and Reiner fell into step next to him, heading down the driveway.

“It’s just... I’m nobody. And you’re...” Reiner shrugged.

“Fuck.” Trey started laughing and bumped Reiner’s shoulder. “I’m a mechanic, okay? I live over the garage where I work. I have no desire whatsoever to take over when Blais retires. If anybody, it’ll be Ethan taking over, not me.”

After a moment, Reiner nudged Trey’s shoulder. “What’s a *telenovela*, anyway?”

There were two customers waiting at the garage when they got there, so Trey opened up shop and Reiner headed to the apartment. He wasn’t really hungry yet, but he did want a shower. Trey popped in about a half hour later, at the same time Reiner—now clean and in sweatpants—padded barefoot into the kitchen in search of a snack.

“Here.” Trey handed him a bakery box that smelled good enough to eat, cardboard and all. “From the bakery. Forgot—if you go around outside, make a left out the door, there’s a deck in the back. Couple of lounge chairs if you wanna lie in the sun.” Then he was gone, leaving a bemused Reiner in the middle of the apartment.

Lying in the sun actually sounded wonderful. Reiner took the bakery box and two bottles of water and went to look for the deck. He saw immediately what Trey meant; the landing extended around the side of the building and opened up across the back into a good-sized deck. There was even a roll-out awning attached to the building for when you wanted some shade.

The bakery box turned out to hold an enormous cinnamon roll, still hot from the oven, covered in a gooey glaze. Reiner stretched out on a lounge chair and ate it, piece by sticky, delicious piece, and followed it with a bottle of water. *Mmm...* he dropped the empty box and the bottle on the deck and let the sun put him to sleep.

He only woke up because something was blocking the sun, and realized it was Trey a split second later.

“Do you taste like cinnamon?” Trey murmured, and licked Reiner’s lips

to find out. “Oh yeah...” His groan vibrated in Reiner’s mouth. *The chair’s too small. Come inside.*

Reiner struggled to his feet, sleepy and dazed. He blinked when Trey tried to shove him through a window. “What the fuck?”

“Bedroom,” Trey said, like that explained anything. Reiner barely managed it, staggering a little after he stepped over the sill into... yup, the bedroom.

Trey was naked, very much so, and all Reiner could do was stare. “Were you just... outside? Naked?”

“Really?” Trey paused in pushing Reiner’s sweats down to scowl at him. “I’m standing here with a hard-on and that’s what you ask?”

Reiner shrugged, and dropped his sweatpants to the floor before kicking them away. “Gimme a second to catch up, okay? I was asleep.”

Trey grunted and urged Reiner back, onto the bed, and crawled on top of him. He stopped when their cocks lined up, and Reiner dragged him down for a messy kiss, relishing the way they fitted together. He rolled his hips, sliding along the crease of Trey’s hip, enjoying the friction and the catch in Trey’s breathing. He didn’t mind at all when Trey started south, trailing nips that turned to open-mouthed bites the lower he got. Trey’s mouth was everywhere but the place Reiner wanted it most, and Reiner tried a direct approach, grabbing Trey’s head and guiding it onto his cock. Trey grabbed one wrist, bracing on the bed with his other hand, and forced Reiner to let go of his head.

Reiner growled in frustration, and tried again. Trey reared back and grabbed the other wrist, growling back. Reiner yanked, twisting to break Trey’s grip, and Trey fell forward and sank his teeth into the meat of Reiner’s shoulder. Snarling, Reiner bucked, threatening Trey’s balls, and... well, things went downhill from there.

But damn, was it fun.

Twice Reiner bit Trey hard enough to taste blood, and the brief pain of Trey’s teeth in retaliation didn’t matter—not when Reiner’s cock was an iron spike and his balls were ten pounds each. Reiner wanted more in his

mouth than a forearm or even Trey's shoulder; he wanted to know if Trey would explode the second he felt Reiner's tongue, because it wouldn't take much more than that for Reiner.

Trey's thigh slammed Reiner's, and Reiner rolled to protect his already-aching balls—and found himself facedown on the bed. The touch of the sheets was almost—almost—enough to get him off, and he popped his hips up, not wanting this to be over yet. Trey bit one ass cheek, and Reiner bit the comforter and pushed back, whining through a mouthful of bedding. He hadn't—he didn't remember anybody doing that before, and he liked it. Trey soothed the teeth marks with his tongue before switching to the other cheek, opening his jaws and taking an easy grip, increasing the pressure until Reiner squirmed at how good it was.

Trey licked the bite, blowing lightly on the abused skin, and Reiner braced himself for another touch of teeth... *Oh no, no, no*—Reiner groaned into the mattress and shuddered, not sure if he should like what Trey was doing quite this much. Trey lapped between Reiner's ass cheeks, holding his legs apart with both hands wrapped around Reiner's knees. Every few licks he'd stab a little deeper, and Reiner's cock jumped every time he did, throbbing and a hair's-breadth from coming.

Humans—male and female—fucked... *there*, sometimes. He knew from the few times he'd seen gay porn that human males even got pleasure from it. His species? He couldn't imagine doing it, never had imagined it, not with the sure promise of damage and the risk of infection. Females were built to deal with the barbs, he knew that. Males... no. Right this second, though, with Trey's tongue cranking him up past sanity, he wondered if the risk might not be worth it.

Trey let go of one of Reiner's knees and levered Reiner's cock down, back between his legs, and Reiner lifted higher to make it easier, needing—*Fuck*. Trey's hot, perfect mouth surrounded his balls, drawing them into wet heat. He pumped his hips, beyond speech, urging Trey to suck him, lick him—something, *anything*.

Please. Please, Trey. Now. I need it now—

Without any warning, Trey engulfed the head of his cock, tongue flicking his slit, and at the same moment, something—Trey's finger?—slid into Reiner's ass. The shock of it didn't matter for any longer than it took for Trey to touch a spot inside Reiner and stroke it, because then Reiner's balls did their very best to turn inside out as he muffled his scream in the comforter. His body took over, wanting more of Trey's fingers and Trey's mouth, and he shook, blissed out by the waves of sparking pleasure and riding the body rush all the way to the end.

When Trey released him, Reiner went flat on the bed, right into a damp spot, and couldn't care less. He was still hard, and would be for a while yet. He rubbed back against Trey's sweaty skin as Trey draped across his upper body, wondering what Trey was getting out of the low dresser near the bed. Reiner heard a *snick*, and a squelchy *click*, and then Trey braced one hand by Reiner's hip and licked the back of his neck.

"Let me..." Trey whispered, and cold slickness pressed along Reiner's crack. "Not... I won't... just let me—" Trey's breath hitched, and then his cock slid deeper, not inside, but rubbing against Reiner's sensitized hole in a way that had Reiner arching up to meet every glide. They found a rhythm, and Trey showed him what it felt like: tense muscles cradling harder flesh, irresistible slippery heat and the teasing brush of hot skin on his balls. Trey rutted against Reiner's ass while Reiner let the comforter give him the friction he craved, dizzy with need and want and the harsh feel of Trey's breath on his neck.

They came together, Trey covering Reiner's lower back with spunk while Reiner soaked the already damp comforter. Trey finally slid off to the side, breathing in long shuddering gasps, wrapping an arm around Reiner to keep him close.

"That was—" Trey kissed Reiner's damp shoulder, laughing weakly. "I didn't think—"

Reiner rolled to face him, edging their hips together. Maybe... they both hissed when he wrapped one hand around both their cocks, and he calculated they maybe had one more orgasm left. The stuff Trey had used

was still nice and slick, and there was enough for Reiner to get himself wet, too. He experimented, easing their foreskins down and sliding his fingers around under each head, teasing until both cocks were hard and straining, making the barbs flare out enough to play with.

Then he bit Trey's lower lip and demanded a kiss. Trey obliged, sucking Reiner's tongue and moaning when Reiner started jacking them in earnest, fingers tight around and under their crowns, squeezing to flare the barbs even more and dragging up just enough to drive them both over in record time, coating both of them with fresh heat. That was it for now—they both felt the subtle un-tensing as their bacula retreated deeper into their bodies, leaving their cocks flaccid in Reiner's hand.

Reiner flopped onto his back—for once not in the wet spot—and Trey snuggled up next to him, burying his head in the crook of Reiner's neck and throwing an arm and a thigh across with a contented sigh. "Thank you," Trey murmured.

"I think it was a group effort," Reiner said, surprised at how hoarse the words sounded.

"No." Trey shook his head, still buried in Reiner's neck. "I mean for not tossing me off the bed when I—I should have asked."

"It felt... good." Reiner shrugged, and turned his head to nuzzle Trey's ear. "I wouldn't mind... if you did it again."

"Or you could—do it to me. You don't have to. I don't expect..." Trey hunched his shoulder when Reiner nipped his earlobe.

"Would only be fair, right?" Reiner knew Trey could hear that he was smiling.

Trey huffed a laugh against his skin. "Absolutely. Fair." He stifled a yawn. "Nap. Then I think it's only fair that you help me get clean in the shower."

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CHAPTER FIVE

The rumbling, ratcheting clatter of the garage doors going up brought Trey awake with a strangled groan, and he stared stupidly at the digital clock on the dresser until the number at the end changed. Eight thirty? *Shit.*

He shoved frantically at Reiner, who swatted him and *mmp*ed into the pillow. “Ry,” Trey hissed. “It’s eight thirty.”

Reiner lifted his head and blinked at Trey, green eyes soft. His lower lip was puffy on one side and—damn. Trey reached over and traced the bruise on one cheekbone. Reiner’s eyes closed and he nuzzled into Trey’s hand. “So?”

“It’s eight thirty *Monday morning.*”

“Fuck!”

Trey got a great view of Reiner’s ass when he rolled off the bed and leapt over the balled-up comforter on the floor. Bite marks on one cheek and bruises on the other, not to mention another bite on Reiner’s left thigh that Trey did not remember putting there. He heard the shower come on, and crawled out of bed to find a pair of sweats to wear. God—everything hurt, even his dick. No, wait—*especially* his dick.

If he’d had half a brain cell working, he should have suggested they shift at some point before they passed out. That would have taken care of the worst of the bruising, at least. He plucked the sweats away from his dick. And probably most of the chafing. Tray winced when he got a look at the rest of the apartment. He didn’t... when did they have *cereal*? He put the cap back on the milk and stuck it in the fridge, closed the box of Lucky Charms, and then got out the ground coffee so he could set up the coffeemaker. He only made enough for himself, because no way was Reiner going to have enough time for coffee if he expected to get over to SMS by nine.

The shower shut off, and a minute later Trey got another flash of ass when Reiner went back into the bedroom, followed by some creative swearing. Less than five minutes later, Reiner reappeared—polo shirt,

chinos, and deck shoes—and looked wildly around the room. “I had an envelope—”

“Desk. In the—”

“Right.” Reiner went and retrieved the envelope, and sprinted for the door. At the last second, he reversed direction and slid a hand around the back of Trey’s neck. He kissed Trey, a soft brush of lips and a teasing hint of tongue, and stepped back, trailing his fingers down Trey’s chest. “That was fucking amazing.”

Then he ran out the door.

Reiner ignored the twinges of pain in his quads as he hurtled down the stairs. The bite on his thigh hurt, too, so did the one on his right pec. The rest wasn’t too bad, just some bruising. He slowed down when Aidan stepped out of the garage, shaking his head at Reiner, whose heart rate began a steady acceleration.

Even just standing there, in jeans and a T-shirt, Aidan managed to be intimidating. Maybe it was that relentless waterfall in his head, or maybe it was his scent; Reiner had no fucking idea, but around Aidan he felt more like a rabbit hiding in the grass than a one hundred and seventy-five pound predator.

Aidan waved a hand at him and Reiner tensed but didn’t—thank you very much—flinch.

“Take your time getting over there,” Aidan said, nostrils flaring slightly. “And the two of you better plan on shifting later, or you’re going to hurt like hell. Next time...” He raised his eyebrows and shook his head, blue eyes gleaming. “Next time put a damn fan in the window, or turn the ceiling fan up. You get that drunk on pheromones, you’ll forget to eat and drink.”

Reiner almost—but not quite—tripped over his own feet on the last step. *Drunk? Well that would explain the hangover.*

Aidan growled, sounding disgusted, and pointed at Reiner. “Stay.” He retreated into the depths of the garage and Reiner hunched to make the itching down his spine go away.

Five seconds later, Aidan came back out with a bottle of water and handed it to Reiner. “Drink this on your way. And walk—Blais is running late.”

Reiner took the bottle, all too aware of his dry mouth and pounding head. How did he know—?

Aidan growled in the back of his throat. “We sleep in the same bed—that’s how I know. *God*. Did Trey suck your—”

“Dad,” Trey snarled from the top of the stairs. “Could you not go there?”

Aidan looked up at Trey, face gone cool and unreadable and the waterfall in his head nothing but white noise and tinged with red. Reiner stopped breathing—and down deep the odd thought that Aidan might not be entirely sane glowed to life. Reiner stamped that shit right out—he was not going there.

Then Aidan’s mouth twitched, one side curling up in a sly smile, and he went from scary-ass-motherfucker to handsome bastard. “You’re *really* loud,” he told Trey. “It was...”

“Oh fuck.” Trey sat down on the stairs, covering his face with his hands.

“Everything but,” Aidan said dryly.

Trey moaned, and lowered his head onto his knees. “Did everybody...?”

Reiner’s sluggish brain caught up with the conversation, and he nearly did a facepalm. *Loud*. They were *loud*. Oh, Christ.

“Not *everybody*. You didn’t reach the house, although Em said—”

Trey held out a hand, palm out. *Stop. I don’t want to know*. He lifted his head and heaved a sigh, meeting Reiner’s eyes. *Sorry*.

Absurdly, Trey’s dismay made Reiner feel a hundred percent better. “Don’t be,” he said, and Trey’s answering smile warmed him all the way through. “Totally worth it.” He stepped backwards, saluting Trey and Aidan with the bottle of water. “I’ll see you later.”

He spun around, stretching his legs a little, and uncapped the water. He chugged the entire bottle before he reached the road and his body demanded

more. Okay, so definitely dehydrated. He vaguely recalled eating something, leaning on the kitchen counter, sometime around midnight. Cereal, *big* bowls of cereal, with lots of milk. There had been more cinnamon rolls in the morning; Trey had gone out early and brought them back. After that? The day was a blur of taste and touch and smell—the world narrowed down to him and Trey.

He'd never truly believed the stories his cousins told about being with females in season—sex was nice, but not so much that you'd forget to eat and drink. Or that you wouldn't care about being bitten and scratched because the pain just made it all better.

Reiner shivered at the memory, and nearly ran over Joel at the door to SMS. Joel eyed Reiner's face and smirked at him as he opened the door. "Looks like you had fun," he muttered.

Reiner decided saying nothing was the best course, and they both walked over to the reception desk. Reiner got rid of the empty water bottle in a wastebasket and wished he'd asked for a second bottle. Lily, the pretty female from Friday, pointed off to the right. "Down the hall, go into Personnel first. After that, you'll go next door to get your ID cards."

Gus was already in the Personnel office, sitting in a chair by the door and filling out a form on a clipboard. An older female, maybe his mother's age, wearing a long swishy skirt in bright colors and a fancy T-shirt kind of top popped out from behind a partition before Reiner did more than nod to Gus. "Come with me," she said, and walked away, clearly expecting them to follow. She steered Joel into a cubicle—"Olivia will get you set up"—and led Reiner into an actual office.

He took a seat, trying not to wince. The chair was *not* comfortable.

"I'm Anna Martinez. Head of Personnel." She gestured at the envelope in Reiner's hand, and he slid it onto the desk. "Did you get a chance to fill everything out?" Pulling out the envelope's contents, she went through them, nodding a little and sorting the pages into a neat pile. "Do you have any questions?"

"Not really." His stomach went hollow when he thought about all of it. He had health insurance now, a life insurance policy with his mother as

beneficiary, and an account with a bank in Wilkesboro—with money in it. He'd read the so-called fine print, too. SMS owned his ass for the next five years; after that he could work wherever he wanted. His salary was slightly lower than he might make anywhere else—not unreasonable considering what they'd paid to get him through college—but on the other hand, he didn't have to pay rent and he could walk to work. Even with sending money home every month, he'd still have plenty of disposable income. He could—he lifted his head, catching Anna's bemused stare—he could get a better car. Damn. He could get Trey to—

She smiled at him, light brown eyes crinkling at the corners, and he caught a hint of indulgent humor over the predictability of young males—*hey!*—before she handed him a thick black plastic card on a lanyard. “This will open any door, including the elevators, provided you have authorized access. Go next door—they'll take care of your ID card. If you have any questions, just come back here.” She stood up, still smiling, and Reiner stood, too, a little dazed. That was it?

“Yes,” Anna said, tilting her head. “Now, get over to next door before Blais gets impatient.”

Joel and Gus waited by the door to Personnel, and the three of them walked the dozen feet to the next door. The two of them looked as dazed as Reiner felt, and they all exchanged wide-eyed looks.

“I don't know why,” Gus whispered, glancing up and down the hallway, “but I thought there was gonna be a catch. You know—sorry, that salary we mentioned? That won't be for another few years.” He brightened. “I can buy a new gaming laptop.”

The male in the photo studio, which is what the office next door turned out to be, took their pictures and sent them back to the waiting area just inside the door. He had the lightest hair Reiner had ever seen on one of his own species, nearly blond, and amber eyes; Gus watched him walk away and hummed in the back of his throat.

He shrugged when Reiner huffed at him. “What? He's pretty.” Gus smirked, eyes on Reiner's puffy lip. “I might have a chance, with you all occupied with Trey.” He wagged his eyebrows. “You got a little loud.”

Reiner curled his lip at the smaller male. “Jealous, much?”

Gus sniffed and looked away, glaring when Joel punched him lightly on the arm.

The door opened right then and Blais walked in, throwing off so much compressed irritation he almost vibrated. Ingrained politeness urged Reiner to stand, his amygdala said *freeze*. It won.

“Are you almost done here?” he snapped, his eyes more gold than hazel. Like the other day, today’s clothes were hanging-out-at-home casual, a chambray shirt and jeans over plain brown slip-on shoes. Were the suits only for special occasions?

The blond male called out, “two minutes” from the back and Blais grumbled, nearly a growl.

“The plan was to have you three spend the day in IT, meet everybody—that plan is now officially shot to hell. I need you to start work on the new server today, and do the meet-and-greet later.” He nodded at the black keycards. “Get used to wearing those now. If the light stays red, you don’t have access to that area, and none of the doors work without them—they will not open to let you in or out.” He leaned back, propping one shoulder on the wall, and Reiner’s lungs uncramped as Blais relaxed.

“Um.” Joel cleared his throat, and Reiner totally sympathized with the other male’s attempt to look small. “What if the power goes out?”

Good question. Locked doors were way worse than closed ones.

The smile Blais gave Joel wasn’t reassuring. “That depends on the reason. If it’s natural causes—the power grid goes down during a storm—our auxiliary power system will come on within a minute. All of the computers and servers have battery backup, so there will be no loss of data.” The faint Spanish accent was back, making Reiner think it was a kind of tell. “On the other hand, if the power is cut somehow—from inside or outside—the backup systems will not come on.”

Gus was the one who spoke up this time. “So we’d be *trapped*?” His voice rose on the last word.

And that gulf, the one between life back home and life here, yawned wide again, reminding Reiner of the gun in Trey’s kitchen drawer and the

knife under his pillow. God, and he had to stay here five years? He nearly missed the assessing look Blais gave him before Blais smiled his not-smile at Gus.

“Every room has an emergency exit, either in the floor or through the ceiling.” Blais stood up straight when the blond male came out of the back and silently handed Reiner, Gus, and Joel their ID cards. “Right. Come with me and we’ll go see your new workspace.

Reiner stared at the wooden crates stacked against one wall. “You’re shitting me,” he said, regretting it immediately. “I mean—”

“I know what you meant. No one has touched them since they were delivered.” Blais shrugged, apparently uncaring of the dismay rolling off Reiner and the other two. “I didn’t want the IT staff messing anything up, so I asked them to leave it all intact. The crates are numbered.” He waved one hand at a pile of tools: two pry bars, two rubber mallets and two hammers. “If you need anything else, call IT on the internal phone. Extension three-one-one.”

“What’s...” Reiner wet dry lips. “What’s the deadline?” Because he was pretty damn sure there was one.

“I need this up and running by Memorial Day weekend. You can pull staff from IT if you need more hands—Just tell Tomas what you need done, and he’ll give you somebody or two.” Blais nodded at Reiner. “Have fun,” he said, and left them alone with what had to be over two dozen crates.

Gus eyed the tools, and then the crates. “I’ve never used a hammer in my life.”

“Me neither.” Joel looked at Reiner. “You?”

Reiner sighed. “Yeah.” He picked up a pry bar. “I’ll start, you watch.”

Trey sat on the stairs and watched Reiner walk away, his heart high and tight in his chest. He had no idea sex could be like that. God help him, that had been—

“You’ve known him for three days,” Aidan said, and the way he said it, the slight reprimand, made Trey growl, surprising them both. Aidan raised his eyebrows and waited, a muscle ticcing in his jaw.

Trey had to swallow hard before he could speak, and his voice still came out rough. “How many times have I heard about you and Mom? About how you fell for her five minutes after you met?” He pushed to his feet, gritting his teeth when his thighs protested. He really wished he could remember exactly what they’d done, because it must have been epic to hurt this much.

Aidan’s head tipped to the right, eyes flaring gold around the pupils, and his mouth flattened. “That was—”

“Do not fucking tell me that was different,” Trey spat, and Aidan hissed at him, eyes narrowed to slits, clear warning for Trey to watch his mouth. For the first time ever, Trey didn’t want to back down, didn’t feel the knee-jerk urge to drop his eyes in the face of Aidan’s temper. “All my life, all I wanted was what you have,” he ground out. “Not—not with Mom. I don’t—” His voice failed him, because there was no way he was talking about *that* with Aidan, of all people. He forced himself to keep going. “I want what you and Papi have. The... I don’t know what to call it.”

Aidan breathed out sharply, and something in Trey eased, even if the hair on his neck wouldn’t go down and the skin between his shoulder blades itched. He knew better than this. Blais you could push, and get away with it, but Aidan? No.

Then Aidan shook his head, sighing, and the gold in his eyes faded a little. “What Blais and I have isn’t—you understand that it’s not always *healthy*, right? Sometimes?”

“No.” Trey’s chest hollowed out. “I *don’t* understand. You—you *get* each other. No matter what. I know—” Okay, maybe he should shut up. Saying *I know you fuck him* probably wasn’t—

The clear dismay—no, wait, better make that horror—on Aidan’s face stopped Trey from saying anything else. “Fuck.” Aidan turned around and walked away, into the garage, and Trey had no choice but to follow him.

“I’m not going to ask how you found out,” Aidan said, after a long pause. He faced Trey, hands on his hips, weight off his bad knee. “And that’s not what I meant about it not being healthy. I know how relationships work for our species, and…” He rubbed a hand over his jaw. “It’s only been the three of us for almost twenty years—and that is not normal. I don’t want you basing your idea of a relationship on our fucked-up family dynamics.”

Trey shrugged, at a loss to explain. “I still want what you have. And I don’t think that’s ever gonna change.”

Aidan crossed the few feet between them and reached for Trey, hugged him hard and pressed a kiss to his temple. And it occurred to Trey that Aidan was relieved somehow, that he’d believed Trey would reject him and walk away. As if. Part of Trey sagged in relief—the idea of disappointing Aidan cut deep, and hurt way more than any possibility of not living up to his father’s expectations. Not that Blais ever seemed to have any when it came to Trey.

“Go take a shower,” Aidan growled into his hair, arms tightening for a moment before he let go. “You reek. Bring me down some coffee and I’ll go pick up some breakfast. *Git.*”

Trey mock-saluted and ducked a good-natured swat at his head before heading outside and up the stairs. He went for the shower first because he did reek—sweat and come and blood. Turning on the shower, he hung the sweatpants off the doorknob and then used the john while the water heated up. Trey hissed softly because even pissing hurt; he was that raw.

He flushed, adjusted the water temperature and stepped under the spray. At some point, he figured Aidan would bring up the whole “I know you fuck him” thing, and he seriously was not looking forward to that.

Jaguar youngsters spied on adults. That was a given. You listened in, because once the sex got hot and heavy, surface thoughts were all about sensation—it was pretty much virtual porn, and how most teenagers learned about sex. Trey stuck his face under the showerhead and let the water pound his head and shoulders. They all did it, and nobody minded, not really. Granted, he’d never purposely listened in on Aidan and Emery, or

when it was Emery, Blais, and Aidan, either. Or just Blais and Aidan, for that matter.

He moved so the water sluiced down his back, stretching sore muscles as he leaned forward to reach the shower gel. No, the one time had been an accident, and he'd *never* done it again. He'd cut out of middle school and come home, sneaking into the deserted house in the early afternoon... and it wasn't deserted. And he'd listened, shivering with a sick combination of disbelief and arousal, to Aidan and Blais in the bedroom. Listened to Blais beg and growl, heard Aidan snarl—and groan—and finally relent and give Blais what he wanted.

Did Trey have a drawer in his dresser with a collection of toys and lube? Oh yes he did. Did he like using those toys? Definitely. But not a single one of those toys came equipped with barbs, thank you very much. Fantasy was one thing, asking another male to actually do it was—not going to happen. Trey's soapy fingers brushed over the bite mark Reiner had left on his shoulder and he shuddered. One day soon he'd show Reiner that drawer, let Reiner see what Trey liked to do—to have done to him.

Trey snorted and turned to rinse. Not for a few days at least, though. He'd had absolutely no fucking idea things would get so out of hand. They'd—barely—remembered to eat, flying high on pheromones. He knew that was normal, even though the only time Trey had ever been with a female had been pure disaster; if she hadn't been in season he doubted his body would have performed at all. With Reiner, though, he'd been hard for hours on end, and the wanting hadn't been all physical.

He... *liked* Reiner, that was the thing. Trey shut off the water and stepped out of the shower, pulling a towel off the back of the door. He wouldn't mind if Reiner stayed here in the apartment a few more days, even if sex was out of the question at the moment. Maybe—maybe see if this thing they had going could go somewhere for real. Or maybe Reiner wouldn't move into the Inn after all.

He'd meant what he said to Aidan; he'd known what he wanted since he was maybe ten or so. And before that, he'd flat-out worshiped Aidan, the first adult who'd ever given a shit about him. His mother? She'd dumped him with Blais when she found out she was pregnant with a daughter.

Mothers weren't supposed to do stuff like that, and he had a vivid memory of how pissed off Emery had been on his behalf when she found out.

Granted, it was old news to Trey at that point, he'd been at Stone Mountain for over two years by then, and was used to being ignored by Blais, who'd been dealing with a shit-ton of other stuff, with no attention to spare for a stray son. Trey hadn't liked it much, but that was his life.

He didn't recall the exact day, maybe six months or so after Aidan and Emery came to live at Stone Mountain, but Eva had been maybe a year and half old at the time, he'd been not quite six—and god, he'd been so fucking jealous of her. She'd go over to Aidan—this impossibly huge male with blue eyes, scary as shit—and crawl into his lap for attention like she had every right to be there. And Aidan would let her, let her crawl on top of him while he watched a movie or took a nap. Trey wanted to do the same thing so bad it made him sick to his stomach. From fourteen years distance Trey got how careful Aidan had been, treating him like a skittish rabbit instead of a little predator. Waiting patiently for Trey to make a move.

And then one day—and it had been a shitty day, he knew that, even if he didn't recall why—Eva hauled herself up onto Aidan's thigh and Trey's misery nearly strangled him. Aidan had reached out and put a hand on Trey's shoulder, thumb stroking his neck, and Trey shivered at just the memory of that first simple contact.

“Come on,” Aidan had rumbled, and guided Trey closer until he could scoop him onto his lap, one-handed; a feat that confirmed Aidan's god-status right then. Aidan got them both settled, Eva on one side and Trey on the other, and... it was too much. Trey curled into the solid warmth of Aidan's chest, held tight by a muscled arm, and cried as quietly as he knew how, one hand gripping Aidan's T-shirt. And all Aidan did was hold him, resting his cheek on Trey's hair and purring, until Trey finally fell asleep.

After that, things—life—got better. Emery, hugely pregnant with Sophie and Ethan, simply took over as Trey's mother without any further discussion; Aidan charged Trey with looking after Eva and keeping her safe... and, somehow, Trey ended up with a family and Aidan became the center of Trey's universe, offering uncomplicated affection and the physical closeness Trey craved.

Right after that, Blais and Aidan stopped circling each other with their hackles up, and Aidan—to Emery’s exasperated relief—finally accepted the fact that Blais wanted him. It still took nearly a month before they moved from cautious courting to being lovers, and then... well, once they came together, they were inseparable. Aidan’s heart still belonged to Emery, but Blais now owned his soul.

And *that’s* what Trey wanted, that kind of connection, somebody to share his life with, not just a bed.

He slung the damp towel over the door, and went into the bedroom for clothes. Once he was dressed, he took the entire carafe from the coffeemaker and went downstairs, sniffing happily at the bacon smell coming from inside the garage. They had a customer—busted radiator or a hose, going by the sweet stink of antifreeze—and Aidan didn’t do more than wave at Trey from under the hood of the car.

Trey checked the clipboard on the office door while he unwrapped the bacon and cheese sandwich, scanning their list of jobs for the day. Tune-ups on four ATVs, two oil changes and a tire swap. Not so bad. He could do the oil changes and let Aidan do the tires. The tire machine they had was old, and a bitch to use, but Aidan could do that standing and not stress his knee getting up and down. Trey crammed the rest of the first half of the sandwich in his mouth and checked to make sure they had the supplies for the oil changes.

A normal day, then, except for the bites and bruises reminding him of the best sex he’d ever had. Yeah, so they’d only known each other three days—so what? Not like they were human and had to play guessing games over who liked who and how much. He’d had semi-serious partners before, when he’d been with Arrowhead. He’d shared quarters with one male, Luc, for nearly six months. It had been good, sure, but neither of them ever figured it for long term. It was company at night, or during the day, depending on their shift, another body and a pair of hands—and that was it. Trey licked his fingers clean and tossed the paper from the sandwich in the trash. Normal day, but he’d have Reiner next to him again tonight.

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CHAPTER SIX

The mountain of crates turned out to only be eighteen boxes after all, though Reiner had maybe twice that many splinters by the time he yanked the last giant-assed staple out of the last stubborn lid. Joel and Gus were absofuckinglutely useless with tools—"I can use a soldering iron," Joel had protested, and Reiner just glared at him—so Reiner had them pull the Styrofoam cubes out of each crate as he opened it. He sent Joel out for breakfast sandwiches right after they started, but that was hours ago according to his pathetically whiny stomach.

Reiner had pried the crates open in number order, and of course the parts for the rack were in the last two damn crates. It figured. He'd need different tools to assemble the rack—an electric screwdriver would be nice—and maybe IT had what he needed. First they had to finish clearing the wood and stray bits of Styrofoam out, and then he could lay the pieces of the rack out and find out where the instructions were. The three of them made multiple trips dragging all the empty crates down the hall and stacked them by the freight elevator.

"Fuck me," Reiner groaned when they got back from doing that, and slid down the wall. He hurt all over and had one major fucking headache, to boot.

"Go get food," a deep honey-and-sand voice said, and Reiner made a half-hearted effort to get on his feet. Blais, who'd changed his clothes and was back in an expensive suit again, raised a dark eyebrow at the pile of technology, most of it still cradled by Styrofoam. "Nice. Now go get food."

Reiner used the wall to stand, wincing when a splinter bit his thumb. Gus stared at Blais with wary fascination, absently offering Joel a helping hand.

"On second thought," Blais muttered, "it's two o'clock. Come back tomorrow and start fresh." He snorted at Reiner's disbelieving look. "You have more than enough time, and most everyone leaves at three, anyway. Go." He jerked a thumb at Reiner. "And you? Shift later and get rid of those bruises, *me oyes*?"

“Yes, sir.”

Blais said something else in Spanish under his breath, shaking his head. “*A los tres—vámonos*. Go eat. Back here at nine tomorrow.”

Food. Okay. That was probably the best idea ever, considering the way Reiner’s head went all spinny when they sun hit him between the eyes once they got outside. Water, too. Water would be good.

“You comin’?” Gus asked, waving at the diner. Joel was already halfway across the road.

“Nah. In a few. Need to—” Reiner shrugged, not really sure what he needed more of at the moment: food, water, or some nice synthetic opiates. All three, maybe. In that order. Gus ran after Joel, and Reiner scuffed his way over to the garage, wishing he had sunglasses.

Five cars were parked out front, and four ATVs sat in a scruffy herd over next to Reiner’s Toyota. Classic rock blasted out of both open bays, punctuated by short, loud bursts of an oddly angry-sounding *whirr*—the world’s biggest pissed-off mechanical cicada on speed. Great. Now he was hallucinating.

“Jesus, you look wrecked,” Trey said, and Reiner jumped like a—well, like a startled cat.

“Fuck,” Reiner spat, and Trey handed him an almost-full bottle of cold water. That went down in one long sucking gulp, and when Reiner lowered the bottle, Trey handed him another one. *You’re forgiven*, Reiner told him, downing that one with something approaching bliss.

“Gee, thanks,” Trey drawled, and Reiner’s dick gave one tentative twitch and gave up.

“Ow,” Reiner said, enunciating carefully, and Trey snorted at him, eyes lighting up.

“I know what you mean. Um... you wanna get an early dinner?” Trey indicated the garage with a tilt of his head. “We’re gonna be done here in about an hour. If I get you something to eat, think you can wait a bit?”

“It better be good,” Reiner told him, and followed Trey into the garage. Aidan had a car up on a lift, two wheels on and two off, and as they came

inside, he hefted the third wheel into place with a clank. He had his shirt off, and Reiner tried not to trip while he stared.

Aidan had tattoos on both upper arms, and another one stretching between his hipbones, the tops of the letters just visible as his jeans dipped when he raised the wheel to chest level. That was just... *weird*. Just about every human he knew in college had tattoos, but his own species—well, they didn't, plain and simple. Then again, maybe Aidan had gotten them bef—

“Shit!”

Trey dragged him into the little office and shut the door. “Breathe,” he said. “Seriously. Breathe.”

Reiner managed three jerky inhale-exhale combinations before his lungs cooperated. That was—that was—oh, fuck. He'd never—not even his uncle, who was pretty dominant, had—okay, compared to Aidan and Blais, not really so much—“Shit.” He sat down on the desk chair Trey shoved at him and breathed some more. Aidan's back... Reiner shivered.

Sometime in their mid-twenties, the skin along a male's spine darkened and mottled until it matched the pattern they wore when they were four-legged and furry. On most males it was maybe a shade darker than their nipples, and on some—a few—it turned darker still. Supposedly it advertised virility, and it kind of corresponded with how dominant a male *felt*. Not so much in the physical sense, but mentally. Reiner's oldest uncle had markings that were sort of brownish, like a coffee stain, and Reiner had never seen any darker ones.

Aidan's markings were the deep purplish-brown of a nasty bruise, stark even against his tanned skin. You'd mistake them for a tattoo if you didn't know any better.

Trey crouched down in front of Reiner, his thumbs rubbing along Reiner's thighs while he gripped him just above the knees.

“I don't know that I can do this,” Reiner croaked, and Trey's hands went still.

“Do what?”

“I’m not... used to this kind of... I don’t know what to call it. You’re all—and I’m not—”

“It’s okay,” Trey said, sounding like it wasn’t. “I get it. What do you wanna do?”

“I don’t know.” Reiner managed a normal breath, and the buzzing need to shift, to... *run*, ramped down to a bearable level.

With a grunt, Trey stood, and crossed the small room to open the refrigerator. He pulled out a big glass cereal bowl and peeled the plastic wrap off the top. He handed the bowl to Reiner, along with a fork from a mug filled with cutlery. “Eat this first.”

It smelled *amazing*, and Reiner stuffed a forkful in his mouth without caring all that much what it was. He moaned in appreciation, and Trey raised an eyebrow. “That sounds familiar.”

“Bite me,” Reiner told him around the mouthful of meaty goodness.

“Did, thanks.” Trey sat on the edge of the ancient metal desk and grinned at Reiner. “Good?”

“Fucking awesome.” Reiner scooped up some more, hoping he wasn’t drooling. Little strips of tender meat—beef?—with citrus—lime?—and oil and minced up leafy stuff and *spices*... The combination of almost-raw meat and everything else started a nice body rush, oh yeah, and he growled happily while he chewed.

“Beef and venison,” Trey told him as Reiner stuffed his face. “And lime juice. Cilantro, cinnamon... not sure what else. It’s like Aidan’s favorite food in the whole wide world. We almost always have a bowl handy. So do I, but I ate it all and didn’t get more from home.” He shrugged. “Mom makes it.”

Reiner wondered if licking the bowl would be rude and decided he didn’t care. The meat juice and the lime hit all the right places on his tongue, and his stomach shut right the hell up. He stared at the empty bowl and swallowed a belated rush of saliva. “I’d love to try this on waffles.”

Trey gagged. “That’s just wrong. Fried chicken and waffles, maybe. Bacon, yeah—”

“Whatever. I want this on some waffles.” Reiner sighed at the vision, and sucked a stray bit of herb out of a molar. “Sorry about the freak out.”

“S’okay. Just... I don’t know why you think you’re not—” Trey shook his head, frowning slightly. “I mean, Aidan’s... *Aidan*, yeah. And Blais is just as bad. But you’re not exactly... submissive, you know?” Trey’s mouth widened in a slow smile, eyes bright. “I have the bruises to prove it, too.”

Reiner huffed, and had to look away, shrugging in unwilling agreement.

Trey bumped Reiner’s foot with his own. “I’m gonna finish up here, then go shower. Wanna go to the Inn for dinner? They do turkey on Mondays. And... we can talk. After dinner, if you don’t wanna while we eat. Either way is good.” Trey looked at him, and Reiner caught it all: a little worry, some tiredness, but over and around and through all the random surface stuff was a big fat thread of *happy*, warm and solid and real.

He stood and set the bowl on the counter so he could reach for Trey with both hands, drew him in until they touched from chest to knees, and tucked his face into the crook of Trey’s neck and breathed him in. Trey’s arms and hands returned the embrace, and Reiner felt the vibration as Trey purred.

“Let’s do that,” he said, into Trey’s skin, “dinner, then talk.” He tasted Trey, a brief touch of tongue to salty skin, and they both shivered. “Okay?”

They spent fifteen minutes with tweezers and Trey’s desk lamp while Trey got most of the splinters out of Reiner’s hands, and after that they both showered and changed into clean jeans and T-shirts. Trey loaned Reiner a pair of flip-flops to go out. According to Trey, he wore shoes in the garage only because there was too much dangerous shit in there, but the rest of the time he either wore flip-flops or went barefoot.

“Even in the winter?” Reiner asked, looking up at Trey from the bottom of the stairs.

“In the house, yeah. I hate wearing socks. You ever try and shift wearing socks?”

“Why... Why would that even be an issue?”

Trey didn't answer until they were eye to eye. "Didn't you ever practice? You know, shifting with all your clothes on?" He shook his head at what Reiner knew was a blank look. "We did it when we were little, like a game. Just in case we ever had to do it for real."

They'd started walking toward the Inn, but that brought Reiner up short. There it was again, that chasm. Trey had stopped walking, too, and Reiner almost asked what the hell *for real* meant, but Trey huffed at him, mouth flattening.

"Must've been nice, growin' up all safe like that," Trey said, with enough bitterness to sting.

"We still had to be careful. Most of the farmers just figured we were leftover hippies or something—or white trash." Reiner could do bitter, too. "Not all of us grew up rich."

Trey laughed at him, and if Reiner's inadequate human ears could have flattened, they would have. With both hands on his hips, it was easy to see that Trey was Aidan's son, just as much as he was a DaSilva. "That's what you think? We all just sit here, and the money just falls down from the sky?" He jabbed a finger at the SMS building, looming behind him. "You think all the money comes from there? It doesn't. If it wasn't for Arrowhead, and the military contracts, believe me, you'd've been working some shit-ass job and going to community college—and you'd be in debt up to your ears anyways." Trey scrubbed his face with one hand, and the mix of emotions churning his gut and his head hung between them like a curtain. "How old do you think I was when I got sent to Arrowhead? Did you even think about that?"

Reiner scrambled to pull that conversation up, wondering what the fuck that had to do with anything. "You... high school. Sophomore year. But..." He did the math and the answer made no sense. "You would've been sixteen. But you can't join the mil... itary..." Trey didn't say *dumbass* out loud, Reiner heard it fine, thanks, loud and clear.

"Not the human one, no. And even if *was* old enough, Aidan and Blais would lock me in a cage—fuck, shoot me—before they'd let me do *that*."

Reiner only imagined that the ground under his feet fell away, and he stood there blinking like the dumbass Trey had called him a few seconds ago. They stared at each other until Trey shook his head and grunted.

“I’m not havin’ this conversation on an empty stomach. How ’bout we get dinner to go and take this back inside?”

After that, Reiner went back to Trey’s apartment and set the table, moving like he was underwater, while Trey went over to the Inn to place their order.

Reiner vaguely remembered registering for Selective Service when he’d turned eighteen; that was the law, and not doing it would make a red flag pop up somewhere, he knew that. He didn’t know the last time the US had actually drafted anybody—way before even his uncles were born, probably—so it wasn’t like he’d thought much about it. As far as he knew, his species *couldn’t* join the US military; all it would take was one physical exam and the doctor would know they weren’t human.

He had no clue how males managed to join up until World War II, because he knew for a fact that they had, but after 1952 they didn’t dare. Later, in the sixties, males headed south to Mexico if they did get drafted, swimming across in four-legged form—and joining Arrowhead when they got there.

When Trey came in with their food, they dished it out and ate without saying a word out loud, although the thicket in Trey’s head rustled ominously. Reiner’s own barrier stretched *taller*, somehow, which was pretty weird, really.

For some reason, his brain seized on the word *barrier*, watching it with predatory patience, and somewhere in between scraping up the last of the mashed potatoes and gravy and stripping the rest of the meat off the turkey leg, one phrase swam out of the murk of miscellaneous trivia left over from his elective classes: the Weismann barrier.

What the fuck? Where the fuck did that come from?

Trey sat back, setting his fork down with a decisive *clink*, eyes wide and fixed on Reiner.

What... Reiner tried to think what class that was from, and he saw the words, scrawled large on a classroom whiteboard and underlined twice. Cold classroom, green leaves outside—air conditioning then, not winter. Spring semester? Summer session? God, what was the name of that course, it *was* an elective, an extra two credit cushion in case he screwed up...

Genetics. *Modern Genetic Theory*. Was that it?

“It’s a... principle,” Trey said flatly. “Is that the right word?”

Reiner needed more air. “Yeah. That’s... yeah. It means that Aidan can’t be Sophie and Ethan’s biological father. Or Marcus or Dean’s. He shouldn’t be able to have offspring *at all*, not with one of us.”

Trey curled his hands around the edge of the table, knuckles going white for second. “Except he is. He did.”

“He *can’t* be.” The rest of it came flooding back, the pertinent bits, anyway. “The... genetic changes happened to him because of gene therapy, not a... natural mutation. They’re not inheritable.” Was that even a word? “His genes were... *altered*, but that doesn’t affect the—fuck—the whatchacallit, the sperm cells.” That wasn’t quite right, but it was close enough.

And Trey understood, oh yes he did. His hazel eyes remained steady, watching while Reiner worked it out for himself, followed the wriggly trail right to the end.

Trey dropped his head, breaking contact, and swallowed. “Pax doesn’t know. I mean, they know Emery has offspring, but Aidan swore up and down that Blais was the father, not him. Because if they knew the truth—”

“—they’d never let him go,” Reiner finished, when Trey didn’t. “Because that would be huge—it would mean that you could alter somebody genetically and they could pass it on. But that would be great, right? I mean, all those...” His voice died. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Trey’s laugh was shaky. “*Oh*. And then they’d want to run tests on Sophie and Ethan and Marcus and Dean, and maybe breed Sophie to see if it’s viable that way.”

Reiner breathed through his nose until the urge to throw up went away, but the acid lingered in the back of his throat.

“The only reason they haven’t looked too close is ’cause Aidan has a brother, Danny, and Pax got him, too. Did the same thing, and it worked, right? Danny can shift and all—but he’s sterile. No, not sterile.” Trey rocked his chair back on two legs. “His sperm are *human*, so he can’t breed with us. So, ’cause of that, Pax bought it, the whole Blais-is-their-father thing. I don’t understand all of it, okay?” His voice went all raspy, and he sat the chair back down with a thump. “I looked stuff up on the Internet, and Mom explained a bunch of it, too. Pax tested Aidan’s come all along, but Mom says that all the changes probably didn’t happen until he shifted the first time—and they never tested him after that, ’cause he was here at Stone Mountain by then.”

“I need a drink.” Reiner stood up on legs that didn’t want to cooperate, and went to the fridge. “You?”

Trey nodded, and the smile he gave Reiner when he took the offered beer was twisted. “You know I’m not old enough to buy this legally, right?”

“No. I just...” Reiner thought for a moment. “...didn’t do the math. How old *are* you?”

“Twenty. Twenty-one in October.” Trey held his beer out of Reiner’s reach, and this time his smile was closer to normal. “I don’t think so. How old are *you*?”

Reiner gave up on getting the beer away from Trey—what was the point? Not like he’d never had a beer before he made twenty-one—and sat down to drink his own. “Twenty-three. I pushed so I could graduate a semester early.”

Trey looked blank, and Reiner shrugged and took a healthy drink of the cold beer. The bottle felt good on his lip, still a little swollen from the day before. “Blais *and* Aidan said we should shift and get rid of the bruises.”

“God.” Trey didn’t slam the bottle down, but it was close. “I’m real sorry they’re buttin’ in like this. I just never got... involved with anybody here before.” He squinted at Reiner. “I really don’t feel like goin’ through all that—we’d have to shift back before we could sleep. Can we just, I don’t know, watch TV tonight?”

Reiner picked at the label on the bottle with his thumb. Vegging out on the sofa sounded like the second best idea ever, but he wasn't ready to let everything else go yet. He met Trey's curious look with one of his own. "The thing you said earlier, about joining the military. You can't really do that, right?"

Trey tipped the chair back again, one hand on the edge of the table for balance. "We can, just... not the normal way." He upended his beer and finished it off. "I can't just walk into a recruiting station and sign up, right? There's all kinds of special forms, and we can't be regular soldiers—we'd stand out too much, and there's all this stuff about security clearances. I think..." Trey shrugged. "Maybe a dozen of us have joined up since 2013, I guess. And I thought about it a little, but like I said, Aidan would skin me alive and Blais would help."

"But they let you join Arrowhead at what, sixteen?"

"Yeah." Trey sat the chair down again and gave Reiner another quirky smile. "I was with my grandfather—Blais' father—and his partner. Believe me, they made the human military look like a fun idea. Can we—can we do the couch thing now? Please?" He whined the last word and widened his eyes, and Reiner nearly choked on the last of his beer.

"Yeah, okay."

Trey woke up in time to watch the last five minutes of *Dune*, and didn't remember falling asleep in the first place. He was sitting up, and Reiner had his head on Trey's thigh. When Trey stirred, Reiner rolled onto his back and stretched a little, licking his lips and blinking.

"Bed?" he asked, and Trey nodded. Reiner shut off the TV and stood, stretching again, hands overhead. Trey couldn't resist leaning in to huff Reiner's armpit, inhaling so the orange peel and peppercorn notes washed over his palate and coated his tongue, the smell-taste doing funny things to his head. He ran his nose along the silky skin on the inside of Reiner's upper arm, holding his elbow when Reiner tried to lower it.

Tickles. Reiner turned his head and licked Trey's ear before he blew on it, and Trey breathed out on a silent laugh.

In the bedroom, they both stared at the disaster that was Trey's bed. The moonlight did nothing to make the sheets look less nasty and he could smell them from here. Well, shit. No way were they sleeping on those sheets, and the comforter needed to be washed and hung out in the sun before he'd even think of putting it back on the bed. On the other hand, he did *not* have the energy to find clean sheets and put them on.

"I can't," Trey groaned, and Reiner rubbed his cheek on Trey's shoulder with a matching unhappy sound.

"I know. Just—" Reiner growled under his breath and started stripping the bed, throwing everything on the floor. Trey gave in and went to the linen closet next to the bathroom for sheets and a quilt, and between them they had the bed back together in a couple of minutes.

Trey let his clothes fall wherever as he undressed, and they crawled into bed at the same time. Reiner shoved Trey flat and sprawled half on top of him, head tucked into Trey's neck, one thigh thrown over Trey's and his hand resting on Trey's chest. Reiner's hair was soft under Trey's cheek and his fingers, and Reiner's sleepy, contented sigh made Trey grin.

Reiner snuggled closer, and his hand flattened and then flexed against Trey's skin, kneading. Trey hummed, a low rumble, and his body moved closer to Reiner, all on its own. Reiner hadn't said a word about moving his stuff to the Inn, hadn't even thought about it so far as Trey could tell. Maybe everything else had pushed that to the side, maybe not.

Reiner mumbled something against Trey's skin, followed by a soft kiss, right where neck and shoulder met. He repeated it when Trey made a questioning sound, but all Trey got was the last bit.

"...stay here."

Trey nodded, and let out the breath he'd been holding. And he fell asleep to the sound of Reiner's faint, pleased purr.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Tuesday morning was less of a frantic scramble out the door, mainly because Aidan opened the garage at seven thirty in the fucking morning. They both heard him laughing in their heads when the overhead doors startled them awake and sent Reiner dashing for the shower.

You have a seriously warped sense of humor, Trey told him.

Aidan gave him back an image of a much-younger Trey and Eva launching themselves into bed on top of Blais, Aidan, and Emery. *Just paying back the favor.*

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Trey didn't bother with clothes, just went and set up the coffee—for two, this time—and pulled the toaster down off the top of the fridge before getting some bacon out of the freezer.

Bacon? Aidan hummed and Trey snorted.

None for you. I had plans.

Trey heard Aidan's bark of laughter even through the floor, and the warm fuzzies stayed with him while he put on a T-shirt and boxers—hot bacon fat was not something to take lightly, thanks.

He stuck his head in the bathroom, and he'd never appreciated the design of his shower—no curtain required—more than right that second. His lower body twitched at the rear view of a wet, soapy Reiner, decorated with the fading bruises from Trey's teeth.

"Ooh, baby," he crooned, and Reiner turned to blow water at him with his eyes closed. "How do waffles and bacon sound?"

"I don't know. How *do* waffles and bacon sound?" Reiner opened one eye, swiping water and shampoo off his face.

"Fine. See if I ever make you breakfast again," Trey assured him, and walked out, grinning as Reiner's wail of "but I *like* waffles" echoed off the tile.

This could work.

This wasn't working.

Reiner wrinkled his nose and hissed at the mess on the floor, just on general principle. On what fucking planet did anybody think not including instructions for something with this many parts was a good idea?

He'd gotten in at ten to nine, eager to start on assembling the rack, and found out from Lily the receptionist that Joel and Gus were spending the day in IT helping with a shipment of new laptops. That wasn't so bad—he didn't mind working alone—and there was a toolbox sitting there, waiting for him outside the door. His keycard got him in, the room wasn't too warm or too cold, he was full of waffles and bacon—so far, so good.

After that? Not so good.

He searched the entire room and couldn't find assembly instructions, not even a picture of the finished product. So he sorted the pieces by size, thinking that might help. It didn't. He'd never had to put anything like this together in his life. And now it was going on eleven o'clock, and all he had to show for two hours of work was... nothing. Wonderful. He dusted off his jeans and headed off to find IT.

By three, Reiner had the rack put together, thanks to Brian from somewhere in the bowels of IT, on loan for the afternoon. Brian, another pale blond like the male from the day before—were they related?—came equipped with a laptop, and found a diagram saved from when they ordered the new server. The first hour, Brian's lowered eyes and subtle avoidance had Reiner half a breath from snarling. He couldn't help it.

"What the fuck?" he snapped, and Brian flinched, dark hazel eyes going wide and startled. "I'm not that scary," Reiner grumbled.

Brian blinked at him, his shields wavering for a brief second, enough for Reiner to get that he was, to Brian, kind of scary.

"I'm not," he protested. "God, I'm a geek, same as you. Really."

"But you're—" Brian hunched his shoulders up around his ears and slid his eyes in the direction of Reiner's chest. Then he *showed* Reiner, and

nearly made him laugh—he was not that tall *or* that big, and he definitely didn't smell like that. No way.

Brian's sigh telegraphed total disbelief, but he stopped the vague flinching that had Reiner wanting to lash his currently-not-there tail and thump Brian in the head just because he could.

By the time the rack was assembled—with no left over parts, thank you very much—Brian had actually initiated conversation beyond, “now you need the five millimeter rubber washers”, it was three o'clock, and the entire building filled with a whispery hint of intent: *Done. Home.* He'd thought Blais had been making an exception yesterday, it being their first day and all. Apparently not.

To be sure, he asked Brian, who was already closing his laptop, “Is this normal? Everybody goes home at three?”

“Yeah.” Brian nodded. “On Fridays, we all leave at lunchtime, unless you have to stick around for something special.” Brian's brown eyes flicked over Reiner. “There's a soccer game on Friday afternoons for whoever wants to play. In the field out back.”

“That'd be cool.” He liked soccer, he'd missed playing with his cousins when he'd been away at college. “Do you play?”

Brian tilted his head, looking at Reiner through his lashes, and his voice dropped maybe a quarter octave. “I like to watch.”

What had Trey said? *Once you hit town, I figure there'll be a line. Best take advantage of seeing you first.* Reiner shrugged, flattered and not altogether sure what to say.

Brian grinned, and, okay, he was damned cute when he did. “Just so you know.” He headed off, laptop under his arm, and Reiner did check out the view—he was male, it came with the equipment.

Besides, the thing with Trey wasn't serious, not... yeah. Reiner touched the tender spot on his cheekbone with one finger. Maybe it wasn't serious *yet*, but it sure as hell could be. Not that he wanted to sit down with Trey and talk about it—shit, no. They were just fine not talking about it. There had been that one point last night, when Reiner caught Trey's stray thought

about him not moving into the Inn, and said he wanted to stay. Trey's happy relief had been obvious—what else did they need to say?

He shut off the lights and made sure the door closed behind him, realizing as he headed down the stairs that he'd completely forgotten about lunch. He didn't know what was around, outside of the diner and the Inn, but maybe he and Trey could go someplace else for an early dinner. That would actually be kind of cool.

The mid-afternoon heat and humidity hit him the second he left the building, and he sighed in relief. Computers might not appreciate early summer in North Carolina, but he sure did. Being cold sucked.

There were half a dozen cars in front of the garage, and Reiner detoured around them on his way to Trey's—their—apartment. He knew Trey was inside, so was Aidan.

As he reached the first open bay, he saw Trey, crouched in front of a stack of boxes and writing on one of them with a marker. Aidan leaned against the wall with a clipboard in one hand, idly scratching his belly under his T-shirt with the other.

“—California,” he said, his eyes on Trey. “You need to think about what you want to do. Theo wants to retire, and you're the best choice to replace him—we both know that. And it's not like you'd have to live in L.A. itself, you can—”

“I already thought of that,” Trey replied mildly, and Reiner's stomach performed an awful stop-drop-and-roll maneuver. He knew he didn't make a sound—he'd have to be breathing for that—and he thought he kept his dismay off his face, but the cool assessment in Aidan's eyes when he looked up made Reiner doubt it. What he didn't doubt was that Aidan had sensed him coming from a ways off, and that the topic of conversation was deliberate. He was meant to overhear this.

You bastard. The thought slipped away from him before he could grab it and stuff it out of sight.

Aidan took a deep breath, but his expression didn't change in the least. He let the air out in a huff, and Reiner looked away from Aidan to meet Trey's startled—guilty?—eyes.

“Hey,” Reiner said through dry lips. “You wanna go get an early dinner somewhere? After you finish?” He was insanely proud of how casual all that came out, not to mention grateful as hell for Eliza’s construction project in his head for keeping his ricocheting thoughts safe and sound.

Trey nodded, his internal bamboo grove gone impenetrable and dark, matching the wide pools of both pupils. “That sounds good.”

“Cool.” Reiner took the stairs two at a time, and by the time he got inside the apartment he’d almost convinced himself it didn’t matter if Trey was going to move to L.A., or wanted to move, or even had to move. They were both young males, and too young to be settling down, right? Right.

Trey was mad enough to spit, and he seriously considered throwing something heavier than the permanent marker at Aidan. He breathed around the tightness in his chest, and wondered which box had the least fragile heavy thing in it.

“Your mother threw a table at me once,” Aidan offered, still leaning against the wall. Out of all of them, he was hands-down the best at keeping his thought to himself and off his face. Even his voice gave nothing away. For the first time in his life, Trey resented the absolute shit out of that ability.

“Why are you trying to fuck this up for me?” Trey stood up, knowing that he gave off *ears flat, tail lashing* and not giving a damn.

“You do need to decide if you want the job in L.A. or not.” Aidan didn’t move, but Trey couldn’t miss the way Aidan’s pupils flared inside their sudden gold coronas. Bad, oh shit, that was *bad*, and still, Trey’s mouth kept going.

“Really? And just by coincidence, you bring it up when Reiner shows up? After telling me the job was mine whenever, no pressure?” Trey swallowed to clear his throat, wanting to just tell Aidan to fuck off even as his other half stirred in warning. “Please,” he croaked. “Stay out of this? I’m old enough to know what I want—and if I fuck it up and it falls apart, fine. I can deal with that.” His muscles twitched with adrenaline and he

rode the rush, ignored the prickle of fresh sweat under his arms and along his spine.

Aidan shuddered, skin breaking out in visible goose bumps, and he breathed in until his T-shirt went taut across his entire upper body. Trey's other half rose higher, breaking the surface of his mind and demanding that he wake the fuck up and pay attention before things went further to shit. Stupid—easy to forget what Aidan was like underneath calm and patient Daddy-Aidan. He *didn't* handle stress well, and even Blais knew when to back off or risk an explosion, which was saying something. Plus, the trip to the VA was only a few days ago... shit.

Trey shoved his own temper in a cage and breathed out, trying for calm. He swallowed and took one more deep breath, let that out slow and easy. "Dad."

Aidan blinked at him, and the red tinge to the waterfall in his head faded slightly. "Go upstairs," he said, with only a hint of growl, and closed his eyes. "Go."

Trey didn't need to be told twice. Aidan would—and had—hurt himself before taking out his runaway temper on someone else when things got too much for him. Trey had said his piece, and he wouldn't apologize for that. Or back down, not on this. That didn't mean he was going to stand around and wait for Aidan to go *boom*.

He didn't know what he was going to find upstairs. Reiner's bags by the door, maybe. He didn't quite expect Reiner to be sitting on the sofa, eating beef jerky. Trey shucked his work boots by the door and peeled off his socks, not sure what to say. Reiner silently offered him a piece of jerky when Trey crossed the room and sat down on the other end of the sofa.

"About six months ago—" was as far as he got before Reiner interrupted him.

"It's okay. You don't need to explain it. I heard... downstairs." Reiner smiled at him, and Trey wished he could see past the entrance to the maze to what Reiner was thinking—because that smile wasn't right.

"I don't want to move to L.A.—you heard that part, right?" Trey edged closer on the sofa.

Reiner nodded, eyes on Trey's mouth. He reached across and hooked two fingers in the neck of Trey's T-shirt, leaning forward as he pulled Trey to him. The smile might not be right, but the kiss was, and Trey laid back on the sofa and took Reiner with him, spreading his legs so Reiner could get right up close from mouth to balls.

Their tongues moved together with a low-grade urgency, a slow build, and Trey's body took a moment to get the message, even with Reiner hot and solid on top of him. From the feel of things, Reiner was a little ahead of him there, his back muscles tightening under Trey's splayed hand as his hips rocked. This wasn't anything like what they'd done the other times, this was... god, it was good. Trey ran his other hand over Reiner's hair, not urging or rushing, enjoying the tickle of it on his palm.

He didn't know how long they stayed like that, long enough for the pleasure of exploring each other's mouth to wash out everything else, anyway, but then Reiner detoured away from Trey's mouth to bite along his jaw, soft bites, little tastes, and Trey lifted his chin to offer his neck up for the same treatment. He pulled Reiner's shirt up so he could smooth his hands down, thumbs finding the dimples above his ass, catching on slightly sweaty skin.

Reiner's teeth closed on the thickest part of his trapezius, and the jolt of sensation went straight to Trey's cock and set up an echo of need in his balls. "Yes," Trey hissed, drawing it out. He curled his hips, trying to get some pressure or friction—anything—and move things along. A tongue found his ear and Trey's moan of appreciation drew an answering sound from Reiner.

Hey, guys?

They both froze, and Reiner drew back enough for Trey to see those gold flecks in his eyes. Pretty. Like leaves in the sunlight—oh fuck, did he really just think that? And not for the first time, either. Then and there, Trey figured he was screwed.

Yeah? Trey sat up as Reiner sat back, and Trey didn't imagine the reluctant way Reiner let go of him. *What, Eva?*

The door to the apartment opened, and all six DaSilva-Foresters were on the landing. Eva waved a handful of twenties at them and shrugged. “Mom says to take us all to Sonic.” She raised her other hand, and jingled a key ring. “I’ve got the keys for the Escalade.”

It took forty-five minutes to drive to Sonic, and Reiner got to listen to Eva argue with Trey for the first fifteen of them about why she should be allowed to drive. Personally, the idea of a sixteen-year-old female driving anything this enormous—with him in it—was enough to kill his appetite.

“I need twelve more hours of practice,” she pleaded. “Come on.”

“I don’t qualify as a supervising driver,” Trey pointed out.

“But Reiner does.”

“Reiner doesn’t have a North Carolina driver license.”

“So? He—”

Trey’s voice acquired an edge. “And what if that’s against the rules? You wanna risk your license?”

“Who’s gonna tell?”

“What if we get stopped?”

They kept at it until Eva was nearly hissing and Trey looked ready to bite something. It was kind of reassuring, more like Reiner and his siblings, who fought constantly. Sophie watched them with an amused patience way older than fourteen while Ethan pretended to nap and Marcus played games on a tablet, earbuds in place. The twins, in the back row next to Marcus, were ominously quiet.

Trey stopped, mid-syllable, and glared at the rear view mirror. “You put that fucking seatbelt back on, Eliza, or so fucking help me I will turn this fucking car around and go home right this goddamn second.”

“Nice Dad imitation,” Ethan muttered.

“Go back to sleep, Ethan,” Trey snapped.

“It’s not *my* fault you got interrupted.” Ethan slumped in his seat. “Jesus. Not like you haven’t gotten any.”

Trey's growl sounded strangled, and his hands flexed on the steering wheel.

"Mom gave Dad Valium." Everybody in the van except Trey looked at Sophie, who shrugged. "She did."

"Dad doesn't *take* drugs," Ethan said. "And how do you know, anyway?"

Sophie gave him a withering look. "I was there, dumbass. So were you. Oh wait, you were too busy playing video games to notice."

"It's the stress," Trey said, and Reiner frowned at the slight hesitation before "stress." Trey shrugged one shoulder. "The whole thing about the knee injection. And—" He shot Reiner an indecipherable look.

"And Dad thinks you should take the job in Los Angeles," Sophie finished for him, and Reiner did not have to imagine that she was looking at him when she it, he knew she was.

He thought he'd gotten past the disappointment, he didn't expect the same bitter taste to rise up in his throat at the idea that this was just him and Trey fooling around for a bit before Trey moved on and moved away. Because obviously that's all it was, and he was okay with it.

"And I told Dad that I still had to think about it," Trey said, in a way-too-even tone.

"Jeez, Trey." Eva almost rolled her eyes. "You've been drooling over that job ever since you found out about it. What's to think about?"

Reiner's flinch was all internal, and totally ridiculous. They'd known each other for four? five? days. Barely. Expecting Trey to—

"A lot," Trey said. "Papi and Dad offered it to me when I first got back, and I get why, okay? But that was months ago, and I'm not so sure that's what I want. That's all. Besides, it's not like Theo is retiring tomorrow, you know? I don't need to decide right this second."

The weird thing was that Reiner could actually feel the warm weight of Trey's gaze on him while Trey said all that, even though Trey had his eyes on the road the whole time.

“Police car,” Dean announced, from all the way in the back.

Sure enough, one had pulled out of somewhere and was rolling along behind them at a discreet distance. Trey snorted. “Still wanna drive, Eva?”

They rode for a couple of miles in relative silence, shadowed by the cruiser. Trey explained that some of the local cops had a hard-on for Blais, and didn’t miss an occasion to mess with anybody from Stone Mountain.

“Don’t ask me,” Trey admitted. “I got no idea why. It’s not like any of us go into town and start bar fights and shit, or mess around with their wives or their husbands.”

Sophie hummed, sort of sing-songy, almost like she wanted to laugh, and Eva hissed at her, very, very softly. Reiner, along with everybody else, waited for more, but all Eva did was heave an exasperated sigh after glaring at Sophie for a few seconds. Trey made a questioning noise, and Eva shook her head.

“Nothing,” she said. “Sophie’s just being a pain in the ass know-it-all. And she doesn’t know *anything*.”

“Can we get ice cream?” Marcus asked, pulling out his earbuds, and hunched his shoulders when everybody muttered at him. “What? What’d I miss?”

After that, the rest of the trip was nothing but debate over what they all wanted to eat, and whether they should bring shakes back for their parents, and if so, what flavors. Reiner’s stomach had settled again, despite the warm way Trey met his eyes at odd moments.

They ordered an obscene amount of food—and Reiner figured it would take two carhops to deliver it all to the SUV. It took three, actually, two girls—and one teenage boy.

“Hey, Eva,” he said, blushing a little as he handed the bags in the window, and Trey twisted around in his seat to stare, handing Reiner his cherry limeade at the same time.

“Sam,” Eva replied, not blushing as far as Reiner could tell. “Didn’t know you worked here.”

“Summer job.” Sam stood there—Ethan pictured him for everybody with big cow eyes—until Trey cleared his throat and startled him.

“Can we have more catsup?” Trey asked, with more of an edge than condiments called for, in Reiner’s opinion. *Bite me*, Trey told him, moving his seat all the way back so he could tuck one foot under his thigh and sit sideways, facing Reiner.

Sam unloaded a double handful of catsup packets into Eva’s hands, blushing harder. “Is that enough?”

“Yeah. That’s enough,” Trey said, and Reiner poked his knee, earning a huff.

Sam and the other two carhops skated off, and Trey leaned over so he could get closer to Eva. “Seriously?”

“It’s *nothing*,” Eva said, stressing the last word and curling her lip at Trey. “Seriously.”

“He asked her to prom,” Sophie muttered. “This isn’t mine. Who ordered the one with mustard?”

“He what?” Trey spat, at the same time Eva said, “And I said no.”

“Wow, this *is* a *telenovela*.” Reiner smirked at Trey’s indignant grunt, and handed Trey a burger. “Nothing exciting ever happens in Pennsylvania.”

Eva shot him a grateful look.

“Well that would suck,” Ethan said around a mouthful of Tots. “What did you do for fun?”

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CHAPTER EIGHT

They pulled around to the back of SMS before it was fully dark, and everybody except Trey and Reiner piled out, taking the one chocolate-chip-mint and two chocolate shakes they'd decided on with them.

Trey drove around the short side of the building, to the automatic door at ground level, hitting the fob to open the door to the parking garage. He parked the Escalade in its assigned space and got out, inhaling the familiar smell of cool concrete with a hint of motor oil and exhaust and wondering if Reiner was going to ask—

He didn't get further than that, because Reiner had him pinned against the warm metal of the SUV and his tongue was exploring Trey's ear. *Oh yeah.* The dozens of little touches they'd exchanged—every brush of fingers reaching for a Tot at the same time, a casual tap on a knee for attention, not to mention watching Reiner lick catsup off his fingers—all added up to them both wanting *this*, mouths on skin and hands searching for evidence of arousal.

What he didn't expect was for Reiner to pull back, panting, and say, "Let's shift and go running."

"Indigestion," Trey pointed out, although it had been over an hour since they'd eaten by now, so not out of the question. "You sure?"

Reiner kissed him, both of them tasting of lime, and hummed a *yes* into Trey's mouth. So Trey undressed him right there, in the garage, taking time to run his fingers over the solid heft of Reiner's cock and balls. He toed off his sneakers and stepped out of his own jeans when Reiner finished getting them open, and shrugged out of his shirt, leaving all of it where it fell. He'd come get their stuff tomorrow, now was all about getting the two of them naked.

His skin pebbled in the chill of the garage, and Reiner bent and flicked one barbell with his tongue before sucking it into his hot mouth. Trey let his head drop back and inhaled sharply, sliding his hands down to grip Reiner's ass. And when Reiner closed his teeth and tugged, that was all it took—

Trey let the flare of pain grow, fanned it into a full-on fire and let go, let the shift take him with no resistance, burning him to oblivion until the blackness sucked him in and spat him out.

He couldn't even feel bad for dragging Reiner into shifting with him, not even when Reiner lay there on the concrete floor for maybe half a minute after they both finished. Reiner blinked at him, eyes shining even in the dark, and rolled onto his chest, absently grooming his whiskers.

That was fucked up. Cool, but... fucked up. Reiner turned his head and let Trey lick his jaw, and his ear, and then did the same, purring into Trey's ear and making him shiver. *How do we get out of here?*

Trey shook his fur into order and jogged across to the automatic door. He used one paw to hit a white button down near the floor, and the door creaked into motion. It only opened partway, enough for them to slip underneath. A few seconds later, the door slid down, and Trey bumped shoulders with Reiner. *Ready?*

Reiner bounced forward, heading for the strip of woods beyond the driveway, and Trey swatted him, claws in. He pounced on Reiner's tail, and that started a mad chase, dodging around trees and scrubby bushes while they played tag and tripped each other. Trey finally gave up and ran flat out, Reiner behind him, nothing in either of their heads but the here and now.

So why did that feel like it wasn't enough?

The moon was up before they made it back to Trey's place, their wet fur covered in leaf litter. They came out on the slope behind the garage, and Trey leapt easily onto the deck, claws digging in to the railing as he hauled himself up and over, followed by Reiner. Trey shook, and Reiner flattened his ears when he got splattered with water and leaf bits.

It was your idea to go swimming, Trey grumbled. *And now we have to shift back, because I'm not getting into bed with wet fur—or sleeping on the floor.*

Reiner sat down with a thump and cocked his head. *I thought we had fun.* He sounded... not sure, and Trey's heart did a ridiculous stop-and-start dance in his chest.

I thought we did, too. Trey rubbed his head under Reiner's chin, inviting a lick or a nuzzle, and got a heavy foreleg draped over his shoulder instead.

I understand about you wanting to go to L.A., you know? Reiner licked the top of Trey's head. *And it's okay.*

What? Trey kept his ears up with an effort. Reiner wasn't lying, but the words didn't match the—the—Trey couldn't pin down the slithery underthought to put a name to it. Not lying, no, but Reiner didn't entirely believe what he was saying, either.

I don't want to go to L.A., Trey repeated, because it was true, and not just because he wanted to know if he and Reiner could make this work. Okay, he'd wanted the job in California when he first got back home, mostly because being home, after three years of military life, was just too strange. But now that he'd renovated the apartment and settled into working at the garage with Aidan—something he'd dreamed about doing since he was ten—he didn't want to run off to the opposite coast quite so much.

Okay, Reiner repeated, which wasn't what Trey wanted to hear. At all. What he wanted was for Reiner to say *I don't want you to go to L.A.,* and how stupid did that make him? Yes, fine, Aidan had a point—he'd known Reiner for all of five days—but, come on, he'd always known right off whether what he had with some male was just sex or not. And didn't it make sense to give it a try if it might be more? Unless...

Trey closed his eyes as Reiner continued to wash his face and ears, slow strokes of his tongue, sinking down flat on the deck with Reiner half on top of him.

Unless Reiner wasn't planning to stick around, which would explain him being all casual about the L.A. thing. Trey had overheard enough dinner-table conversation to know that Blais planned to set up a new server in California, and it would make sense to move Reiner there to do that.

We could sleep out here, Reiner suggested, nibbling the edge of Trey's ear. *Bring the comforter out and sleep on that. I'll wash it,* he added, *if you want.*

Trey shook off his weird funk and heaved himself onto all four paws, dislodging Reiner. *That sounds good.* He padded over and jumped through

the window into the bedroom, climbing back out with the edge of the comforter in his jaws. They got it spread out, more or less, and Reiner sprawled in the center, rolling onto his back and stretching.

Trey nipped his belly—hard to resist—and Reiner grabbed him with all four legs and bit his head. Trey flopped on his side, bracing his paws on Reiner's chest and shoving a little. *You smell like corn chips*, Trey told him. *Hot stale corn chips*.

Reiner wrinkled his nose until his canines showed, and then licked his own nose. *So do you*. He yawned, the inside of his mouth startlingly pink even in the dark. He rolled over until he could rest his head on Trey's ribs, high up near his forelegs, and sighed deeply, settling them together. *G'night Trey*.

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CHAPTER NINE

They didn't talk about Reiner moving to the Inn, not the next morning or the next night, and after two weeks, Reiner didn't *want* to talk about it. They didn't talk about L.A., either, which was okay, too. What they had was just fine, and asking Trey outright when he planned on moving to the West Coast would just... ruin everything.

He got used to having coffee with Trey in the mornings and talking about nothing—like what they should have for dinner, and whether Trey should pick up some groceries down in Wilkesboro if he made a parts run—or debating what kind of car he should buy. The plan was to wait until after Memorial Day, and then they could go around and check out the local dealerships. The twelve-year-old Toyota wasn't worth much as a trade-in, so Trey had come up with offering it to Eva, who had some money saved for a car but not enough. According to Trey, she'd been given a choice: she could drive one of the family cars—not the Porsche—or buy her own, with money she earned. Same choice as Trey, actually, although he'd left before he'd gotten his license.

Late afternoons and evenings were the two of them out on the deck or in front of the TV... except for the times they tumbled into bed or onto the couch the minute they were alone. And for every time they wrestled and bit and bruised each other before and during sex, there were the other times—kisses that went on until they were both panting and impatient, a slow buildup that left one or the other begging for more. Reiner understood the rough, looked forward to it, liked it. The gentle stuff left his stomach in a knot wondering if Trey meant... whatever it was that kind of thing meant.

A few times he'd come close to bringing up the subject of Trey leaving, and realized he'd sound ridiculous. He didn't even know what he wanted to say, other than a vague demand that Trey give them, the two of them, more time. Reiner had grown up deliberately not paying attention to random thoughts around him, so the idea of actually rummaging around Trey's surface thoughts *on purpose* made him slightly ill. He wasn't an idiot—he knew that Trey knew something was bothering him, but Trey was polite

enough not to try and push into Reiner's head and see what was going on in there.

The server was up and running—mostly—on schedule. He'd chased bugs and gremlins for three days, Joel and Gus scratching their heads right along with him, until they figured out one of the power cords was bad. The replacement came via overnight mail, solving that problem, and then one of the diagnostic routines started hanging up. Joel swore he had that fixed and Reiner really fucking hoped so, because this was the Friday of Memorial Day weekend, and he did not want to have to tell Blais they needed more time.

Reiner waved to Lily as he jogged through the lobby, wanting a shower so bad he could taste it. He'd nearly been late this morning, and had to settle for a quick rinse before throwing clothes on and dashing out the door.

The late afternoon had turned sultry and still, and absolutely nothing moved outside. The garage apron was empty except for his Toyota and Trey's El Camino over on the side, next to Trey's pair of ATVs. The big doors were open, though, and Reiner could sense Trey inside, in the office.

I'll be done in a bit, Trey told him. We've got some time before the barbecue.

I'm gonna grab a shower. Reiner headed up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He left his shoes by the door and stripped once he reached the bedroom.

The sight of the laundry basket gave him a pause, with his and Trey's clothes mixed together. They hadn't even tried to keep stuff separate; the first week, Reiner had tossed everything in the washer one day before he left the apartment, not bothering to sort it, and Trey ran back up later and stuck everything in the dryer when it was done. It hadn't hit him until right now how *domestic* that was. Even cleaning—they just did it, together, and it had to be done, right? And with the two of them, it went fast, so that made sense.

He shook off the funny weight in his gut and got the water going in the shower. The hot water heater was downstairs in the garage, and it took

freaking ages for some reason. He got in before it was hot enough, sticking his face under the stream and bracing his hands on the wall.

He knew Trey was there a second before callused hands slid around his waist and a more than half-hard dick pressed up along his ass cheeks. Reiner stayed right where he was, dropping his head forward so Trey could bite at his neck. He did spread his feet, and Trey hummed against his skin in appreciation at the same time he rolled his hips, sliding along Reiner's crack.

Reiner got that Trey liked a finger—or two, or even three—inside him when he got off, and after over a week of trial and error, so did Reiner. He wasn't so sure about the toys, although he absolutely appreciated the effect on Trey. Speaking of which...

Trey hummed again. *Sorry, wanted to get in here with you. Next time?* He licked water off Reiner's neck and ran one hand down to circle the base of Reiner's dick and his balls, squeezing enough to be fun but not *enough*, and Reiner grunted, pushing into Trey's fingers.

"Don't tease," he said, and they both knew he meant the opposite. That was half the fun. He twisted to reach Trey's mouth, and the rest of his body followed until they faced each other. His hands couldn't decide what was more interesting—the hard curve of Trey's ass or the slick expanse of his upper back. Then Trey slid his tongue deep into Reiner's mouth and after a second or two, he forgot about everything but how good Trey tasted.

They moved so the water cascaded over them equally, and Reiner reached down and wrapped both their cocks in his fist. He didn't need to do more than that; Trey started a nice slow rock and glide, and between that and the matching push and retreat of his tongue, all Reiner managed was to moan and shiver.

He got his other hand back on Trey's ass, and the feel of the muscles tensing and relaxing under his palm and fingers was almost as good as a pheromone rush. He dug his fingers in, trying for a better grip on the taut, slippery skin, and Trey whimpered into his mouth. Reiner pressed a little, breaching the very outer ring with his middle finger, just to hear that again. Instead, he got...

...Trey on his knees, hands braced on the headboard, knees wide to welcome Reiner behind him. And Reiner was balls-deep in heat and slick and—oh god, so, so tight—and then Trey reached around and grabbed Reiner's thigh to urge him harder, deeper, faster, rocking back with enough force to make Reiner hold even tighter onto Trey's hipbones. Trey groaned, a guttural vibration that set off a chain reaction in Reiner's gut and sparked an explosion in his balls and turned the world white...

...and his head fell back, hips stuttering, ass clenching in helpless sympathy as they both pulsed hotly into the meager space between their bellies and chests.

And the second Reiner had control over his body again he shoved back from Trey, still hard, wanting to see that again, so help him, wanting to feel that—

“No,” Trey said, reaching for his arm, and Reiner moved out of reach. “Just because I think about it doesn't mean I want to do it for real.” Trey pressed a hand against his own hard-on; grimacing, he stuck his face under the water and sluiced his abs and belly clean. He wiped his face and blinked at Reiner. “I swear—I don't want to.”

What made everything worse was the flash of an image Reiner got when Trey said *for real*. And even though he'd never seen Blais or Aidan naked, the tattoos were a giveaway. That couldn't be right. They wouldn't—He caught the way Trey's whole face tightened, and knew the answer to that was *yes, they would*. Oh... god. Worse, his mouth engaged with no input from his brain.

“How does—do they use condoms?” Now there was a thought. A bad thought, but a valid one.

Trey shook his head. “Rinse off,” he said, and Reiner moved to do just that. “I don't think so,” Trey went on. “For one thing, they'd probably rip. Maybe not completely, but yeah, even a thick condom? I don't think so.”

“So... How?” Reiner stepped closer, needing reassurance, and slipped his hands around Trey's waist. Trey did the same, and they stood there, under the not-quite-as-hot water, their still-interested cocks bumping and twitching.

“Well...” Trey sighed, nuzzling behind Reiner’s ear. “If you shifted, right after—”

“—you’d heal,” Reiner finished, and Trey nodded. He shut off the water, since it was starting to run cool, and his hazel eyes were serious when he looked back.

“There’s limits—we all know that. It works on minor stuff, and I’m guessing it works for... *that*, too. I just don’t know if I want to go that far. I’m not...” His voice trailed off and he lifted one shoulder. “I don’t mind some pain. But I don’t know if I’d have the control to shift right after—and...” Trey shrugged again, and his voice lowered to barely audible. “Doesn’t mean I don’t fantasize about it, though.” He reached for a towel.

Reiner breathed out on a broken laugh. “Damn, Trey. I don’t think I’m gonna be able to get that out of my head anytime soon.” Trey’s smile was crooked, and Reiner kissed him, body still humming with arousal. Trey bumped him, hip to hip, and Reiner sank to his knees on the thick bathmat, mouth trailing over Trey’s wet skin. He closed his eyes as Trey ran both hands through his hair, and found the damp head of Trey’s cock with no trouble. Reiner answered Trey’s rumble of pleasure with his own low hum, hands coming to rest with his thumbs tracing the point of Trey’s hipbones.

“We’re gonna be late if you—*jeezusss*—” Trey hissed and his fingers tightened in Reiner’s hair.

Tell me to stop, then. Reiner eased his tongue inside Trey’s foreskin, gently pushing it down so he could play with the barbs. *Well?* Trey’s answer was a full-body shudder, and his flanks tensed under Reiner’s hands. Reiner didn’t smile, not quite. *Let’s try a different fantasy.*

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CHAPTER TEN

Reiner had never in his life been around this many members of his own species, period. One or two, shit, three or four of his species in a crowd of humans didn't stand out that much. Put forty or so of them all in a group, though, and all of a sudden the *sameness* got too obvious to ignore.

At the moment, what seemed like thirty males were wrestling on the mowed grass field behind SMS, maybe five or six yards away from the deck leading to Trey's family's house. A ball—a football? Reiner was fuzzy on team sports other than soccer—arced over the larger tangle, and a big male snatched it out of the air and ran like hell. With a start, Reiner recognized Blais as the one with the ball.

Blais, in shorts and nothing else, made it about a dozen feet before an equally large male—Aidan—vaulted over two other players and launched himself after Blais. Aidan tackled him—that *had* to hurt—and somehow, Blais twisted around and threw the ball as he went down. A blond male stretched to catch it and started running, putting on extra speed to evade snatching hands and a failed tackle. He made it over some invisible line and spiked the ball into the grass, giving a triumphant thumbs up to the rest of the players and doing a sinuous victory dance.

That caught Reiner's eye, more interesting than watching everybody else running on the grass, or even Blais helping Aidan to his feet, both of them laughing. He honestly didn't get why Trey growled, or the reason for the hot wave of frustration washing over him, also from Trey.

At Reiner's questioning look, all Trey did was growl again, and finish walking over to the deck. Reiner trailed him up the stairs, distracted by the way Trey's ass looked in an ancient pair of faded jeans. A half dozen pairs of female eyes surveyed him and Trey when they reached the deck, and Reiner did not imagine the way Trey went dark inside, not even a wisp of a thought escaping the dense thicket in his head.

"About time you showed up." Eva arched her eyebrows and waved at the grassy field. "Thought you were gonna play."

“Not in the mood,” Trey muttered, not looking anywhere near Reiner. “And it’s football, anyway. Thought they were gonna play soccer.”

“All the soccer balls had holes in them,” Emery said, sounding grimly amused. “Because *someone* let the cubs play with them.”

“Right.” Aidan brushed by Reiner, leaving a heady trail of smoke-and-apple scent, and snaked out an arm to grab Emery. She didn’t even try to get away, and Aidan wrapped her close, resting his chin on top of her head from behind. “Not like *you’ve* ever destroyed a soccer ball, hmm?”

Emery smiled, almost smug, and Aidan rubbed his cheek on her hair before he let her go, eyes gleaming with a touch of heat. Reiner checked to make sure his mouth was closed. His mother would’ve done serious damage if a male tried handling her like that, even one she knew. He vaguely recalled his own father coming around before his youngest brother was conceived, and you’d think his parents had never met before, much less made offspring together. Reiner hadn’t found out it was his father until after the fact.

Reiner smelled Blais right before he saw him, and for the first time he realized how much alike his and Aidan’s scents were. Blais lacked the apple notes, he was smoke and some kind of wood, maybe oak, and a hint of salt. Which explained the vague smokiness of Trey’s scent, since family members usually had some similarities.

Blais patted Aidan’s hip, and leaned in so he could run his nose along the side of Emery’s neck. She reached up and petted his hair, and this time Reiner did have to close his mouth. He turned and caught Trey watching him, eyes hooded.

What? He had no idea what that look meant. Out of the corner of his eye, Reiner saw Emery’s head swivel in his direction, and he put his body into motion, heading for the tables of food.

He filled half a plate with the marinated meat concoction Trey had served him in the garage, and took an ear of corn, too, dripping with melted butter and some kind of powdered chile—whatever it was, it smelled good.

Trey was already sitting at a table on the deck, and Reiner slid into the seat across from him. Trey had his head down, so Reiner started eating.

Mutual blow jobs had left both of them feeling pretty good, if not entirely satisfied, and he planned on continuing what they'd started later tonight. He was about to ask Trey what the problem was when Emery slid into the seat next to Trey.

She ignored Trey and smiled at Reiner. "I see you like the meat dish."

"Yes, ma'am," he assured her. "Trey gave me some at the garage, and it was amazing. What's it called?"

She laughed, and it was the same dark sound he remembered from the first time they met. "It doesn't have a name. We just always called it the meat dish when I was growing up." Except when she said it, she attached a picture to the words, tiny strips of meat gleaming with oil and bits of cilantro.

"Reiner said he wanted it on waffles," Trey mumbled, and Emery leaned her shoulder into his.

"It would be excellent on waffles," Emery said, and Reiner didn't imagine the sharp look she gave Trey.

"Would there be any way for me to get the recipe?" Reiner asked, partly to distract Emery from the way Trey was acting, and partly because his mom would love it.

"I'll email it to Trey, and he can forward it to you, if that's all right." She sat back in her chair and tipped her head to the side, studying Reiner. "Did Blais explain what the new server is for?" Reiner shook his head, and Emery nodded at his plate. "Eat. And I'll explain."

Reiner picked up his ear of corn automatically—the command in her voice was impossible to ignore. She was a little... he didn't want to say *scary*, but she kind of was, in a way he couldn't pin down. Emery had to be close to his mom's age, and his mom was rounded and soft and undeniably female—complete with the unpredictable female temper. Emery wasn't round or soft. She was lean and... scary.

Emery hummed in the back of her throat, and invisible warm fingers trailed across Reiner's surface thoughts. Her mouth curved up on one side. "I'll try to be less scary." She waved a hand at Reiner's instant, wordless protest around a mouthful of corn. "Anyway—the server. Next week, Pax is

releasing their genealogical database. To us. That will give us accurate bloodline information for every jaguar Pax ever bred, with DNA information going back almost to the beginning. Some of those bloodlines don't exist outside of Pax, not anymore." Her eyes fixed on something behind Reiner for a moment, and then came back to him. "With our limited gene pool, those bloodlines are important. So we want the database, but the risk..." She sighed.

Reiner nodded, and picked up where she'd left off. "It needs to be kept isolated."

"Yes. So there's no way we let it anywhere near our other systems. And once we unpack the data, it's going to take time to match it up with our own records—which are not complete. At all." Emery sighed again, and reached up to run her hand over Trey's hair. "You're being very quiet."

Trey didn't raise his head, although he leaned into her touch. "Don't have much to add. Not like computers are my thing."

The chair next to Reiner scraped on the deck, and he had a split second to realize it was Blais, now wearing a tank top with his shorts. "Filling him in?" Blais asked Emery, and she huffed at him.

"He should at least know why you needed that thing up and running on a deadline." She pushed back from the table and stood, her hand lingering on Trey's shoulder. Some thought, some message too quick for Reiner to catch, passed between them, and Trey shrugged away from her, frustration rising off him like heat waves on blacktop. Reiner frowned at Trey, and only realized that Blais was talking to him when Blais paused and tilted his head like he'd asked a question.

Reiner ignored the flush heating the back of his neck and sat back in his chair. "I'm sorry—I didn't realize—"

"*Que está bien*—" He snorted and waved a hand at Reiner's blank look. "That's all right. I was just saying that until the database arrives, I'd suggest taking some time for yourself—because once it gets here, making the database accessible is going to be your priority for the foreseeable future. And no, there isn't a deadline, not exactly, but we do need to know early on

if there are any traps. I don't want to spend months on this and have it blow up because they've hidden a worm somewhere."

"That'll be Gus," Reiner told him. "He's better at that than I am."

"That's fine." Blais flicked his pale eyes from Reiner to Trey and back, and for no reason, Reiner braced himself. "It's very possible that I might need you to transfer to the L.A. office in a few months, depending on how far we get on this."

"Okay," Reiner said carefully, trying to think around the lead ball forming in his gut.

Blais nodded. "You—"

Trey stood up, and the heat in his eyes was *not* Reiner's imagination. Reiner reached, mind to mind, and bounced off Trey's shields with enough force to sting. Trey's face was a perfectly blank mask as he stepped sideways and pushed his chair back under the table, and he walked away without saying a word to Blais or Reiner.

"No," Reiner blurted to a startled Blais. "I'm sorry, but... I don't think that would be a good idea." When all Blais did was raise his eyebrows, Reiner tried to explain. "I know that Trey is supposed to move out there, and maybe it would be better if I was here."

Blais tapped his fingers, long and blunt, with scarred knuckles, on the edge of the table. "I'd think you'd want to go with him," he said, with a sideways glance at Reiner.

"He hasn't asked me to." His neck hair bristled at the admission, and he wasn't about to confess that he and Trey had avoided the subject entirely. He didn't understand the noise Blais made, a sort of amused grunt. Stung, his words came out with more of an edge than he intended. "And until I discuss this with him, I really can't give you an answer either way."

He didn't expect Blais to blink, or huff thoughtfully. Or to incline his head and squeeze his shoulder before getting up. "You do that," Blais told him. "And then let me know what you decide."

Reiner tried breathing again once Blais walked away, and wished he'd thought to snag a beer before he'd sat down. One appeared, beads of

condensation just forming on the dark brown glass, and Brian, the cute blond from IT, laughed at the grateful look Reiner threw at him. The blond male slid into the seat Blais had abandoned, stretching his legs out under the table and lacing his hands across his—very flat, very cut—bare abs. “I was looking forward to watching,” he murmured, and there was no mistaking the tone for anything but flirting.

“Hmm.” Reiner took a sip of beer. “I wasn’t planning on playing.” He only realized how that sounded after the fact.

Brian’s mouth curved, and all right, he was damn cute and smelled like hazelnuts and salt—an invitation in and of itself. Brian slid his hands along his belly, down to his faded jeans, hooking his thumbs in the waistband and tugging it lower to display a bit more of skin. And, Reiner was sure, not incidentally drawing attention to his package. And as nice as all that was, Reiner’s body had zero interest at the moment.

“You gonna give us all a show?” Trey drawled from across the table, and thumped two beers down before taking a seat. “Or are you the one who likes to watch?” Brian’s eyes narrowed, and he breathed out sharply through his nose. Before he could say anything, Trey slouched and curled his lip, looking down his nose at Brian. “Yeah, that’s right—your cousin’s the one into doing—you’re just a tease.” He smiled and gave Brian a slow blink, all lazy menace, and took a long pull on his beer. When he put the bottle down, he sucked his lower lip clean, and Reiner’s idiot dick plumped against his thigh.

Trey’s nostrils flared, and he met Reiner’s eyes. “That what you want?” he asked, voice rough, and Reiner’s dick thickened more at the harsh tone, not caring that he had no idea what Trey meant. “Cause I don’t know if I can share.”

Reiner could literally not look away—on the one hand, Trey’s mind was a blank wall of leafy green with not a hint of emotion escaping, and on the other, his eyes were bright and hard, and he smelled sharply of peppercorns. “Jealous?” he asked, with a vague twinge of *déjà vu*, and had no idea why he was surprised when Trey nodded.

“Yes,” Trey said, with absolutely no inflection. He clenched his jaw.

Reiner tipped his head to one side, wondering if the tightness in his chest was anger or dismay and not entirely sure he wanted to have this conversation right here, right now.

Trey blinked twice, fast, and repeated, “I don’t think I can share.”

Oh. Reiner realized that Trey wasn’t talking about Brian—who’d disappeared—at all. It hadn’t even occurred to him that Trey might want the same kind of relationship Aidan, Blais, and Emery had, which, apparently, Trey *didn’t* want.

When Trey didn’t add anything to that, Reiner shrugged. “Okay.” He could deal with that. Not that he’d have to deal with it, would he? Not if Trey was in California. He spared one nanosecond to consider it, to imagine the two of them someplace else, and couldn’t do it for some reason. He didn’t get it at all. The urge to explain that itched like mad all of a sudden, and he took a breath, ready to just come out and ask if Trey was really going to leave for L.A. and when—and at the same time, he realized Eva was standing behind Trey, frowning at him.

Trey’s eyes widened, and he twisted around in his chair. “Eva—”

“You’re my brother,” she said.

“I’m *not*.” But he said it oddly, more like he was trying to convince himself than her, and Reiner had the feeling he’d tuned in to the end of a movie.

She shook her head, biting her lower lip with sharp white teeth. “Trust me, I know that.” She lowered her head, and her amber eyes were dark. “Still.” Her eyes flicked to Reiner, and she gave him a burst of information, complex and compact at the same time.

There had been a time, when she and Trey were small, when Aidan had hoped the two of them would pair off, a less-complicated version of himself and Emery. Trey would have tried to make it work, for no other reason than loving Aidan and wanting to make him happy... and Eva would have had to leave—or Trey would—because she couldn’t *not* think of him as her brother, even if she tried.

Trey’s face lost all expression, and any idea Reiner had of asking about

L.A. disappeared. “Trey,” he said, and waited until Trey faced him. “Is that beer for me?”

It wasn't until much later in the evening, when it occurred to him to wonder why no one around them seemed to pay attention to their brief bit of drama, that Reiner realized the difference between his upgraded shields and what everybody else—other than the DaSilva-Foresters—had in their heads. If he pushed, even a little, he had no trouble picking up stray thoughts here and there, whereas the rest of the two dozen jaguars on the deck saw him as a blank wall—the maze that Eliza had showed him. What he hadn't noticed at the time, and what had him on the edge of laughing at the moment, was exactly *what* the walls of his maze were made of.

Bamboo.

He didn't know if it was a five-year-old's idea of a joke or... or what?

Trey had shaken off his mood from earlier, but Reiner couldn't forget the way Trey's jealousy revved him up or stop wondering if he'd missed something important—other than Trey not wanting to share a female with another male, or not wanting to pair off with Eva. He'd kind of understood that being with Trey meant being with Trey's family, and really, he thought he could deal with that. He'd been too caught up in getting the server up to think about much else, and now he had the feeling he should have paid more attention when Trey talked about L.A.

The six beers made concentrating a neat trick, but not impossible, though. His species might feel the buzz a bit earlier than a human—a gift of their faster metabolism—they also burned off the alcohol quicker than a human would.

The two of them had been careful with each other for the rest of the evening, which Reiner appreciated at the same time it pissed him off. Now he wanted answers, wanted to know why Trey would be jealous if he wasn't planning to stick around. They sat or stood close to each other, but not too close, and by mutually unspoken agreement, far away from Blais and Aidan.

Finally, though, Trey leaned in and murmured, “How about we head out?” He leaned up against Reiner, throwing off heat and smelling like temptation, and Reiner didn’t bother to say anything—he headed for the stairs. Trey caught up with him at the bottom, bumping shoulders and striding off down the dark driveway.

The sounds of laughter and conversation died away by the time they were at the road, and Reiner didn’t want to disturb the comfortable, quiet vibe he and Trey had going. Across the apron in front of the garage, up the stairs—Trey crowded him all of a sudden, and Reiner would have had to be a lot more intoxicated to miss the spike of hot-musky-salty rolling off Trey in waves.

Inside, shoes off, standing in the dark with the rest of the world outside—Reiner paused in the doorway to the bedroom, not sure why he did. They needed to talk—

“Reiner.” That’s all Trey had to say, one word, and Reiner closed his eyes against the shiver that racked him from head to feet, toes curling on the cool wooden floor. Trey’s hands slid up his back, up to his shoulders, fingers curling around the muscles there while he breathed out, and then in, against Reiner’s prickling skin. Trey rubbed his cheek against Reiner’s neck, purring almost inaudibly, running his nose into the hollow at the corner of Reiner’s jaw and behind his ear. His tongue came out to taste, tickling the inside of Reiner’s ear, followed by his lips, sucking gently until he reached curve of the neck into shoulder.

Trey’s arms slipped around him from behind, and still, all he did was simply stand there, face pressed to Reiner’s neck. Breathing. Trey gave a little shudder, an uneven inhale, and Reiner couldn’t stand it—he turned inside the circle of Trey’s arms, nudging at Trey until their mouths met and fused.

Trey tasted like beer and himself and... heat. One-handed, Reiner undid his own jeans and shoved them down until gravity took over, stepping on them and working one foot and then the other free. He got Trey’s jeans off, too, still not breaking their kiss, and finally pulled off with a gasp so he could whip his shirt off over his head. Trey did the same, turning around

and falling back onto the bed. Reiner crawled over him, and Trey eeled higher on the bed, reaching for Reiner's face and drawing him down for another kiss. Reiner rocked back on his knees and grabbed Trey's wrists, forcing them onto the bed, above Trey's head, using his weight to pin them to the mattress.

Trey arched his back, head stretched back to bare his throat, and Reiner took that for the invitation it was. He licked from the hollow between Trey's collarbones up to his jaw, laying the flat of his tongue on Trey's madly pulsing jugular and taking a deep, deep breath. He practically felt his synapses fry, rode the body rush when it wanted to turn him—turn both of them—inside out. He growled against Trey's skin, wrapped his fingers more firmly around Trey's wrists and rolled his hips, feeling Trey groan as he pushed back. Their other halves nearly surfaced, bumping the edge of awareness and wanting out—it would be easy to let go right now, but Reiner wanted a different kind of satisfaction.

He slipped one leg in between Trey's, moaning a *yes* when Trey moved his own leg to rub more firmly behind Reiner's balls. "Come on," he whispered, guttural and almost not speech at all. "Fuck yourself on me." He licked inside Trey's mouth, and lowered his hips some more, but not all the way. Trey curled his spine, hooking his free leg as high on Reiner's thigh as he could.

His fists clenched, wrists tightening against Reiner's palms and fingers, and he whined through his teeth. "Please—" He tried again, his entire lower body curling up off the bed, reaching for Reiner. Their cocks bumped and slid, almost randomly, and Trey's arms bulged, fighting Reiner's hold. Reiner threw his weight forward and let his lower body drop, hissing through his teeth at the catch and release of Trey's sweaty abs on his cock. Trey thrust up, grunting in time, and Reiner took up the counter rhythm, sliding his hips over enough so they could rasp lengths, sandwiched between bunching muscles and growing slicker and stickier by the second. Reiner bent his head and thrust his tongue into Trey's mouth, breath whistling through his nostrils, moaning deep in his throat.

*Do it, do it, do it—so good. So, so good. Perfect—oh god, the way you feel—*Reality tilted, and he couldn't be sure whose voice that was in his

head, his or Trey's. Sensation overlapped, his balls tightening at the same time he knew to shove his leg up that much higher to give Trey just that much more pressure right there, oh god, fuck yes. Trey got his wrists free, only to twine their fingers into fists, pressure and counter pressure, Trey pushing up, Reiner down. Trey sucked on his tongue, making Reiner's hips rabbit all on their own, fast frantic friction and a hint of barbs now—so close. Their bellies were wet, sweat and slippery goodness making the grind and the glide absolutely perfect.

What he wanted was right there, just like that, no way to separate whose cock caught the perfect angle and exact right amount of resistance and it didn't matter—Reiner couldn't breathe unless Trey inhaled, and Trey writhed their bodies together like he could eliminate the last bit of distance between their skins. Total overload, electricity coiling low inside and lighting them up as they spilled together, and as they drifted, gasping, Reiner carefully unwound their hands, stiff and tingling.

He rolled to the side, and Trey nuzzled up under his chin, keeping them close. Reiner curled his numb hand around the curve of Trey's skull, and remembered how to breathe on his own.

"Please stay," Trey murmured, just as Reiner drifted under—or maybe it was the other way around.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Trey untangled himself from Reiner at first light, not that he'd slept for more than a few hours, tops. The scent of sex pulled at him, urged him back into bed, into Reiner's warmth—he steeled himself and walked out of the bedroom.

He went to the kitchen and started the coffeemaker, even if coffee was the last thing his acid-filled stomach needed. His headache from the night before lingered—he sat the mug back down on the counter with a *thunk*, catching himself before he gave in and threw it.

He huffed out a silent laugh. In that, he was Aidan's son for sure. Pushed hard enough, Aidan would throw *things*; Blais was more likely to throw a punch. On the other hand, given a choice of weapons, Blais would go for the gun every time, and so would Trey, while Aidan preferred a knife.

Trey inhaled through his nose and then let it out, long and slow. He couldn't believe that Blais had done that, right in front of him, too. He'd thought since Aidan had backed off, the two of them would leave him and Reiner to work this out on their own. But no, just when Trey figured maybe he and Reiner really did have something—a partnership, friendship, call it whatever—Blais had to go and offer Reiner a chance to see the world beyond Stone Mountain and the back of nowhere.

And he knew that was something Reiner wanted because they'd talked about it, talked about the places Trey had been, and the places Reiner wanted to see. Alaska, for one, and that would be easy if Reiner was in goddamn California, now, wouldn't it?

Fuck. He leaned his head on the upper cabinet. He'd thought—he really thought he'd made it clear that he wasn't going anywhere, but maybe he hadn't. Although maybe him being a total asshole about some harmless flirting had clued Reiner in that this was more than casual sex for Trey. And then, to cap off the stupid, the thing with Eva.

God—Eva. She was still way too young, and he'd figured on three or four years before they would need to have that particular discussion. Even

so, as much as it stung, he knew she was right—he didn't want her any more than she wanted him. Better to admit it now, right? Shit, the fucking family drama alone should give Reiner a solid reason to run away from Trey. He bumped his forehead once on the cabinet door. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

He wanted—needed—to talk to Reiner before anything else, because if Reiner was planning to head off to California in the near future then he wanted to know what the fuck all that was last night. Good-bye sex? It felt more like a goddamn promise, like whatever they had done was binding somehow.

Trey?

He twitched—not the voice he expected to hear this time of the morning.

Can I come in?

Sure. Just—one second. He grabbed a pair of boxers off the bathroom doorknob and slipped them on. Not that she hadn't ever seen him naked, but that was when they were shifting, not standing around in his apartment—it just felt wrong. He opened the door. “What's up, Mom?”

Emery stepped inside, and the way she surveyed the place made him realize he'd never thought to invite her here to see what he'd done. She huffed, almost a laugh, and gave him a sideways glance, her mouth curving in a half smile. “I never expected you to,” she said. “It's very nice, though. Bright.” Her half smile turned to a full one when Reiner appeared in the doorway to the bedroom. Naked. She looked back at Trey, amber eyes gleaming wickedly. “Very pretty.”

Reiner made a noise that sounded like “*Eeep*” and disappeared. You couldn't grow up shifting and be body-shy, but naked in front of your lover's mother? Trey didn't blame him.

“Do you want coffee?” Trey offered.

“No.” Emery tucked her hair behind her ears and sighed. “Dean and Eliza have run off.” She held up a palm when Trey opened his mouth. “Not as in *run away*, just... slipped out of the house without me seeing. It's one

thing if I know—I don't worry about them out in the woods, not those two. And I understand about them escaping from day care. This... they tried to get away last night, and they had food with them. I worry that they're baiting some animal out in the woods to lure it in. I wouldn't put it past them to try and get a closer look at a bear." She reached up and cupped Trey's cheek, and his eyes half-closed. He inhaled against her wrist, breathing in mint and leather, and her familiar scent soothed some of the ragged edges off his mood. "At least with you and Eva, it was never anything bigger than raccoons." Her smile matched his. "So I have a favor to ask."

"You want me to go find them?"

She patted his cheek and nodded, taking her hand away with a last brush of her thumb on his skin. "You *and* Reiner, preferably. Just in case. I'd send your fathers, but you know how they get. No matter what, they'll overreact." She raised her eyebrows.

Trey got the message. "I'm sorry about all the—"

"*You* haven't done anything, so don't apologize. The two of them have been perfect idiots." Emery showed him an image of Blais and Aidan sleeping on the big sofa, and not looking happy about it.

Ouch. Trey raised his head when Reiner reappeared, dressed this time.

"Good morning," Reiner said, and Trey didn't imagine the faint flush along his cheekbones. He also didn't imagine the approving look on his mother's face, either. She apparently liked Reiner, and not just because he was pretty to look at.

Although that helps. I forgive your father a great deal for being pretty. Out loud, she said, "I'll let Trey explain, but I'm hoping you'll help him look for Dean and Eliza." She turned to Trey. "Let me know when you find them." With a wave to Reiner, she let herself out.

Reiner frowned at the closed door. "Did she just call Aidan *pretty*? 'Cause I don't see it." He shivered, and scrubbed at his face. "Look, before we do anything else—I'm sorry for not talking to you more last night, okay? I didn't expect you to be, I don't know, jealous."

“And I didn’t expect you to be flirting right in front of me,” Trey snapped, and felt like a perfect idiot. It must be hereditary.

Reiner just stared at him, whatever he was thinking completely hidden from view.

“What?” Trey’s stomach cramped, and not just because it was empty.

“Just... nothing. Forget it. What did your mom mean about us looking for Eliza and Dean?”

Trey clenched his jaw against the protest he wanted to make—if it was nothing, why did Reiner feel so edgy?—took a breath, and explained.

“Two hours.” Reiner slapped at a mosquito, and spoke up for the first time since they’d left the apartment. “We’ve been out here for two fucking hours. How can five-year-olds just disappear?”

“Think about that for a second. We’re tracking who?” Trey brushed a swarm of midges away from his eyes.

“I thought you said you knew where they went when they ran away from day care.” Reiner didn’t snarl, but Trey could hear it anyway.

“I was just messing with them. I got no clue.”

Reiner heaved an exaggerated sigh, and Trey almost smacked him. At first, the silence had been okay, but over the last hour he could sense whatever it was Reiner had started to say earlier damming up behind his shields, and he guessed none of it had to do with why they were wandering around in the woods getting bitten by insects.

“Maybe we should shift,” he suggested.

“Right. You wanna strip naked and get eaten alive, be my guest,” Reiner hissed, and damn if there wasn’t real anger behind it.

“What the fuck is your problem?” Trey snarled, sweaty and irritated and a little bit desperate.

“My problem?” Reiner glared sideways at him. “Really? *I’m* not the one leaving.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not going anywhere. *You’re* the one who’s gonna head off to California.”

“I am not.”

“Yes you are. Blais said—” Trey stopped, flushing cold and then hot. Reiner blinked at him, and the honest dismay on his face dropped Trey’s stomach to about knee-level.

Reiner shook his head, or maybe it was the midges. “I said no.” He slapped at another mosquito. “I figured, if you’re moving to L.A. it would be better if I stayed here.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Trey wanted to sit. Or throw something. Or maybe shake some sense into Reiner. Now there was a thought. “I *told* you I don’t want to move to L.A., I dunno, ten times. Did you think I was *lying*?”

“I thought”—Reiner slapped another mosquito—“I thought you meant you didn’t *want* to move but you had to anyway.”

“That’s—” Trey spit out a bug. “Why the fuck would I say something like that?”

“So you’re not moving?”

“I just *said* I wasn’t!” Trey snapped. “Why the fuck would I move?”

“Because... the job. And... that’s what males do.” The rest of it was there, too, plain as day: Trey heading off to breed up some more little DaSilvas.

“Oh for fu—” Trey scrubbed his face with both hands, then laced them on top of his head. “I don’t want—” He made a dark, frustrated sound. “I *can’t*, okay? I tried and it was a total fucking disaster and I think—I *know*—that if she wasn’t in season, I wouldn’t have been able—And then she didn’t get pregnant, right? And I was so fucking glad, because the last thing I want is to—to—*god!*”

“The last thing you want is what?” Reiner asked softly, and they both stopped moving.

“To do—I don’t want to be with a female at all, okay?” Trey could’ve fucking howled right then, because if this was what had been simmering

under the surface for the past week—fuck. And damn. “All I want—” he started to say, at the same time Reiner said, “But—”

Both of them swiveled their heads at the single explosive bark, out of place in the woods. Trey didn’t stop to ask, he grabbed at Reiner through the group-sense and flung out an invisible net in the direction of that bark, letting Reiner boost him, their minds spinning out, out, out, until... *wait*.

There. A blob of static energy, bigger than anything else in the woods, and Trey started moving the instant he had a lock on it. Reiner followed him, no stealth at all for the first dozen strides, breathing hard. Easy to forget that Reiner wasn’t used to hunting like this, as weird as it seemed.

Trey had maybe been four the first time he tried going after anything bigger than a mouse or a vole—who knew turkeys could run like that? A couple of years later, Aidan took him hunting, and after that it was always Trey and Eva roaming the woods together, pestering the local wildlife. Emery taught them both the finer points of stalking and tracking, and they’d spent a lot of summer evenings hunting frogs for fun. She was the one who’d taught them how to use the group-sense for hunting, too.

They know not to run, right? Reiner asked.

Yeah. Trey spared him a glance. *The rule is to hide if they can’t climb, wedge into someplace tight.* *Dogs*—He hurdled a log, and how stupid did he have to be to get distracted by the graceful way Reiner went over it next to him? *Dogs have owners. They know better than to tease a dog out here.* *Emery would—*

Oh god, Emery would flip the fuck out if those two got hurt by a dog. She hated dogs to begin with, and Aidan wasn’t all that fond either. Shit. There were so many ways this could be bad, and going up against a dog while he was two-legged was the least of it.

Not that he planned on killing the dog, not unless it was threatening Eliza or Dean. Emery, on the other hand—

Another bark, and they both angled off more to the left, Reiner catching up a bit. Trey had a good idea where they were; they’d come around in a rough half-circle, heading back toward SMS and the garage. Damn.

What are we gonna do? Reiner slowed down to get behind Trey as they hopped across a shallow stream, and then sped up again. *With the dog?*

Depends. Trey wasn't gonna sugarcoat this. *If it's threatening them? I'm not gonna stop and check if it's got a collar or a microchip. There's no humans out here, not that I can sense—whoa.* They both semi-slid to a stop, Trey putting out an arm to steady Reiner. *You have got to be fucking kidding me.*

Missing five-year-olds? Check.

Large hairy—and filthy, and, oh god, *smelly*—dog? Check.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Trey roared, and only realized he'd said it out loud when Reiner winced.

The dog whipped around, drool flying everywhere, and Dean and Eliza flung themselves on it to keep it from moving, arms around the matted, and no doubt flea-infested, neck. *Gross.*

Trey stalked closer, trying to think of something to say other than “fuck me” or—Well, that pretty much covered it, really.

“A *dog?*” was what he ended up saying. “Are you shitting me? You run away, give Mom fits, Reiner and I spent two hours—*two whole fucking hours*—looking for you, and you're out here playing with a *dog?*” He stopped maybe six feet short of the hairy thing, truly grateful to be upwind. “Leave it and let's go.”

“He's ours now,” Dean said, not moving an inch.

“They left him out here. Tied to a tree.” Eliza added, glaring at Trey. “To die.”

“It's a dog.” Trey stuck to his main point, because he was not going to let them talk him into anything stupid. He looked at Reiner for reinforcement, and Reiner shrugged. *Oh for fuck's sake, could you back me up here?*

He'd have to spell it out. “Mom. Hates. Dogs. Period. Okay? There is no way in hell that thing is coming back with us. It's probably got *fleas*, and—and—*ticks*. Lice. You'd have to shave it bald—”

Reiner bit the inside of his cheeks, and Trey growled at him. The dog growled, too, and Trey turned on it—him?—with a full-throated snarl. That made the fur-ball think twice, hell yeah, and Eliza let go—thank you—and took a step forward, scrubbing at her face with both hands.

Eww—dog hands. Next to him, Trey could hear Reiner suck in a breath and knew he was trying not to laugh.

“Eliza—” That was as far as he got. She stared at him, breathing hard and... *shaking*... and he let go of being furious long enough to realize she was trying not to cry. He squeezed his skull, pressing his palms tight, and took a deep breath. “Honey, I don’t know what to tell you. You know how Mom feels about dogs. Oh for fuck’s sake—” He was never, ever, *ever* going to sneer at Aidan for being a sucker when it came to crying females. Eliza flung herself at him and he caught her, lifted her up and held her while she trembled and buried her face in his neck.

The dog twitched, eyeing Trey with its ears back, and Trey glared at it. “Stay.” To his surprise, the dog laid down right where it was, and actually sighed. The matted ears rose, like it was making an effort to be polite—unless of course he was completely anthropomorphizing the damn thing. Which, okay, was fucked up all on its own, considering.

“What if...” Reiner raised his eyebrows in a facial shrug when Trey turned to look at him. “He could live at the garage.”

“You’ve met my father?” Trey asked him. “He’s not really a dog person.”

“Duh,” Reiner offered, deadpan, but his widened eyes made it nearly impossible for Trey to keep a straight face. They both swallowed, and Reiner gave the barest hint of a shrug. “Maybe... we could wash him first, you know?” His voice shook with suppressed laughter.

“I don’t even want to get close enough to smell him,” Trey admitted with a shiver, “much less give him a bath.”

“We could take him somewhere, pay somebody to wash him.” Reiner frowned and shook his head. “I dunno, one of those big pet stores. They all have grooming services.”

Trey didn't even want to know how Reiner knew that, but he did figure it would be good for a ton of catnip jokes at some point. "You got your phone?" Reiner nodded. "Fine. Where's the closest pet mega-store?"

The El Camino was their only choice—Trey was not de-fleaing one of the SMS vehicles—meaning Eliza and Dean had to stay behind. *That* argument took up the whole time it took to walk back.

"If we get stopped—and I guaran-fucking-tee that we will—it's two points on *my* license for you two not wearing seatbelts." God, he hated being the grownup. "And you can't ride in the back, so don't even ask."

"But we do that all the time." Dean gave him a narrow-eyed look.

"Just around here. Not... *going* anywhere, like to Wilkesboro. On the county roads." Trey waved a hand. "You need to wear a seatbelt if you ride in the front, and unless an adult is in the back with you—"

"Reiner could ride in the back," Eliza pointed out.

"No, Reiner could not ride in the back, because he needs to give me directions. And don't tell me he can do that just as well from the back because I don't want to hear it."

"But—" Eliza froze when Trey rounded on her, and the look she gave him was as close to *ears back, whiskers flat* as human features could manage.

"Do you want to keep this fucking dog?"

She and Dean nodded, and to Trey's disgust, they both moved closer to the dog and dug their fingers in its fur. Hair. Did dogs have hair or fur? Did he give a shit?

He made eye contact with both of them before he continued. "Then stop arguing, or you can take it up to the house just like this and explain about keeping it."

"Not *it*. We told you—his name is Moose." Eliza tried a pout, and Trey didn't hiss, but he did growl at her.

"Moose is a very good name," Reiner said, and Eliza's pout disappeared. "He's kind of... big. Like a moose."

“*Pfah.*” Trey gave him a dirty look. “They could have called him ‘Possum’—same difference.” Reiner raised his eyebrows, and Trey almost, but not quite, rolled his eyes. “The two of them have been pestering Mom and the dads for months about going someplace that has moose. Not a zoo,” he added. “We could just go up to Asheville for that.”

“Okay.” Reiner obviously still didn’t get it, and Trey sighed.

“Moose *hunting*. Might as well call him Possum. Or Elk. Now *there’s* a name.”

“We’re not *eating* him,” Dean spat, and the dog gave an explosive “woof”, surprising the hell out of Trey. “We just wanna *keep* him. He can’t stay in the woods.”

“That’s nice, except he’s not going to be living with you, is he? God—this is *not* going to work.”

They’d reached the road, maybe twenty yards away from the main driveway for SMS. Trey stopped them far enough back to still be screened from view, and pointed toward SMS with his chin. “You two head home—tell Mom that Reiner and I found you, and tell her I’ll come by later and explain, right?” Eliza and Dean nodded in tandem and scampered off—followed by Moose. *Wait!*

Trey stalked over, pointing at the dog, who was watching him with its ears out sideways. “You. Stay.” The dog dropped onto its belly like it had been shot, brown eyes fixed on Trey. “Okay. Change of plan. Everybody stay here while I go get the El Camino.” Trey tilted his head at Reiner. “Watch ’em until I get back.”

He took off along the side of the road at a jog, trying to figure out how the hell he was going to get the El Camino without Aidan noticing. Emery had to have told him about Eliza and Dean—and about asking him and Reiner to search for them.

So the first thing his dad was going to... ask was... *oh, fuck, yeah.* Trey hissed between his teeth instead of doing a victory dance, because the “Back Shortly” sign was hanging on the door to the garage office. The flatbed was still there, but the other truck, the ancient F150, was gone, meaning somebody over at the State Park probably had a dead battery or a busted hose, and Aidan was over there fixing it. Sweet.

Trey ran upstairs and grabbed his wallet and keys, and by the time he pulled up near where the twins and Reiner were waiting, he started to think they might pull this off. The first part, anyway.

He'd snatched a piece of mountain-climbing rope from the garage, a short piece they had hanging on the wall for a reason he couldn't recall, thinking it would make a good leash, at least for the drive to the mega-store. When Trey dropped the tailgate, Moose heaved himself up into the bed, jaws wide and drippy pink tongue sticking out about a foot, and Trey guessed this wasn't the first time the animal had ridden like this. So far, so good. The dog didn't mind Trey slipping a loop over its head, or when he tied the other end to a cleat near the wheel well. Also good.

Dean and Eliza scampered off when Trey hissed at them to "Git", leaving him and Reiner alone by the car. Before Trey could say anything, Reiner got in the passenger side, and Trey gave up and got behind the wheel—after telling Moose to stay.

"I put the store in the GPS," Reiner told him, buckling up. "I figured that would be easier."

Trey pointed at the clamp suctioned to the dashboard. "Stick it in there, and fire it up." He put the car in Drive and pulled out, rolling east—not past SMS—at a sedate thirty miles an hour.

"Recalculating," the phone told them.

"Thank you for coming with me," Trey said, figuring he should say *something*.

Reiner looked out the open passenger side window, and his hands flexed on his thighs. "Did you mean all that? About not wanting to go to California? And the—the other stuff?"

"Yes." Trey ran his tongue along the inside of his teeth. "When I first came back home, I felt so... out of place. I thought maybe taking the job out there would be better."

"In one point five miles, make a left onto County Road 517," the GPS put in.

"Thank you, darlin'." Trey drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, eyes forward. "But then I renovated the apartment, and—I've wanted to

work with Aidan ever since he opened the garage. I like what I do, and I'm good at it. But..." He glanced over at Reiner, and tried a smile. "I like not being the boss. I like being able to take a day off, and it's no big deal. In L.A., I'd be in charge of the garage out there—all the vehicles SMS owns—and the more I think about it, the less I want it." He cleared his throat. "I understand you wanting to take the other job."

Reiner didn't say anything, and the entrance to the maze in his head loomed higher all of a sudden. Trey made the left, and Reiner still hadn't said anything. The GPS told him to drive five miles. He thought he'd give Reiner another mile. Maybe two.

"Do you want me to take the job?"

It was hard to breathe all of a sudden. Honest answer? No. But he'd also been raised by three adults who'd made it clear that what you wanted and what was right wasn't always the same thing. On the other hand, he'd seen what happened when you lied about what you wanted in the first place. Then again—

"I want you to be happy," Trey said, before he could think better of it. "That's all."

Reiner didn't say another word, not for the entire rest of the drive, and if Trey had eaten, he probably would've stopped to throw up. They had to circle the huge parking lot twice to find a spot, and yes, the damn dog was still there when he got out and looked in the back.

The thing thumped its thick tail on the bed, and Trey did not want to think about what was inside the matted hair. He untied the rope and tugged, and the—okay, *Moose*—jumped out and looked up at Trey with what he read as expectation.

"Oh god, we're really gonna do this, aren't we?" Trey didn't expect Reiner to smile at him, or the way that smile would ease the cramp in his stomach.

"Looks like it." Reiner's eyes were vivid in the bright light, and he waved at the store. "Let's do this."

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CHAPTER TWELVE

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Trey muttered, and Reiner clenched his jaw so he wouldn’t laugh. The grooming—bath, including a flea treatment, plus clipping or shaving or whatever they did, and blow drying—was close to two hundred dollars, much to Trey’s disgust.

And now they had to kill an hour and a half while all that happened. There was a McDonald’s, so at least they could get food, and Reiner figured that was a priority.

Trey wasn’t leaving Stone Mountain. He held on to that thought, letting it balance out the clutch of panic he’d had when he woke up alone in bed. Trey saying right out that he wasn’t leaving was the important part, he figured, and the rest—Trey saying that all he wanted was for Reiner to be happy—that meant that last night hadn’t been some kind of farewell sex. He really hoped so, because he didn’t think he could let go, not now.

At the moment, Trey was eyeing the aisles and the humans with their shopping carts and growling softly. “We need to buy... *stuff*, don’t we?” he asked, and Reiner couldn’t help the laugh that broke loose.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “Food, I guess. And... a collar? A leash, too.” He shrugged when Trey raised his eyebrows. “I had neighbors who owned a dog, when I was in college. And they were always buying shit—bowls, and beds, and treats. All the time.” He tipped his head to one side and grinned at Trey’s resigned sigh. “I think we’re gonna need a cart.”

The food aisle was confusing as hell—who the hell thought fish and pumpkin was a good flavor combination? That was just nasty, and Reiner said so, not caring about the humans giving him a strange look.

Trey didn’t sneer, but it was close. “I,” he said under his breath, “am an obligate carnivore. Some of the time, at least. About the only way I like pumpkin is in pie. With whipped cream.”

“Dogs are omnivores,” Reiner pointed out, although if you couldn’t figure that out from reading the dog food bags, you had to be pretty damn stupid. “Just pick one.”

Trey tossed a thirty pound bag of grain-free organic dry dog food in the cart. Without pumpkin. Or fish. Or sweet potatoes, for that matter. “Next?”

Bowls were easy—stainless steel, and huge—but collar and leash? Not so much.

Trey fingered a wide rhinestone-studded pink leather collar that was probably too big to fit around his neck. “If you had a dog this big, would you put something like this on it?”

“I think we do have a dog that big.” Reiner only clocked what he’d said—*we*—when Trey caught his breath and stared at him. Trey swallowed, and Reiner tuned out the store around them and focused on the important shit, like the way Trey’s pupils flared and the shallow way he was breathing.

The funny thing was that he couldn’t actually figure out what he wanted to say, or ask, and what came out was the same question he’d tried earlier. “Do you want me to take the job?”

Trey shook his head, a tiny motion, his jaw so tight a muscle jumped in his cheek. A chill coursed through Reiner, head to toes, prickling all the hair on his body.

“Boys?”

Trey’s head jerked at the interruption, and Reiner heard the aborted growl even if the nice human lady smiling at them didn’t.

“Sorry, ma’am,” Reiner said, and drew Trey over to the side to let her pass. He took the opportunity to crowd him, just a little, just enough to get Trey’s attention. “Okay.”

Trey’s eyes were cool now, shaded by his lashes, and his mouth was a flat line. *Okay what?*

Okay, can we talk about this when we’re finished here?

Trey nodded, and picked a wide black leather collar decorated with silver studs off the display. “How about this?” He checked the price tag and blinked. “*Chingame.*”

Reiner didn’t need to ask for a translation on that at all. He found a matching leash and tossed it in the cart, took the collar away from Trey and

added that to the pile. He made sure their fingers brushed, humming at the spark that generated.

Jumbo-sized dog biscuits went in the cart next, a big box of them, followed by a huge chew bone—"The twins'll steal that for sure," Trey pointed out. "Get three."—and while they were in line, they picked out a bone-shaped brass ID tag from a point-of-purchase display and got that, too. One hundred and fifty-some-odd dollars later, they approached the machine that would engrave the ID tag.

Reiner inserted the blank tag and waited for the menu to come up on the touch screen. He typed in "Moose" at the prompt, and hesitated. "We should put a cell phone number. Or maybe the garage number?"

Trey leaned in until his chest bumped Reiner's arm. "Cell phone." Reiner heard a click as Trey swallowed, and turned his head. The expression in Trey's eyes hurt, and Reiner's entire insides hollowed out.

He took a breath and typed in Trey's cell phone number from memory, hit return... and typed his own on the line underneath. Trey exhaled, not quite a word, and leaned his head against Reiner's for half a second. "Okay?" Reiner said, all he could manage past whatever was blocking his throat.

"Okay," Trey whispered. "Let's get the fucking dog and get out of here."

One rabies vaccination and an extra tube of something for fleas and ticks later—Trey swore his credit card was going to melt—one of the groomers brought out a dog and handed Trey the cheap plastic combined choke-collar-and leash.

Reiner stared, and so did Trey, because there was no way this was the same animal. Without the hair—fur? Reiner had no idea—the head was blocky and the ears were floppy, shading to black at the rounded tips. Huge feet. What they'd both assumed was dirt turned out to be color, mottled dark and light bands all over.

"Tiger stripes," Trey murmured, and the dog wagged its thick tail, light amber eyes fixed on Trey with something like adoration. Trey swore under his breath and the tail picked up speed. "I think we need a bigger collar."

They hit the drive-through at McDonald's—Cokes and fries for him and Trey, plus two Quarter Pounders with cheese each, and four cheeseburgers for Moose—before heading for home.

Home. Reiner tested the idea carefully for almost the entire trip back. The house he'd grown up in wasn't home, not anymore, not since he'd moved out after high school. His apartment all through college had never been home, either, he knew that for sure. He'd put that off to being male. To being too young to settle in a place, to stake out territory of his own or share it with another male or two. Being with Trey, though...

“What if we both went? To L.A., I mean?”

Trey kept his eyes on the road, but he took one hand off the wheel and laid it on Reiner's thigh. Reiner covered it with his own, holding it in place.

“Not forever,” Reiner added. “I don't know that I want that. I like it here.”

“That could work,” Trey said, after about a mile. “Maybe... next spring.”

“Or the summer. We could be here for Eva's graduation, and then go.”

Trey's fingers tightened for a moment. “That—yeah. We could even drive out, if you want. See stuff.”

Reiner picked up Trey's hand and laced their fingers together, and squeezed. Trey squeezed back, hard enough to grind the bones together, and Reiner tipped his head to catch the breeze from the open window. He let his smile grow into a grin, a grin that got wider when Trey lifted their hands and kissed his knuckles. “Yeah. That'll work.”

Trey slowed down to swing across the opposite lane and pulled to a stop in front of the garage. He and Reiner both got out, and Trey untied the rope from the leash so Moose could jump down.

“What the hell is that?” Aidan stopped maybe a dozen feet away, glaring at Moose before turning his glare on Trey and Reiner.

Trey reached over with the hand not holding the leash and curled his fingers around Reiner's. “Um—”

Reiner laughed, almost a snort, and met Aidan's eyes full on. "It's complicated."

THE END

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Author Bio

J.J. Cassidy has held more jobs than she cares to think about over the past thirty-plus years—everything from freight forwarding to driving a hay wagon—and she figures that gives her a lot of experiences to draw on when it comes to writing. At least that's the theory. Her novella, Wish List, was published last year by Dreamspinner Press, as part of their Advent calendar anthology, and Handsome Beast, a retelling of Beauty and the Beast, is available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and AllRomance eBooks. Dark Mirror, one of her stories for last year's Love Is Always Write event, can be found on Amazon and AllRomance eBooks. With a little luck, she plans to have two novels out by the end of 2013. She is always happy to hear from readers.

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LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

ANYTHING FOR YOU SIR

Max Vos

ANYTHING FOR YOU SIR

By Max Vos

Photo Description

Dom Daddy: Muscular, in shape, hairy bear of a man who is obviously very dominant. Our gentleman is a little rough around the edges. He wears a cock ring, has a Prince Albert piercing, and a pierced left nipple. He is wearing leather arm bands which partially cover tattoos on both upper arms. With his head lowered, he appears to be avoiding the camera, or is there more to it?

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This Dom is gruff and grumpy. He's rough around the edges and hard to please. Many even say he is too rough on his subs. What is his story? Is he too far gone to find love? And will his love be predictable in any way?

Sincerely,

Jason

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: grief, BDSM, bears, blue collar, toys

Word count: 52,645

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Dedication

I would really like to thank Ms. Susan G. for turning me on to writing. She has been a big supporter and a great friend. Thank you Susan, it truly was a lifesaver.

I would also like to thank Lise Horton and the ever handsome Troy Storm for having confidence in me and pushing me to continue. And last, but not least, Ms. Diane B. who was a wonderful Beta reader for this project. It was wonderful to work with you Diane! Big smooches!

ANYTHING FOR YOU SIR

By Max Vos

CHAPTER ONE

The heavy cast iron bell over the front door clanked as someone came in.

“Never fucking fails,” Jerome Fontaine grumbled as he pulled off the welding shield from his head.

He picked up a rag, once white, and mopped his brow while walking to the front of the shop, the acrid smell of the arc welder hanging in the air like the wisps of the residual smoke floating from its tip.

“May I help you?” Jerome asked the younger man standing in front of the cluttered counter.

“Mr. Jerome Fontaine?”

“Yes, I’m Jerome Fontaine,” Jerome frowned, thinking this is another process paper server from the law office.

The young man dropped to one knee, his head bowed, hands behind his back. “Sir, I’m boy Jason. Master Sampson sent me, Sir.”

Jerome’s mouth opened slightly. It had been a long time since he had been given a full honor present, so long that he almost forgot what it looked like.

“Stand up, boy,” Jerome said huskily his throat dry.

Once Jason stood, his hands still behind his body, head bowed, Jerome took a long look at the young man. The light-green polo shirt fit him snugly; the arms stretched the fabric over large biceps. Nipples clearly showed through the stretched fabric of his shirt. The expensive looking khaki pants had a dark mark on the knee where the boy had knelt before him. Jerome noticed the leather loafers the man wore, and he knew that they were not cheap.

“So you’re the one that Sampson called me to say he was sending?”

“Sir, yes, Sir.”

“You’re early,” Jerome all but snarled. “You’re not supposed to be here until Monday. Unless I’ve totally screwed up, this is only Friday.”

“Sir, yes, Sir, that was the original plan, Sir.” Jason, his head still bowed, acknowledged.

“So why the fuck are you here now?”

“Sir, Master Sampson said that you were desperate for help, so I didn’t stop until I got here, Sir.”

“You drove?”

“Sir, yes, Sir.” Jason never looked up as he answered.

“You drove straight through from Arizona?”

“Sir, yes, Sir.”

“You never stopped?” Jerome’s voice cracked. He hadn’t spoken a word all day, not that that wasn’t unusual for him.

“Sir, I only stopped for bathroom breaks, gas, or to catch a quick nap to keep from falling asleep at the wheel, Sir.”

“Well fuck,” Jerome said, both shocked and irritated.

Jerome looked at Jason and shook his head, knowing he was going to have to shut down for the day now. There was no way this guy was going to be able to stand up for much longer if he’d driven from Phoenix to New Orleans, straight through.

“Well, come on back and have a seat,” Jerome huffed. “I’ll have to close up and get you back to the house before you fucking fall over.”

It didn’t take Jerome long to shut down the arc welder and put a few things away before he turned off the one light over the tool bench in the dark ironworks shop.

Looking over at the young man standing off to the side, he again shook his head, a frown crinkling his forehead.

“Come on, boy,” Jerome said flatly.

Jerome locked the front door and when he turned around he saw the nearly new silver BMW 750Li parked on the street in front of the shop.

Looking at Jason he pointed to the vehicle. “Is that yours?”

“Sir, yes, Sir,” Jason replied, his head bowed slightly.

Jerome walked up to the almost new car and looked inside the tinted windows.

Turning back to Jason he said, “I can’t ride in that thing.” He knew that his soot and smoke covered clothing would ruin the upholstered seats.

“Sir, you may drive if it would make you more comfortable, Sir.”

“Naw, it ain’t that, boy,” Jerome barked. “I’m not gonna mess up that car wearing work clothes.”

“Sir, I can fix that, Sir.”

Quickly, Jason popped the trunk with the key fob. He reached in and pulled out an old wool army blanket. He swiftly opened the passenger side door and spread it across the seat and the floorboard.

“Sir, I think this should work for you, Sir.”

“Dammit. Okay,” Jerome agreed, although reluctantly, as he got inside the pristine car.

Jason got in behind the wheel and started the engine. The air conditioning instantly started cooling the interior.

“Sir, where are we going, Sir?”

“Go ’round the block, and turn right onto Burgundy. Go for four blocks and then I’ll show you the house. It’s on the corner of Burgundy and Port,” Jerome all but growled.

He didn’t like being caught off guard like this. Jason wasn’t due to arrive until Monday, three days from now, and Jerome wasn’t ready. He *really* wasn’t prepared for this guy. The two men rode in silence for the short distance.

“Here, pull into this driveway,” Jerome indicated with his left hand. His hands were like the rest of his body, covered in a light-gray dust.

Jason parked the car and jumped out rushing to open the door for Jerome, but Jerome was too fast for him. He was already out of the car

heading up the five steps to the door, leaving the car door open for Jason to close.

“Grab your gear and come on inside, boy.”

Jason quickly grabbed his one suitcase and shoulder bag from the trunk of the car, scrambling to catch up to the dour-faced Jerome Fontaine.

Jerome had already dropped his keys on the counter of the breakfast bar and had two bottles of Voodoo beer in hand by the time Jason closed the front door behind him. Jerome came into the living area, pushed carryout containers to one side of the coffee table, setting one of the beers down.

“Drop your bags by the stairs then come sit down,” Jerome commanded.

Jason did as he was told, dropping to his knees beside the cluttered coffee table onto the floor, facing the older man. Jerome handed him a cold beer. Jason kept his head slightly bowed and waited.

“You said your name was Jeremy?”

“Sir, no, Sir. Jason, Sir.”

“Okay, this *Sir* crap needs to stop,” Jerome said snidely, smacking his lips after chugging half the beer. “This ain’t the military. One Sir will do. Think you can manage that, boy?”

“Sir... um, yes, Sir.”

“Go on, drink your beer. It’ll help you sleep better.”

“S... yes, Sir.”

Jason took a long, slow drink of the slightly bitter tasting beer, taking the opportunity to survey his current surroundings. The place was a wreck. Empty carryout containers cluttered the coffee table and the kitchen counters. Mail, newspapers and other types of papers were on most every other surface and on the floor. There were dirty socks and a couple of shirts tossed around the room. It was obvious that the rug he was kneeling on hadn’t enjoyed the company of the vacuum cleaner in sometime.

“Boy, you ever worked with iron?” Jerome asked, knowing the answer. He looked at Jason’s hands and knew that boy hadn’t done manual labor anytime recently, if ever.

“No, Sir.”

“You ever done any type of work with your hands?”

“No, Sir.”

“Then what the fuck are you doing here?”

“Master Sampson seemed to think that I would catch on quickly, Sir. I am a fast learner, Sir.”

“Yeah, well I guess we’ll have to see about that,” Jerome grumped as he stood up, going to get another beer.

Jerome sat back down, not having offered another beer to Jason, since he hadn’t finished half of the first beer yet. Once he had settled back down onto the black leather sofa, Jason asked, “Sir, may I ask a question, Sir?”

Jerome only grunted a response.

“Would you like me to follow the Power Exchange’s protocols, or do you have other protocols you wish for me to observe?”

“Boy, I ain’t that formal,” Jerome snorted. “I don’t have any set protocols. We’ll make ’em up as we go along. See what works.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jason said. “Would you like for me to be naked while in the house, Sir?”

Jerome stared at Jason; one eye squinted, still scowling. “Did Sampson not tell you that this was a work only situation? I didn’t want, nor need, a sex slave?”

“Yes, Sir, he did, Sir.”

“Then I don’t guess you being naked is a requirement, but feel free to wear or not wear whatever you want. I don’t give a shit.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Jason finished his beer, holding the empty bottle since there really was nowhere to set it on the coffee table.

“Get your stuff and follow me, boy, and I’ll show you where you’ll be sleepin’.” Jerome stood up and walked toward the narrow staircase.

Jason picked up his bags and followed the muscled man.

At the top of the stairs Jerome said, “To the left is my office and over here is your space,” he indicated, turning right.

Jason took in the room. It was a decent-sized room with a queen sized bed. The room itself was neat, but he could tell that it hadn’t been occupied or cleaned in some time. There was a coating of dust on every surface.

“There’s an air-conditioning unit in the window. It gets a little hot up here even with the central A/C running,” Jerome stated as he looked at the room. “I’d have cleaned up a bit this weekend, but you got here before I had a chance.”

“Don’t worry, Sir. I will make do, Sir.”

“Well... you get settled in, grab a shower if you want, and I’ll get us some grub rounded up.” Jerome went back down the stairs.

Jason let out a deep breath and sat on the edge of the bed. He was exhausted, and on edge.

Jerome dug out his cell phone from his dirty 501 jeans and immediately called Steve Sampson when he reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Sampson, Jerome Fontaine here,” he said, speaking into his cell phone.

“Hey Jerome, how’s it going buddy?” Sampson answered.

“Man, what the fuck is up with this kid you sent me?”

“What do you mean, Jerome?”

“This Jason boy you sent me hasn’t done an honest day’s work in his life!”

“Calm down, Jerome,” Sampson chuckled slightly on the other end. “Do you trust me?”

Jerome sighed heavily, rubbing his forehead. “Yeah, I trust you Sampson, you know that.”

“Then give Jason a chance. I think he is *exactly* what you need.”

“Sampson, I need someone who has a clue about what hard work is,” Jerome said as he paced, “*and* preferably knows his way around tools!”

“Jerome, you have no idea how hard Jason is willing to work. You’re gonna have to trust me on this one, okay?” Sampson cajoled. “Hey, you

asked me to help find you someone and I have. I've known you, what? Ten years?"

"Yeah, more or less."

"Then take my word for it. Jason is what you need right now."

"Okay, I'll give him a week," Jerome grumbled.

"No, you'll give him a couple of months," Sampson said a little forcefully. "Jerome, there isn't anyone who can learn anything in just a week. Now promise me you'll at least give him a chance."

"Fuck you, Sampson," Jerome barked. "Okay. Fuck, I'll give him at least a couple of months, okay? Happy now?"

Sampson laughed. "Yeah, I'm happy now. Tell you what, you keep him until Labor Day, and if after Southern Decadence, you aren't happy with him by then, I'll take him back with me."

"What? Decadence is more than *three* months away!"

"Yeah, yeah, you'll live, Jerome."

"So you'll be here for Decadence?"

"Yes, I'll be there," Sampson replied.

"Okay, I will plan on seeing you then."

"You bet. Bye, Jerome."

CHAPTER TWO

Jason stood at the sink at the top of the stairs, washing his face as he listened to Jerome's and Sampson's conversation, though only able to hear Jerome's part.

As Sampson had predicted, the man whose life he just invaded didn't want him here. He had been told that Jerome was a gruff and hard to reach kind of man, but to try and be patient with him.

Jason would like to be more than just patient. When he first saw the man, his mouth watered. Jerome Fontaine was everything he thought a hot daddy should be, bulging muscles everywhere. His gray hair made Jason's gut tighten, and the way his muscle T-shirt slid over to one side, exposing the furry pectoral with the pierced nipple made his knees weak.

"Boy, I'm goin' to the market, I'll be back in fifteen," Jerome bellowed up the stairs, causing Jason to jump.

"Sir, yes, Sir."

Jason could hear his new Sir grumble as he shut the door behind him.

Quickly, Jason pulled on a pair of onion skin running shorts and ran down the stairs. The one way to get this man to accept him was to make himself useful, if not indispensable. He gathered up all the trash from the living room and kitchen. The trash can next to the stairs was already overflowing so he changed out the liner and found the trash cans outside.

It didn't take Jason long to get the living room tidied up, the kitchen counters wiped down, and all the dirty dishes loaded into the dishwasher. He was hunting for the vacuum cleaner when the front door opened. Jason froze. Glancing towards the door he saw Jerome, his mouth slightly open. Jason, as taught, took a submissive stance, his feet shoulder width apart, hands behind his back and his head slightly bowed.

"Boy..." Jerome set a bag on the bar area of the kitchen and looked around. "Come and get it."

Jerome was about to open up the bag when he noticed his hands and how dirty they were. He then looked at Jason who was clean, as were the

counter tops of the kitchen. Scowling, he got back up and went to the sink to wash up. When he was done, Jason handed him a clean towel to dry his hands. Jerome looked at the young man, who was more than likely close to thirty, and frowned. Going back to the food still in the bag, he pulled out a large bag of chips and several paper-wrapped parcels.

“Thought you might as well get a taste of N’awlins right off. Got a couple of muffalettas.”

Jerome set one of the sandwiches down on the counter for Jason. Jason then picked up the sandwich and walked away from the counter. When Jerome turned around to see where he was going, he saw Jason sit on the floor in the corner, while starting to unwrap the sandwich.

“What the fuck you doing over there?”

Jason looked up surprised. “Sir?”

“Why you sittin’ way over there on the floor?”

“Sir... I mean... a slave never sits with, or presumes that he will eat with, his Master,” Jason stuttered.

“First off, I ain’t your Master and I don’t want a slave,” Jerome barked. “A boy I might can handle, but this slave shit isn’t for me. Got it?”

“Sir, yes, Sir,” Jason stiffened.

“Now get your ass over here and sit down like someone who’s got a lick of sense.”

“Sir, yes, Sir,” Jason automatically replied jumping up.

“And what did I tell you about all that *Sir* crap?”

Jason opened his mouth and thought before he spoke, “Yes, Sir.” Before sitting he asked, “May I have some water, Sir?”

“Yeah, glasses are over the dishwasher,” Jerome answered, his mouth full from the first bite of his own sandwich. “And you don’t have to ask.”

“Would you care for any, Sir?”

“No, I’ll have another beer.”

Jason got the beer first then got a large glass of water for himself. He sat

next to Jerome at the counter. He took a bite of the sandwich while Jerome looked on.

“Like it?”

Jason chewed then swallowed. “Wow, yes, Sir. It is very good, Sir.”

“It’s a staple here,” Jerome informed him.

The two sat in silence as they ate for a bit. Jerome looked to be about to ask a question when he started scowling at Jason.

“Boy, is your chest shaved?”

“Um... yes, Sir. My entire body was shaved as part of a going away ceremony just before I left, Sir.”

“You’re gonna regret that,” Jerome smirked.

“Why is that, Sir?”

Jerome smiled wickedly. “Boy, you know what kinda work I do?”

“No, Sir, not really, Sir.”

Jerome frowned at the extra “Sir”. “Ironwork, boy, I do ironwork. It’s hot and dirty work. There are miniscule metal particles flying through the air. When it’s that hot your pores open up and them little metal pieces start coating your skin. They make their way down and latch on to the hair follicles. The end result is intense itching, rashes. It can be downright painful.”

“Oh,” Jason said.

“You’ll see.” Jerome chuckled mischievously. “Until your hair grows out some, you’re in for a miserable time.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jason replied, a scowl on his face.

As soon as the two men had finished eating, Jason immediately cleaned up the trash and wiped the counter down once again.

“Boy, aren’t you tired yet?” Jerome asked shaking his head.

“Yes, Sir, I am.”

“Go on then and get some sleep. I plan on working tomorrow. Might as well get you started.”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.” Jason bowed slightly before heading upstairs.

Jason fell into the bed and quickly fell asleep.

“Boy? Jason?” Jerome stood over the sleeping man that had entered his life. Looking down he couldn’t help but notice how handsome he was. It wasn’t that he hadn’t noticed when he first saw him but now he was able to study him.

His heavy morning beard, so black it looked blue against his skin. The full pink lips relaxed with a slight upward curve at the corners. Jason was lying on his side, his muscled arm resting easily against his chest.

Jerome smiled wickedly. It seemed that Jason here was a little furball. There was now a definite shadow of hair sprouting across his chest. Jerome knew he was going to be very uncomfortable after a few days in the shop.

Jerome’s smile faded as he remembered a time now past, a time of laughter, a time of misery of a similar occurrence that they later laughed about. Of when his life was easier, when he was happy. It ended too soon. *Why did you have to go, Toby?*

“Boy!” Jerome barked. “Come on; get your ass in gear, time to go to work.”

Jason sat up, startled, looking around trying to figure out exactly where he was. He saw Jerome standing there, hands on his hips, frowning. Wiping the slumber from his face, he said, “Yes, Sir. I’ll shower quickly.”

“Boy, no need to shower just to get dirty,” Jerome all but snarled. “Just get dressed and come downstairs. I’ve got coffee made.”

Jerome turned and went down the stairs, his heavy work boots clunking on the wooden stairs.

Jerome could hear Jason upstairs stumbling around hurrying to get ready. He sighed before taking a sip of his chicory coffee. Already behind schedule by several weeks, Jerome was worried. He hoped that Sampson was right about Jason being a quick learner because he really did need the

help. The challenge would be finding something for Jason to do that would be productive. He didn't have time to stop and train someone.

He turned when he heard Jason come down the stairs, not believing what he saw. Jason had on a bright blue golf shirt, a pair of designer jeans that he'd never even heard of, and bright-white running shoes.

"Have you lost your mind?" Jerome asked.

Jason froze, the slight smile on his face vanished. "Pardon me, Sir?"

"Don't you have any work clothes?"

"Um... Sir, these are as close as I have, Sir."

"Fuck," Jerome slammed his coffee mug down before stomping down the hall. "Stay there, boy."

A moment later Jerome returned, throwing a wad of clothing at Jason. "Here, put these on," he commanded.

Jason started to strip immediately. Picking up the T-shirt that was given him, he saw it was so thin it was almost sheer. He glanced up before pulling it over his head, as Jerome snickered.

"Boy, we're gonna have to go get you some work clothes this afternoon. By the way... you're gonna regret them silk boxers later on."

"Why, Sir?"

"Best let you learn your lesson by experience. Trust me, you'll see," Jerome smiled almost evilly.

Jason pulled up the jeans Jerome had provided. They were a little big in the legs and waist, but his belt took care of the waist issue.

Jerome was already waiting at the front door by the time Jason hustled out, pulling out his keys.

"You can just put those away. We walk," Jerome said, locking the door.

They walked the four plus blocks to the shop. The heavy clank of the cast iron bell echoed in the dark shop when they entered. Jerome closed and locked the door behind them, not turning on the lights in the small reception area in front, or flipping the sign on the door to read open.

“As far as I’m concerned, I’m closed on the weekends to customers,” he answered any potential questions Jason may have. “I’m already behind and I don’t need any distractions.”

Jason remained silent, following Jerome into the dark shop area. He watched carefully as Jerome went and turned on a light over a table, the wall behind it covered with all kinds of tools.

“Over here is a chop saw. You ever used one?” Jerome turned on a florescent light over a large saw.

“No, Sir.”

“You’re gonna learn how today.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Gotta get some material first,” Jerome announced, throwing a pair of leather gloves at Jason. “Follow me.”

Jerome opened up the steel double doors at the back of the shop. For almost an hour they carried long iron bars into the shop, stacking them close to the chop saw. Jerome then set up the chop saw with what he informed Jason was a jig. He gave Jason a pair of safety glasses and ear protectors.

“Now, cut each one to this length,” Jerome instructed, as he showed him how to operate the saw.

“How many, Sir?”

Jerome laughed. “Until there isn’t any more of that stack left.”

Jason’s mouth fell open. Looking at the chop saw, then at the stack of iron on the floor he quickly calculated that he would get four pieces out of every bar, and there was no telling how many bars there were. Closing his mouth, he picked up the first bar and started. As instructed, he picked up a brush and swept away the tiny metal shavings after every few cuts.

He didn’t know how long he had been at it when he felt Jerome tap him on the shoulder. Turning, he pulled off the ear muffs.

“Take a break. I got us something to eat,” Jerome let him know.

Following Jerome outside behind the shop, he was a little surprised at how bright it was and how hot it was getting and it wasn’t even nine a.m.

yet. There was a makeshift table and a couple of overturned five-gallon buckets to sit on. Jerome handed Jason a breakfast sandwich and a plate of beignets, still warm.

“Thank you, Sir,” Jason said before biting into the sandwich.

“Have one of these,” Jerome grunted pushing the beignets towards him.

Jason took a bite of the still warm sugar-coated treat. “Oh, my God!”

Jerome almost smiled. “I take it you’ve not had a beignet before?”

“No, Sir, I’ve not. These are wonderful. Thank you, Sir.”

“When we get back inside, I’m gonna show you what you’re gonna do next with what you’ve cut up already. Then you can go back and forth between cutting and bending.”

“Bending, Sir?”

“This is an ironworks shop you know. I make ornamental ironworks.”

“Um... yes, Sir.”

“You have no idea what I’m talking about do you?”

“I think I have an idea, Sir.”

“When we go out to get you some proper work clothes, I’ll show you what I mean.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jason said, his pink lips covered in powdered sugar. “Thank you for breakfast, Sir.”

“You’re welcome. Just don’t take too much time in eating it. Got a lot to get done today.”

Back inside, Jerome set up another jig. He picked up a piece of the iron that Jason had cut.

“Insert one end here,” he demonstrated, “then push it around this curve.” Jerome pushed the bar and it curved around the form. “Then step to the other side and pull it on around like this.” The muscles in Jerome’s arms bulged as he pulled the metal around, finishing what looked like a question mark. “Then take it out like this, turn it around and repeat on the other end.” He demonstrated, repeating the same steps as he did the first time.

“Wow, Sir. That’s cool,” Jason said admiringly.

“Okay, now you do it.”

Jason picked up a piece of cut iron, placed the end in the jig and pushed. Nothing happened. He took a deep breath and pushed again, harder this time. The bar barely moved.

Jerome burst out laughing. “Boy, you’re gonna have ta do a lot better than that!”

Frowning, a look of determination on his face, Jason gripped the bar firmly and pushed, putting his whole body into it. The bar started to curl around the jig.

“Good, now come around here and pull it on around, boy.”

Jason walked around to the other side of the jig and took hold of the bar. Now knowing that this was going to take some serious effort, he pulled. With a look of satisfaction he removed the piece from the jig and held it up for Jerome to see.

“Could be a little tighter, but it will pass,” Jerome squinted at the piece. “Think you got this?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Alrighty then. I’m going to go back to welding that gate piece over there. If you need anything, let me know.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Jason did the other end of the decorative iron piece with a sense of pride, thinking *I can do this*.

The morning wore on and the later it became, the hotter it became in the shop. Jerome had turned on a large industrial exhaust fan, which helped some, but it wasn’t long before Jason was soaked to the skin in his own sweat. When Jerome finally called time for lunch, Jason was exhausted.

The two men sat in almost total silence, just inside the open double doors as they ate. Jason downed several bottles of water before he took the first bite.

“Make sure you drink plenty of that,” Jerome advised.

“Yes, Sir. No problem there, Sir.”

After lunch they resumed. Jason didn't know how much longer he was going to be able to go on. The muscles in his arms and back were screaming. He had been working steadily but still had only finished half of the pieces that he had cut earlier. If that wasn't bad enough, he was starting to really itch. All over. From his ankles to his chest, he felt as if his body was on fire. Jason also knew what Jerome had meant when he said he would be sorry for wearing his silk boxers. They were sticking to the insides of his thighs. They were also bunched up under his nuts, chafing the tender skin.

About three thirty Jerome called it a day. He looked at Jason. “You gonna make it, boy?”

Jason glanced up after draining a water bottle. “Yes, Sir.”

Jerome chuckled. “All right, let's go get you some work clothes.”

When they walked out of the shop the heat blasted up from the sidewalk like a furnace. Not even realizing it, Jason groaned softly.

“Boy, it's only May! Better get used to this heat and humidity quick, 'cause summer isn't even here yet,” Jerome exclaimed, half laughing. “Where you from anyway?”

“Philadelphia, Sir.”

“Yankee boy,” Jerome muttered shaking his head.

That was the extent of the conversation between them. Jerome led and Jason followed. They had walked for quite a while when Jerome steered Jason into a second-hand store. There he showed Jason what he needed for work clothes: T-shirts and jeans, all used but with plenty of wear left in them, nothing that Jason would have normally picked out, and he had never bought second-hand clothing before in his life. Jerome attempted to pay, but Jason insisted that he buy his own clothes.

They stopped at an athletic store around the corner. Jerome suggested that he might want to pick up several jock straps, unless he wanted to continue to wear his silk boxers. Jason bought ten jocks. He also picked up a pair of heavy-duty hiking boots.

Jerome gave a short tour on the way back to his house pointing out various ironwork. Jason was amazed at the beauty and art of the various ironworks. The elaborate gates and balconies, overflowing with flowering plants as well as the beautiful courtyards behind some of the gates, showed off the intricate ironwork typical of New Orleans.

Jason was dragging up the front steps once they got back to the house. Jerome looked at the man and almost felt sorry for him.

“Give me them clothes you just got and I’ll run ’em through the wash. Get that musty smell outta them,” Jerome ordered.

Jason complied without comment or offering to do the chore himself.

“Go take you a hot shower and then soak for a while in the tub with this.” He tossed a container of Epsom salts to Jason. “Get the water as hot as you can stand it.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Let me know when you’re done with that.”

Jason only nodded as he trudged up the stairs.

At the top of the stairs Jason stopped, not sure he could take another step. Taking a deep breath he continued on into his room. It was difficult, but he was able to peel off the wet T-shirt, his face scrunched up smelling the stench coming from the drenched fabric. He undid the belt that was holding up the soggy jeans. The jeans dropped to the floor of their own accord. Jason toed off his shoes and stepped out of the dirty jeans, leaving them on the floor. He grimaced as he was sliding down the wet silk boxers, peeling them away from his inner thighs as well as the bunched up fabric from behind his sore nuts. Jason sighed in relief when the cool air hit his exposed skin.

Jason wheezed loudly when he saw himself in the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. His entire body was flame red, especially his chest, groin and inner thighs. When he rubbed his chest it was covered in fine grit. It was as if he was rubbing sandpaper across his overly sensitive skin.

“What the fuck?”

Doing as he was told, he got into the shower, the water as hot as he could tolerate. He washed himself thoroughly, watching the gray water swirling away, then finally replaced with clear, clean water. Switching the shower off, he started filling the tub, adding about a cup of the Epsom salts. Slowly he lowered himself into the hot water, wincing as he did. The hot water made his sensitive skin scream.

Rubbing his chest, he could feel the stubble of the hair growing back. He had only been shaved four days prior and was slightly surprised that it was growing back so rapidly. *I'll have to do a quick shave when I get out*, he thought to himself.

After the water had cooled, Jason got out of the tub and gently patted himself dry, letting the A/C do most of the work. He pulled out his razor and shaving gel, preparing to give his body a quick shave.

“Don’t shave anything, boy” Jerome’s voice bellowed up the stairwell.

Jason sighed as he put away his shaving equipment. No sooner had he put the toiletries away, than Jerome walked in. Jason’s first instinct was to cover himself, but he fought off that urge and stood there, fully exposed, waiting.

“Damn, boy, but you sure is red,” Jerome chuckled. “That is why you don’t want to shave. Remember what I said this morning? About the metal shavings?”

Jason nodded.

“Okay, that’s why, so no shaving unless you wanna look like that and itch all the time.”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.” Jason understood why his skin was on fire. It made perfect sense now.

“Here,” Jerome handed him a large bottle of baby powder. “Use this after every shower and even in between, especially while all your hair grows out. It won’t cure what ails ya, but it will help.” Jerome snickered. “Now get dressed. We’re going to dinner.”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.”

Jason was in a bit of a quandary. He had no idea what to wear. He looked at what he had packed and hesitated.

“Casual, boy,” Jerome bellowed up the stairs at him. “Jeans and T-shirt.”

Jason smiled, thankfully.

CHAPTER THREE

They walked to dinner. Jason soon found out that the locals walked just about everywhere, if they were going to be anywhere near the “Quarter”, since parking was next to impossible.

Jerome was welcomed heartily as they entered a small eatery. The place was packed and very loud. The two found a table against a wall not far from the bar.

Seated, Jerome asked, “You like oysters, boy?”

“Yes, Sir,” Jason answered loudly to make himself heard.

A young black man came to the table, a pitcher of beer and two iced mugs in hand. “*Amis bonsoir!*”

“Ant, how’s it goin’?” Jerome greeted the man. “Ant, this is Jason. Jason, Ant.”

“Nice to meet you, Ant,” Jason said, holding out his hand.

“You too, Jason,” Ant smiled widely. He turned to Jerome. “*Gentil, très beau.*”

Jason was shocked to see Jerome blush. “He said you look nice.”

Jerome didn’t know, but Jason knew some French. What he had actually said was, “Nice, very nice.” Jason only smiled at the compliment.

“Nuff, Ant. Give us a bucket of oysters and Gumbo for two,” Jerome ordered for both of them.

“*Quelque chose pour vous, mon amour,*” Ant said to Jerome before bustling off.

Jason looked at Jerome questioningly. In his head, he loosely translated “Anything for you, my love.”

“What?” Jerome asked.

“Do they always speak French?” Jason questioned. “Is Ant his real name?”

Jerome laughed out loud. “Ant is short for Antoine, but that is his daddy’s name and his uncle’s name on his mamma’s side. So they

shortened it to Ant to keep them straight. And Ant always speaks Cajun French with me.”

“Does he call everyone ‘love’ when asking what they want?”

Jerome only scowled, not answering, realizing that Jason spoke at least some French.

Just then a large black woman came to the table with a roll of brown paper.

“Pick up your beer,” Jerome instructed Jason.

“Jerome, you gets betta lookin’ ever times I see’s ya,” The woman smiled, kissed Jerome’s cheek and spread two layers of the paper on the table. “If’n I wasn’t a hones’ woman, I’d be a chasin’ afta you!”

“Marie, I couldn’t handle you. You’re more woman than I’d know what to do with,” Jerome flirted back. “Marie, this is Jason, my new helper.”

Marie took Jason’s chin in her hand and turned his head first left, then right. “He’s too pretty for you Jerome. Jason,” Marie said, with a definite accent, “don’cha go takin’ none of his lip now ya hear? If’n he gets outta line, you jus’ come tell ol’ Marie, ya hear? I kin set him straight.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jason blushed.

“Ah, and he has manners too!” Marie smiled sweetly. Jason could just imagine that would be the same smile she would give one of her own children.

Marie put her hands on her hips and looked sternly at Jerome. “*Si vous chassez celui-ci, vous êtes un imbécile.* You hears me, Jerome?”

Jerome frowned at Marie, but nodded his head.

Jason struggled to remember some of the French that he’d learned while in France when he was in college. Best he could translate was something about chasing him off and calling Jerome either stupid or a fool.

Ant suddenly reappeared with what appeared to be a mop bucket full of oysters.

“Y’all ’njoy now,” Marie smiled, thumping Jerome on the back. “Hollars if’n you need sumpthin’.”

She and Ant left, the bucket sitting on the floor next to the small table. Jerome noticed the puzzled look on Jason's face.

"What's wrong?" Jerome asked with a bemused look on his face.

"I have never opened an oyster before," Jason admitted.

Jerome threw his head back, looking at the ceiling shaking his head. "Opened?" He shook his head. "Boy, you don't *open* an oyster, you *shuck* an oyster. Here, let me show you."

Jerome picked up a flat looking knife and showed Jason how to shuck an oyster. Jason picked up the knife and attempted to do exactly as Jerome did. His first attempt resulted in him stabbing himself with the dull flat blade. Jerome chuckled, but left him to it.

Jason slurped the raw oyster from the shell and stopped. "Wow. That's really good."

"Yep," Jerome grinned, as he put a couple of dashes of hot sauce on an oyster. "Probably was brought in this mornin'."

It didn't take Jason long to get the hang of it and soon he was shucking and slurping right along with Jerome. Before the bucket was half-empty, Ant appeared with two large steaming bowls, setting one in front of each of them, he grinned and winked at Jason.

"Just what the doctor ordered," Jerome said before taking a big bite.

Jason smelled it, licked his lips, then took a big spoonful and put it in his mouth. Jerome watched as his eyes bugged out, his face turned red, and he reached for the cold beer. Once he had managed to swallow, he downed the rest of his beer. Beer drained, he started coughing.

Gasping for air he asked, "What the hell is in this stuff?"

Marie noticed the commotion and came rushing over. She took one look at the gumbo and turned a glaring look on Jerome, hands on hips.

"Jerome Fontaine, I should take you out back right now and tan yo' hide! You didn't even tell this poor white boy that gumbo had heat to it?" Shaking her head she motioned for Ant. "I knows you didn't. I can tells by that hound dog look you gots."

She handed Jason's bowl of gumbo to Ant. "Go on and fetch me a plate of that jambalaya I made. Not that which Antoine made, but what I done made. And gets some water too!"

When Ant scurried away she looked at Jason who had tears in his eyes and sweat pouring from his face. Again, she turned to Jerome. "I don't know what you think you was a doin', Jerome, but tha' weren't one bit funny."

"Honest, Marie, I didn't even think about it," Jerome defended himself.

"You is full of shit, Jerome Fontaine, and yous and I boths knows it."

"Now, Marie, there's no reason to go and get all bent outta shape. I said it was an honest mistake."

"I has half a mind to takes you out back and give you a good ol' what for," Marie barked.

"Woman, don't go making threats of a good time if you ain't gonna follow through with them," Jerome grinned mischievously.

"Boy..." Marie started, leaning onto the table with her meaty hands, her face only inches from Jerome's. "Boy, I could beat you half ta deaf with my hands behind my back using only my big ol' titties here."

Jerome opened his mouth to respond but was interrupted by Jason's laughter. Marie and Jerome both glared at Jason for a moment as he continued to laugh, holding his stomach.

"Do you two always carry on like this? If so, you need to sell tickets," Jason gasped, trying to catch his breath.

Marie and Jerome looked at each other and started grinning.

Marie stood up smiling. "Yes, I guess we does do our share of fussin'."

"Yeah, Marie and I have known each other for so long I guess we don't even think about it anymore."

"I think of Jerome like he was one of my kids," Marie smiled broadly.

"Hmph, kids? I'm older than you, Marie!"

"Not likes you acts like it," her hands back on her hips. "You acts like a spoilt child and it's gots worse since yo'r daddy died."

It was as if a black curtain had been drawn across Jerome's face. His eyes turned dark before he looked down at his bowl of gumbo and started to eat. The chill in the air would freeze an Eskimo.

Ant was back with a plate and a large glass of ice water. Setting it down in front of Jason he looked between Marie and Jerome, rolled his eyes and hurriedly left.

"There, baby," Marie said kindly to Jason. "You goes and enjoy that. I think that will be more ta ya likin'." She glanced worriedly at Jerome and left.

Jerome hardly spoke through the rest of the meal. Jason would have thoroughly enjoyed the jambalaya had there not been so much tension at the table. As soon as they had finished, Jerome dropped some cash on the table and left the restaurant, Jason hurrying after him. During the walk home, Jason thought about trying to break the silence but decided against it.

As they walked through the door, Jerome said over his shoulder, "We're working tomorrow, so get some rest."

He dropped his keys on the counter without ever turning around, and stomped off to his bedroom at the back of the house. Jason stood there a moment before slowly making his way upstairs.

As Jason lay in bed, he thought back to what Sampson had told him. He had been right. Jerome was a deeply troubled man.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jason awoke with a start. He could hear Jerome downstairs making coffee. He groaned as he sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, his arms stiff and aching. Standing up, he groaned again, his back sore and shoulders stinging with pain. Brushing his teeth seemed like a major ordeal, the pain in his arms and shoulders making him whine.

Downstairs, Jerome handed Jason a cup of coffee. He noticed Jason wince as he lifted the cup to his lips.

“Little sore this morning, are ya?” He asked with a sadistic smile on his face.

“Just a little,” Jason answered, trying to hide the pain that was shooting up and down his arms.

“Here,” Jerome said, tossing him a small pill bottle. “Take a few of those. It’ll help.”

Jason looked at the over-the-counter pain medication and took three. As he started to hand the bottle back to Jerome, he was told to put them in his pocket as he might need them later in the day.

Having finished their coffee, they walked to the shop. The day started where they had left off the previous day. Jason’s muscles screamed as he returned to using them in the same manner that had caused the pain in the first place. Luckily, it didn’t take long for the pain to subside and for him to be moving easier, working out the soreness.

Like the day before, Jerome brought in some breakfast. Neither spoke much. The sun was up and it was getting hotter by the minute. Jason’s shirt was already clinging to him despite the generous amount of talcum powder he had used before getting dressed.

Jason was bending a piece of iron when he heard church bells ringing. Looking over, he noticed that Jerome had stopped, also listening to the bells calling the parishioners to service. He had a faraway look on his face. When they stopped, Jerome nodded his head, his welding shield falling back over his face. He resumed welding and Jason went back to his task.

As they continued to work, Jason continued to sweat. When his stomach growled, indicating that it must be close to lunchtime, the back door opened, spilling light across the dark shop interior. Jason looked up and saw two figures outlined by the sun at their backs.

Jerome also looked up, pushing back his welding shield, a frown on his face.

“Jerome.” An elderly man walked into the shop, followed by a taller slim man.

Jason almost laughed. The elderly man was wearing an honest-to-God blue seersucker suit. His hair was snow white and he walked with a cane. One glance at the other man caused his breath to catch. He looked just like Jerome, only thinner. He also was wearing a suit, just not a seersucker one.

“Uncle Bartholomew. David. And to what do I owe this unfortunate visit?” Jerome growled.

“We brought some papers for you to sign, Jerome,” the younger of the two, Jerome’s almost twin who must be David, spoke as he held out a blue legal-size packet of papers.

“Those taxes aren’t due for another three weeks,” Jerome stated flatly.

“Now, Jerome, you and I both know you won’t have the money for your share of the taxes due,” the man in seersucker said. “I covered for you last year and I thought I made myself perfectly clear that I would not be doing so again this year. It makes no sense for you to hold on to that property. You have no need for it.”

“My client will look these over and get back to you,” Jason said as he stepped between the two men and Jerome, taking the packet of papers out of David’s hand.

“Who the hell are you?” David asked as he made to take the papers back.

“I am Jason Corleone, Esquire. Mr. Fontaine’s legal representative.”

Although Jason had his back to Jerome, he could feel the surprise emanating from him.

“Jerome?” The elder, who must be Uncle Bartholomew, asked.

“What he said,” Jerome said from behind Jason.

“Now, gentlemen, if there is nothing else?” Jason asked, not batting an eye.

“Jerome, I expect to hear something from you by tomorrow,” David ground out, looking as if he had smelled something sour.

“As I said, gentlemen, I will look these over with my client and get back to you,” Jason said, standing his ground. “Now if you will excuse us, we have work to do. Good day.”

Jason put the documents in his back pocket and went back to where he had been working before they were interrupted. Jerome flipped his shield back down and picked up his welding torch, thus ending any further conversation.

With nothing else to say or do, the two men left. As soon as they were out the door, Jason took the papers out of his pocket and started reading them under the one shop light. He could feel Jerome standing behind him, saying nothing.

When he finished reading, he turned to Jerome, who had a slight frown on his face.

“Yes, Sir, I am an attorney,” he answered the question before it could even be asked. “And from what I gather from these papers, a Mr. Bartholomew Fontaine is basically taking ownership of a piece of property in which you both have a share, in lieu of you paying taxes.”

“Yeah, I don’t have the money to pay the taxes,” Jerome admitted with a look of sadness shrouding his face. “I didn’t have it last year, and Uncle Bart covered for me.”

“Do you want to sell this property to him, or anyone else?”

“One of the last things my daddy said before he died was to hold on to that land. No, I don’t want to sell it, but I don’t have much of a choice.”

“You do have a choice... Sir,” Jason quickly added the Sir. “He is basically buying the land for what you would owe in taxes. Do you know what the property is worth?”

“I have no idea,” Jerome shrugged. It was clear he had already given up. “It’s been in the family for as long as I can remember. There isn’t even anything on it anymore. The old family home was torn down years ago, not that it was worth much anyway.”

“I think it might be a good idea to at least find out what fair market value is before you sign it away,” Jason said softly. “Do you know why your Uncle Bart wants this property?”

“I guess because it’s been in the family?”

“I don’t think so, Sir.” Jason said as he looked at the papers again. “I have a gut feeling there is more to it.”

“What can I do?” Jerome asked.

“I don’t know yet, but it is worth looking into. I don’t have a license to practice law in this state, but my cousin Luciana may be able to help you. Her law firm has an office here, so I think we should be able to ask them to represent you. She is more familiar with this type of law than I am. I specialize in family law, whereas she practices corporate law. Let me call her first.”

As if punctuating his last sentence, Jason’s stomach let out a loud growl.

Jerome chuckled. “I think I may need to feed you first.” He sighed heavily. “I guess we can call it a day and deal with this.”

“I think that might be wise, Sir.”

On their way back to the house, they stopped and picked up a few sandwiches at the corner store. Jason ordered a whole muffuletta for himself. He also picked up a couple of legal pads.

While they were eating, Jason read over the documents again, asking questions of Jerome occasionally. He also took notes on one of the legal pads. When he had finished the entire sandwich he leaned back, hands behind his head, closing his eyes.

“What the hell, are you sleeping?” Jerome asked.

“No, Sir, just thinking a minute.”

“Oh.”

“The more I think about this, the fishier it all sounds,” Jason said, his eyes still closed. “Has your uncle ever asked you to sell him your share before?”

“Yeah, several times, but more so this past year,” Jerome answered.

Jason opened his eyes and stood up. “Okay, time to give Ana a call.”

He went upstairs and came back moments later, a cell phone in hand. Punching in a number, he waited.

“Hello, Ana... I’m fine, cousin. I’m in New Orleans.”

Even Jerome could hear the squeal on the other end.

“Calm down,” Jason smiled. “Listen, I have a favor to ask.” He paused as he listened. “It’s professional, don’t worry I’m not asking you to speak to Father. It’s about a case that I’m taking on here... Yes a case... Ready?”

Jason sat down, pulling the documents and the legal pad closer. “First of all, it was drawn up at Fontaine, Shuster and Fontaine, Attorneys at Law. Look into them. Something doesn’t feel right there.” Jason flipped open the legal document. “It is about some property...” Jason gave the information on the property, and answered a few detailed questions.

“Hey, cousin, do you think you can get me into the offices of your firm down here? Maybe hook me up with an attorney?” Jason waited for what seemed like forever to Jerome. “Sure, just let me know. These guys are trying to rush this and there is a three-week deadline to work around... That would be perfect, Ana. I’ll look forward to hearing from you... Bye. Love you too.”

“Well?” asked Jerome.

“Well, my cousin is going to put her people to work on it first thing in the morning. They’re pretty good at tracking all kinds of information, so I have a feeling we should know a little something no later than Wednesday.”

“What if Uncle Bart shows back up before then?” Jerome frowned.

“You just leave him to me, Sir.”

“Um, Jason, you know I can’t pay for any of this, don’t you?”

“Sir, I’m only paying you back,” Jason said.

Jerome looked dumbfounded. “What are you talking about?”

“Your letting me be here, learning from you, is payment enough for me, Sir.”

“I’ve worked you like a mule, and you’re thanking me?”

“Yes, Sir.” Jerome bowed his head slightly. “You have no idea how much I’ve needed something like this, Sir. To be in a place with someone who doesn’t know me or my family. To be treated like an average person, it’s really a treat for me.”

Jerome still looked puzzled. “Just *who* is your family, Jason?”

“The Corleones, Sir. My father and uncle, Ana’s father, own a restaurant chain in Philadelphia and other parts of Pennsylvania and New Jersey.”

Jerome looked blankly at Jason.

“Sir, it is a multibillion dollar business, and they are renowned in the entire region. Needless to say, most everyone recognizes my family name. Ana was smart. She took her mother’s maiden name professionally.”

“I see.” Jerome thought for a moment. “I guess I should thank you.”

“No need, Sir,” Jason said softly. “I would like to know a little more about this case, if you don’t mind?”

“Sure, what do you want to know?” Jerome stood up and got them each a beer.

“Can you tell me how you came to own this property with your Uncle Bart?”

“Daddy inherited it from his father, my gran’daddy. Even though he and Bart never did really get along, especially after Bart swindled Daddy out of what should have been rightfully his, he felt that it was his family duty to leave half of the property to him.” Jerome sat down and handed a beer to Jason before he went on. “Daddy figured that I would never have kids since I was queer, and David has kids, so the property would stay within the family that way.”

“What do you mean he swindled your daddy?”

“After Gran’daddy died, Uncle Bart made a big fuss about everything being left to Daddy. Daddy was the eldest of the two and that was just the way things was done back in the day.” Jerome paused a moment, that faraway look back on his face. “Anyways, Bart talked Daddy into giving him some property that our gran’ mama had. She was a Fuche, a very old family here in Louisiana and in Georgia. I don’t think my daddy had any idea that the property in Georgia was worth anything. All we’d ever heard was that it was just pasture land with the ruins of an old plantation house that had burned down eons ago. Not long after that, though, Daddy found out that a huge mall was being built on it and that Uncle Bart had known about it the whole time. It’s where the Mall of Gwinnett stands now. Uncle Bart is part owner of it and has a hundred year land lease on the thing.”

“Holy shit,” Jason said astonished. “Your Uncle Bart is as shady as some of my family.”

“Yeah, well that ain’t all of it neither.” Jerome snorted disgustedly. “That other piece of land is now part of the port in Lafourche Parish.”

Jason whistled. “I think that may be it.”

“What may be it?” Jerome scowled.

“There is something going on with that property I bet,” Jason said picking up his cell phone again.

“Hey, Ana... I got something else for you. Check and see if there has been any current activity on that property—any kind of surveys or something along those lines. It seems that dear old Uncle Bart has a history of high-end land deals.” Jason waited. “Yeah, that’s right, so check on that too. Thanks, Ana—love you too, bye.”

Jerome sat, his eyebrows raised.

“She’s going to look and see if your Uncle Bart or anyone in his firm has ever been accused of anything illegal,” Jason explained.

Jerome snorted. “I’ll be surprised if there hasn’t been, but Uncle Bart is very well connected, so I doubt anything will pan out on that. If there was, I’m sure it’s been covered up.” He stood up and stretched. “Go grab you a shower, boy, we’re goin’ out. After all this, I need some serious bar time.”

Walking away, Jerome pulled the sleeveless shirt off over his head, leaving Jason to admire the man's fine physique.

CHAPTER FIVE

Monday morning came and went much like the previous two mornings. Jason was falling into the routine easily, enjoying the physicality of working with his body for the first time in his life. He felt stronger than ever before. His mind felt clear and he felt... lighter somehow.

The previous night, Jerome and he had gone to a local watering hole where a jazz ensemble was playing. It was one of the most relaxing evenings he'd had in a very long time. He had never really appreciated jazz before, but now he was a new convert. He couldn't wait to listen to more.

Jerome had finished the gate he had been working on and had moved on to the posts and frames for it. Whenever Jason was on the pull side of his bending, he would glance over and with his eyes lowered, would watch Jerome. He enjoyed seeing the flex of muscles in his forearms as he maneuvered the torch. Jerome's sweat-covered body glistened in the limited light. Jason wanted this man more than any man he had ever known. The way his muscle shirt slid to one side exposing the pierced nipple, surrounded by the light dusting of fur, made Jason's mouth water. Yes, he was physically attracted to him, that was a given. He was exactly Jason's type. But now that he had gotten to know Jerome better, he found that he was attracted to the man inside as well. Getting past the thick walls the man had erected, as Master Sampson had warned him, was going to take some work though.

Jerome was just shutting things down while Jason swept up the shop when his cell phone chirped. He looked at the incoming call and motioned for Jerome to come over.

"Hey, Ana, I didn't expect to hear from you today," Jason answered the call. "Where are you?" Jason looked at Jerome, his eyebrows raised. "Pick you up at the airport? Here?" He paused as he listened to Ana on the other end. "Um... Okay. Go grab a coffee. It'll take me a few minutes to get there... See you shortly."

When Jason looked at Jerome, his face mirrored the surprise that must have been on his own.

“Ana is here at the airport and wants me to pick her up.”

“I gathered that much, but why is she here?” Jerome asked.

“She said that she needed to talk to us face-to-face,” Jason informed him. “That’s all she would say on the phone.”

“Well, go and pick her up then.” Jerome shrugged.

“Um... Sir, I don’t know where the airport is.”

“Awww shit, I didn’t think of that.” Jerome looked down, dusting himself off as best he could as he walked towards the front of the shop. “Let’s go then.”

Since Jerome’s truck would be too crowded for three, Jason insisted that Jerome drive his BMW. After all, he knew where he was going and it was the height of rush hour. This way, Jerome could circle the passenger pickup area while Jason ran inside to retrieve his cousin.

Jerome pulled around for the third time before he saw Jason and a petite woman in a business suit. Jerome knew nothing about women’s fashions, but he knew quality when he saw it, and this lady was nothing if not quality, as was her suit.

He pulled up and Jason opened the back door to allow the small woman to slip into the back seat.

“Hi, I’m Luciana Rizzo,” she introduced herself, offering her hand to shake.

Jerome turned, and took the small manicured hand. “Hi, I’m Jerome Fontaine.”

“The client?” She asked, slightly puzzled.

“Yeah, I guess that would be me,” Jerome pondered, not having thought of himself in those terms before that moment.

Jason opened the trunk to stow Ana’s one bag before getting into the front seat.

“Ana, this is...”

Ana cut him off before he could finish. “We’ve met. He’s the client?”

“Ana, I’ll explain after we get you settled in.” Jason put her off, not exactly knowing how he was planning to explain this odd relationship. “Where are you staying?”

“Tonight, with you,” she said matter-of-factly. “The corporate suites are occupied and there wasn’t a hotel room to be had until tomorrow.”

“Bayou Boogaloo,” Jerome said. “I forgot that was this week.”

“The what?” Ana asked, her eyes wide.

“It’s like a big neighborhood party. Lots of live music, food and basically another reason to have a party,” Jerome explained as he blew the horn at a taxi.

“Anyway, you are going to have to put up with me until tomorrow. I have a room reserved at the Loews for tomorrow.” Ana had pulled out a compact and was touching up her makeup. “God, I need a drink. This way you can tell me everything,” she paused, looking at Jerome’s reflection in the rear-view mirror, “and I do mean *everything*.”

Jason looked almost pained as he glanced at Jerome. One look at Jason’s face and Jerome knew what he was thinking.

“Yeah, she can have the sofa I guess,” Jerome all but growled.

“I’ll take the sofa and Ana can have my bed,” Jason volunteered.

“Thanks, cousin,” Ana smiled, obviously very fond of Jason. “Tonight, drinks and dinner are on me. Lord knows I need to find something to use this expense account on!”

“You two go and have a good time,” Jerome said.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Ana chirped. “You’re the one I need to talk to the most. Besides, I’ve already made reservations at the Court of Two Sisters for seven thirty.”

“What?” Jerome did growl this time.

Ana looked at Jason, “Is he housebroken?”

Jason couldn’t help himself but laugh, which earned him a glare from Jerome.

When they arrived at the house, Ana followed Jason as he carried her bag upstairs.

“Okay, spill it,” Ana demanded, looking up at her handsome cousin. “And what the hell is up with your hair? Why did you cut it all off?”

“Listen, Ana, I want to be honest with you...”

“As well you should, now what the fuck is going on with you? First, you quit your job. Then you basically run away from home and go to someplace out west. Now you’re here in New Orleans with some man who barely seems civilized!”

“He’s not all that bad. A little rough around the edges, but he’s really a good man, Ana.”

“We’ll see about that. What is going on with you, Jason? Talk to me, babe.”

“Ana, it’s hard to explain. I just couldn’t take it anymore. I hate being a lawyer. It felt like I was living a lie.” Jason sat on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands. “I had to make a change or I was going to kill myself.” He looked at his cousin and she knew he was serious.

“I knew you weren’t happy, but I had no idea it was that bad, Jason.”

“It was that bad,” Jason sighed. “Father will never accept me for who I am. He’ll never be able to come to terms with the fact that I’m gay. You should see the way he looks at me. I’ll never be good enough for him, no matter what I do.”

“I know you’re right. I *have* seen the way he looks at you,” Ana said, sitting next to him. “But that’s on him, Jason. You’re a good man and you deserve to be happy. I hope you know I’ll support you any way I can, but can you at least clue me in as to what you’re doing here?”

Jason tried to explain the dynamics of what he had learned in Arizona at the Power Exchange as best he could; leaving out the grittier details. He told her how he had come to Jerome as a favor to Master Sampson. How he craved being of service to an older man.

“You mean like in that *Shades of 50* or whatever that book is?” Ana looked a little shocked, which was something quite alien for her.

“Well, in a way yes, but not exactly,” Jason blushed. “Ana, for the past three days, I have worked my ass off and I’ve never felt better in my life. I feel like I can truly breathe for the first time... ever.”

“Jason, if that’s what you want, then go for it.” She hugged the man to her. “Jason?”

“Yes?”

“You stink!”

Jason laughed. “Yeah, I do and I love it.” He laughed harder. “I’ll jump in the shower and then I’ll leave you to freshen up.”

“Okay. I’ll go downstairs while you’re getting ready.”

“Ana, don’t poke the bear.” Jason chuckled. “He may bite.”

“I think I can handle my own, thank you very much!”

“Yeah, that’s what scares me,” Jason frowned.

Downstairs, Ana walked right up to Jerome, who was standing at the edge of the counter drinking a beer. “You break his heart and I’ll scratch your eyes out.” She took the beer out of his hand and chugged it.

“Lady, I don’t know who you are, but you are in *my* house, drinking *my* beer and you have the nerve to threaten me?”

“I’ll threaten anyone who breaks Jason’s heart.”

Jerome froze. “Do what?”

“Are you completely dense?” Ana went to the refrigerator and grabbed two beers, handing one to Jerome. “He’s falling in love with you, asshole.”

“He’s only been here three days!”

“Doesn’t matter. Jason has been so miserable for so long that it was bound to happen. He needs to be loved more than anyone I’ve ever known. If you can’t do that, then you need to send him on his way. Got it?”

Jerome just stood there in shock.

“Listen, I know Jason better than anyone else, and he is one of the good ones, and right now he’s more relaxed than I’ve ever seen him... ever.”

Ana softened her tone. "So if he loves you and you can make him happy, then I'm all for it. Just don't hurt him is all I'm asking."

They both heard the shower turn off upstairs.

"I need to grab a shower." Jerome drank deeply of the beer in his hand and left.

Ana smiled knowingly. *He may not know it, but Jerome Fontaine has feelings for Jason too.*

Jason and Ana were sitting on the sofa catching up when Jerome reentered the room. Ana let out a low wolf whistle. "My, but you do clean up well," she complimented.

Jerome blushed as he wiped the palms of his hands on the tan linen pants. Jason couldn't help but notice that the blue-gray golf shirt matched his eyes, and the blue blazer made his shoulders seem a mile wide. He licked his lips as he noticed that Jerome was hanging to the left. *Really* hanging.

"Shall we?" Ana asked, as she stood up. "I'm starved."

Having been seated and with dinner ordered, Ana leaned forward, focusing on Jerome. "Let me tell you what I have found out, and then you can fill in the blanks. First off, that property that your Uncle Bart wants you to sell him has been tested and came back positive for a huge natural gas reserve. In other words, he stands to make a fortune off it." She paused for a moment, letting that sink in.

"That son of a bitch," Jerome snarled and drained the bourbon in front of him. "I'm not surprised; that is the sad part."

"It gets better," Ana smiled none too sweetly. "That property that Port Lafourche is now sitting on... isn't legally his and never has been."

"What do you mean?" Jason asked.

"That property belonged to a Fuche family, which was Jerome's great grandfather's, as best as I can determine. His will clearly states that only direct heirs could inherit. Since his only son was killed during WWI, the only surviving heir was Jerome's grandmother, his *mother's* mother. Following so far?"

Jerome and Jason looked at each other as they nodded that they did.

“Okay, there is an old law that deals with Inherent Land Trust. Boiled down, it means that only a blood descendant can inherit and own the property. In this case, old man Fuche set it up where the eldest male child would be sole owner until death, whereas it would then go to that descendant’s eldest male child, and so on and so forth. It would only go to a female if there were no males, which was the case with Jerome’s grandmother.” She watched the two men. Jerome’s mouth tightened. “Jerome, your father had no right to sell that property, which he probably didn’t even realize, *but* your Uncle *did*.”

“How could that happen?” Jason asked.

“Ah, this is where it gets really interesting.” Ana took a deep breath before she continued. “Dear old Uncle Bart knew that he had no real legal rights to the property, but he finagled it to where it appeared that he became Jerome’s trustee, which in turn made him the trustee for the property.”

“What?” Jerome almost yelled partially standing up. “He did what?”

“All these years, *legally*, it has been on paper that you, Jerome Fontaine, are the rightful owner of that property and that your dear sweet Uncle has only been the trustee acting on your behalf,” Ana said grinning like a Cheshire cat. She settled back into her chair and picked up her wine glass.

Jerome’s face was so red it looked like he might explode. His fists were balled up in front of him.

“I’m going to wring his neck,” Jerome ground out between clenched teeth. “Daddy worked like a dog, and when he got sick Uncle Bart never lifted a finger to help. I’m still paying the medical bills from when he was in the hospital and Uncle Bart never said a fucking word. Now, he’s trying to swindle me like he did my father? Wait ’til I get my hands on him.”

“Whoa there, cowboy,” Ana said. “Settle down. I’m also having that property in Georgia researched. If it has the same conditions attached to it, and Georgia’s law holds like it does here, then that may come into play as well.”

“What are we going to do?” Jason asked, smiling. He knew his cousin

well enough to know that she had already devised a plan to get good ol' Uncle Bart.

"We need to buy some time. There is still a lot of digging that we need to do," Ana said as Jason reached over and ate one of her snails. "The main thing is not to spook him and give him a chance to destroy any records or go hiding money somewhere."

"I don't have much time," Jerome said, before popping a fried oyster into his mouth. "Them taxes are due in a few weeks and I don't have the money."

"Yes, you do," Jason said. "I'll loan you the money for the taxes. Once all this is settled, you can pay me back then."

"I'm not taking your money," Jerome grumbled.

"You can and you will," Ana said. "And that is final. I'll draw up a promissory note this week, you sign it, and you take the money, *and* you pay those taxes. This will really throw ol' Uncle Bart off the track and perhaps make him do something stupid. Make sure you let him know that Jason is your new boyfriend and that will, hopefully, throw him a curve. Also, you should allude to the fact that Jason isn't licensed to practice here and has no interest in returning to practicing law anyway. This is an important key."

Jerome started to say something, but one look at Ana's face told him it would be of no use. Looking at Jason, who was staring down at his plate, Jerome could see a slight smile on his face. He knew that he would take the loan whether he liked it or not.

They had just finished dinner and Ana had paid the bill with a corporate credit card, when she stiffened.

Jason looked at her closely. "Ana, what's wrong?"

"I'll tell you outside. Let's get out of here."

Ana didn't wait for her two dinner companions as she headed out the front door of the restaurant. She was pacing in front of the door on the sidewalk when Jerome and Jason came out.

"Now what the hell was that all about?" Jason asked.

“Charles.”

“Your Charles? Charles Whitcomb?”

“No, *not* my Charles anymore,” Ana hissed between clenched teeth.

“Oh. Sorry to hear that. I thought you two had something going,” Jason said sympathetically.

“Yeah, so did I,” Ana spat. “That was until he took a case right out from under me, once I had done all the work on it, and then dumped me, taking all the credit. I have a feeling that was his motive for seeing me all along.”

“Ouch, that’s harsh,” Jason said. “I’m sorry, Ana.”

“Yeah, well I should have listened to you. You told me to be careful... that there wasn’t something quite right about him.” Ana slipped her arm into Jason’s, then pulled Jerome close and did the same with him. Looking at Jerome she said, “Jason has always had like a sixth sense about people. He can unfailingly pick out the bad ones.” She smiled up at Jerome.

Jerome raised his eyebrows, not missing the not so subtle message.

Trying to quickly change the subject, Jason asked, “So, now what?”

“Oh, I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve,” Ana smirked. “Of course, with Charles here I may need to mix things up a bit, at least until I find out what *he’s* doing here.”

“I’ve never known you to run from anything, Ana,” Jason said, stunned.

“I’m not running from anything or anyone. I just don’t trust that bastard,” Ana said, as if Jason had lost his mind. “The last thing I want is for him to spill the beans on why I’m here is all. The quieter we can keep this thing, the better off we’ll be. You know how lawyers are. They all gossip like old women.”

CHAPTER SIX

"If you don't mind, gentlemen," Ana started, as they walked into the house, "I'm going to call it a night. I've had a long day and these shoes are killing me." To prove the point, she kicked them off.

"Yeah, I'm kind of beat myself," Jason added as he covered his mouth, yawning.

"Goodnight then cousin," Ana said as she kissed Jason on the cheek. "Goodnight, Jerome," she also reached up, her hand around his neck, and pulled him down to kiss him as well, much to his obvious surprise.

Ana picked up her shoes and shuffled off upstairs.

Jerome slipped the blazer off. "Is she always so...?"

"Brash?" Jason finished for him, smiling.

"Yeah, I guess that word works."

"Pretty much," Jason said fondly. "It would be ill-advised to make her mad. She is pretty fierce when she's pissed."

"I can see that." Jerome shook his head.

"Is there a spare pillow and blanket I may use, Sir?" Jason asked respectfully.

"Yeah, hold on a sec." Jerome walked towards the master bedroom in the back of the house.

A few moments later Jason heard Jerome call his name. Having never been in Jerome's bedroom, he was curious to see it. He walked back and found Jerome standing bare to the waist, having taken off his shirt.

"You'll bunk in with me," he said as he removed his socks. "That sofa ain't at all comfortable. Besides, you're as tall as I am and trust me; it's too small to stretch out on."

"Sir?" Jason became a little alarmed. He was afraid that his attraction to Jerome would become evident being that close to the man.

"It's a king-sized bed," Jerome said simply as he dropped his pants,

leaving him standing there in a pair of boxers. “There is more than enough room.”

“I don’t mind the sofa, Sir.”

“Nonsense. I need you fresh for work tomorrow. You won’t be much good if you don’t get some decent sleep.”

With that, he went into the bathroom. Jason could hear him pissing into the toilet. He didn’t seem to have much of a choice in the matter. Jason quickly stripped down to his own boxers, folding the rest of his clothes and carefully placing them on a chair in the corner. He then slipped into the right side of the big bed. He had noticed the alarm clock and a book were placed next to the bed on the left side, so he took the right.

Jerome came out of the bathroom and stretched. The muscles in his arms and shoulders bulged, his heavy pectorals stretched tight. Jason could feel the muscles in his own stomach constrict with want. With his back to the bed, Jerome dropped the boxers, giving Jason a full view of his spectacular ass. A light dusting of hair feathered in towards the center, becoming a little heavier towards the valley of his tight butt.

Jerome set the alarm and turned off the light before he crawled into bed. He rolled to his side, pulled the sheet up and quietly said, “Night.”

“Night, Sir.”

Jason was so conscious of Jerome’s body lying next to him in the same bed, that he couldn’t fall asleep. Only after he heard Jerome start to snore, was he able to relax enough to drift off. Odd as it may seem, he found the snoring, which was a little loud, soothing.

Jason woke up with a start. Curled up behind him was Jerome, his right arm around Jason, holding him close. He felt Jerome’s warm skin against his back and his dick nestled in the crack of his ass. Even though Jason had kept his boxers on, he could feel the heat from the man’s groin.

Jason stiffened. He felt his own dick, which was semihard already, spring to a full, throbbing erection. How was he going to deal with this?

Jason carefully tried to slide out towards the edge of the bed, but Jerome's arm only tightened around him, holding him closer. He ground his hips into Jason, pushing his hard dick against him, sighing heavily in his sleep.

He sighed to himself, recognizing that he was good and stuck. As much as he enjoyed being this close to Jerome, he was afraid. Afraid... afraid of what Jerome might think or do when he realized what was going on. He didn't have long to worry about it.

Jerome's alarm clock started beeping, rousing the older man. Jason felt him stiffen behind him as he woke up. Jason played possum, hoping that Jerome would just get up and not mention it.

"I know you're awake," Jerome huffed, his voice close to Jason's ear. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to invade your space."

Jerome rolled out of bed and left the room. Jason heard him start to make coffee. Jason closed his eyes, letting out a deep breath. *If he only knew*, Jason thought.

He crawled out of bed slowly and went to the bathroom. Just as he flushed the toilet, Jerome walked in, still naked. Jason tried to avert his eyes but failed miserably. Jerome was indeed hung, and hung well. His big swinging dick, still slightly plumped from his earlier erection, was uncut and sported a Prince Albert piercing.

"Coffee's ready," Jerome grumped as he started to urinate.

"Thank you, Sir," Jason said, hastily leaving the bathroom.

He poured himself a cup of coffee before going upstairs to get dressed for the day. He also took a cup up for Ana.

"Morning," Ana said stretching in bed. "Sleep well on that sofa?"

"I... uh... didn't sleep on the sofa," Jason said, as he pulled a jock and socks out of a drawer.

"Ooohhh, I see," Ana giggled. "How was it?"

"How was what?" Jason tried to play ignorant, even though he knew what she was hinting at.

"Oh, come on, Jason, you know? Was he *good*?"

“We just slept, Ana, nothing more.”

“Well that’s no fun,” she said, getting out of bed wearing an oversized T-shirt with “BITCH” printed on it in large, pink letters.

Jason didn’t answer. He went into the bathroom, taking his clothes with him. When he came out, Ana was sitting on the bed, coffee in hand.

“Thanks for the coffee, Cuz.”

“Welcome.”

“Jason?”

Jason stopped, turning towards her. “Yeah?”

“You’re going to have to make the first move you know?”

“What?”

“He won’t do it. He’s afraid,” Ana said softly.

“Afraid? Afraid of what?”

“He’s been hurt, Jason, and I’d say pretty badly. You’re going to have to be the one to take the next step. He won’t do it.”

Jason sighed, his head hanging. “I don’t know if I can, Ana.”

“Sure you can. Take the bull by the horns,” she snickered. “Remember what Momma always said? If you don’t ask, you don’t get?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Okay. If this is what you want, Jason... go for it.”

Jason walked over to the petite woman, her curly black hair all tousled from bed, leaned over and kissed the top of her head. “Ana, you always know how to cut right down to the bone. It’s what I love about you. Thanks.”

“Anytime.” She grinned, before slurping the coffee.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jerome and Jason were sitting at the breakfast bar sipping coffee while they waited for Ana. When she finally be-bopped down the stairs in a pair of jeans, tennis shoes, and a Cornell T-shirt, they both sat there with their mouths hanging open. Her hair was loose, and the tight curls bounced as she walked. She had minimum makeup on, which made her look very young.

“Ana?” Jason questioned.

“I’m going to use the library at Tulane so I thought I would try and fit in,” she grinned. “Like it?” She asked, twirling around.

Jerome only scowled, turning back to his coffee.

“Yeah, I guess,” Jason looked at her skeptically.

“I made some calls, and Charles is in town with one of the senior partners on some big hush-hush case. The last thing I want to do is run into him at the office, at least until I know what he’s up to.” She poured herself some more coffee. “This way I can get the work done that I need to do and not see him.”

“Whatever works I guess,” Jason said, sipping his coffee.

“So... Jerome...?” Ana sidled up next to Jerome.

“Uh-oh,” Jason muttered.

“Hush you,” Ana directed at Jason. “Jerome, may I ask a teensy-weensy favor?”

Jerome looked at Ana, one eyebrow raised and still scowling. “What?”

“Do you think I could *possibly* take advantage of your *generous* hospitality for a few more days?” Ana almost cooed.

Jason was barely able to hold it together. He’d seen Ana in action before and knew that Jerome didn’t stand a chance.

“It’s just that Charles is also staying at the Loews and I really don’t want him to know I’m here. Pleeaaaasse,” she said sweetly, gently rubbing his nearly naked shoulder. “And all the other hotels are booked solid.”

Jerome squinted his eyes at her then looked at Jason, who was doing his best to concentrate on his coffee, carefully keeping his face blank.

He looked at Ana, then said, “No.” He then turned back to his own coffee.

Ana stood there with her mouth open. Even Jason looked dumbfounded.

Recovering quickly, Ana, one hand on her hip, the other holding the cup of coffee, asked, “What? I’m helping you out pro bono and you say no? What kind of asshole are you?”

“I’m the kind of asshole who doesn’t care for such ploys from the female persuasion. Now if you can ask me like a fucking adult woman, instead of this little coy, pretentious, prima donna, the answer might be different.”

Caught totally off guard, Ana stood there completely shocked.

Jason sucked in air before he totally lost it. No longer able to hold back, he busted out laughing, tears streaming down his face. Jerome only glanced at Jason, a smirky grin on his face.

When Ana did recover, she glared at Jason and kicked him in the shin.

“Ow!” Jason howled, one hand holding his shin, the other his stomach. “Oh, Ana, you should have seen your face. That was priceless. I’ve never seen you so shot down.” Jason continued to laugh.

Jerome turned to face Ana fully. “Now, you want to try that again?”

Ana huffed, furious that she’d been so openly put down. “Jerome, may I continue to stay here in your home while working on *your* case?”

“Yes, you may, Ana.”

Jerome put his coffee cup down, walked over to a drawer and found a spare key.

“Here, come and go as you wish. Only rule is that if you drink all the beer, you replace it. You drink all my booze, you replace it. You wake me up when I’m trying to sleep, you’re outta here. Got it?”

“Yes, I got it,” Ana said through clenched teeth, snatching the key from Jerome’s hand.

“Good, now we have work to do. Come on, boy, time to get a move on.” Jerome rinsed his cup and put it in the dishwasher, something Jason had not seen him do since he’d arrived. Jason scrambled to do the same, then followed Jerome towards the door.

“Jason, I need to borrow your car,” Ana asked before he could leave.

“Sure, here are the keys,” he said tossing them to her.

“She sure don’t ask for much does she?” Jerome muttered, walking out the door.

“Barbarian!” Ana called after the two, just before the door closed.

Walking down the sidewalk, just past the house, Jason said, “Oh, Sir, that was priceless. I have never heard anyone talk to Ana like that before. Not even her own father.”

“That’s probably what’s wrong with her,” Jerome stated flatly. “Probably could use a good turning over the knee too.”

Jason actually stumbled. His mouth went dry.

“Walk much?” Jerome glowered.

Jason was so thankful he was wearing the jock strap at that particular moment. The thought of being over Jerome’s knee getting a bare-handed spanking made him instantly hard. Remembering the closeness that he’d shared with Jerome just that morning made him start to leak precum. Remembering the hardness against his ass and the heat that radiated from Jerome made his dick twitch. Remembering the spicy smell of him so close, and the image of his big swinging dick, made his mouth water. All of these thoughts came rushing back to him, almost overwhelming him. Then he suddenly realized that with Ana staying, he would more than likely be sleeping with Jerome again. At first he was thrilled, but then started to panic. *What if?...* then remembering what Ana told him, “Take the bull by the horns.” *Perhaps she was right* he thought to himself.

Before the end of the day, Jason was again exhausted, but very pleased with himself. He had finally finished all the pieces that needed to be cut and bent into the desired shapes. He was so happy he actually did a little happy dance, making Jerome stare at him like he’d lost his mind.

Walking over, Jerome picked up several pieces and inspected them. “Not bad, boy, not bad at all. I actually thought that this might keep you busy for the rest of the week, and you’ve already gotten it done. Good job.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Jason smiled.

“Why don’t we knock off a little early,” Jerome suggested. “I’m feeling a bit better about where we are. Besides, it’s a little late in the day to get you started on something else.”

“Okay, Sir.” Jason was all smiles.

On the walk home, Jerome mumbled something about waiting for Ana before going out for dinner.

“Sir, if you don’t mind, why don’t I just cook dinner?”

“Cook? You can cook?”

“Remember, my family owns a chain of restaurants and I am Italian after all. All Italians cook.”

Jerome shrugged his shoulders. “Sure, fine by me. We’ll have to go to the store though. As you know, there ain’t shit at the house. I *don’t* cook.”

“Is there a decent Italian grocery or deli around?”

“Yeah, there’s Central Grocery over on Decatur Street,” Jerome answered.

“Let’s go there then.”

Jerome watched as Jason shopped for the items he wanted for dinner. He had no idea what Jason was planning on making, and he didn’t ask. By the time they left, each was carrying five heavy bags of groceries.

Jason saw a cab and hailed it. “I don’t want that butter to melt before we get home,” he explained to Jerome. Jerome only nodded.

Jason unpacked the groceries on the counter, seemingly very happy.

“Um... while you’re doing that I’m gonna go up to the office and get some of the paper work done. I’ve put it off long enough.”

“Okay, Sir,” Jason smiled.

As Jerome plowed through the bookkeeping, which he detested, he could hear Jason downstairs, whistling and humming intermittently.

Shaking his head, he concentrated on the task in front of him. The next thing he knew there was a delicious smell gliding up the stairs interrupting his thoughts. His curiosity got the better of him, so he went down to check it out.

“Hi, Sir,” Jason greeted him. He went to the fridge, got Jerome a beer, opened it and gave it to him.

“Thanks, boy,” Jerome took a long drink. “Smells good. I can’t remember the last time a full meal was cooked in this kitchen.” In fact he could, but he wasn’t going down that road.

“I think it’ll be good,” Jason said. “I called Ana and she should be here shortly. We can eat when she gets here if that’s all right with you, Sir.”

“Yeah, that’ll work.” He couldn’t make heads or tails out of what Jason was doing. “Best I just stay outta the way. Let me know when you’re ready.”

It wasn’t long before he heard Ana come in, followed by a female squeal, something he definitely wasn’t used to. Grimacing, Jerome shook his head and stood up. “Enough of this shit for one day.” He closed the ledger book.

“Oh, good, I was just about to call you, Sir,” Jason beamed. “Have a seat,” he indicated the vacant barstool.

Jerome sat down, looking at the large platter on the counter. Jason handed him a balloon glass of red wine.

“Um, I’m not all that fond of wine,” Jerome started.

“Tonight you are,” Ana smiled. “You’ll see. Just try it.”

Jerome took a sip, but wasn’t that impressed. He shrugged. “Yeah, not much into it.”

“Here,” Ana picked up a piece of Prosciutto and a piece of something that looked like fruit. “Eat this *then* take a sip of wine.”

Jerome did. His eyebrow shot up. “Yeah, that makes a difference. What is all this?”

“Antipasto,” Jason said as he popped a fig in his mouth.

“Prosciutto ham, fresh figs, baby mozzarella, fresh tomatoes with basil and bruschetta,” Ana said, pointing at each thing on the large dish.

Jerome tasted everything while sipping the wine. “This is really very good,” he admitted, setting the glass down.

“Thank you, Sir. I hoped you would like it,” Jason smiled, a smile that Ana didn’t miss.

“Is this dinner?” Jerome asked.

Ana laughed. “No silly. It’s like an appetizer, part salad.”

“Oh,” Jerome said simply.

“We eat this before the main course,” Ana explained. “If we were eating back home this would be the first course of, like, seven!”

“Seven?” Jerome’s eyebrows flew up.

“Italians are big on dinners. They can take all night,” Jason replied, a flash of pain on his face as he remembered being tortured by his father during such meals.

“I can’t wait for dinner, Jason,” Ana followed by popping a piece of fig into her mouth. “Mmm... can’t believe you found fresh figs.”

Jason smiled brightly. “Eat up, dinner is almost ready.”

The three continued to munch on the platter of appetizers. Before it was done, Jason told them to take a seat at the table. Although small, the table was comfortable enough for three.

Once Ana and Jerome were seated, Jason came out with two steaming plates.

“Oh, Jason, you didn’t!” Ana clapped her hands together as Jason set a plate in front of her. “One of my favorites.”

Jerome looked at the plate, the heavenly smell blasting him in the face.

“Hope you like it,” Jason said looking at Jerome.

Ana took a big bite. “Oh... my... God...! Jason, this is better than Mama’s and I didn’t think that was possible. How did you do it?”

“What is it?” Jerome asked, just before taking a bite. His eyes lit up.

“You like it?” Jason asked, still not having picked up his fork, having come back with his own plate.

“Hell yeah, now what the fuck is it?”

“It’s Veal Marsala. A traditional Italian dish, usually reserved for special occasions,” Ana answered him. “And trust me, this is the best I’ve ever had, and I’ve had my share to compare it to.”

“Maybe could have used a little more thyme,” Jason commented.

“Are you kidding? This is perfect, Jason.” Ana swallowed a bite. “How you made it better than Mama’s is what I want to know! Ohhh, wait until I tell her!”

“The secret is marinating the veal in the wine for at least thirty minutes before cooking it,” he smiled.

“This really is excellent, boy,” Jerome complimented, speaking with his mouth full.

“How’s the wine now?” Ana smirked at him.

“Okay, I admit it really is good with this food,” Jerome reluctantly conceded.

The rest of the meal consisted mostly of Jerome devouring his food, having seconds, and listening to Ana and Jason reminisce about their childhood, each telling stories on the other. Jerome learned a lot about Jason over dinner.

Jason insisted on cleaning up, not letting either of the other two help at all. They sat at the bar, watching Jason and talking. Ana coaxed Jerome into talking about New Orleans. It was Jason’s turn to learn more about Jerome, and he soaked it up like a sponge.

“Who’s ready for dessert?”

“You made dessert too?” Jerome asked, surprised.

“Oh, goody, I can’t wait to see what you came up with,” Ana said excitedly.

“Voila!” Jason pulled out a tart, placing it in front of the two.

“No... you didn’t?” Ana sat there with her mouth open.

“Yep,” Jason grinned like a big kid. Seeing the look on Jerome’s face he said, “It’s a strawberry jam tart,” he explained.

“I’m going to gain ten pounds just tonight,” Ana pouted. “Hell, it’ll be worth it.”

Jason cut the tart and poured everyone a cup of coffee, adding cream and sugar to each.

Ana sat there shaking her head, “Jason, you have outdone yourself.”

Jerome, his mouth full, whipped cream at the corner, said, “What she said,” pointing to Ana with his fork.

They all laughed, enjoying the sugary treat.

“Learn anything more today, Cuz?” Jason asked as he rinsed the dessert plates before putting them in the dishwasher.

“Not a whole lot. I found out that all the cases that dealt with that lineage heredity Land Trust thing stood with the original intent. Oh, I did find out that Georgia will also uphold the same law,” Ana answered. “I’ve got someone working on tracking the ownership on that. Seems there is a lot of dodging and weaving going on there—leases from outside sources that lead to another lessee. It is common when trying to cover something up.”

Jason nodded and Jerome growled.

“Oh, I did find out one new thing,” Ana said, finishing her coffee. “The property in Georgia was linked to another property in Rome, Georgia.”

“What?” Jerome stood up looking at Ana. “Rome, *Georgia*?”

“Yes, is that important, Jerome?” Ana asked.

“I don’t believe it,” Jerome said, looking shocked as he sat back down on the barstool. “I thought that was just a story Gran’daddy used to tell. Hell, I thought he was talking about Rome, like in Italy.”

Ana retrieved the legal pad off the coffee table. “Tell me everything you remember, Jerome.”

“Gran’daddy used to tell me stories, you know, family stories. I was no more than eight or so. I never believed most of them, that one in particular.” Jerome sat looking stunned.

“Go on,” Ana prodded.

“Well, he used to go on about his mama being raised in a big mansion in Rome and how well off they were—that they were a well-known family in the area.”

“It was your great-grandmother who was a Fuche, so that makes perfect sense,” Ana pondered. “You know, it could very well be that whomever it was that set up the terms of the will did so on all the properties. I’ll get Diane to look into it. I sure wish we had the original will. I need to see if I can get a copy of it.”

“Diane?” Jason asked. “Diane Bayley?”

“Yes,” Ana smiled.

“If anyone can find out, it’s that woman,” Jason laughed.

Jerome looked puzzled.

Ana explained, “Diane is like a pit bull with a bone. She never gives up, and she can find a needle in a haystack.”

Jerome nodded, still looking a little stunned.

Ana stood up, placed her hand on his shoulder and said, “Don’t worry, Jerome, we’re going to get to the bottom of all this. Trust me.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jerome yawned and stretched, flexing his biceps and broad shoulders, extending his arms to either side of his body. Jason instantly got hard. “Need to get to bed, boy. Tomorrow is a work day.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jason acknowledged. “Need to go brush my teeth and wash my face.” What Jason actually needed was a few minutes away to let his raging hormones settle down.

With one foot on the stairs, Jason heard Jerome calling to him from down the hall, “Might as well just bring all your stuff down here. At least while that *woman* is here.”

Jason froze for a moment. *Move his stuff? In with Jerome?* A feeling like electricity coursed through his entire body. He took the steps two at a time. Walking into the bathroom, he picked up his toiletries then headed into the bedroom to grab some clothes for the next day. He saw Ana sitting on the edge of the bed talking on the phone.

Jason got what he needed from the dresser. Before he could leave the room, Ana ended her call.

“Jason, your father is threatening to cut you out of his will if you don’t go home,” Ana said softly.

He turned with his arms full. “That’s his prerogative.”

“Aren’t you concerned?”

“No, not really,” Jason shrugged. “It’s time I started living *my* life, Ana. Not what my father thinks my life should be. I will never be able to be what he wants me to be, and I’ve come to terms with that.”

“What about the money?”

“Ana, I have my own money, I don’t need his.” Jason said stated matter-of-factly. “You know that Grandfather gave each of us grandkids a trust. What you may not know is that I actually inherited two trusts. Hell, I didn’t even know about it myself until my twenty-eighth birthday.”

Ana looked shocked. “Why did you get two?”

“He left me a letter explaining that he wanted me to be able to be who I wanted to be. That he saw things in me that he had seen in himself, but that he was never able to follow his own dreams.” Jason was transported to another time, a time when he would spend hours talking with his grandfather, enjoying their special relationship.

“You were always his favorite,” Ana smiled. “It was as if when you were around, no one else really mattered.”

“Really? I never noticed.”

“Of course not,” Ana smiled softly. “The two of you were always so caught up with each other.”

“I think Grandfather knew I was gay,” Jason reminisced.

“Could be,” Ana said.

“Anyway, that was the catalyst for me leaving Philly,” Jason said, smiling sadly. “It was time I did what was going to make me happy.”

“I’m glad, Jason, I really am.”

“Anyway... goodnight. Thanks Cuz.”

“Goodnight, Jason.”

Jason brushed his teeth and put away his few toiletries. Placing his clothes for the next day on the chair in the corner of the bedroom, he took a deep breath. He stripped off his T-shirt, hesitated, then removed his running shorts, the clothes he had put on after his post-work shower.

Jerome was already in bed and Jason could feel his eyes on him. Turning, he walked to the bed and climbed in.

“Night,” Jerome said, turning off the light. He turned his back to Jason, staying close to the edge of the bed.

Jason could reach his arm out, fully extended, and still not be able to touch Jerome, he was so far away on the large, king sized bed.

As he lay there, Jason concentrated on his breathing until he fell asleep.

Sometime during the night, just like the night before, Jason awoke with Jerome snuggled up behind him, his big arm holding him tight. As before,

first Jason's body stiffened, and then he relaxed, enjoying the close contact. He loved the smell of Jerome, the heaviness of his big arm across his waist, his furry chest against his back. What Jason enjoyed the most however, was the security he felt while Jerome held him. He felt safe. He almost snickered when the thought of Jerome and his father going toe to toe flashed through his mind. Jason had a feeling that his old man might actually lose that fight.

Jason lay there, his eyes growing heavy again, just drifting back to sleep, when Jerome's hips suddenly pushed up harder into his backside. The heat coming from his groin felt intense. Jason remembered that same sensation from the night before. He wondered what it was that made that part of Jerome's body so much warmer than the rest of him.

"Toby," Jerome muttered in his sleep, pushing his semihard dick into the cleft of Jason's ass, pulling him in even tighter.

Toby? Who the hell is Toby? Jason wondered silently.

That thought quickly left his mind when Jerome's dick became fully erect and began jabbing him in the butt. Reaching behind, he took Jerome's fat dick and maneuvered it between his thighs. Jerome proceeded to hump him silently, using the friction between his legs. Jerome gripped Jason's hip as he thrust, but then suddenly stopped, mumbled, and was still.

Jason was very confused. Why did he stop? Once Jerome's grip loosened, he slid out from under his hand and slowly moved down the bed, under the light covers. Taking Jerome's still erect dick in his hand, he leaned over and slowly licked the head, tasting the saltiness of the dribble of precum he found there. Wanting more, Jason opened his mouth and took in the first few inches of Jerome's cock. He slowly bobbed until he had most of Jerome's uncut dick sliding easily in and out of his mouth.

Jerome began gently thrusting upwards, meeting Jason midway. He groaned, and his hands went to either side of Jason's head as his lunges into the warm wetness of Jason's mouth increased in intensity. His hands gradually tightened on Jason's head as his hip action became a bit erratic. Jason could feel the swelling and further hardening of Jerome's cock, and knew that he was about to get a mouthful of the hot man's spunk.

Hips jerking and then before long, Jerome erupted. Although Jason was prepared to receive the load, he had not counted on the velocity, nor the amount. Jason gagged once, a little escaping his mouth and sliding down his chin. Jerome continued pumping out a huge load, and Jason was forced to swallow several times in order to catch it all. Just as Jerome's cock started to relax, his body stiffened and he pushed Jason roughly away and jumped out of bed.

"What the fuck are you doin'?" Jerome's face looked furious from what little Jason could see from the bit of daylight that was creeping in through the miniblinds.

Jason, caught off guard and slightly freaked out, had also jumped out of the bed, his own erection sticking out in front of him through the fly of his boxers, completely forgotten.

Jerome flew across the bed towards him then slammed him against the wall, causing Jason's head to bounce back from the body slam. "Don't you *ever* fuckin' do that again, you git me, boy?" Jerome screamed into Jason's shocked face.

The alarm clock suddenly going off had Jerome stomping back around the bed in a rage. He yanked it from the nightstand and threw it against the bathroom door, shattering it completely. Stepping over the mess, he stomped off to the kitchen, leaving Jason stunned and shaking.

Desperately trying to clear his head, Jason began to clean up the shattered alarm clock. Stepping around him, Jerome stalked back into the room and silently got dressed. Having picked up most of the mess, Jason took it to the trashcan in the kitchen.

Jerome passed by him already fully dressed and poured himself a cup of coffee into a to-go cup. As he walked to the door, he said, "I don't need you today," and left the house.

Jason's face was burning, first with embarrassment, and then with fury. *How fucking dare he?* Jason could hear Ana moving about upstairs, getting ready to start her day. *Now what do I do?*

He poured himself a cup of coffee and went back to Jerome's bedroom

to finish cleaning up the mess. He dressed in the clothes that he'd laid out the night before then called Master Sampson.

Jason explained what had happened that morning. At first, Jason intended to go to the shop anyway, whether Jerome wanted him to or not, but Master Sampson talked him out of that. He said to give Jerome the day to calm down and think about what he'd done. He also reiterated that Jason needed to give Jerome more time. Jason hadn't even been there a full week yet, and he expected that it would take Jerome longer than that to get used to him. Resigning himself to doing as Master Sampson suggested, Jason went into the kitchen, deciding to give it a thorough cleaning.

"Morning, Jason," Ana said, walking into the kitchen in search of coffee.

"Morning," Jason replied flatly.

"What was all the yelling about?" Ana asked, taking her first sip of coffee.

"Oh, nothing really. Don't worry about it."

"Mm, okay... Listen, I need to borrow your car again if you don't mind." Ana was dressed professionally today in an impeccably tailored suit. "I'm going to go over to the court house in Lafourche Parish. See if I can't get a copy of Jerome's grandfather's will."

"Sure, no problem," Jason said. "You've still got the keys."

"Okay, I'll see you later then," she said, walking towards the door.

"Ana?"

She turned back around, briefcase and coffee cup in hand. "Yes?"

"You spill that coffee in my car and I will shave your head!"

"Phft, I'd like to see you try!" Then she was gone, leaving Jason alone in the house for the first time.

Getting busy, Jason cleaned out one of the bottom cabinets, pulling everything out. He quickly realized that there was some serious kitchen equipment stored away.

"If Jerome doesn't cook, then what is he doing with all this stuff?" Jason asked, realizing he was talking to himself.

There was a professional-grade food processor, a Kitchen Aid mixer, pizza stone and several other gourmet-type gadgets. Everything was in pristine condition, and really didn't need cleaning.

Curious, Jason went through all the cabinets in the kitchen. It was a fairly large kitchen and he was astounded by all the equipment he found. "Someone was a serious cook here at one time or another. Could it have been this Toby?"

At eleven o'clock, his stomach grumbled. He hadn't had anything to eat yet, since he'd gotten used to Jerome providing breakfast at the shop. He found some of the leftovers from the night before, and nibbled on the prosciutto and figs. It was enough to hold him over until he could go out and get something more substantial.

"The best way to a man's heart is through the stomach, I've heard," he said to the empty house.

He went upstairs, dug out his laptop, and changed into more appropriate attire. Sitting at the kitchen counter, he booted up his computer and did a search for oyster recipes. Knowing how much Jerome liked the local favorite, he found a few recipes and bookmarked them.

"All right, Mr. Jerome Fontaine, you're in for a treat tonight!"

Finding another spare key, he left the house in a much better mood. The first thing he needed was something to eat, and he knew exactly where he was going to go.

CHAPTER NINE

Jason walked into the small restaurant and saw Marie. She motioned for him to take a small table close to the one that he and Jerome had used the night they were there.

“Well, well, well. How’s ya doin’ sugah?” Marie smiled at him broadly. “You gonna be waiting on that ol’ hateful bastard?”

“No, I’m here alone, Marie,” Jason answered her, taking the menu from her hand.

“I’s ain’t so surprised you done give him the boot,” she said shaking her head. “He runs off more folk than anyone I’s ever seen.”

“Oh, it isn’t that,” Jason quickly said. “He just gave me the day off is all.”

“Humph, I knows better ’n that,” Marie said, a sour look on her face. “He done gone an’ throwed one o’ his hissy fits is what it is. Listen, sugah, I knows that man better ’n my own husband. There ain’t a thang you kin do with him when he’s in that kinda mood. Jes let him cool off some.”

“I guess that’s what I’m doing,” Jason said quietly.

Marie took the menu from his hand. “Don’ worry, let Marie here fix you up sumpthin’ ta eat. Trust me now, I’s gonna take care of you, baby.”

Ant came over with a big glass of water for Jason, smiling, but saying nothing.

A few minutes later, Marie came out with a steaming plate. “Here’s ya go, baby. You jes g’won an’ gives that a try.”

Jason took a tentative bite of the stuff that looked like brown gravy, and his eyes rolled back in his head. “Oh, my God, Marie, what is this?”

“Étouffée, baby. One o’ my specialties,” Marie beamed.

“It is wonderful,” Jason said after another heaping forkful.

“You jes enjoys it,” Marie said.

“Marie?” Jason called to her as she began to walk away. She turned around and came back.

“Do you know who Toby is?”

Marie caught Ant’s eye and made a circle in the air, then sat down at the table.

“Who tole you ’bout Toby?” Marie asked, her large breasts resting on the table top.

“Jerome said it in his sleep last night, er... this morning.”

“You’s in his bed?” Marie sat back her eyes wide.

“It isn’t what you think, Marie. It was kind of forced on him. That’s a whole ’nother story.”

“Well chil’, you’d be the firs’ since Toby then,” Marie said shaking her head.

“So Toby and Jerome were together?”

“Toby was sumptin’ to behold. He had Jerome minding his P’s an’ Q’s fer shore,” Marie chuckled. “Toby was a smooth operator... smooth as a baby’s ass, he was.”

“Can you tell me about him, Marie? What happened to him?”

“Tha’s part of the story, baby. It’s shore is sad.” Marie leaned back towards the table. “Less me start off ’fore Katrina tore up this city. Toby an’ Jerome bought that house an’ was workin’ alongside Mr. Fontaine. Now they wasn’ a man any better’n him, I’s tellin’ ya. Anyways,” she sighed heavily, “all was goin’ jes fine ’til Katrina. Toby loads up his truck an’ Mr. Fontaine an’ drives up to where his peoples is, up near’s Shreveport. Jerome was a still puttin’ ups wood on theys windows an’ all. Well, he took too long a doin’ it. ’Fore he was a done, ta roads closed up an’ Katrina was on top o’ us’n.

Ant brought over some tea for his mother, looked at her and nodded, understanding what she was talking about. *The Storm*.

“We’d all made it through that storm aw’rights. I means, there was so much damage in the streets, but it weren’t nuttin’ we’s ain’t done ’fore, ya knows?” She took another deep breath; her eyes had a distant look in them. “Then them levies broke. Tha’s when all hell broke loose on this town.

People was a drownin' in the streets an' in they's houses. They'd be animals jes' floatin' down the streets, it was ter'ble, jes ter'ble." Marie wiped a tear away.

"I can't even imagine how awful it must have been," Jason sympathized.

"So's, those of us'n's that stayed an' toughed it out faired 'nuff," Marine went on. "Now Jerome were a big help. He made shore we's was okay an' boarded up the winders real tight. The big problem was that the whole city was shut off an' nobody had no foods. We'd be take'n turns sittin' up nights makin' shore no one's got in ta steal. We made it through though with the good Lord's bless'ns."

Marie started rocking back and forth in her chair. "Now's is where's it gits bad. When they's opened up they roads, an' folks started a comin' back, they didn't know's what's they was a comin' back to. They was gangs roamin' the streets an' killin' folk over jes about anytang, you sees. Toby was drivin' his big ol' truck, that still had a bunch of they's stuff in the back, when one of them gangs highjacks 'em. They shot poor Toby in the head as soon as he was outta the truck. They knocks poor Mr. Fontaine in the back's o' his head with a bat an' then they leaves 'em just lyin' on the street." Marie was sitting there, tears streaming down her full cheeks now.

"Oh... my... God," Jason whispered hoarsely.

"Jerome jes 'bout went crazy," Marie's voice was soft. "Tha' po' man didn't know's if he was a comin' or a goin'. His daddy was in the hospital, his brain had sumpthin' bad wrong. His husband was kilt dead in the streets by them thugs. The funeral homes was a booked so tight, almos' no one was able to gits they's family buried."

"Oh, Marie, how awful," Jason took her fat hand in his.

"I's got's a cousin who was able to take care of poor Toby, an' I thought I might as well g'won an' bury Jerome too." Marie looked Jason in the eye. "They's was a part of Jerome that died that day, baby. Another big part of him died with his daddy not longs after. His daddy hung on fer months an'

months. They'd be times when he would'a seem okay, but they'd become less an' less. Then one day the doctors tole Jerome that his daddy wasn't able to breathe on his own no more's an' they'd done all they could. That was the day Jerome went an' turned mean."

"So Toby was murdered..." Jason stated to no one in particular.

"Yes, chil' he was. Rights in the streets like a dawg."

"But Jerome was happy before that?"

"Oh, yes, baby, he were 'nother man backs then," Marie wiped her eyes again. "Now that Toby, he were a smart one. He knew how to handle Jerome. I's known Jerome jes 'bout all our lives an' they isn't much he do that I don' knows about. I knows all's 'bout tha' little spanky, spanky, smack, smack stuff he do. Why they's them what wants to git hurts and them what wants to go an' hurt others while's they doin' mattress dancin' is beyond me, but it ain't none o' my business. I ain't in that room, so's I's don' care none. As long as they's a both agreeable's to it, ain't none a my bees wax."

"Spanky, spanky, smack, smack," Jason hooted. "Oh, now that's priceless, Marie."

Marie scowled at him. "An' you knows jes what I's meanin' too, so don' you g'won an' pretends you don't. You's the same way's Toby was in that regard. I's see's it in yer eyes when ya looks at Jerome."

"I have another question," Jason said quietly, his face somber. "Did Toby cook?"

"Shoooooot, did Toby cook," Marie's eyes started to sparkle. "That man could jes 'bout out cook me, an' I don' go an' says that too of'en now."

"That explains all the equipment in the kitchen then."

"Yep, that would've been Toby's, shore 'nuff."

"Thank you, Marie. I understand things much better now."

"Jason, you gots a way's 'bout you." Marie took his hand back into hers, laying her other hand on top. "You's ain't Toby, and ya ain't never goin' ta be neither. Don' try. You has to lay you own track now. If'n

anyone can break Jerome outta his own prison, I thinks you's the one thats kin do it."

"Thank you, Marie. I plan to try."

"One more tang... don't cha go an' be a skeered of that man now. When Toby stood his ground, Jerome would fuss 'n fume 'n carry on's like a chil'. But Toby stood his ground an' Jerome got over hisself. Mos' time's though... Toby maneuvered Jerome an' let that man think it were all his own idea." Marie laughed. "That boy knew how to work Jerome, shore o'nuff. His mamma done right by him, she did."

Jason smiled, knowing exactly what she meant. He had seen his own mother do that to his father. "I think I get it, Marie."

"Jason... you need's ta help him. He's a dying inside. If'n you can't git to him, I don't know that he'll ever come back ta the way he was."

"I'm going to try, Marie. I am going to try."

CHAPTER TEN

“Hey, Ana,” Jason greeted his cousin, the phone wedged between his ear and shoulder. “Can you do me a *big* favor?”

“What’s up?” Ana asked.

“Think you could grab dinner out somewhere?”

“You must have been reading my mind. I’m still in Lafourche Parish and was going to call and tell you not to wait on me,” she answered. “I do have a lot to share with you and Jerome though, but I want to do it in person.”

“Good news, I hope.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it news, but it will shed some light on what’s been going on all these years with dear Uncle Bart.”

“Sounds juicy.”

“It is. Anyway, don’t worry about me busting up any romantic notions you’ve got, Cuz,” Ana laughed, just before she blew the horn at someone.

“Don’t wreck my car, Ana.”

“Oh, hush, I’m not going to wreck your precious car.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to you later then.”

“Sure thing, Jason. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Jason had everything ready. He had gone shopping and stocked the house with groceries. He had menus planned out for the next five days. He was going to make sure that Jerome was well fed.

The door opened and Jerome walked in, covered in grey dust, the whites of his eyes looking even whiter in contrast.

Jason grabbed a beer out of the fridge and handed it to Jerome.

“Um... thanks, boy,” he said gruffly, continuing down the hall towards his bedroom.

As soon as Jason heard the shower start, he turned on the broiler. When the shower shut off, he put the oysters in the oven and pulled out the savory scallop and shrimp torte. Then he tossed the salad and put it on the table.

Jason could feel, before he smelled, Jerome come up behind him. Without looking, he asked, "Are you hungry, Sir?"

"I could eat I guess," Jerome mumbled.

"Have a seat then, Sir. Start on the salad. I'll be right there."

Jerome mumbled something that Jason didn't quite catch.

"Pardon me, Sir?" He asked, thinking back to what Marie had told him that afternoon.

"Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself," Jerome answered, embarrassed. He reached for the salad and started eating.

Jason walked out with two steaming plates. He set one down in front of Jerome and the other where he sat.

"Where's Ana?" Jerome asked, not making eye contact.

"She's still out working on your case. She said not to wait on her."

"What's this?" Jerome asked pointing to the oysters.

"Oysters Bienville, Sir."

For the first time since coming home, Jerome looked Jason square in the eye. "How did you know?"

"Know what, Sir?" Jason asked innocently, before taking a bite of his salad.

"Never mind," Jerome huffed. Then he took one of the oysters, blew on it slightly and put it in his mouth. His eyes closed as he slowly chewed.

"Is that okay, Sir?" Jason knew it was, just as he knew that this was one of Jerome's favorites. He'd found a small notebook full of recipes in one of the cabinets and it had little stars next to each, rating them. It didn't take long to figure out that the five star ones were Jerome's favorites. Of course it had to have been Toby's notebook.

"It's very good, boy." Jerome looked up, an almost imperceptible smile on his face.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it, Sir.” Jason flashed a big smile back.

When both were finished, Jerome started to get up.

“Oh, uh, Sir, we’re not done yet,” Jason said, picking up the plates then taking them to the kitchen.

Grabbing Jerome another beer, he came back with the main course. “Scallops and shrimp torte,” Jason said as he set the plate down.

Jerome breathed deeply of the smell rising up from the plate then dug in. He didn’t lift his head until his plate was clean.

“That was excellent, Jason.”

Jason just sat there, stunned. He couldn’t remember Jerome using his name except that first time, when he had gotten it wrong.

“I’m glad that you liked it, Sir,” Jason said softly. “Would you care for some coffee, Sir?”

“No, it’s too fucking hot for coffee,” Jerome grouched.

“Then I have just the thing, Sir.”

Jason took the dinner plates away and in a few moments came back with two bowls of vanilla ice cream with berries on top.

“Um, thanks, boy,” Jerome said, clearly surprised.

Jason was surprised himself when he saw Jerome actually pick up the bowl and lick it clean.

“Boy, you keep feeding me like this and I’m going to get fat.”

“I doubt that, Sir. You work too hard, and I sincerely doubt you could get fat.”

“Yeah, but I don’t wanna push it neither,” Jerome said leaning back and rubbing his full stomach.

“Sir, can we talk about this morning, please, Sir?”

Jerome visibly stiffened. It was as if a wall fell down in front of him.

“Nothin’ to talk about,” he said standing up.

“I would like to explain my actions please, Sir,” Jason said, quickly getting up and picking up the bowls.

Jerome turned, an odd look on his face that Jason was unable to read. "If you have to, then fucking get it over with!"

Jason explained how he woke up to find Jerome humping him. Jerome turned beet red, then chugged his beer and turned to get another one.

Then Jason explained that he was only trying to service his new Sir. When he was finished, he just stood there, hands behind his back, head bowed. "If you feel you need to punish me, Sir, I understand and I'll take that punishment."

"I'm not going to punish you," Jerome said, sighing. "Maybe I overreacted a little. Just don't do it again."

"Yes, Sir," Jason secretly smiled.

For the first time since Jason had arrived, Jerome flopped on the couch, put his feet on the coffee table and turned on the TV. After Jason finished cleaning up the dinner dishes, he sat close by Jerome on the floor. They both stayed that way until it was time for bed.

When it was time to turn in, they each brushed their teeth, climbed into bed, said good night and repeated the routine from the previous two nights, with Jerome as far from Jason as he could get. Again, in the early hours of the morning, Jason woke up with Jerome curled up behind him, holding him. He smiled to himself, knowing what would be happening soon.

Jason didn't have to wait long. Jerome started his humping session, his large, callused hand slipping down to hold Jason's hip. Jason shifted around a bit until he was able to trap Jerome's hard dick between his thighs again. Jerome moaned in his sleep while nuzzling Jason's neck.

Jerome's dick was sliding easily between Jason's thighs now, his precum having lubed the area. When Jerome shifted slightly it started jabbing Jason right behind his balls, one of his erogenous zones. He was becoming more and more turned on as the ring of Jerome's Prince Albert rubbed that sensitive spot just behind his balls. Jason's own dick was leaking profusely as it bobbed abstractly under the covers.

Jason could feel when Jerome's breath against his neck became ragged. He waited, wondering if he would stop as he had the night before. Jason

didn't have to wait long for the answer. Jerome's grip on his hip tightened, he grunted, and Jason could feel Jerome's cock pumping out a load, smearing his thighs with his scalding hot cum. Jason smiled to himself. Jerome jerked awake and jumped backwards out of bed.

"Goddamn it, boy!"

Jason casually pushed back the covers, exposing his own hard dick as he got up. Jerome's load of cum was running down the inside of his thighs as he turned to face him.

"Didn't I tell you about this shit?" Jerome snarled.

"Sir, I did nothing. I was only laying there, Sir," Jason responded, before walking to the bathroom to clean himself off.

Jason stood at the sink in the bathroom waiting for the hot water, smiling. He wiped his legs, rinsed the cloth well, and then wet it again. He walked back into the bedroom, the warm washcloth in hand. Jerome was sitting on the edge of the bed, his head in hands that were propped up on his knees.

Jason dropped to his knees in front of Jerome. "Sir?"

Jerome looked up. He was clearly embarrassed. The look in his eyes caused a little start in Jason's chest. There was pure misery there.

"May I, Sir?" Jason asked gently, holding up the cloth.

Jerome only nodded, leaning back on the bed. Jason took the warm cloth and proceeded to clean Jerome's flaccid dick, which was still somewhat extended from the recent event. Jason wrapped the warm cloth around the appendage, cleaning it gently. He peeled the foreskin back and wiped the sensitive head clean. When he squeezed gently, a thick glob of cum oozed out of the small slit. He wiped it away, although he would have preferred licking it off.

Jason set the cloth aside and laid his head on Jerome's muscular, hairy thigh. He heard Jerome take a deep breath and hold it for a moment.

"Sir, I'm a good listener," Jason all but whispered.

Jerome didn't say anything. They sat that way for several minutes, neither saying a word. When it was obvious that Jerome wasn't going to

speaking, Jason got up and went to the kitchen. He'd heard the coffee maker start from when he had set the timer the night before. He poured each of them a cup of coffee. When he returned to the bedroom, Jerome was sitting just as Jason had left him. He handed Jerome the cup of coffee and knelt between his legs again, resting his chin on Jerome's knee.

Their peaceful interaction was interrupted when they heard Ana come in. It was painfully obvious that she was trying to be quiet, but she bumped into something and let out a stream of whispered curse words. Jerome was about to push Jason away, but Jason motioned for him to be quiet and smiled. They continued sitting there, listening as Ana tried to go up the stairs quietly.

Jason couldn't hold it in any longer. When he heard Ana moving upstairs, he started giggling. With some effort, he pulled himself together somewhat to look up at Jerome. He also had a smirky smile on his face too.

Jason stood up and offered his hand to Jerome, who took it. He pulled the older man to his feet. Without a word they both got dressed for the day, each in their work clothes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ana was sitting at the breakfast bar in the kitchen when Jerome and Jason got back home that afternoon. There were papers spread out all over as she made notes on a legal pad. She had also opened a bottle of red wine.

“Starting a little early aren’t you there, Cuz?” Jason greeted her, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

Jerome stood on the other side of the counter from her, leaning on his hands. “How’s your little tootsies?” he asked, his face blank.

Ana’s mouth opened and shut several times but nothing came out. Jason chuckled as he handed Jerome a beer.

Jason came to her rescue. “Don’t worry, we were already awake.”

Ana scowled at Jerome. “Not *even* funny. I was *trying* to be quiet.”

Jerome only grunted in response before taking a long draw on his beer. Turning, he grumbled something about taking a shower then left the room.

“I swear I don’t see how you put up with him, Jason.”

“Ana, if you knew what I knew, you’d forgive him a lot too.”

“If you say so,” Ana said, her lips pursed. “Anyway, I’ve got a lot of information to go through. I need to ask Jerome a few questions to clarify a few details.”

“Can’t wait to hear what you’ve found out,” Jason said as he started dinner.

Jerome came back all showered. He was wearing a pair of Levi’s cut-offs and one of what seemed to be an endless supply of muscle shirts.

“My turn,” Jason said.

Jerome stood at the counter looking at Ana, a fresh beer in his hand.

Annoyed, Ana looked up. “What?”

“Why are you doing all this?” Jerome indicated all the work in front of her.

“Because Jason asked me to?” Ana asked, as if it was obvious.

“You always do what Jason asks?”

Ana put her pen down, picked up her wine glass, drained it and poured more.

“Of course not, but Jason is special. He never asks for anything unless he really needs it, Jerome. He must see something in you to have asked for my help. Something no one else seems to see,” Ana said a little snarky.

Ana saw a slight flush rise on Jerome’s cheeks.

“Besides, I think I have found out some things that may also be beneficial to me,” Ana added, then winked at Jerome.

“What in the hell could any of my family’s crap do to benefit you?”

“I’ll tell you when Jason gets back. He’ll want to hear this too.”

“Hear what?” Jason asked, walking back into the kitchen.

“Jason! What have you done?” Ana gasped.

“What?” Jason asked looking down at himself. He had on a pair of running shorts and nothing else.

“Your chest? It’s... you’ve shaved it... and it’s all red!” Ana looked alarmed.

Jason chuckled a bit. “Before I left Arizona they gave me a shaving ceremony, kind of a ritual there. Unfortunately, neither they nor I knew of the consequences of doing that before helping Jerome out in the shop.”

Jerome chuckled a bit.

“You think that’s funny?” Ana asked angrily. “Look at him!”

“It isn’t as serious as it looks, Ana,” Jason tried to soothe her. “Part of the redness is because I just got out of the shower. Trust me, it’s better than it was the first few days. Besides, my hair is starting to grow back.”

Ana looked between the two men, then settled her glare on Jerome.

Jerome threw his hands up. “I had nothing to do with it.”

“Come on, Ana, tell us what you’ve found out,” Jason said, changing the subject as he continued with dinner.

“The first thing I found out is that your cousin,” Ana said to Jerome, “is one fine piece of work. It seems he raped one of the parish clerks in Lafourche.”

“He what?” Jerome all but yelled.

“I’ll tell you quickly, but it has no bearing on your case,” Ana stated. “I was looking through this ancient microfiche, somewhat hidden by a large filing cabinet, when your cousin David and, get this, *Charles*, came in. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw this clerk go completely white and basically turn into a statue. I knew something was up then. Anyway, they were there to file documents dealing with getting permits for a shipping company to start shipping internationally.

“They seemed in fine spirits, which always makes me suspicious with Charles, that snake.” Ana drained her glass again and refilled it. “As soon as they left, the clerk ran out of the room. I had a feeling she was going to the ladies room and I was right. I followed her and found her in there crying her eyes out. It took a few minutes, but I finally got her story out of her. She said that one night late last year David walked her to her minivan after work. It was raining and she didn’t have an umbrella. He forced her into the van and did the deed.”

“Why did she not report it then?” Jason asked, as he put a salad on the table.

“He threatened her,” Ana answered. “It appears he has quite a bit of power in that parish, and from what I’ve gathered, both Uncle Bart and Cousin David control the docks, the trucking *and* the local shipping company there, which they are prepping to take international.”

“That asshole!” Jerome spat.

“Anyway, that is where I was last night. I stayed with Rebecca and her two kids,” Ana said, moving to the table. “She was a wealth of information.”

“Not Rebecca Durrand?” Jerome asked surprised.

“Her last name is Stapleton,” Ana answered.

“Oh, yeah, that’s her married name. I knew her as Durrand, her maiden

name,” Jerome snarled angrily. “How could anyone hurt her like that? She was always so timid anyway.”

“How do you know her, Jerome?” Ana asked, as Jason set plates in front of them.

“I don’t know her so much as I know her mother,” Jerome replied, as he took a bite of the steak in front of him. “Her mother and I used to play together as kids when gran’daddy still lived in the old house.”

“I see,” Ana said thoughtfully. “Unfortunately, there’s nothing that can be done about the rape now. There is no evidence, and it would only be her word against his. That won’t hold any water in a court of law.”

“I’d like to wring that fucker’s neck,” Jerome growled around a piece of meat.

“Jerome... don’t do that. It scares me,” Ana frowned.

Jason laughed.

Jerome glared at both of them as he pushed a large forkful of salad into his mouth.

“So what else did you find out that is pertinent to the case?” Jason asked.

“The main shipping firm that operates out of the port is A&F Shipping. They control most of the cargo ships that come in, the trucking company that services the port, and somehow have been able to block most other shippers from using that dock, which in itself is highly suspicious.”

“Why would that be so suspicious?” Jason asked.

“Because the more shipping that comes into that dock, the more money dear ol’ Uncle Bart would make. Now why would he turn down money?” Ana asked. “From everything I found out about this man, he is not one to turn down money.”

Jerome snorted. “You got that right.”

“I see what you mean,” Jason added.

“I gave this information to Diane as well,” Ana informed them. “Right off the bat, she learned that they are working with another shipping

company, which it turns out they also own, but that information is buried pretty deeply. You have to really go looking to find any connection. This other company does a lot of shipping in and out of Mexico.”

“Mexico?” Jerome asked looking puzzled.

“Yup. And guess what the number one export from Mexico is? Drugs!” Ana informed him. “Not a legal export, but the biggest one. Of course all the manifests say produce, which is widely ignored because of NAFTA.”

“Christ on a cross,” Jerome said, shaking his head.

“Here is where it gets fun...” Ana started taking a bite of her steak. “*If*, and it’s a pretty big if, but *if* Charles has any inkling as to what they are up to, he also can be held accountable. Knowing Charles the way I do, he is up to his neck in this thing. He is one greedy son of a bitch.”

“Am I missing something here?” Jason asked. “Don’t you have to have *proof* that they are importing something illegal?”

“Of course,” Anna scowled at him like he was dense. “That is where Jerome comes in. I didn’t know that you knew Rebecca, but now it makes things much easier.”

“How?” Jerome asked.

“The one hold that David has over Rebecca is that her husband works for the shipping company,” Ana said, as if it made perfect sense.

“Okay, what am I missing here?” Jerome all but growled, looking impatient.

“We just need to convince the husband to find out what, and or when, they are doing something illegal, and then we’ve got them.” Ana smiled sweetly, munching on her salad.

“Is it really that easy?” Jason asked.

“Listen, I’m pretty sure I’ve got them dead to rights on the property issue. That alone will, at the very least, get Uncle Bart some serious jail time. Then, Jerome will be able to take back what is rightfully his and receive any money that was made during that time *plus* some!” Ana looked pleased with herself. “Unless dear Uncle Bart has some hidden accounts we

don't know about yet, which I suspect that he does, that will more than likely wipe him out. However, it would also mean that David will get off free and clear."

"Can't we be happy with that?" Jason asked.

"That's the rub here, Cuz," Ana said. "If Jerome takes over the port, then this becomes *his* problem and then he can be held liable for the crimes as well."

"I see," Jerome said, pondering everything that Ana had said. "So if I can convince Rebecca's husband to spy for us and he comes up with something, then what happens?"

"We all win," Ana smiled brightly. "Uncle Bart goes to jail. Cousin David goes to jail. And the property is returned to you along with all the assets."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jerome and Jason got ready for bed. Each man crawled in, both grateful to finally be horizontal.

“Night,” Jerome muttered as he turned off the light.

Again, he turned his back to Jason, hugging his side of the bed.

“Sir?” Jason asked quietly.

“What?” Jerome grumbled.

“Isn’t this a bit ridiculous?”

Jerome sat up, turning to look at Jason. “What the fuck do you want from me? Want me to spank you and then fuck you senseless?”

“That would be a good start,” Jason answered casually.

Jerome sat there with his mouth hanging open.

“I mean seriously, you’re going to end up snuggled up behind me, so why not do it consciously this time?” Jason asked quietly, still lying down.

Jerome got out of bed. From the dim lights streaming in from the street outside, Jason could see him, his fists clenched and his jaw tight. Jason pushed the bed covering back, rolled over onto his stomach, pushed his butt into the air and smiled. He was hoping that Jerome could see his smile.

“You little fucker, you think you want to be spanked? Huh?” Jerome snarled. “Come on then, I’ll warm up that ass of yours.” He sat down on the edge of the bed, his back to Jason.

Jason scrambled across the bed to where Jerome indicated his lap. Jason, his dick already fully erect and beginning to leak, laid across Jerome’s lap, his cock jutting down into the air between Jerome’s thick legs. Jason had barely gotten settled when he received the first swat. It was much harder than he expected, and the sound echoed through the room.

“That what you want, boy? Huh?” Jerome swatted the other cheek just as forcefully.

“Sir, yes, Sir! May I have another, Sir?”

Another hard slap hit Jason’s already stinging right buttock.

“Sir, thank you, Sir! May I have another?”

Jason kept asking for more until there were tears streaming down his face and his ass was stinging. When he started to sob and quit asking for more, Jerome used his strong arms to turn him over and cradled Jason, stroking his head.

Jason hiccupped and looked up into Jerome’s eyes. “Thank you, Sir. I really needed that.”

Jerome smiled gently, shocking Jason with the tenderness that he could see in his face. “I guess I’ve forgotten what a boy needs sometimes. I’m sorry if I’ve been a bit selfish. I’ll try and do better by you, Boy.”

Jason could not have been more shocked.

“Why don’t we get some sleep?” Jerome suggested.

“Yes, Sir,” Jason smiled, his tears already drying on his cheeks.

This time when they got into bed, Jerome turned towards Jason, pulling him into his arms, spooning behind him. Jason squirmed a little as he adjusted his sore ass, then sighed contentedly and quickly fell asleep.

Jason smiled sleepily as he woke up to Jerome’s persistent dick poking him in the ass, in the early dawn hours. This time though, he was prepared. Stretching, he leaned over the bed to where he had stashed a bottle of lube. Popping the top open, getting some of the slick in his palm, he reached behind and took Jerome’s semihard dick in his hand, coating it as it grew to full hardness. He squeezed out a little more lube and coated his hole. Arching his back, he positioned Jerome and waited for nature to take its course.

Soon enough, Jerome pushed, and his dick popped through Jason’s anal opening, causing him to gasp slightly, and clench his eyes tightly. Normally he would never even have considered going bareback, but he knew for a fact that he himself was clean and he was willing to bet that Jerome was

also. He got the distinct impression from Marie that Jerome had been playing at being a monk for years now.

The shock of Jerome pushing in all the way until his balls pressed against his ass, took Jason's breath away. It felt so good, so natural, like it was a perfect fit. As usual, Jerome's hand slid down and gripped Jason's hip. He started with little pumps, barely moving his dick in and out. At the point when Jerome stopped, his hand relaxing a little, Jason knew that he was awake.

Jason held his breath, waiting to see what Jerome's reaction would be. When he pulled back, Jason was afraid that he was about to pull out completely. He was pleasantly surprised to feel Jerome pushing back in, the ring through the head of his dick scraping across that delicate gland, making Jason shiver with arousal.

"That what you want, Boy?" Jerome grunted into Jason's ear, his hand once again gripping his hip strongly.

"Sir, yes, Sir," Jason breathed softly. "Please, Sir."

Jerome pushed one of Jason's legs up as he pulled back. With a powerful thrust he slammed into Jason. There was a sharp intake of breath as Jason was filled again. Jerome pushed him over a little farther until he was halfway turned onto his belly. Jerome started finding his rhythm as he continuously banged into Jason's hot ass. Reaching up, he took one of Jason's nipples in his strong fingers and started pinching and twisting.

"Oh, yes, Sir," Jason hissed, pushing his ass back to meet Jerome's thrust.

"That what you want, *Boy*?"

"It's what I need, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

Jerome picked up the pace.

"Jack your dick, Boy. Get that nut ready," Jerome said between his teeth, as he chewed on Jason's earlobe.

"Yes, Sir," Jason obeyed. He didn't need to be asked twice. It had been over a week since he'd gotten off, and he was desperate for it.

Both men were covered in a fine sheen of sweat. Jerome's chest hair was plastered to his chest and Jason's back.

"What do you want, Boy?"

"Sir, I want you to breed my ass, Sir. Please, Sir!"

Jerome started to really pound into Jason, the ring in his dick driving Jason crazy.

"You ready, Boy? You ready to take my load?"

"Oh, Sir... Sir," Jason's leg started to twitch, his feet were flexed. "Oh, Sir, please, Sir. I'm about to..."

"Here ya go, Boy!"

A resounding slap stung Jason's tender ass as Jerome slammed into him hard, grunting as he pushed as deep as he could. Jason could feel the fat dick in his ass twitch and the warmth of the hot cum that was flooding his insides. That was enough to put him over the edge too.

"Fuck me..." Jason yelled, his ass locking down on Jerome's cock, as he pumped out his own load, making a mess on the sheet beneath him.

Jerome pushed in and out of Jason a few more times, prolonging Jason's orgasm and making him groan through the last moments of bliss.

Jerome started chewing lightly on Jason's neck, holding him tightly against his body. He didn't let go until his dick softened and fell from the warm confines of Jason's butt. Jerome rolled out of bed and padded his way into the bathroom. He returned with a warm wash cloth which he handed to Jason.

When Jason took the wet cloth, he saw what appeared to be a wicked-looking smile on Jerome's face. He rolled over before reaching back to wipe the lube and cum from his ass. A surprised gasp escaped his lips when Jerome pushed him flat, face first, onto the bed and smacked both ass cheeks again, hard.

"Ouch," Jason yelled into the pillow. The two swats on his already tender ass really smarted.

Jason rolled over and saw the sadistic grin on Jerome's face.

“Be careful what you ask for, Boy. You just might get it!”

With that, Jerome walked to the kitchen, his big dick swinging out in front of him, leaving Jason grinning from ear to ear.

They each had a cup of coffee, and then got dressed to go the shop for the day. Ana had finally come downstairs, her hair awry, still in the T-shirt that she had slept in.

“Morning,” she greeted the two men, yawning.

“Good morning, Ana,” Jason smiled broadly.

“Oh, shut up, Jason,” she grouched.

When Jerome growled at her, her eyes opened wide as she hurried around the counter away from him.

“What’s up with him?” She asked with a frown, pouring her own cup of coffee.

“I don’t know what you mean?” Jason grinned.

Ana eyed both men suspiciously.

“Anyway, we’ll see you tonight Cuz,” Jason said cheerfully as he followed Jerome to the door. “Have a good day.”

“Jason?” Ana looked at her cousin funny.

“Yeah?” Jason turned, his hand on the doorknob.

“Why are you walking so funny?” Ana smirked, thinking she’d get a rise out of Jason.

“Try shoving a huge dick up your ass and see how you walk!” Jason’s smile was as big as she’d ever seen. “Bye, Cuz, have a great day!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jerome and Jason broke for breakfast at nine, and instead of Jerome going off by himself, Jason went with him in order to open a bank account. He figured he was going to need some cash while in New Orleans, and it would make paying the taxes on Jerome's portion of the property in Lafourche Parish much easier.

Jason saw the look on Jerome's face when he asked to have twenty-thousand dollars wired into the new account from his bank in Philadelphia. He felt a little embarrassed because he knew how tight things were for Jerome.

Jerome was shocked, and more than a little pissed, when Jason dropped ten grand into his own account.

"We need for you to be able to write a check from your account for those taxes. That way Uncle Bart can't say a thing about it," Jason explained.

Jerome only nodded, his lips so tight they almost disappeared.

Several minutes later, while Jerome was getting some beignets, Jason's phone rang.

"Hey, Ana," Jason answered.

"Hey, I just got off the phone with Rebecca," she immediately started. "Is Jerome there with you?"

"Yes, he is, but he's getting beignets right now." Jason explained. "He'll be here in just a minute."

"Okay, when he gets back, put me on speaker," Ana said.

"Sure," Jason answered.

Jerome came over with a bag to where Jason was sitting in the open café area.

"It's Ana, she wants to talk to us," Jason said as he put the phone on speaker. "Okay, Ana, we're both here and you're on speaker. We're in public so keep it clean."

“Yeah... right, Jason. Hey, Jerome,” Ana was all business. “I just got off the phone with Rebecca, and Hank, her husband, is going to be off work tomorrow. Think you can make it out to Lafourche?”

“Aww hell, that means I’m going to lose a day’s work,” Jerome complained.

“Jerome, this is important remember?” Ana chided.

“Hey, this is perfect actually, Jerome,” Jason chimed in. “We can stop off and pay those taxes while we’re out there.”

“Yeah, I guess that does make sense,” Jerome said, giving in.

“You’ll have to bring my car back, Ana.”

“No she don’t, I’ve got the truck. We can go in that.”

“Okay, then that’s all set. What time do you think you can be there?” Ana asked.

Jerome and Jason looked at each other, but it was Jerome who answered. “Somewhere between nine thirty and ten.”

“Perfect, Jerome. I’ll tell them,” Ana said. “By the way, I think I’ll stay the night again out here. I’m going to do some more snooping around at the courthouse. I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

Jason disconnected the call and reached for the bag, when Jerome promptly smacked his hand away.

“What?” Jason almost whined.

“Wait until we get back to the shop,” Jerome gruffed as he stood up.

“You ol’ meanie,” Jason pouted.

Jerome laughed heartily. It was a joyful noise to Jason, one he hoped to hear more and more often.

As they were walking back, Jason commented, “At least going to Lafourche tomorrow will kill two birds with one stone.”

“How you figure?” Jerome asked.

“You can take care of the business with Ana first, and then we can go take care of the taxes,” Jason explained, reiterating the point of getting the taxes taken care of.

Instantly, Jerome got quiet and his face tightened back up. Jason decided to let it go for now. As they turned the corner heading back to the shop, things went from bad to worse real quick.

“Awww, fuck,” Jerome gritted out.

Jason looked down the street to the car parked in front of the shop and knew, without being told, who it was: Uncle Bart and his rapist son, David.

“Let me handle this, Jerome,” Jason spoke softly. “Just go into the shop. Don’t say a word to them.”

Jerome looked at Jason, his face relaxed a bit, and he nodded okay.

As they approached, Jerome did exactly what Jason had told him to do. When Uncle Bart and David started to follow him inside the shop, Jason stood in front of the door, not allowing them entrance.

“Get outta my way, boy,” Uncle Bart commanded.

“I am representing Mr. Fontaine, sir, so you will deal with me and me only,” Jason said calmly.

“I had you checked out, and you don’t have a license to practice here,” David sneered.

“Ah, but I do have a proxy with a firm here who does have a license and who will be filing any documents that I deem need to be filed. So gentlemen, to what do I owe this unexpected and unneeded visit?” Jason asked, folding his arms across his chest.

“I said stand aside,” Uncle Bart tried to push past.

“Sir, if you insist on pushing this issue, I will have no other choice but to call the police and inform them that you are committing assault,” Jason stated firmly, pulling out his cell phone.

Uncle Bart raised his cane as if to strike Jason, but David held him back.

“Again, I will ask, what business do you have here?”

“We came to get Jerome’s signature on these documents,” David said, patting the inner pocket of his suit and smiling snidely.

“Not going to happen,” Jason reiterated. “I guess you gentlemen have wasted your time.”

“Boy, you have no idea who you’re dealing with,” Uncle Bart started.

“Oh, but I do, Mr. Fontaine,” Jason said smugly, as he looked down his nose at the shorter man. “I know all about both of you, and I must say, I’m not impressed.”

“Why you!” Uncle Bart started forward, his cane raised again.

Jason didn’t even flinch. “Is there anything else?” he asked.

When neither of the men said anything, Jason followed up, “Then I will bid you good day, gentlemen.”

He turned on his heel, walked into the shop, then closed and locked the door.

Jason hadn’t even rounded the corner when he ran into Jerome, who was grinning from ear to ear.

“‘I’m not impressed’, oh, that was priceless. The look on Uncle Bart’s face was...just priceless. I don’t know any other word to use,” Jerome laughed.

“You saw *and* heard, I take it?” Jason smiled.

“Yeah, that air vent over the door is open and I could see out if I stood just to the side. With it being dark inside, no one can see in,” Jerome explained.

“So I’m assuming that you’re okay with the way I handled your Uncle Bart and Cousin David, Sir?”

“Oh, hell yeah!”

Jerome grabbed Jason in a big bear hug, shocking the hell out of him, and lifted him off his feet.

“That was sooo worth it,” Jerome said, putting Jason back on the floor.

“What was it worth, Sir?” Jason asked, not following.

Jerome turned somber. “Taking your money.”

“It’s a loan Sir, just a loan. Pretty soon you’ll have money of your own and then you can pay me back,” Jason reminded him. “Remember, Ana is going to draw up that promissory note?”

“Yeah, I know, but it still doesn’t make it any easier to swallow,” Jerome added. “But what you just did with that ol’ asshole did my heart good. I’m taking you out to dinner tonight.” Jerome beamed. “Where ya wanna go?”

“No brainer,” Jason smiled. “Marie’s.”

Jason was on his knees laying out the cross pieces to the fence they were working on. Jerome walked over and corrected him on a piece, having him turn it the other way.

“You see the pattern there,” Jerome pointed out, using the toe of his boot to indicate the pieces he was talking about.

When he did that, his crotch was only inches from the side of Jason’s face. Jason could again feel the heat that came from the man’s groin area. He turned his head and could see the outline of Jerome’s dick, hanging to the left. He took a deep breath smelling Jerome’s scent, unconsciously licking his lips.

“Boy, you payin’ attention to me or just dog sniffin’ my dick?”

“Sorry, Sir. I can’t help it,” Jason blushed at being caught.

“Damn, you like my dick that much?” Jerome actually seemed surprised.

“Oh, yes, Sir, I do, Sir.”

Jerome started to step back, but stopped. He seemed to be thinking. “What do you want, Boy?” Jerome’s voice was low, sounding so sexy to Jason.

Jason looked up into Jerome’s eyes. “Sir, I would like it if you would fuck my face, right here, right now... Sir.”

Jerome’s eyes seemed to fog over and the heat index went up all around him. He put his hands behind his head, his furry wet pits exposed, biceps bulged.

“If’n you want it, Boy, get it out.” Jerome’s voice was even lower, deeper, making Jason’s insides vibrate.

Jason wasted no time. He quickly undid Jerome's belt and popped the buttons of his 501's. Jerome's dense pubic bush and the thick root of his cock came into view. Again, without even realizing he did it, Jason licked his lips. Taking Jerome's jeans in his hands, he pulled them down, almost to his knees, exposing Jerome's cock and low hanging balls. Jason reached for the object of his lust.

"I said get it out, I didn't say nothin' 'bout touchin', did I?"

Jason frowned, "No, Sir."

"Open your mouth, Boy."

Jason did as he was told. Jerome stood on tiptoe letting his dick lay across Jason's bottom lip then pushed it slowly into his waiting mouth.

"You keep them hands of yours to your sides, Boy," Jerome growled.

Jason didn't answer verbally, only nodded once in understanding.

Jerome took Jason's head in both of his big hands and slowly rocked back and forth gradually feeding Jason a bit at a time. Jason groaned as his mouth was used. He found the musky smell of Jerome's sweaty crotch both heady and intoxicating.

"Is this what you wanted, Boy?" Jerome asked, pushing more of his now fully erect dick into Jason.

"Mmm-mmm," was all that Jason could utter, the sound vibrating around the cock in his mouth.

"You do have a hot mouth, Boy," Jerome huffed, his head thrown back, enjoying the sensations of Jason's lips wrapped around him.

Jerome took his time, not letting Jason have all of it at once, just letting Jason get it spit-slicked little by little. After what seemed an eternity to Jason, he finally felt the ring tickle the entrance to his throat.

"You ready for all of it, Boy?"

Jason moaned his assent.

Jerome pushed his thick dick in, causing Jason to gag. Pulling back, "Boy, I thought you said you was ready?"

He pushed his entire length in again. This time Jason opened his throat and took it all.

“Ahhh, there ya go, Boy. Take it.”

Jerome started to pick up the pace, face fucking Jason. Jason moaned as a little spittle started to drool from his mouth. He had to move his hand to adjust his own cock, which was bent down painfully, being held in place by the jock.

“Boy, I told you to keep your hands down!” Jerome ordered forcefully.

Jason could only whine slightly as he obeyed.

Soon, Jerome was banging away, really using Jason, skull fucking him, and none too gently. His heavy balls began to draw up close to his body. Holding Jason tightly by the ears now, Jerome bucked, then froze.

“Ahhh fuck, Boy. Here it comes,” Jerome said through his gritted teeth, eyes closed, head back.

He pushed deep, his first shot going directly down Jason’s throat, causing him to gag slightly. Jerome pulled back a bit, using short thrusts as he emptied himself, his hot cum blasting the inside of Jason’s mouth.

“Oh, fuck, Boy,” Jerome moaned as he stopped.

Jason started sucking, using the tip of his tongue to glide under the partially retracted foreskin, teasing the ring with his teeth. Jerome flinched from the attention on his now overly sensitive dick head. Not being able to take anymore, he pulled out of Jason’s mouth. The spittle on his chin now mixed with a little of the cum that had escaped his mouth. Jerome leaned forward and scraped the combination of spittle and cum from Jason’s chin and fed it back to him. Jason sucked on the thick fingers eagerly.

Jerome took a short step back; his bunched up jeans not letting him step much further. He looked at Jason on his knees, his face flushed, his legs spread wide, and at the strained fabric covering his crotch where he could see a small wet spot where all the seams of his jeans met at the crotch.

Smiling, Jerome asked, “Boy, your dick hard?”

“Yes, Sir, it is.”

“You wanna get off?”

“Oh, yes, Sir. Please Sir?” Jason pleaded.

“Too fucking bad. You’ll just have to wait,” Jerome chuckled as Jason whined again.

Jerome’s face turned serious. He pulled up his jeans, adjusted himself, buttoned and then buckled up. He reached down and grabbed Jason by the ear forcing him to stand up painfully. Looking into Jason’s eyes, his hand still holding his ear, he studied him closely for a full minute.

“Is that what you wanted, Jason? You wantin’ this kind of relationship with me?”

“Yes, Sir,” Jason answered without hesitation.

“I want you to think on that some more,” Jerome ordered quietly. “I’m a mean son of a bitch. I’m not easy to be around; I know that. I like things *my* way, which oftentimes can be rough. I’ll be the first one to admit I’ve got a lot of baggage I’m lugging around.” Jerome paused, still looking into Jason’s eyes intently. “You still think you want to be in my bed?”

“Yes, Sir. More than anything, Sir,” Jason answered again with no apparent indecision.

“You do know that this is not what I wanted, or what I wanted you for, don’t you?” Jerome asked, his head cocked a little to the side. “Hell, I didn’t ask for you at all. This was all Sampson’s idea.”

“Yes, Sir, I know, Sir.” Jason seemed sad all of a sudden.

“Speak, Boy. Tell me what’s goin’ on in that head of yours.”

“Sir, I fully understood from the start that you weren’t looking for a relationship of any kind. I was told that you needed a helper, and that it was purely for physical labor. That is what I felt I needed too, Sir. I *needed* to work with my hands.” Jason looked down, even though Jerome still held on to his ear. “I needed to be able to get out of my own head, at least for a while, Sir.”

“What happened then?” Jerome was very curious.

“Sir, I’m a pretty good judge of people, Sir.” Jason looked back up, into Jerome’s eyes. “I think you are a good man. I know all about baggage, Sir. I

have my own to deal with.” Jason’s eyes became shiny. “You don’t know how much you have helped me already.”

“I’ve helped you?” Jerome’s eyes went wide with surprise.

“Yes, Sir, you have, Sir.” Jason smiled slightly. “You’ve given me a purpose again. I love working in the shop with my hands. My head is clearer now... more than I’ve ever known, Sir. I enjoy being round you, and if I may, Sir... I think you are one of the hottest men I’ve ever known.”

“Jason, I can’t promise you anything,” Jerome said as he let go of Jason’s ear. “I don’t want to lead you on or let you think that there is anything remotely permanent here. Understand?”

“Yes, Sir, I understand,” Jason answered.

“Okay, then we’ll play this by ear, Boy.”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir,” Jason smiled widely.

“Boy?”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Your dick still hard?”

“Yes, Sir, pretty much, Sir.”

“Good,” Jerome said almost flatly as he walked away.

“Sir?”

“Yes, Boy?” Jerome stopped and turned to face Jason.

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re a sadistic son of a bitch?”

Jerome chuckled. “Yep, more times than I care to remember.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“There’s my favorite boy,” Marie greeted the two men as they walked in. “Y’all sits here,” Marie said, pulling out a chair at a table in front of the window.

“You’re too good to me, Marie,” Jerome said.

A frown crossed Marie’s face. “Did you thinks I was a talkin’ ’bout you, Jerome? Naw, I was a talkin’ ’bout this sweet boy heres,” Marie said as she pinched Jason’s cheek.

“Yeah, and I love you too, Marie,” Jerome scowled, as he sat opposite Jason.

“Now, Jerome, you knows I loves you jes ’bout as much as I loves my bes’ house shoes!”

“Wow, I rank right up there,” Jerome said shaking his head.

Jason was laughing and smiling at the good natured banter between the two old friends.

“Marie, may we have two beers please?” Jason asked, smiling.

“Honey, of cou’se you kin,” Marie clucked.

“Seems like you’ve made a new best friend,” Jerome chuckled after Marie left.

“We have something in common that we both care about,” Jason said, glancing down at the menu.

“Oh? What’s that?” Jerome asked, leaning on his menu, having already decided on what he wanted.

Jason looked up. “You.”

Jerome’s mouth opened and closed a few times, then shut tight.

“Here’s ya go now,” Marie said as she set the two beers in frosty mugs down on the table. “What ch’alls in the mood fer?”

“Ooo, how about some oysters, Sir?” Jason asked, his eyes twinkling.

"If that's what you want, then sure. You heard the man, Marie," Jerome smiled.

Marie looked really closely at Jerome. She bent over and took his chin in her hand, turning his head first one way and then the other. "You's sick, Jerome?"

"No, why?"

"'Cause you jes smiled an' yo face didn' break," Marie replied seriously.

Jason busted out laughing all over again.

"Get off me, woman," Jerome pushed her hand away, scowling again.

"Yeah, tha's still yous in there," she said shaking her head.

"What else y'all wantin'?"

"You always do right by me, Marie, so you pick for me," Jason smiled as he handed back the menu.

"Marie, did Antoine make any dirty beans and rice today?"

"Shore 'nuff," Marie answered Jerome.

"I'll have some of that and some grilled shrimp," Jerome added.

"And...?" Marie asked, her hands on her hips.

Jerome huffed. "*Please?*"

"Yes, baby, I'll gits it fer you," Marie smiled mischievously, then patted Jerome's head just before she left.

"You know, Sir, if anyone wanted a go at you, they'd have to go through Marie first, and that's something I know I wouldn't want to do."

Jerome blushed slightly. "Yeah, well I think she's got a new favorite now."

Ant came over with the butcher's paper and spread it out on the table. He smiled at both men, but didn't say anything. In a few minutes he was back with the customary yellow bucket of oysters.

Now that Jason knew how to *shuck* an oyster, he kept up with Jerome oyster for oyster. Jason still wasn't adventurous enough to use the hot sauce

however, which Jerome took great delight in teasing him about. When their entrees arrived, Marie once again was able to give Jason something which instantly became his new favorite.

When Jerome got up to speak to a woman at another table who had been a friend of his father's, Marie was on Jason like a duck on a June bug.

"What'cha gone an' done to Jerome? I ain't seen him smile in I don't knows how long?"

"I took yours and my cousin's advice," Jason smiled.

"I didn't give you no a'vice," Marie said with her eyebrows raised.

"You did inadvertently."

"Wha'd I say?"

"You told me to stand my ground and not put up with his shit."

"You did tha'?" Marie looked shocked.

"Yep, pretty much," Jason smiled.

"An' wha' yo cousin say?"

"She said to take the bull by the horns."

"Hmm, I's gonna likes this cousin."

"I think that she'll like you too, Marie." Jason took Marie's hand in his. "I'll make sure to bring her in soon."

"She live here?" Marie looked surprised all over again.

"No, but she is here working for a while."

"Yes, Lord. Bes' bring that gal on in heres then," Marie patted Jason's hand. "I needs to git on back ta work, baby. Holler now if'n you need sumpthin'."

"I will, Marie."

"An' you jes keep on doin' what you's been a doin', sugah. I ain't seen Jerome happy in a long time now, an' he deserves to be. He's a good man."

"I know, Marie, I know."

“It was nice of Marie to send us home with pecan pie,” Jason said, as he put the doggie bag on the counter.

“She knows it’s one of my favorites,” Jerome said, then yawned.

“You want yours now, Sir?”

“No, I’m full. I think I’ll have mine for breakfast.”

“Breakfast?” Jason looked at Jerome like he was crazy.

“You sure don’t say anything about them beignets you been wolfin’ down every mornin’!”

“True,” Jason laughed as he followed Jerome into the bedroom.

Jerome lowered himself, then fell backwards on the bed. “I’m tired,” he stated, looking at the ceiling.

“We worked hard today, Sir” Jason said as he knelt in front of Jerome, starting to remove his shoes.

“Had to, since we’re basically losing tomorrow. We’re almost caught up, but not quite.”

Since Jerome didn’t say anything about Jason taking off his shoes, Jason decided to see how far he could go. Leaning forward he unbuckled Jerome’s belt.

“Boy, what are you doin’?” Jerome asked, but didn’t move.

“Just helping you get undressed, Sir. Making you more comfortable.”

“Yeah, right,” Jerome scoffed. “Why do I have the feelin’ that you have somethin’ else in mind?”

“I don’t know what you mean, Sir,” Jason grinned.

“Just you remember, I’m an old man. After this afternoon...”

Jason ignored him as he tugged off his pants, then his socks; leaving Jerome reclined on the bed wearing only a T-shirt.

Beginning with Jerome’s left foot, Jason started to massage, working his way up the thick calf. Jerome moaned in pleasure, his crossed arms covering his eyes. Jason switched to the other leg, giving it the same treatment all the way to the knee. With one hand on each of Jerome’s hairy

legs, he massaged the bulging quadriceps next, moving closer to his crotch. When Jason's hands moved to the insides of his thighs, he saw Jerome's large uncut dick twitch and start to elongate.

Jason smiled as he rubbed closer, deliberately getting close but not touching the low hanging balls or the quickly thickening cock. Instead, he massaged Jerome's hips, then all around the pubic area, watching as Jerome became fully erect.

Jerome growled low in his throat, but Jason cut the sound off by swallowing Jerome's dick almost to the root. The growl turned into a mix between a groan and a gurgle, as if Jerome was gargling. Jerome's big hands went to either side of Jason's head guiding him up and down.

"Boy, you sure suck a mean dick," Jerome groaned, thrusting his hips up to meet Jason's mouth.

Jason worked Jerome's cock, locking down around the head with his throat muscles, the ring tickling the back of his throat. He pulled completely off when the heavy balls started to draw up, and stood. Jerome opened his eyes, wondering what the hell was going on.

His eyes burned then turned smoky while he watched Jason remove his shirt. The now darker shadow of his chest hair made his pink nipples stand out in contrast. Fully aware that Jerome was watching him intently, Jason slowly undid his jeans, teasing him. He let the heavy denim drop, leaving him standing there wearing only a jock and socks. Jason's own large cock was obviously hard, angled to the left, a wet spot visible where the tip of the head was outlined against the jock. There was a low rumble in Jerome's chest.

Jason hooked his thumbs into the waistband of the jock and teased, slowly pushing it down. He deliberately slid the back off first, saving his cock and balls for last. As he stepped out of the jock, he was about to toss it over with his jeans when Jerome held his hand out for it. Jason tossed the jock to Jerome, who brought it up to his nose, inhaling deeply. His eyes never left Jason's as he took his time, savoring the scent. Jason shuddered as he watched.

Jerome reached down and gripped his dick, aiming it towards the

ceiling. “You want this, Boy?” His voice was slightly muffled by the jock covering his mouth.

Jason could only nod before he ran around to the other side of the bed to get the lube he had stashed there. Coming back, he poured some of the slick silicone over Jerome’s dick. He climbed onto the bed, straddled Jerome’s cock and sat down quickly, taking it all in one lunge. He clenched his eyes tight, his mouth open in a silent scream. The blinding flash of exquisite pain was exactly what he wanted.

Jerome moaned, his hands gripping Jason’s hips hard. Neither man moved, relishing the erotic feeling that each were experiencing.

When Jason opened his eyes, he looked at Jerome, the jock now lying forgotten on the bed beside him. Jason started to rock back and forth, his head falling back, exposing his throat and the heavy five o’clock shadow there. The same shadow could now be seen spreading across his chest and abdomen.

“Ahhh, *fuck*,” Jason moaned, as he ground his ass across Jerome’s pubic bone.

Jerome pushed and pulled Jason’s hips in a grasp that was hard enough to leave bruises. “Christ on a cross, your ass is hot.”

Jason flattened his hands on Jerome’s fur-covered chest then rose up and sat back down hard, burying Jerome deeply inside him. He did this over and over, each time with more and more force.

Without warning, Jerome grabbed Jason under the legs and stood up, his dick still impaling him. Automatically, Jason wrapped his hands around Jerome’s neck, holding on for dear life as his body was held suspended. Jerome turned and dropped Jason onto the bed, his dick staying lodged in his ass as his body followed Jason’s down.

Bent almost double, Jason’s eyes were opened wide as Jerome slammed into his ass hard, making his breath whoosh out as he grunted.

“You like it hard, Boy?”

“Sir, yes, Sir!”

Jerome pulled back and slammed into the hot ass again.

“Like that?”

“Sir, yes, Sir. Harder, Sir!” Jason all but screamed, his legs on Jerome’s shoulders, his ass at least a foot off the bed, and both his and Jerome’s weight on his shoulders.

Jerome reached up to take a firm grip of Jason’s shoulders then he started to jackhammer his ass.

Jason’s neck arched, “Oh... fuck... thank... you... Sir!”

Jerome watched the handsome man’s face as he pounded into him as hard as he could. The fuck was almost brutal, but still Jason begged, almost incoherently, for more and harder still. With one hand, Jerome reached down and grabbed one of Jason’s pink nipples, pinching and twisting it hard. Jason finally screamed, his face contorting as if in pain, as his dick jerked and started blasting a heavy load of cum, the first shot striping his chin. Jerome twisted harder as he covered Jason’s mouth, taking the scream into his own mouth. Still, he continued to pound into Jason, his cum hitting them both on their chins.

They both tasted the coppery tang of blood when Jerome bit down on Jason’s lower lip as he started to cum. His rhythm became erratic as he pumped his cream deeply into the man beneath him.

When he had finally finished, each man was breathing heavily. Jason’s cum was cooling and starting to drip down his side. He looked up at Jerome’s face, with his tightly closed eyes, and he couldn’t help but start laughing.

Jerome’s eyes flew open, his face scowling. “What the fuck is so funny?”

“Oh, Sir, that was the best fuck of my life!”

Jerome grinned. “Yeah, it was pretty good.” He chuckled.

“Again, Sir?”

“You tryin’ to kill me, Boy?”

“Never hurts to ask, Sir.” Jason smiled.

Jerome shook his head as he pulled his rapidly deflating dick from Jason's well-fucked ass. He groaned slightly as he stood up.

"My back isn't going to survive you," Jerome said, stretching.

Jason got up and headed to the bathroom to clean up. When he returned, Jerome was already under the covers, in the middle of the bed. Jason crawled in too, sidling up close to Jerome. Jerome turned them both, spooning up behind Jason.

"I guess I'm going to need to get the sling put up," Jerome mumbled behind Jason's ear.

Jason smiled and closed his eyes. He was asleep in Jerome's arms in minutes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The drive to Lafourche Parish was uneventful. For a change, it was cool enough to have the windows down. Jason got a kick out of riding in Jerome's old truck which had a massive spot welder secured in the back. There was a clean saltiness in the air that reminded him of fresh oysters. It was a type of countryside that he had never seen before, and it fascinated him. The huge water oaks dripping with Spanish moss made it seem very romantic.

Looking at Jerome, he asked, "Did you grow up here?"

"We lived in the city most of the time 'cause that's where Daddy worked. He was a welder on one of the docks back then," Jerome answered casually. "I spent most summers as a kid out here with Gran'daddy, though. I love it out here."

"I can see why. It's really beautiful. There's something calm but wild about it at the same time."

Jerome didn't say anything else, but had a slight smile on his face. Jason noticed that the further away they got from New Orleans, the more relaxed Jerome seemed to become. The small lines around his eyes smoothed. The little crease between his eyes all but disappeared and his shoulders seemed to relax.

Jerome pulled off the main road, which was barely two lanes, onto a gravel road. It wasn't long before a white house with a large front porch with four columns came into view. There were several large trees on either side of the house that seemed to frame it perfectly, a gentle breeze making them sway as if they were doing a slow exotic dance. Two little towheaded boys in the front yard were running around in white jockey shorts playing, making both Jerome and Jason grin.

Jason's BMW was parked under one of the trees, alongside a white minivan and an old Dodge truck. Jerome parked next to the other truck. The two little boys came running toward them, whooping and jumping in greeting, their lower legs covered in dust.

Ana and two other women were on the porch by the time they approached the house.

“Why, as I live ’n’ breathe, if it ain’t that handsome devil, Jerome Fontaine,” the older woman said as she opened her arms to him. Jerome readily walked into her warm embrace.

“Yvonne, you’re just as pretty as ever,” Jerome said, hugging her, before kissing her cheek.

“You ain’t changed one bit.” Yvonne laughed. “You is still the devil, flirting just like you always done!” She had the kind of laugh that made you smile or laugh along; it was that infectious.

“You remember my daughter, Rebecca, don’cha, Jerome?” Yvonne beamed.

“Of course I do, Yvonne. I ain’t senile yet,” Jerome smiled at Yvonne’s daughter. “You’re just as pretty as your momma was when she was your age.”

The young woman hugged Jerome, blushing.

Jerome turned to Ana with a slight frown. “Ana.”

“Well, nice to see you too, Jerome,” Ana gruffed, her hands on her hips.

“Yvonne, Rebecca, this is Jason Corleone,” Jerome said introducing Jason.

“He’s my cousin I was telling you about,” Ana chimed in.

“It’s nice to meet all of you,” Jason smiled as he shook hands. “You have a lovely place here.”

“Thank you, Jason,” Yvonne said, smiling as she looked deeply into his eyes, causing him to pause.

“Hank’s inside fixing the washing machine,” Rebecca informed them as she held open the screen door, inviting them inside.

The living area was neat and clean, except for a few toys on the floor. It was nothing fancy, but felt very comfortable, very much a home.

“Can I get y’all some tea?” Yvonne asked.

“That would be great, Yvonne,” Jerome answered.

“Let me go get Hank,” Rebecca said, quickly leaving the room.

“She’s a little on the shy side,” Ana whispered once they were alone.

“I remember her to be a little on the quiet side as a little girl,” Jerome said.

“Hank said he’d be here in a minute. He’s washin’ his hands,” Rebecca said as she followed her mother in with a large pitcher of iced tea.

A large man, who must have been Hank, came into the room, his T-shirt soaked. “Y’all excuse me, but that old pipe just gave out,” he said, wiping his hands on a towel. “I’m Hank, Hank Stapleton,” he held his hand out to Jerome first, then Jason.

“I remember you Hank,” Jerome said. “I remember you playing ball in high school. You were one hell of a left tackle.”

Hank’s face broke into a broad smile. “Yeah, just not good enough to get a scholarship but thank ya just the same.”

“What’s wrong with your pipe?” Jerome asked.

Jason shook his head slightly, thinking; *Leave it to Jerome to worry more about their pipe than his own issues.*

“Oh, hell, that ol’ cast iron fittin’ just gave way,” Hank explained. “You know how these ol’ houses are.”

“Yeah, I do,” Jerome chuckled. “I might be able to help. I’ve got an arc welder on the truck.”

“That’s exactly what I need,” Hank replied, starting to look excited.

“Then let’s go have a look-see and figure somethin’ out,” Jerome said, patting Hank on the shoulder.

As soon as the other men left, Yvonne sat next to Jason, keeping him on the sofa by taking his hand in hers, turning palm up. She studied it for a moment, then looked deep into his eyes.

“Your love is strong,” Yvonne said, almost in wonder. “Strong and pure. You have a chance to be very happy, but you’re unsure that your love

will be returned. There is a long history of being hurt by those who are close to you. I think... family?"

Jason looked at the woman, stunned.

She peered back into his open palm. "You have a long, healthy life ahead of you, but you will have trouble soon. You have to make yourself known," Yvonne said softly, looking into Jason's eyes again, "You must protect him. He is in grave danger right now, both from someone close, and also from himself. He can be self-destructive, but if you stand with him, he will be yours."

"I... I'm not sure I... understand," Jason said hoarsely.

"It's Jerome, isn't it?" She asked in a quiet whisper. "You love him. He can, and will, love you just as strongly, if you stand by him now in this time of great need. It is you who needs to protect him. There are evil outside sources that want to do him great harm." Yvonne explained as she stroked his cheek. "You are his salvation. It is you who must save him, not only from those evil sources, but also from himself."

"Oh, Momma, no one wants to hear your mumbo jumbo," Rebecca said as she handed Jason a glass of tea. "You'll have to excuse her. Sometimes she goes on about silly stuff."

"And had you listened to me, Rebecca, what happened to you wouldn't have." Yvonne snapped.

Rebecca blushed bright red. "I need to go check on the boys."

Jerome and Hank came back into the room laughing, carrying a piece of old rusted pipe. "We're gonna run down to the hardware store. We'll be back in a bit," Jerome informed them, as he and Hank walked out the front door, letting the screen door bang shut behind them.

Yvonne, Ana and Jason just looked at each other for a moment. Yvonne shook her head and laughed lightly.

"I swear, you give a man a project that involves tools, and he's gone," Yvonne said. "Come on, Jason, I have a feelin' you know your way 'round a kitchen. I know that gal there don'," she said, indicating Ana.

Jason laughed, "Nope, she can't even boil water without burning it."

“That’s not true,” Ana protested, standing up.

“Ana, the last time you tried to boil water for tea, you set off the fire alarms!”

“It was just the one time,” she pouted.

“I think it’s a good day for a boil,” Yvonne informed them. “Rebecca...!” Yvonne shouted out the door. “Go down to Monde’s and get the fixin’s for a boil. Take some of that money outta my purse.”

“Okay, Momma.”

“And make sure to get extra oysters, I know Jerome likes ’em,” she added.

“Okay, Momma,” Rebecca answered again.

Yvonne led the way through the house and out the back door. There were a couple of out buildings, including a chicken coop, which although it fascinated Jason, it just made Ana hold her nose. Jason helped Yvonne set up a large pot on a propane burner.

“There isn’t much ripe in the garden as yet, but I think there might be some red tomatoes ’bout ready and I know there’s some green ones. I know there is some okra ready, so we can definitely use some of that,” she said, strolling down a long row in a large vegetable garden.

“Wow, this is incredible,” Jason said in amazement. “You could feed an army from this garden alone.”

Yvonne had picked up a couple of wooden baskets from the small shed next to the garden, and handed one to Jason. “Rebecca and I will put a lot of things up durin’ the summers. I don’t much care for store bought, so we grow most of our own.”

“That is so cool,” Jason said, excited.

Ana stood at the edge of the garden, just watching.

“Hey, Ana, you going to help?” Jason asked, smiling at his cousin.

“Are you kidding? There might be snakes in there!”

Yvonne just laughed. “City gals never cease to amaze me.”

Jason helped Yvonne pick two baskets full of fresh produce and herbs. They laughed and joked while Ana just stood there looking bored.

The screen door banged, and Hank stepped out. "What'cha doin' Momma?"

Before she could answer, Jerome drove his truck around the house, parking it right in front of the back door.

"What's goin' on?" he asked, getting out.

"Well if'n one of y'all would let me answer," she said, hands on her hips. "We're gonna have a boil!"

"Whooo-eee!" Jerome ran over, picked her up and swung her around. "I loves you woman!"

"Put me down, Jerome," Yvonne laughed. "If'n you get that washer fixed up, I might just make some strawberry shortcakes."

"With biscuits?" He asked, hopefully.

"Of course."

Hank and Jerome worked on the washer and Yvonne, Rebecca and Jason worked in the kitchen, while Ana sat back and looked on like they were all crazy. Jason got a lesson in country cooking, and Yvonne even taught him how to make "cathead biscuits".

They covered a long picnic table under a tall tree with a big plastic table cloth, and shortly after one in the afternoon, they all sat down to eat. Jason and Ana experienced their very first authentic boil, Louisiana style.

While they were eating, Ana explained what she was hoping Hank could do for them. Rebecca was against the idea immediately, while Yvonne looked apprehensive, and Jerome looked embarrassed.

"Once or twice a month I make a run to Atlanta," Hank explained as he peeled a shrimp. "I've always had a feeling that what I was haulin' wasn't just seafood. There was always somethin' not right about that load."

"What do you mean, Hank?" Ana asked.

"Well, normally I inspect the cargo, ya know, makin' sure it's stacked

good,” he answered. “On those runs, though, the back is always locked up before I even get it.”

“Do you think you could get inside the trailer?” Ana asked.

“I’m never given the key.”

Ana was silent for a minute, and then started thinking out loud. “Atlanta’s a pretty big city. What if we could find a place where you could take your truck and I got someone to open it up so that no one would be the wiser?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Rebecca spoke up. “Don’t do it, Hank. You know what could happen if you do.”

“Yeah, and I know what will happen if I don’t,” Hank said firmly. “One day I’ll be the one who gets pulled over and caught with God only knows what in the back of that truck.”

“Rebecca, he has a point,” Yvonne said. “I think you need to listen to what Jerome has to say. I know I can trust him, and I think you do too, Hank.”

“Jerome?” Hank asked.

Jerome sat there quietly, his head down. When he lifted his gaze, he looked first at Rebecca, then at Yvonne and finally at Hank. “Hank, I don’t want you to risk your life or livelihood on my behalf. I couldn’t live with myself if anything happened to you or your family.”

“Jerome!” Ana almost exploded.

“Hush, Ana,” Jason said firmly.

“What I can tell y’all, is if Hank is willing to do this for us, and if Ana is right in sayin’ that I’ll end up out right owning this whole thing, I’ll make sure you’re taken care of, Hank. You and your family. I don’t forget those who are like family, and y’all are like my own family. I’ve known Yvonne most all my life, and I know y’all are good folk.”

Everyone was quiet for a bit, waiting on Hank.

Hank looked at Jerome. “If anything happens to me, you gotta make sure to take care of ’Becca and the boys.”

“I swear to you, Hank, that no matter what happens, that is somethin’ you’ll never have to worry about,” Jerome said seriously. “I promise you, I’ll make sure that they will be taken care of to the best of my ability.”

“I’ll do it then,” Hank gave his answer quietly.

“Hank, no.” Rebecca almost yelled.

“I’ve got to ’Becca,” Hank said, turning to her. “It’s gettin’ bad over there and my gut’s tellin’ me that it’s about to get a lot worse.” He took her head in his hands and leaned his forehead to hers. Then he looked to Ana, “You just tell me what you want me to do.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ana, Jerome, and Jason had gotten home a little late and all three went directly to bed. They all, even Ana, had had a wonderful time in Lafourche Parish. Jerome came back relaxed, Ana was happy with the outcome, and Jason felt he knew the new man in his life a lot better.

The next morning things got back to somewhat normal. Jason was able to get a good fuck in with Jerome before the new alarm clock went off, which made him happy. It also seemed to make Jerome quite relaxed as he had his coffee. Things weren't to stay that way though.

Jerome opened the front door to leave, saying, "We'll try and get as much done today on those rails as we can. Maybe we won't be so far behind, even after taking yesterday off."

"Yes, Sir," Jason answered, as he pulled the door shut behind him.

Just as he turned, an old pimped-out Caprice, rounded the corner, tires screeching. Jason looked up and saw a gun poking out of the barely lowered back window.

"Watch out!" He yelled as he tackled Jerome, taking him to the floor of the front porch.

Multiple shots rang out, the windows to the living room shattered, as did those of the front door. The car raced off, leaving the two men with hearts racing, ears ringing and astounded as they lay on the floor, Jason on top of Jerome.

"What the fuck?" Ana came out of the house screaming. "Ouch, motherfucker!" she screeched as she stepped on broken glass, cutting her foot.

"Ana, stand still, don't move," Jason commanded her.

"Easy for you to say," she yelled, holding up her bleeding foot while balancing on the other.

Jason got up, held out a hand to Jerome, and helped him to his feet. He then went over and picked up his cousin, carrying her into the house. He sat her on the kitchen counter.

“Jerome, call the police,” Jason shouted.

“Who the fuck was that?” Ana started.

“Shut up, Ana.” Jason said quietly.

Ana didn’t say another word, but listened to Jerome as he called the police.

Jason went into the bathroom and got a wet cloth, some alcohol, and a large bandage.

“Jason, just saved my life,” Jerome muttered to himself, while on hold. “Police are on their way,” Jerome confirmed moments later. “You okay, Ana?”

“I’m pissed is what I am,” Ana yelled. “I’ve not even had a cup of coffee and all hell’s broken loose.” She didn’t even notice that Jerome sounded concerned about her well-being.

Jason poured a cup of coffee and handed it to her. “Will you calm down now?” Turning to Jerome he asked, “Did you recognize the car?”

“Never seen it before,” Jerome shook his head. “Who would want to shoot me?”

“I have a feeling it might be your dear, beloved Uncle Bart,” Ana scoffed, blowing on the hot coffee. “I think we may have hit a nerve somewhere. This is getting serious. It appears that we’ve been found out. I need to call the office. Jason, would you go get my cell phone please?”

“Sure,” Jason ran up the stairs two at a time.

“Jerome, someone is playing hardball,” Ana said quietly. “It might be wise if we got you out of town.”

“I’m not fucking leaving!” Jerome paced back and forth over broken glass that covered almost everything in the living room. “I’m not going to be run out of my own home.”

“Then we are going to have to take some extra precautions. You have Jason to consider now.”

That stopped Jerome dead in his tracks. He looked at Ana. “What should I do?”

“First off, you can’t walk to work anymore,” she started, as Jason returned with the phone. “Change up your routine. Stay inside and away from the windows until we can figure something out.”

Jason doctored Ana’s foot as she made a call. Sirens, then screeching tires, alerted them that the police had arrived. Jerome watched as three patrol cars skidded to a stop in front of his house. He could see neighbors standing in various stages of dress on their porches and sidewalks, staring at the commotion.

Mass confusion ensued. One cop interviewed first Jerome and then Jason. Two other policemen walked around asking neighbors if they had seen or heard anything. Ana was on the phone with Diane, and then one of the partners in her law firm.

Jason swept up the glass while the policeman interviewed Jerome. Then it was Ana’s turn to confirm their account of what happened. They all had pretty much the same story, so it checked out as far as the police were concerned. It was being referred to as a drive-by shooting, unless any more evidence was produced.

It was just before noon when Marie showed up pushing a cart in front of her. The police were just pulling away as she made her way up to the steps.

“Honey, will yous git that buggy up heres fer me?” Marie asked Jason as she made her way up the front steps.

“Of course,” Jason replied.

Marie took Jerome into her arms, crushing him to her bosom. “Baby, wha’s goin’ on?”

“Missing another day’s work is what’s going on,” Jerome growled. “It’s like some force is against me finishing this fucking job. That’s what’s up!”

“Yous jes about gits yorese’f kill’t and you’s a fussin’ ’bout some work? You’s jes plain crazy, Jerome Fontaine.”

Jason pushed the small cart inside the house.

“Honey, g’won take tha’ ta the kitchen,” Marie told Jason.

There was a knock on what was left of the front door. Everyone turned to see a young man standing there.

“Cameron?” Jerome asked, his eyes as big as saucers.

“Uh... hello, Uncle Jerome,” the twenty-something said.

Jason could tell that he must be David’s son. He could have been *Jerome’s* son, the family resemblance was so strong.

“What are you doing here?” Jerome scowled. “If you’re here to try and get me...”

Cameron cut him off. “I’m not here for my father or Grandpa, Uncle Jerome. I’m here... I’m here for you.”

“Umm, wait a minute,” Ana interjected. “Uncle? If he is David’s son that means he is your second cousin, right?”

“Technically, yeah,” Jerome said. “But try and explain that to a three year old. Uncle just made things easier.”

Ana nodded understanding.

“Well come on in Cameron, no sense in just standing there in the doorway.” Jerome motioned for the young man to come inside.

“I’m so sorry, Uncle Jerome,” Cameron burst into tears and threw himself at Jerome, wrapping his arms around the older man.

“Here, here, what’s all this,” Jerome held the young man, stroking his head.

“It was Father who tried to have you killed this morning.”

“What?” Four voices asked all at once in a chorus.

Cameron looked at everyone in the room. A frightened look came over his face. “Maybe I shouldn’t be here,” he said as he tried to push Jerome away.

“Why would you say that about your daddy, Cameron?” Jerome asked softly, still stroking the boy’s head.

“Because... it’s true,” Cameron answered in a whisper.

“Can you prove that?” Ana asked the young man as she stepped closer.

“Who are you?” Cameron asked suspiciously.

“Cameron, this is Ana Rizzo and her cousin Jason Corleone,” Jerome

introduced the two. “And that behemoth in the kitchen is none other than Marie Freeman.”

“Hmph, insults me afta I done brought food!”

“Um... nice to meet y’all,” Cameron said, still not certain about them.

“Cameron, anything you say to me, you can say in front of them,” Jerome smiled at the boy. “They’re my friends.”

“Really? Would never know it,” Ana snarked.

“Okay, with the exception of her, but she’s a necessary evil,” Jerome said, scowling at Ana.

Cameron and Jason both laughed. Cameron stepped away from Jerome and walked towards Jason, his hand extended.

“I’m glad to meet you,” Cameron said with a big smile. “Anyone who can send my father into fits like you’ve done, I’m pleased to meet.”

“I did?” Jason smiled as he shook Cameron’s hand.

“Oh, you did,” Cameron laughed. “I’ve never seen him so tore up.”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good thing,” Jason smiled.

“I think so,” Cameron smiled.

“Okay, are you going to tell us about this bombshell you just dropped?” Ana asked.

Cameron looked questioningly at Jerome. Jerome nodded his head okay.

“I just took the bar exam, and while waiting on the scores to come back, Father has me working at the law firm, mostly doing odd jobs.” He looked at Jerome again. “I hate it there.”

“Do I know that feeling,” Jason said bitterly.

“Ignore him,” Ana huffed. “Go on.”

“I got bored yesterday and started playing on Father’s computer while he and Grandpa were over at another firm in a meeting,” Cameron resumed. “Anyway, I ran across a file that had your name on it, Uncle Jerome, and I opened it. I put it on this,” Cameron held up a flash drive. “It was buried pretty deep. It was pure luck that I found it.

“Let me have that,” Ana demanded, her hand held out. “Jason go...”

She hadn’t finished before Jason interrupted, “I’m on it.”

Jason came back with his laptop, set it up on the counter and booted it up. Taking the flash drive from Ana, he inserted it into the USB port. At this point, he let Ana take over, since she knew what she was looking for.

You could have heard a pin drop in the room until Ana said, “Oh... My... God!”

“What?” Jerome asked.

“We’ve got ’em. We have fucking got them,” Ana squealed.

Ana jumped up and started dancing around the room. Jason sat down at the computer and started reading as well. He took longer to read than Ana had, and by the time he was finished his face was white.

“Honey... wha’s a matter?” Marie asked, looking concerned.

“Sir... David has... your cousin has taken a hit out on you!”

“He did what?” Jerome’s mouth fell open. “I mean, I know we’ve never gotten along and that he hates me, but enough to have me killed?”

“Uncle Jerome, it’s worse than that,” Cameron hung his head.

“What is it, Cam?” Jerome asked quietly.

“There is just so much more...” Cameron looked at Jerome, then Jason. “He hates fags. Mom and he have been contributing to all kinds of groups who try to block legislation that is even remotely pro-gay. Somehow, he has it in his mind that you are a stain on the family name.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. No offense, Cam, but your mom is some piece of work.” Jerome shook his head. “I think she hates anyone who isn’t white and rich.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Cameron smiled.

“Oh, my God!” Jason stood up. “Is it true about your grandfather, Cameron?” Jason asked expectantly. “Did your father really do this?”

“If you’re talking about blackmailing him, then yes.” Cameron answered. “Uncle Jerome, Grandpa doesn’t hate you, never has.”

“Hmph, you’d never prove it by me,” Jerome scowled again.

“Father has had the goods on Grandpa for almost thirty years now. Grandpa has been nothing but a puppet,” Cameron said bitterly.

“What are you talking about, Cam?” Jerome took him by the shoulders.

“Grandpa is gay too.”

There was a knock on the doorframe, since the door had been removed and was currently being replaced by a company Jerome had called.

“May we come in?” Rebecca asked, Hank right behind her.

“Rebecca? Hank?” Ana said as she walked over to the door. “Sure, come on in.”

“What’s been going on here?” Hank asked, looking around and noticing that there were no windows in the front of the house and that the door was being replaced.

“It’s a long story. What’s up?” Ana asked.

“I don’t want Hank involved in this,” Rebecca started. “And I think this is proof enough that he shouldn’t be.”

“Hush, now, ’Becca,” Hank shushed his wife gently. “Things have gotten really weird down at the docks. They’ve got all kinds of security guards roamin’ around now with machine guns, and they got me scheduled to make two runs to Atlanta this week. They also got another guy booked to do two trips as well.”

“Is that uncommon?” Ana asked.

“Oh, yeah. That’s like quadruple what is the norm,” Hank answered, obviously out of sorts about it.

“It’s too dangerous,” Rebecca fretted.

There was yet another knock on the doorframe, and a large man filled the empty space.

“Father?” Jason questioned, not believing his eyes.

“Hello, son, Ana,” the big man answered, walking into the room.

“What are you doing here?” Jason asked, stunned to see his father in New Orleans.

"I have come to take you home, as you're evidently not in your right mind," Mr. Corleone answered snidely. "Go get your things and we can leave. Ana, you are welcome to fly back with us."

"I'm not going anywhere, Father, and neither is Ana." Jason said defiantly.

"Don't you take that tone with me, Jason, I'm your father and I deserve respect. You will do as I say."

"As far as I'm concerned, you are a sperm donor, nothing more," Jason said quietly, but firmly, standing up to the man for the first time in his life.

Francis Corleone slapped his son across the face, hard. "How dare you speak to me like that? This is precisely why you need to come home. This type of... *environment* isn't healthy for you."

Jerome pushed Jason out of the way and stood toe to toe with the elder Corleone. "Mine. You want to hit what's mine again, you'll have to go through me first."

"Who the hell are you?" Francis Corleone asked smugly.

"This is *my* house," Jerome started.

"You call this a house?" Jason's father laughed. "This is a shack compared to what my son is used to."

"Father, I am *not* going home with you, so please, leave." Jason said, calmly stepping beside Jerome to show a united front.

"You're coming home with me, Jason, if I have to physically drag you!" his father yelled.

Jerome growled, his face tight.

"You have a leash for this mongrel?" Francis asked, making that his first mistake.

Jerome's arm flew up and out, his fist landing squarely in Jason's father's face.

Francis Corleone fell backwards, across the coffee table, landing on his ass, his feet up in the air, suspended by the heavy wooden table. Blood was streaming from his nose and lips.

“I should have warned you, Uncle Francis,” Ana giggled. “Don’t poke the bear.”

Without warning, there was a loud banging from the kitchen. Everyone turned to see Marie standing in the doorway hitting the bottom of a pot with a wooden spoon.

“Y’all come on an’ eats yous sumptin’. You’s gonna needs y’all strength to keep a fightin’.”

When everyone turned, they could see there was a huge buffet set up on the breakfast counter.

“Jason, come on over heres and gets this towel. Put you some ice in it and gives it to yo daddy,” she said, holding up an old kitchen towel.

“What the hell is this place?” Francis Corleone asked in a muffled voice from the floor. “A looney bin?”

Hank held out his hand to help the man up. “Hi, I’m Hank Stapleton and this here is my wife, Rebecca,” he said, introducing himself.

“I don’t care who the hell you are,” Francis said, refusing to take the hand and standing on his own.

“Here, Father,” Jason said, handing him the towel with ice.

Jason’s father snatched it out of his hand. “I should have you arrested for assault!” he yelled at Jerome.

“Technically, Uncle Francis, you provoked him in his own home and committed assault on Jason,” Ana informed him. “He could have *you* arrested for battery, the assault, and he has many witnesses here who are his friends. Who do you think would get out of jail first?”

“Come an’ gits it,” Marie said, pushing Rebecca and Hank towards the counter, then grabbed Jerome by the belt and turned him around.

“Get your hands off me, Marie,” Jerome snarled.

“Don’ yous take that tone with me, Jerome Fontaine, I’ll slaps them teef right outta yore mouf! Now gits on over there an’ eats,” Marie fussed at him. “I bets none y’all et at all today!”

“Damn, Marie, I don’t feel like eatin’,” Jerome started to pout.

“Jerome, you gits yo ass on over there. I ain’t never knowed yous to not et an oyster. G’won now.”

Marie took Jason by the ear. “Yous too now.”

She turned to Ana, eying her up and down. “You’s just a pretty little thang, ain’t ya? You’s the cousin?”

Ana smiled widely. “Why, yes, I am.”

“I’m Marie, Marie Freeman. I’s pleased to meets you. I’s knowed Jerome mos’ my life. He’s a bit on the ornery side, but he’s like kin to me,” Marie chuckled as she watched Jerome load up a plate full of fried oysters, grilled shrimp and red beans and rice.

Then she turned her attention to Jason’s father. “Yo nose g’wona be a’right?”

“What’s it to you?” He snapped back.

“Didn’ no ones ever tell ya that you gits more flies with sugar than vinegar?” She shook her head at him. “Yous too. G’won and gits yous a plate.”

“I’m not...”

“Oh, yes you is,” Marie said, grabbing him by the front of his shirt and pulling him along to the food on the counter. Standing there, she picked up a plate. “You’s gonna eats if’n I gotta feeds ya,” she said as she started filling a plate for the shocked man.

“You people are crazy!” Jason’s dad said, shaking his head.

“Uncle Francis, it’s best to just go with the flow down here,” Ana giggled as she sat on the floor, her plate on the coffee table. “You won’t win here, that’s just a fact.”

Rebecca and Hank were sitting at the small table while Jerome sat on the sofa, the plate only inches from his nose as he practically inhaled the fried oysters. Jason sat next to him, a little smile on his face, their legs touching. Cameron, still somewhat shocked, sat in the one and only chair in the living room, his plate heaped with shrimp and oysters as well.

“Mr. Francis, yous g’won and sit down heres,” Marie said pulling out

the other chair at the small table. “Once you’s wrap yo lips ’round some of them oysters, you’s’ll quiet down soon’s ’nuff,” Marie chuckled.

Marie got herself a plate and sat on the other end of the sofa, close enough to touch Jason. “Now... ain’t this nice?”

Jerome grunted. Jason smiled fondly at the big black woman. Ana just sat grinning and nodding.

“These oysters are amazin’, ma’am,” Hank said, wiping his mouth.

“Thank ya,” Marie smiled.

Francis Corleone looked around the room. He picked up an oyster and popped it into his mouth. His eyebrows shot up as he looked over at Marie, who was watching for his reaction.

“This...” he licked his fingers. “This is truly outstanding.”

“Why thank you, Mr. Francis,” Marie giggled.

“Marie has her own restaurant, Father,” Jason said, smiling at Marie. “She’s an incredible cook.”

“Yes, I see that she is,” Jason’s father conceded.

The workers finally got the door hung as everyone else finished up eating; giving them some privacy from the outside world, even though there still weren’t any windows toward the street.

Jerome got up, rubbing his belly. “Thank you, Marie. That was as tasty as ever. I’m sorry if I was hard on you.”

Marie looked at Jerome, her mouth open, then Jason.

“Don’t look at me!” Jason laughed, standing up with his empty plate.

“Come on, Boy, we need to get some plywood up on these windows,” Jerome said, heading towards the back of the house.

“Hold on, Jerome, I’ll help y’all out,” Hank said, also getting up. Cameron followed the trio out too, leaving Jason’s father alone in a room full of women.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jerome opened up the lattice-covered crawl space underneath the back of the house.

“I’ve got all this plywood already cut to cover the windows in case of a hurricane,” he explained. “Each is marked for a specific window, so I just need to find the ones for the front.”

“Where’s the drill and screws?” Hank asked.

“In the utility room,” Jerome answered.

“I’ll get ’em,” Jason volunteered.

It didn’t take Jerome long before he had the plywood pieces he was looking for pulled out. Jerome, Hank and Cameron carried them to the front of the house. Jason showed up with the tools needed moments later.

They started putting up the covering for the windows. Cameron held the plywood while Hank screwed them in place with the cordless screwdriver.

“Cameron?” Jerome started hesitantly. “What did you mean that Uncle Bart is gay?”

Cameron glanced quickly at Jerome, then looked down. “Daddy found out that Grandpa was having an affair not long after he joined the firm, Uncle Jerome. He made it his mission to find out who it was with.”

Cameron stopped. “Go on,” Jerome prodded.

“He didn’t count on it being ol’ Mr. Shipe.”

“Mr. Shipe!” Jerome nearly dropped the corner of the piece of plywood he was holding in place. “That ol’ coot at the bank?”

“Yes, Sir, that’d be the one.” Cameron smiled slightly. “Although he probably wasn’t such an ol’ coot back then.”

Jerome thought for a moment. “Damn, that had to have been... almost thirty years ago.”

“Close to it,” Cameron confirmed. “From what I’ve been able to find out, it’s still going on too.”

“Why that ol’ rooster,” Jerome laughed. “I didn’t know he had it in him.”

Cameron frowned. “Daddy has been holding that over his head all these years, Uncle Jerome, making him do things I don’t think he would do otherwise. Like what he did to your daddy. Grandpa isn’t all that bad, Uncle Jerome, honest.”

“I still find it hard to believe, but I can see where it could happen,” Jerome said sadly.

“Uncle Jerome?”

Jerome stepped away from the house, picking up the next piece of plywood they needed. He looked at his nephew, who looked so much like he had at that age, “Yeah, Cam?”

“I’m gay too.”

“Ah, Cam,” Jerome hugged the younger version of himself. “It’s okay, you know *I* don’t care.”

“Thanks, Uncle Jerome,” he said almost shyly.

“I guess that makes me the odd man out,” Hank laughed. “I’m the only non-gay man here?”

Jerome chuckled. “We won’t hold it against ya, Hank.”

“You’re not the only one if you count my Father,” Jason said sadly.

“No offense, Jason, but I think I’d rather be gay than like him,” Hank said sharply.

“No offense taken,” Jason smiled at the straight man standing there.

“Yous have ’nuf, Mr. Francis?” Marie asked.

“If you don’t mind, I would like a few more of those oysters,” he answered almost shyly. “They are spectacular,” he complimented, holding out the plate to Marie.

“Then gits up an’ gits ’em. Yo legs broke or sumpthin?”

Francis Corleone’s mouth hung open before he got to his feet. He helped himself to more of the wonderful food and sat back down.

“You know, Uncle Francis, you’re not going to be able to force Jason to go back to Philadelphia with you,” Ana said, as gently as she could.

“Yes I can, and he *will* go back with me,” he responded to his niece. “And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll do the same Luciana!”

“Listen here, Uncle Francis, I’m a grown woman and I will make my own decisions,” Ana retorted, standing up, her hands on her hips. “Neither you, nor my father, will dictate to *me* what I can or cannot do!”

“I’m not your father so I can’t control you, but I can my own son,” he barked at his brother’s daughter. “That boy has no idea what’s good for him, and *this* isn’t good for him.”

“Mr. Francis, I don’t know if you’ve noticed or not, but Jason ain’t no boy. He’s a grown up man,” Marie said gently. “He’s a mighty fine man too.”

“I don’t know any of y’all, but I did spend all day yesterday with Jason, and he is a kind and gentle man, sir,” Rebecca said timidly. “He’s a fine gentleman.”

“Uncle Francis, I’ve never seen Jason as happy as he has been here.” Ana said, kneeling beside her uncle. “Did you know that Jason was considering suicide before he left home?”

“What?” Francis Corleone choked.

“He was, Uncle Francis. He’s been that unhappy.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?” Jason’s father looked shocked.

“Uncle Francis, you either wouldn’t have listened, or you would have put him in some hospital, and you know it,” Ana said frankly. “You never listen to Jason, never have.”

“Mr. Francis, Jason don’t need a father, that boy needs a daddy,” Marie said, placing one of her large hands on his arm. “They’s a big difference ya knows?”

“Uncle Francis, Jason only ever wanted you to love him for who and what he is.”

“I do love him. He’s my son.”

“Do you?” Ana asked, her eyebrows raised. “Do you really love Jason for who he is? Because it looks like you have done everything for him *but* show him any kind of affection.”

“I... I have tried to give him everything.” Francis Corleone snapped.

“Uncle Francis... I think you were jealous of Jason,” Ana said quietly, staring at the floor before looking back up at her uncle.

“How in the hell do you figure that, Luciana?” he asked shocked.

“You were jealous of his relationship with your own father.”

“Why... that is just preposterous. I never...”

“Think about it, Uncle Francis.” Ana nudged his knee with her elbow.

“They were as thick as thieves those two,” Francis thought back. “I never knew what they were up to. The two of them were always off in a corner together having a good time.”

“And?” Ana prodded further.

“Okay, I guess I was a little jealous, but I’ve always done what I thought best for Jason,” he rationalized. “He has never been as strong as his brother Frank.”

“Yes, he *is* as strong as Frank,” Ana spat out. “Hell, he is so much stronger, and a much better man, than Frank could ever hope to be.”

“What are you talking about, Ana?” her uncle asked starting to look angry.

“I’m surprised you don’t know,” Ana looked harshly at her uncle, “or do you? Frank has a really bad reputation as a womanizer. As a matter of fact, there have been a few times where it was more than likely flat-out rape! It was always hushed up, but I have a feeling you knew about it.”

“No, not Frank,” Francis Corleone said. “He knows better. I taught him better than that. Sure, I knew he had an occasional fling, but nothing like that! I never covered for him in that regard.”

“Yeah, just like you,” Ana spat out. “Typical isn’t it?” she said, her anger apparent. “Jason is a grown man, a good man, and truth be told, a better man than *you* and *Frank* put together!”

“Now you listen here, Ana, I won’t...”

“You won’t what? Huh, Uncle Francis?” Ana stood up so she was looking down on him. “You won’t take your licks? Tell me it isn’t true. Go on, deny it.”

“I don’t have to...”

“You don’t have to what, Uncle Francis? Admit that you were wrong?” Ana was furious, her face red. “The only thing Jason has ever done is try to do what pleases *you*! And what have you done for him? Turned his mother into an alcoholic by chasing skirts all over town, embarrassing her and the rest of the family? Make him go to law school when he didn’t really want to. What you have done to your own family is disgraceful.”

Francis Corleone looked beaten.

“Uncle Francis, it isn’t too late,” Ana softened a bit. “Jason wants to love you, but if you don’t at least meet him halfway, you are going to lose him forever. If you love him like you say you do, you need to show it, and show it now before it’s too late.”

“Mr. Francis, you might wanna lis’en to this gal,” Marie said, squeezing his arm. “She shore is smart. I’s thinks she be right on this ’un.”

Francis looked at Marie, his eyes sad. “I really only wanted what was best for him. It was his being gay that made me think he was so unhappy.”

“He seems very happy here,” Rebecca said softly, also reaching out and touching Jason’s father’s arm. “He’s a very gentle man.”

Francis looked around at each face. “I do love my son, no matter what he is.”

“Then you need to show him that, Uncle Francis. Soon.”

There was a clatter and loud voices coming from the back of the house, as the rest of the men came back inside. One by one, they filtered into the living room area.

“We got all the windows covered up for the night,” Hank said as he stood next to his wife, kissing her on the top of her head.

Jason’s father stood up as his son came into the room. Jason kept his

eyes averted, not looking at his father. Slowly, Francis Corleone approached his son.

“Jason...” He took Jason into his arms, holding him tight.

Jason looked shocked, his arms hanging loosely to his sides, his eyes wide open as well as his mouth.

“Jason,” Francis said, standing back a bit, but still holding on. “I... I’ve been wrong on so many levels and I hope that you can forgive me, son.”

“Father...?”

His father cut him off. “Just listen, Jason. Luciana has pointed out to me, something that I don’t think I ever realized until right now.” He took a deep breath. “I think that I’ve been jealous of you ever since you were a little boy. I just didn’t know it.”

“What?” Jason looked even more surprised. “Jealous? Of me?”

“You were closer to my own father than I ever was. I think that maybe I resented you for it.” He took another deep breath. “But with that said, I have always done what I thought was best for you. I only wanted you to be happy and successful. I guess I just went about it all wrong.”

“I understood Grandfather,” Jason smiled gently. “Grandfather understood me too, I think. He seemed to know me better than I did”

“And I think that I picked up on that, Jason,” Francis sighed. “I just... I don’t think he really let me know him the way he did you, and now that I look back, I think... that I resented you for that. I never had that connection with him.”

“I hate being a lawyer,” Jason finally said, his head down. “I never wanted to go to law school.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” Francis asked his son.

“I... I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

“Oh, Jason, I’m so sorry.” Francis hugged his son close to him again. “I do love you, Jason. I just want you to be happy. I don’t understand this gay thing, I may never understand it, but I’ll try. As it was so rudely pointed out to me, you are a better man than I, but I swear to you, I’m going to try to do better. I will give you my promise.”

Jason returned his father's hug, tears streaming down his face. "I love you too... Daddy." For the first time in Jason's life, he felt the warmth of his father's love and relished being in his arms.

The two men just stood there holding each other for a long time. Everyone else in the room was quiet, with hardly a dry eye in the place. Even Jerome's eyes were shiny.

"I's thinkin' it's 'bout time for some pie an' coffee, don' y'all?" Marie hefted herself up and went into the kitchen. "I done brought pecan, o'course," she smiled widely at Jerome. "an' peach an' a strawbury. Y'all come on an' hep yo own selves."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The next day proved to be even more bizarre than the day before. Although Jerome and Jason went to the shop as usual, they were actually driven there by Ana in Jason's car. They were given strict instructions that they were not to walk anywhere, and to drive as little as possible.

Just before lunch, Jason heard glass breaking at the front of the shop. Jerome hadn't heard it since he was using the grinder and had ear protectors on. When Jason went around the wall dividing the shop from the tiny reception area, he saw fire spreading across the floor to the small counter blocking the front door.

"Fire!" he screamed, running to Jerome waving his arms. "Fire!" he yelled again, Jerome hearing him this time.

Both men ran to the front of the shop. The whole reception area was in flames, smoke filling the small space. Thinking quickly, Jerome ran to the welding station and grabbed a large fire extinguisher while Jason called the fire department. It took some work, but Jerome was able to extinguish the fire, leaving white powder filling the air instead of smoke.

They could hear the sirens as the fire department approached, but they both smelled smoke again. Walking back into the shop area, they saw more smoke coming in from under the double steel doors.

"We need to get out of here," Jason yelled, pulling Jerome back towards the front of the building where they could get out the front door.

It wasn't easy to convince Jerome to leave it to the professionals, but with the shop rapidly filling with smoke, he eventually stopped fighting as he began to choke on the smoke. Standing on the sidewalk coughing, they watched as the NOFD battled to put out the fire in the back of the old building.

EMT's had to practically force Jerome to use an oxygen mask, while Jason took advantage of the clean air without needing any persuasion. They felt helpless as thick black smoke billowed up from the back of the building, and they were unable to do anything but watch. It wasn't long

before the police also showed up, and right behind them were Ana and Cameron.

“What are you doing here?” Jason choked.

“We gotta get you out of here *now*!” Ana said, just as a man in a dark suit approached.

“I can’t leave,” Jerome coughed. “That’s my business on fire, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Mr. Fontaine,” the newcomer said as he approached. “I’m Special Agent Tanner, FBI.”

“What the fuck?” Jerome looked from Ana to the FBI agent. “What is the FBI doing here?”

Just then, the fire chief walked up to the small group. “Who is the business owner here?”

“I am,” Jerome answered, tossing aside the plastic face mask.

“Sir, this was definitely a case of arson,” he said sourly. “Someone set old tires on fire and leaned them against the building. The steel doors prevented a lot of damage, but the wooden part of the building has been severely compromised I’m afraid.”

Jerome started to go to see for himself, but was stopped by the fire fighter. “Sir, they are still working back there. You can’t be back there.”

“The hell I can’t,” Jerome tried to jerk free.

“Mr. Fontaine, I need to speak with you and Mr. Corleone right now,” Special Agent Tanner said, stepping in front of him. “I have reliable information that your lives are in danger. This fire was meant to kill you.”

“What the hell?” Jerome stood there in disbelief.

“What the...?” Jason said too, as he watched his father walk towards them. “Father, what are you doing here?”

“I’m going to get your asses out of here,” Francis Corleone snarled, somewhat nasally.

Jason had to hide his grin after hearing him talk. The swollen nose, fat

lip and traces of a black eye were incongruous with the five-hundred-dollar suit he was wearing.

“Gentlemen, we need to get off the street,” urged Mr. FBI.

“Uncle Francis, can you take them home?” Ana asked her Uncle.

“Of course,” he answered without hesitation.

“That can only be a short stop I’m afraid,” Special Agent Tanner quickly added. “We need to get them to a safe location, and fast.”

“Wait a minute. Just fucking wait!” Jerome yelled. “I’m not going anywhere until I get some goddamned answers.”

“Sir, I will explain as much as I can once we get you off the street,” Agent Tanner tried to soothe Jerome without much success.

“What about my shop?” Jerome was close to losing it.

“Sir... Sir,” Jason held his shoulders and forced Jerome to focus on him. “Let’s go home and get some lunch and let the fire department take care of the shop for now.”

“Uncle Jerome?” Cameron said somewhat quietly. “Please?”

“Ah, *fuck!*” Jerome said, running his hand through his short hair. “Okay, let’s go.”

They rode the short distance in the big black sedan that Jason’s father had rented, in silence. When they reached Jerome’s house, where the windows were still boarded up, Jerome unlocked the door and stomped in. The rest followed him in single file. Soon the living room was full with Ana, Agent Tanner, Cameron, Jason, his father, and Jerome.

“Can someone, anyone, tell me what the fuck is going on?” Jerome snarled.

“Jerome, let me try and explain,” Ana started. She was dressed in a raw silk, grey suit, looking every bit the professional high-powered lawyer she was. “Your cousin David has figured out that someone connected to Jason has been poking their nose into his business. Right now, he doesn’t know that it goes beyond him.”

“And he’s wanting me dead over that?” Jerome said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Listen, if you’re out of the picture, then there will be no obstacle for him to do what he wants. After getting a warrant to follow the money, we discovered it’s a lot bigger than any of us originally thought,” Ana said seriously. “Jerome, this is much bigger than even I was expecting.”

“I’m still not seeing where...” Jerome was at a loss for words.

“Here’s the deal, Mr. Fontaine,” Agent Tanner took over. “Not only does David Fontaine benefit from your untimely demise, but he needs to make sure that Mr. Corleone, Jason, is also permanently silent, since he isn’t certain just how much he has been able to discover.”

“Me?” Jason asked shocked.

“So far he thinks you’re the only one doing all the snooping,” Ana supplied that tidbit of information. “No one knows I’m here... yet, and Diane, who has also worked for Jason, is the perfect tie-in.”

“Mr. Fontaine, your cousin has resources that are... far reaching,” Agent Tanner said, looking at Ana uncomfortably. “Sir, he has contacts that will guarantee your death.”

“This can’t be happening,” Jerome rubbed his face.

“Jerome, if it helps at all, it won’t be for long.” Ana said gently, touching his arm.

That is when Jerome really lost it.

“What the hell am I supposed to do? Huh?” Jerome started screaming. “I’m already days behind schedule. I’ve got obligations and contracts. My shop has just almost burned to the ground and is unsecured. I’ve got... Don’t you people...”

Ana stepped up and slapped Jerome hard, shocking everyone in the room, especially Jerome.

“Listen up, asshole, you can’t do much of anything if you’re dead,” Ana said, poking Jerome in the chest. “And just so you’re clear on this, you are *not* the only one whose life is on the line now either. You go off and get Jason hurt or killed because of this and you won’t just have your family to worry about, you’ll have to worry about me finding and kicking your ass!

Now sit down and shut your fucking trap!” Ana pushed Jerome with the flat of her hand, causing him to sit down hard on the sofa.

Ana turned to say something to Jason, but stopped dead. He was looking at her as if he were ready to rip her head off. His fists were clenched so tight his knuckles were white, and his face was red with anger.

Ana finally found her voice. “Jason, he was getting hysterical, I had to do something.”

With an obvious effort, Jason’s face calmed slightly. He looked down at his hands, flexing them. Taking a deep breath, he held it in before slowly letting it out, and then managed to say, “Don’t hit Jerome again, Ana.”

Ana only nodded.

Special Agent Tanner broke the uncomfortable silence. “We need to get these two under wraps quickly. Best place is probably going to be a hotel for now.”

“I’m not—” Jerome started, until Ana turned and looked at him sternly.

“We need to get Jerome, Jason, and Cameron all together in a secure place before everything goes down,” Tanner repeated to no one in particular, as he pulled out his cell phone.

“If I have to go to a hotel, then I’ll only go to the Phoenix,” Jerome stated flatly. “There is no negotiation on that.”

Tanner scowled briefly. “Where is it?”

“On Dauphine, between Mandeville and Marigny Streets,” Jerome answered, almost defiantly.

“I’ll need to make sure it is securable before—” Tanner started before Jerome cut him off.

“Oh, it is secure. Trust me, I helped make it that way,” Jerome said proudly.

“What do you mean, ‘before everything goes down’?” Cameron asked timidly.

“Mr. Fontaine, Cameron,” Special Agent Tanner said, “I can’t tell you a lot but what I can tell you is that things are about to become very

unpleasant for your father and grandfather. Since you are the one who turned over indisputable evidence, your life could also be at risk.”

“I see,” Cameron said, looking at his feet.

“What about my shop?” Jerome almost whined.

“Jerome, I’ll take care of it,” Jason’s dad said, stepping forward.

Jason and Jerome both looked stunned. Jason stood up and walked to his father. “Thanks, Father.”

Francis Corleone pulled his son into a hug. “Think you can just call me... Dad?”

Jason, unable to speak, looked at his father and nodded.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Agent Tanner pulled up to the address that Jerome had given him on Dauphine Street. “This it?” he asked, looking up at the building. “There’s no sign.”

“Nope, no sign needed.” Jerome smiled sourly “Only people who know about The Phoenix are those who want, or need, to know about it.”

The only outward sign that it was indeed The Phoenix was the ornate cast and wrought iron gate, which was fashioned to resemble a phoenix in flight. Beyond the gate they could see a long hall lit by overhead gas lights. Beyond that was another iron gate that no one could see through. Beside the front gate was an intercom box.

“You called the owner?” Tanner asked.

“Yeah, he’s expecting us,” Jerome answered. “Just ring the intercom and he’ll buzz us in.”

“Okay, you guys wait here,” Tanner said as he got out of the double parked car.

“Did you make that gate, Sir?” Jason asked Jerome in awe.

For the first time that day, Jerome smiled. “Yeah, I did. Like it?”

“Wow, Uncle Jerome,” Cameron said in admiration.

“That is beautiful, Sir.” Jason added.

“I worked steadily on this place for almost five years,” Jerome said, almost wistfully.

The three men in the car heard the buzzer and saw Tanner motion to them. They quickly got out of the car, grabbed their bags, and went through the gate they had been admiring. The gate at the other end of the long corridor opened, allowing them to see into a large courtyard area with a large rectangular swimming pool.

“Wow,” Jason exclaimed as they walked through. “It’s... amazing.”

“I did all the balconies,” Jerome pointed out. There were long balconies on the second story of all four sides, and even more elaborate balconies on

the one side that had more than two stories. Bougainvillea vines were draped all over the place in an explosion of color. There was a sweet perfume riding on the air, adding to the atmosphere in the tranquil courtyard. Planters bursting with color were placed around the pool, creating separate lounging areas.

“What the hell you got yourself mixed up in, Jerome?” a voice behind them asked as the internal gate closed and locked.

The four men turned to see a shorter hairy man wearing a very skimpy black bikini. While three of them stood with their mouths agape, Jerome leaned down and hugged the shorter man before kissing him on the lips, causing Jason’s hackles to rise.

“Well, Jerome? What’s goin’ on?”

“Can I tell you over a cold beer?” Jerome asked, grinning widely.

“You know you can,” the nearly naked man answered, mirroring Jerome’s smile.

Jerome turned to the three men behind him. “This is Will, Will Parkinson. He’s the owner of this fine establishment. Will, this is Jason, my Boy.” Will’s eyebrows shot up, but he didn’t say anything. “This is Cameron, my nephew, and Special Agent Tanner,” Jerome finished the introductions.

“Special Agent?” Will frowned as he looked at Jerome. “A G-Man?”

“Yeah, sorry. It couldn’t be helped,” Jerome answered apologetically.

“Um... nice to meet you,” Cameron grinned shyly as he shook Will’s hand, his eyes wandering a bit over his body, noticing the gold rings in each nipple that were buried in dark fur.

“Mr. Parkinson—” Tanner started to say before Will cut him off.

“Zip it, suit,” Will all but spat out. “Jerome, in a nutshell, tell me what’cha wantin’.”

Jerome sighed heavily. “We need a place to stay for at least a few days, Will. It will be the three of us,” Jerome indicated himself, Jason and Cameron.

“No problem, Jerome,” Will said. “Only got one other guest right now, and won’t have any more until Friday. Even then we aren’t booked up.”

“Mr. Parkinson, this is a federal—”

Will turned to Tanner and said, “You just don’t know how to be quiet do you?”

“Excuse me!” Tanner said angrily. “I’m a Federal Agent, Mr. Parkinson, and this is a federal matter and you will listen to what I have to say!”

Will sighed heavily, shaking his head. “Christ. Go ahead if you fuckin’ have to,” he said, giving in to Tanner.

“First, I have a few questions,” Tanner said, clearly rattled. “Are there any other entrances to this place?”

“Yeah, only one, on the other side of the courtyard,” Will answered rolling his eyes.

“I’ll need to see it and make sure it is secure,” Tanner said officially.

Jerome and Will both laughed.

“Tanner, you can stand down.” Jerome chuckled. “That back gate is even more secure than the front. I should know... I made it that way.”

Tanner frowned.

“Trust me, *Agent*,” Will said smugly, “this place is almost as tight as Fort Knox, mainly to keep the likes of you out.”

Tanner frowned again. “Then we will need four rooms please, one for each of these men and another for an agent.”

“Jason and I room together,” Jerome informed Will, bringing a smile to Jason’s face.

“Listen, I don’t mind putting Jerome and party up,” Will said, sidestepping Jerome a bit to look directly at Tanner, “but I can’t have a fed in here stinkin’ up the place. You’d run off my clientele.”

“First off, Mr. Parkinson, it won’t be *me* staying here, trust me, but if *they* are going to stay here, then so is an agent.” There was no doubt that this was the way it was going to be.

Will looked to Jerome for help.

“How about a waiver?” Jason suggested.

“What do you mean?” Tanner asked suspiciously.

“What if you, as acting official, signed a waiver that the agent who is assigned to stay here will do their best to blend in, and that whatever he sees, hears, or in any way witnesses stays here, and no one can be prosecuted in any way?”

“I don’t know,” Tanner said thoughtfully. “So the agent, he or she would have to turn a blind eye to everything?”

“First off, *suit*,” Will said, none too politely, “This is a men’s only environment. Second, the only way I’d let a fed stay here is if they swear on their mother’s grave that what goes on here stays here, just like in Vegas.”

Tanner scowled at the muscled, hairy man in front of him. “Okay, that’s doable... I think, provided there are no major laws being broken.”

“Good, now, that we’ve got that settled,” Will smirked, “when are *you* leaving?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Jerome huffed. “Will, just tell me where we’re gonna be staying so I can get a shower and a cold beer. Then you two peacocks can strut all you want.”

“Y’all take the third floor,” Will said, not taking his eyes off Tanner. “You and your Boy can take the big suite. That leaves two rooms for junior to choose from. All have connecting doors if you remember, Jerome.”

“Yeah, cool. Thanks, Will.” Jerome seemed happy with the news. “Come on, Jason, I think you’re gonna love this.”

“Come to the office so I can get you the keys first, Jerome,” Will said, striding off and displaying his cute bubble butt. “Bring that suit with you.”

They all entered the small office where Will gave Jerome keys for the “Penthouse”, smiling slyly at Jason. “Everything is fully stocked up there, Jerome, just the way you like it.” Will winked, then smiled.

“Mr. Parkinson, if you will provide a purchase order—”

“Credit card or cash only, Suit, that’s the way it works around here,” Will said, squinting up at the agent. “Deal with it however you need to, but that’s how it’s gonna be.”

Agent Tanner was becoming more and more flustered, while his face turned redder. “I’ll arrange payment for you, Mr. Parkinson.” Tanner turned his back on Will, catching Jerome, Jason and Cameron before they could leave the office. “I’ll stay with you until the other Special Agent arrives, Mr. Fontaine.”

“Hey, what about that waiver?” Will asked.

“Mr. Parkinson, if you have a computer I can draw one up in just a few minutes.” Jason volunteered.

“You?” Will asked surprised.

“It’s okay, Will, he’s a lawyer,” Jerome smiled.

“Cool beans!” Will looked even more favorably at Jason. “Right over here,” he said, crooking a finger at Jason. “Make yourself at home right here, handsome.” Will pulled out the chair in front of a computer desk. “And just call me Will.”

“Oooo, Papi!” Everyone turned to see a young Latino man wearing a neon green thong slink in, his hand already sliding down the front of Tanner’s suit. “You need fresh towels?”

“Give it a rest, Ricky.” Will snickered. “He’s not a guest.”

“Maybe yes? Maybe no?” Ricky circled the man, smiling lasciviously at him.

“Here you go, Mr. Parkinson... um, Will,” Jason said, standing up and holding out a couple of printed pages. “I think this will cover most of your concerns.”

“Thanks, Jason.” Will read over the document then looked at Jason again. “Pretty *and* has smarts. You need to keep this one, Jerome.”

Jason took the document back then tried to hand it to Agent Tanner. However, Tanner was frozen in place, as Ricky had latched onto his arm and was giving him goo-goo eyes. “Agent Tanner,” Jason prompted him.

Finally, Agent Tanner managed to pull his arm away from Ricky and took the document. "Excuse me," he said. Just as he started to read, his phone rang, so he stepped outside of the office to answer it.

"This is Ricky," Will smiled at the man and shook his head. "He is our lead housekeeper. If there is anything you need, he's the one to call."

Everyone had just finished introducing themselves when Tanner stepped back into the office. "This looks okay," he said, indicating the document. "Although I'm still not comfortable condoning illegal activity."

Jason stepped in before Will exploded. "Agent Tanner, I'm pretty sure that there isn't going to be anything illegal going on. I think that Mr. Parkinson just needs to be reassured that his customers won't have to be concerned about their possible sexual proclivities getting them into trouble."

"Oh." Tanner said flatly, his face turning red.

"You want I can show you?" Ricky asked, reattaching himself to the tall FBI agent.

"No!" Tanner almost yelled. "A... an agent is on his way, one who will stay with you while you are here." Tanner wasn't sure how to get out of Ricky's clutches, and it was quite apparent that the pretty Latino man wasn't one to take no easily.

"Come on, y'all" Will said, picking up a cordless phone. "I'll show you to your rooms."

"I'll need to look them over," Tanner said, trying to extricate himself from Ricky's hold.

They all trudged up the stairs to the third floor, Ricky right on Tanner's heels. Will opened the center French doors on the balcony.

"Here is the main lounge," Will informed them. "There is the flat screen TV and stereo." He pointed out along one wall. "There are DVDs in the drawer. The sectional is new." The large black leather furniture dominated the room.

"Here is the Master Suite." He opened the door so they could all see. Jerome and Jason dropped their bags just inside the door.

“Wow, this is incredible,” Jason exclaimed, his eyes wide. “Sir, did you make that bed?”

“Of course he did,” Will answered for him. “Where else you going to find that kind of work? The shackles are a permanent part of it too!” Will grinned widely, his eyebrows raised.

Tanner became more agitated looking at the large king sized canopy bed with chains hanging from the four intricate posts. He became even more uncomfortable when Will opened up a wardrobe full of whips, floggers, and a few other things that he could only imagine what they were used for.

“That turn you on, Papi?” Ricky leered at Tanner.

“I’m not gay!” Tanner proclaimed, finally having had enough of Ricky’s insinuations.

“That’s what they all say,” Ricky replied, undeterred.

“Jerome, there is a sling in the closet.” Will informed him. “I’ll get Ricky to rig it for you.”

“Oh, yes, I will do that.” Ricky nodded.

“The bathroom is through that door. There is a shower shot already hooked up,” Will said casually.

He led the way back through the lounge and then through another door. “This is the second bedroom. Its bathroom is shared with the next bedroom. There is another door over there that can be used to access it as well,” he demonstrated his point.

Just then the phone rang, so Will answered it. He looked at Tanner, eyebrows raised. “I’ll buzz you in. That was your agent.” He directed at Tanner. “I’ll go down and meet him,” Will said, going out the door of the second bedroom. “Y’all make yourselves at home. Ricky, go hang that sling for Jerome.”

“Yes, sir,” Ricky said, smiling slyly at Tanner. “You like to help?”

“No!” Tanner blushed again.

Jerome helped Ricky put up the sling in the Master Suite while Jason put their clothes away.

“I didn’t think to bring a bathing suit,” Jason said.

“You no need one,” Ricky reassured. “It is clothes optional.”

“Cool,” Cameron said. “I’ve never been to a clothing optional place before.”

Jason saw Jerome smile slightly at his nephew’s enthusiasm.

“Right in here, Eric,” they heard Will say, coming into the room with a giant of a man.

“Special Agent Tanner?” The big blond asked, holding out his hand to Tanner. “I’m Special Agent Eric Olsen.”

Tanner’s astonished face mirrored everyone else’s in the room, except for Will’s, who was grinning from ear to ear. All eyes looked over Agent Olsen. From the tight DC Eagle T-shirt, to the 501 jeans that looked as if they had been painted on, Eric Olsen was quite a specimen. He towered over everyone in the room, standing at least six foot five. His shoulders looked as wide as the doorframe.

“You’re... gay?” Tanner almost squeaked.

“Yes, sir.” Special Agent Olsen answered, smiling.

With introductions out of the way, Jason noticed Cameron was all but drooling while looking at their new bodyguard. He poked Jerome on the ribs with his elbow drawing his attention to his nephew. Jerome looked at Jason and smiled, then winked.

“Well, Special Agent Olsen, I will leave you to it then.” Tanner made a speedy exit, Ricky right on his heels to “help let him out”.

As soon as the pair left, the rest all burst out laughing.

“Ricky won’t give up, trust me,” Will said, almost doubled over. “I wouldn’t put money on that suit either,” he quickly added.

“Um... Special Agent Olsen, I’ll show you your room if you like,” Cameron said, blushing fiercely.

“Please, just Eric,” he said smiling at Cameron. “Lead the way, handsome.”

Poor Cameron turned beet red as he left the room followed by Special Agent Eric Olsen.

Jason and Jerome both started laughing again.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It was late afternoon by the time the new guests at The Phoenix had completely settled in. At that point, both Jerome and Jason were starving, having missed lunch altogether. When Jerome was told that they were pretty much prisoners, and not allowed to leave at all, he started to become agitated.

“You mind telling me how we’re supposed to eat?” Jerome asked, pushing Special Agent Olsen for a quick answer.

“The FBI will have all meals sent in, Mr. Fontaine,” the big man soothed Jerome. “I’ll make a call right now and see if they can’t get something in here immediately.”

“Great.” Jerome started pacing like a caged animal.

Jason went to the kitchenette and got a beer out of the refrigerator for Jerome. “Here, Sir,” Jason said quietly.

Jerome took the beer and scowled slightly.

“Think of it like a mini vacation, Sir.” Jason tried to rationalize.

“Like I have time for a fucking vacation? I don’t even know the condition of my shop and you’re wantin’ me to relax?” Jerome was close to losing it.

“Let me call my father and see if he knows what’s going on with the shop, Sir,” Jason said, his phone already in his hand.

“Corleone,” Francis Corleone answered.

“Fath... Dad, it’s Jason.”

“Hello, Jason, how’re you doing, son?” He asked, genuinely concerned.

“I’m fine, Dad. I have you on speakerphone and Jerome is with me.” Jason looked at Jerome, whose brows were creased. “Dad, what’s the word on the shop?”

“I just left there and everything is boarded up tight.” Jason thought that he sounded tired. “Jerome, there wasn’t a lot of structural damage; mostly it was just the siding that was effected. That has been taken care of.”

There was a look of great relief on Jerome's face. "Thank you, Mr. Corleone, I don't know how to thank you." The expression on Jerome's face changed quickly as if he had just bitten into something foul, almost making Jason laugh out loud.

"Jerome, call me Francis, okay?"

"Um... sure... Francis. Thanks for your help."

"Anytime, Jerome. We'll talk when all this is over." Francis said, but it was phrased almost as a question.

"Sure, Francis. We'll have a couple of beers," Jerome replied, looking less stressed.

"Listen," Francis said, and they could hear a car engine starting in the background, "Ana wants me back at my hotel. I'm not sure what is going down, but she is suggesting that even I keep out of sight. Son, we may not be able to talk for a few days. I've been told that we shouldn't contact each other until this blows over."

"I understand... Dad."

"I'll talk to you as soon as I can, Jason. I love you, son." Francis Corleone's emotions rang loud and clear.

"I love you too, Dad. We'll talk soon."

Jason ended the call just as Eric Olsen walked into the room. Both Jerome and Jason's eyes nearly popped out of their heads. Their bodyguard was wearing a neon, lime-green, square-cut bathing suit that couldn't have been any tighter, and left nothing to the imagination. He had a towel over his shoulder, a Glock automatic gun in one hand and bottle of sunscreen and cell phone in the other.

Eric scowled slightly at Jason. "Mr. Corleone, I need to take your phone please, just for now."

"Why?" Jason asked surprised.

"You and Mr. Fontaine are targets and your phone is traceable," Eric explained, his hand out, waiting for Jason to give up his phone.

Jason sighed, "I guess that makes sense." He handed the phone to the blond giant who promptly removed the battery.

“Yours too, please, Mr. Fontaine.”

Jerome dug in his jeans pocket then slapped his phone into the big man’s hand, grumbling. The battery was taken out of his as well.

“I’m sorry, but it is for your protection,” Eric said sympathetically. “I’ll give ’em back just as soon as I’m given the okay. Sorry guys.”

Even Jerome couldn’t be mad at the man.

“If it’s any consolation, we should have some food here shortly,” Eric said brightly.

Cameron walked in wearing a towel around his waist, his face flushed.

“Looks as if you both are headed to the pool?” Jason observed grinning.

“Might as well take advantage of it while we’re here,” Cameron stammered.

“Sounds like a good idea to me.” Jason smiled in agreement. “Why don’t we all go, Sir?”

Jerome grumbled something incoherent, which Jason took to be a yes. “Why don’t we meet you guys down by the pool?”

“Cool.” Eric grinned his perfect, model smile. “We can eat poolside.”

Eric had to duck his head going through the French doors, with Cameron following like an eager puppy.

Jason studied Jerome, who just looked lost. “Come on, Sir; let’s make the best of it. There’s nothing we can do right now.”

Jerome’s shoulders heaved as he took a deep breath. He rubbed his face with both hands as he exhaled.

“I guess you’re right, Boy.”

“I’ll grab us a few beers and we can relax by the pool until the food arrives,” Jason said, rubbing Jerome’s shoulders a bit.

“I don’t know about relax, but the beer and food sound good ’bout now.”

“Let’s go then.”

The two men stripped, grabbed a couple of towels and two beers apiece, then headed down to the pool.

When Jerome and Jason approached the pool, Cameron was lying on his stomach naked, Special Agent Olsen was stretched out next to him, also naked, his cock and balls on display with his hands behind his head and his aviator shades on.

“Nice Prince Albert,” Jerome complimented the Agent. “What is that? An eight gauge?”

“Thanks.” The FBI Agent smiled. “Actually it’s a six gauge.”

“I’ve always liked a curved barbell,” Jerome said, commenting on the cock jewelry while shucking his towel.

“Yeah, me too,” the big blond agreed.

“I can tell.” Jerome chuckled.

“Oh, these?” Mr. FBI replied as he played with the two surgical steel barbell piercings in both nipples. “Yeah, I like it when they’re twisted,” he said, waggling his eyebrows.

Jerome flipped his own surgical steel nipple ring, smiling, as he stretched out on the chaise next to the blond. Glancing down, he couldn’t help but notice the outline of the Glock under the towel next to him.

Jason stretched out on the other side of Jerome, sighing.

“Boy, I hope you don’t burn,” Jerome frowned.

“Here, Mr. Corleone,” Eric Olsen said, tossing the sunscreen to Jason.

“Thanks.” Jason caught the bottle easily. “I tan easily after I burn the first time. And you can drop the Mr. Corleone. Just Jason, please.”

“Yeah, if we’re gonna be stuck here, might as well be on a first-name basis,” Jerome added.

“Works for me,” Eric said. “Just call me Eric then.”

“Now this is what I like to see,” interrupted Will, carrying one side of a large bucket filled with ice and beer. Ricky was on the other side. “Hot naked men by my pool, makes it all worthwhile.”

As they set down the beer, Will’s phone rang. “Food delivery?” he asked the small group.

"I'll get that," Eric said, picking up the Glock as he stood.

Will escorted Eric through the two gates, Eric wearing nothing but a towel. When they returned, they were both carrying large bags of food.

"Food, guys," Eric smiled as he and Will set the bags on a table. He spread his towel over a chair as he sat down to eat.

"You guys let me know if there is anything y'all need," Will spoke, as he and Ricky went back towards the office.

Everyone got up but Cameron, who seemed to be squirming a bit.

"Come on, Cam, get a move on," his Uncle Jerome called to him. "Best get it while you can. Might not be nothin' left if you wait too long." Jerome smirked.

Cameron rolled away from the others and tried to pull the towel out from under his butt without exposing himself.

"Oh, good God, Cameron, it ain't like I never saw a dick before," Jerome huffed impatiently.

"But... you're family." Cameron blushed.

"Like anyone gives a flying rat's ass?" Jerome scowled at the younger version of himself.

"Don't worry about it, Cam." Eric urged, smiling at the youth.

Cameron took a deep breath and stood up, his semihard, elongated dick swinging out in front of him.

Jerome whistled lowly. "Damn, Cam, you're hung!"

Cameron's head dropped in embarrassment.

"Um... Sir?" Jason grinned broadly. "Cameron looks to be a little larger than you. You really could pass for father and son. Is that what you looked like when you were his age?"

Jerome glared at Jason for a moment before looking back at his nephew.

"Come here, Cam," Jerome ordered.

Cameron stood next to his uncle, still obviously embarrassed. There was no doubt they were related with the two standing side by side.

“Damn, you guys really do look alike,” Eric said, shaking his head.

“Now that you’re side by side, I take it back, Sir,” Jason said with eyes wide. “I think you are pretty much equals in the endowment department.”

Jerome pulled his nephew close by his side. Jason’s jaw dropped when he saw Jerome kiss the younger man’s cheek.

“You were a cute kid, but you’ve turned into a very handsome man now. You’ve nothing to be ashamed of, Cameron.” Jerome smiled almost tenderly at Cameron.

“Thanks, Uncle Jerome. I always hated it when we had family get-togethers and you weren’t there. You know, we didn’t even bring your name up when Dad was around,” Cameron said quietly.

“Don’t matter,” Jerome said, his voice sounding a bit scratchy. “Let’s eat.”

They all sat around the table and unloaded the deli sandwiches that had been delivered.

“How long we gonna be stuck here?” Jerome asked, before taking a large bite of the oyster po’boy.

“I can’t say for sure,” Eric answered after swallowing a bit of his own sandwich. “I do know that it shouldn’t be all that long.”

“Why do you say that?” Jason asked, muffuletta in hand.

“I guess I can tell you since you’re here and not really in communication with anyone,” Eric said seriously. “There are a bunch of warrants being gathered up. I think there is going to be a series of coordinated raids. Almost every agency known is going to be in on this operation.”

“Huh?” Cameron looked surprised.

“FBI, ATF, New Orleans PD, LBI and there was even a hint that the CIA might be in on this one.” Eric saw the shock on the other three faces. “This is pretty big, guys, and some of these people are ruthless. It’s why you’re being held up here. There are legitimate hits out on both Jerome and Jason here.”

“Who are they raiding?” Jason asked.

“Two law firms, the Port in Fourche, and three private residences.” Eric looked at Cameron. “Sorry, Cam, but your dad and granddad’s places are on that list.”

“What other private residence?” Jason prodded.

“Some big lawyer here in town. I don’t even know the name,” Eric informed them. “All I know is that as soon as they have all the warrants in place and all the agencies involved are ready, it’s a go.”

“Holy hell,” Jason commented, shaking his head.

“By the way, Eric,” Jerome said, his mouth full, “my Boy here requires beignets every morning. Got it?”

Eric grinned. “Got it, Sir.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When the shadows encroached up and over the courtyard, the foursome left the pool and trudged up the stairs to their suites. Almost immediately, Jason could tell that Jerome was antsy and feeling caged.

“Sir?” Jason whispered as he took Jerome’s hand.

“Huh?” Jerome seemed miles away, like he was ready to crawl out of his own skin.

Jason didn’t say anything more, just pulled Jerome towards the bathroom. Turning on the shower and waiting for the water to heat up, he could feel Jerome becoming impatient. As soon as the water was as hot as Jason wanted, he pulled Jerome into the large, tiled shower. He adjusted the multiple jets to maximize the massage benefits.

Jason turned Jerome away from him, squeezed a dollop of shampoo in his hand and started to wash Jerome’s hair, taking the time to massage his scalp.

“Ahhh,” Jerome moaned as he leaned back into Jason’s body.

Jason smiled, pleased that he had called this one right. Once he was done with the shampoo, he took the natural sea sponge and chose the eucalyptus soap from the variety that was available. He started slowly, making small, then larger, circles across Jerome’s broad muscled back. Another groan of pleasure escaped Jerome and echoed in the steamy enclosure, as he braced his arms on the tiled wall.

As he moved down Jerome’s tight body, Jason could feel the muscles start to relax. The big man tensed momentarily when Jason spread his ass cheeks, but soon relaxed as he continued the deep massage of the thick, dense muscles. Jerome gasped when Jason’s fingers brushed lightly over his dark plum-colored pucker. Jason had learned long ago that there wasn’t a man alive that didn’t enjoy a little anal massage from time to time.

Not wanting to make him uncomfortable, Jason moved on to the thick hairy legs, digging deeply into the dense tissue, evoking another loud moan.

Jerome dropped his head, resting his chin on his chest. When Jason reached his feet, he had Jerome turn and sit on the built-in bench. Picking up each foot, he washed and then massaged each one slowly. He watched as the remaining tension in Jerome's face slid away down the drain along with the swirling soapy water.

The smell of eucalyptus filled the steamy room as Jason worked his way up Jerome's legs, taking special care to work the heavy quad muscles, circling closer and closer to the center, where Jerome's substantial genitals hung. His balls rested on the bench, while his big uncut dick lay nestled between the heavy orbs. Taking his time, Jason eventually reached Jerome's crotch area. Adding a little soap in his palm, Jason pushed back the foreskin, exposing the flared, sensitive glans. Gently, he cleaned the head of Jerome's cock, taking special care around the surgical steel ring of his Prince Albert. Lifting the hefty ball sack, he stretched it tight as he washed and massaged them. Looking up, he saw that Jerome was watching him intently, an expression on his face that Jason couldn't quite get a read on.

Satisfied that everything was squeaky clean, he picked up the sea sponge again and started on Jerome's furry abs. Jason loved the way the hair swirled as he made symmetrical circles, leaving soapsuds in the wake of the soft sponge as he moved upwards. He stood up when he reached Jerome's chest, continuing to wash and massage, lifting one arm, then the other, to reach the hairy pits.

Jason traced the outline of the tribal tattoo that was inked on Jerome's right shoulder, running down his arm as it circled his large bicep. This time, it was Jason who moaned. Shaking himself, getting back to the job at hand, he got the handheld shower sprayer and started to rinse off Jerome, taking extra care with the jewels that he hoped to taste later.

Pulling Jerome up to a standing position from the bench, Jason turned him, rinsing off his backside, enjoying the close personal contact.

He was taken by surprise when Jerome turned and snatched the handheld device, putting it back on its holder. "My turn," he said, a glint in his eye.

Jerome dumped shampoo on Jason's head and roughly scrubbed his scalp. The only thing Jason could do was brace himself against the shower wall and enjoy the ride. After Jerome rinsed away the shampoo, he started on Jason's back, using the same sea sponge to make large lazy circles on his shoulders and back. When he got around to Jason's tightly rounded ass, the stubble there now thick, Jerome shoved a thick finger inside Jason, causing him to yelp.

"You like me inside you, Boy?"

"Oh, yes, Sir," Jason moaned, thrusting his hips back, trying to get more of the digit inside him.

Jerome chuckled, "You're just gonna have to wait for any more, Boy."

By the time Jerome was finished, Jason had a raging hard-on, and was leaking precum like a faucet. Jerome turned the shower off and stepped out to grab a towel. He smiled as Jason whined so softly it was almost imperceptible.

"Come on, Boy." Jerome snickered to himself as he watched Jason, his face flushed as his dick stuck out in front of him.

"Yes, Sir," Jason said, obviously frustrated.

Walking into the bedroom, Jerome pointed to the sling.

"Oh, yes, Sir!" Had Jason had a tail, it would have been wagging just then.

It took Jason a moment to lie down in the hanging leather sling which was suspended from the ceiling by nickel-plated chains. Jerome walked up and pulled Jason toward him, positioning his ass to where it was hanging off the edge. He then used the leather shackles to secure first Jason's ankles, then his wrists, from each of the four chains holding the sling. The look in Jason's eyes was now dark and full of lust.

"Gonna have a little fun since there ain't nothin' else to do," Jerome said, a slightly evil smirk curling up one side of his mouth.

"Yes, Sir!"

"You trust me, Boy?"

“Yes, Sir,” Jason replied seriously. “I do, Sir.”

“Good. Let’s see if you really understand how I like to play.” Jerome stood between Jason’s legs, his ankles about shoulder height. “Yellow is your safe word for me to slow down. Got that?”

“Yes, Sir. Yellow means slow down.”

“My name... Jerome... is for stop,” he said quietly, looking Jason directly in the eyes. “Understand?”

“Yes, Sir. Jerome means stop.”

“If you say my name, everything stops. It ends right then.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Jerome ran his hand down Jason’s prickly chest, then down his tight stomach. “Damn, you sure are hairy.”

“Sorry, Sir.”

“Why you sorry? Ain’t nothing wrong with it.” Jerome frowned. “You’re a man. Men have hair. I happen to like men, not little hairless boys. I don’t wanna hear that again.”

“Yes, Sir.” Jason smiled, glad that Jerome didn’t mind him being so damned hairy.

“Let’s see where some of your limits are,” Jerome said with a gleam in his eye.

He walked over to the armoire. Opening the door, he peered back over his shoulder at Jason suspended in the shackles, his hands and legs spread. Grinning, he walked back with a leather bootlace and something else hidden behind his back.

“You ready, Boy?”

“Sir, yes, Sir!” Jason was almost hoarse with anticipation.

Jerome smiled at Jason’s enthusiasm. He looped the bootlace around the base of Jason’s cock and balls a few times, pulled it tight, then knotted it. He then held up a black leather phallus, approximately a foot long and four or five inches in diameter. He tied it onto the bootlace, through a loop at

one end. He held it up for Jason to see, making sure that he had his full attention, then Jerome let it drop.

The weight of the object pulled Jason's cock straight up, the tip pointing towards the ceiling. Jason grunted slightly as it pulled his dick up and his balls tight.

"How's that, Boy?"

"It is fine, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

Jerome smiled, his eyes squinting, before he returned to the open toy chest. Jason was curious when he came back with a galvanized bucket and a spool of black string. Jerome pulled a small table close and set both objects down. He smirked and rubbed his hands together, looking like a kid in a candy store. Jason's mouth opened then quickly closed when he saw the wooden clothes pin in Jerome's hand.

Jason winced slightly as Jerome placed a clothes pin onto his left nipple. After the initial pain dissipated somewhat, it really didn't hurt all that much. Then his right nipple was given the same treatment.

"You ever played with clothes pins before, Boy?"

"No, Sir."

Jerome grunted as he picked up another clothes pin. Starting on the inside of Jason's inner elbow, he started placing clothes pins about an inch apart, lining the inside of Jason's arm, the tender skin turning pink quickly. Jason gasped at the tight pinch just below his armpit, but quickly shut his mouth.

A slow burn started. At first it didn't seem like much of a big deal, but the longer the clothes pins pinched the tender flesh, the more intense the burning sensation became. Jerome continued to place the wooden clothes pins in a line all the way down his side, then he cut across to the left nipple, his face studious as he worked.

Jerome paused to survey his work. Seeming satisfied thus far, he started on the other arm, taking his time to make sure that each pin was secure. When both sides looked the way he wanted, he started to thread the black twine through the center hole of each clothes pin, smiling as he went.

Jason really started to twitch as the pain ran from his nipples to each elbow. Jerome took a pocket knife and cut the string, leaving enough on both ends to be gathered together, one for the right side and one for the left. He laid the ends on Jason's stomach.

"Focus on me, Boy," Jerome said, rubbing the stubbled stomach where the four ends of the string lay. "Keep your eyes on me, you hear?"

"Yes, Sir," Jason said through clenched teeth.

Jason let out a long moan when Jerome placed the first clothes pin on his inner thigh, just above his knee. He gave each inner leg the same treatment as he had Jason's arms. Jason tried not to move, or flinch, with each added pinch to his tender flesh. The pain was really starting to radiate through his limbs.

"Breathe, Boy. Trust me. Believe. Focus on me, Boy," Jerome whispered his voice deep and rumbling.

"Yes, Sir."

Jason's dick was granite hard, a small pearl of clear fluid beading the tiny slit. Jason did flinch when the first clothes pin snapped closed on the tender underside of his dick, just below the now purple head.

"Breathe, Boy" Jerome instructed.

Jason took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. Then Jerome placed the rest of the pins, going down the underside of his rock hard cock. When Jerome got to the base, he started circling the pins around his balls.

"Focus, Boy. I'm almost done."

Jason didn't trust his voice anymore, so only nodded and kept breathing.

Jerome placed the last clothes pin just underneath Jason's balls, and smiled broadly. "There," he said, more to himself than to Jason.

Again, he ran the black twine through the clothes pins, laying the ends on Jason's heaving stomach, patting it and looking extremely satisfied with himself.

Jason could sense him moving, but couldn't see from his point of view. All he knew was that he no longer felt each individual clothes pin, only the

searing pain running up his arms centering on his nipples and from his knees to his balls. He felt Jerome's name rise to his lips, ready to be spoken. He really didn't know how much more he was going to be able to take. He could feel sweat running down his sides from his armpits. The snaking pain pulsing up his arms and legs intensified with every beat of his heart.

"Focus on me, Boy," Jerome said, his chocolate brown eyes drilling into Jason's.

Jerome looked down briefly. Slowly he lifted his eyes, surveying his handiwork. He picked up the ends of the string in one hand.

Looking directly at Jason, he said, "Ready, Boy?"

Jason had an idea of what was about to happen and braced himself. "Yes, Sir," he managed through clenched teeth.

Jerome jerked the strings sharply as he buried his dick deep in Jason's clenched ass. A scream left Jason's mouth, as he threw his head back as far as it would go in the sling.

The door to the bedroom slammed open. Eric stood there with the Glock in both hands, just in time to see Jason's cum flying through the air.

"Oh, shit! Sorry." Eric quickly shut the door, just as the second explosion of cum left Jason's pulsing dick.

Jerome pounded Jason's ass as he continued to spurt hot cum into the air, until his upper body was splattered with his own cum. He gasped for breath, still seeing stars, as he looked up at Jerome who was pounding his ass for all he was worth.

When Jerome changed positions and then started jerking on Jason's already overly-sensitive dick, he screamed again as he started shooting another load into the air.

"That's my Boy," Jerome yelled as he emptied his balls into Jason's quivering ass.

Not knowing how long he lay there, Jason finally opened his eyes to see Jerome holding onto the chains where his legs were tethered, breathing heavily. To Jason, there seemed to be a glow surrounding Jerome's head.

Jason closed his eyes while Jerome took all the shackles off, his body too limp to move.

“Put your arms around my neck, Jason,” Jerome whispered in his ear.

Without opening his eyes, Jason sluggishly complied, placing his arms around Jerome’s neck. He was lifted, his body brought close to Jerome’s. He could feel the heat of the man as the now cool cum sealed them together. Half walking, half carrying him, Jerome took him and laid him gently on the bed. Lying beside him, he pulled Jason close.

Jason opened his eyes and looked deeply into Jerome’s. He could feel his eyes watering. Unable to hold them back, he felt tears silently start to stream down his face. There was a genuine tenderness in Jerome’s eyes, which made Jason weep even harder.

“You okay, Boy?”

“Oh, yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir,” Jason whispered as he mushed his face into Jerome’s furry chest. “That was amazing.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jason opened his eyes to the dark room. Jerome was spooned up behind him, in what had become the norm, which suited Jason just fine. As much as he hated to leave the comforts of Jerome's body, his bladder screamed at him to move his ass. Pushing Jerome's arm aside, he slid out of the big bed and made his way to the bathroom. He sighed contentedly as his urine cascaded into the bowl. The warm soreness in his ass made him smile.

When done, he realized how thirsty he was, so went to get some water from the small kitchenette's mini refrigerator. Bending over, he heard a slapping noise followed by a muffled "Fuck!" from the room next door. He grinned as he recognized that sound. He crept quietly towards the adjoining door. It wasn't completely closed.

"Oh... fuck yeah," the same voice groaned.

Jason, unable to resist, pushed the door open a crack so he could peer in. The lights were on, so he was able to clearly see Cameron slamming his big dick into Special Agent Eric Olsen's bubble butt.

Must run in the family, Jason said to himself, chuckling and closing the door.

He slipped back into his and Jerome's room, chugging the water as he went. Soon, he was back in the comfort of Jerome's arms, fast asleep.

Jerome pushed his morning wood into the firm cheeks of Jason's ass, grinning before he even opened his eyes. He breathed in the man's scent, the man who had been foisted upon him. The masculine scent made his cock twitch in the warm cleavage. The prickly stubble sticking him in his hips and dick as he pushed closer only added to the erotic feeling.

Just as quickly as Jerome grinned, it was replaced by a hard scowl. He slipped quietly out of bed. After a quick trip to the bathroom, he went in search of coffee. The scowl on his face never wavered as he measured out the grounds and waited for the coffee to drip through the filter. Tension

seeped back into his neck and shoulders, going practically unnoticed by him.

Walking onto the third story balcony, he could see across the other rooftops. A barge was being pushed by a tugboat, at eye level, even though he was on the third floor. Tourists were always amazed at having to look *up* to see the boats on the Mississippi. He rubbed his eyes, then pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers hard enough to be painful. Reopening his eyes, he looked down and spotted Will sitting at a table next to the pool, reading the paper and drinking a cup of coffee. Naked, Jerome went down the stairs he had fabricated years earlier.

Will looked up from his paper. "Morning, Jerome."

"Yeah... morning," Jerome grumped.

"Who the hell pissed in your Cheerios?" Will asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No one." Jerome sat down across from his long-time friend.

"What is up with you, Jerome?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit. You're hiding out here with a fed guarding you. You came in here with a new boy *and* your nephew. Now, you wanna talk to me or you want me to kick your ass?" Will glared over the glasses that were perched on the end of his nose. "I've known you too many years, Jerome Fontaine, *not* to know that some big shit is going on, now spill."

"Man, I can't talk about why we're here," Jerome said as he leaned back in the chair, sighing.

"Is that what's eating at you?"

"Things are just... complicated right now." Jerome looked over his cup at Will.

"Yeah, well I know how that can be. Life sometimes just throws us a curveball." Will also leaned back, watching Jerome. "That new boy you got is some looker though."

Jerome's face scrunched up. "He ain't my Boy."

“Bingo!” Will said shaking his head. “That’s what’s eating you huh? Fuck, Jerome, why can’t you let go of the past and just be happy? Man, I have watched you these past twelve years throw happiness away with both hands. Toby would never have wanted that for you.”

Will knew instantly that that was the crux of Jerome’s problem. His face all but turned to stone when Toby’s name was mentioned.

“Fuck you, Will.”

“Jerome, I love you like a blood brother and I hate to see you so miserable. It’s time, man.” Will’s voice was soft. “That boy up there is in love with you, if you haven’t noticed.”

“What the fuck, Will? He’s not even been here a month. Ain’t no way that can happen in that short a time.”

Will shook his head, smirking. “Jerome, you, my friend, are a first-rate dumbass.”

“Fuck you, Will.”

“One, you’ve already said that, so you’re starting to sound like a broken record. And two, if you remember, we tried that once and ended up laughing our asses off. Friends is all we’re ever gonna be,” Will laughed at the memory.

Jerome looked at his friend and couldn’t help but laugh along with him as he also remembered the failed attempt at being bedmates.

“Yeah, two tops don’t always make for good lovers,” Jerome said as he continued to laugh.

The two friends fell into a comfortable silence as they sipped their coffees. They had a history together that only close friends could share.

“Jerome?”

“Yeah?”

“Go for it. Don’t let this one slip away,” Will said, looking at his friend. “You have feelings for this Jason guy and he is in love with you, whether you want to believe it or not.” Will watched as Jerome took that all in. “It’s time, Jerome, time for you to be happy. It’s time to let Toby go.”

A single tear slipped from the corner of Jerome's eye. "I don't know if I can, Will."

Will stood up and took Jerome's hand. Pulling him up too, he led him to a double chaise next to the pool. Lying together on the lounge, Will took Jerome into his arms.

"Say good-bye Jerome. You've held on way too long. Toby has moved on and now so should you."

Jerome held onto his friend as sobs took over, wracking his body. He clung to Will so tightly there were bound to be bruises left behind. Will just held his friend, tears also streaming down his face as they both said their final farewells to the beautiful man whose life had ended way too soon.

Jason stretched long and hard, luxuriating in the king sized bed. He knew that Jerome had made coffee, the smell beckoned to him. First things first, he went to relieve himself, pointing his semihard dick down. Finished, he turned to brush his teeth. In the mirror, he saw the redness on his body where the previous night's activities had left their marks. Lifting his arms, he noticed the tiny bruises just under his armpits. Rubbing his hand over one, he felt the tenderness and smiled.

"Damn, that was hot," he said to himself in the mirror. "I really need to at least shave my neck." His hand rubbed the itchy growth there. "Eh, later."

Coffee in hand, he went out onto the balcony in search of Jerome. He found him. A pang of pain hit him in the chest when he saw Jerome and Will, naked, holding each other on the large chaise lounge by the pool. He felt as if someone had just dumped a bucket of cold water over his head. His eyes were locked on the two men. It was like a bad car wreck; you just couldn't help but look, no matter how disgusting it was.

His hand started to cramp from holding the wrought-iron railing so tightly. Peeling his fingers away, he went back inside, the coffee in his hand no longer appealing. Standing in the middle of the room Jason ran his hand over his chest, feeling the crustiness of his dried cum from the night before.

Wrinkling his nose, he went back to the bathroom and turned on the shower, getting the water as hot as he could stand.

Jason scrubbed his body... hard. His skin was red and sore by the time he got out of the shower. Wiping the steam away from the mirror, he shaved his entire face smooth. Every move he made was automatic. He went through the same routine that he had done for years, not even thinking about what he was doing.

Getting dressed, he picked up a jock, looked at it and put it back, opting for a pair of cotton boxers. Jason chose a long-sleeved T-shirt and a pair of jeans to wear for the day. Sighing heavily, he went into the common area and turned on the large TV to a local station. Purely out of habit, he sipped the now lukewarm coffee.

“Morning,” Eric said as he entered the room, yawning and scratching his butt.

“Morning,” Jason replied, his eyes never leaving the TV.

Eric poured himself a cup of coffee and joined Jason on the big leather sectional, sitting to his left.

Jason looked over at the big naked man, remembering him from the night before, his ankles on Cameron’s shoulders, getting his ass plowed. Now he didn’t find it so cute.

“Eric, can I use my phone to call Ana?”

“Sorry, Jason, I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Eric answered.

“Can I use your phone then?”

Eric looked at Jason, his body slumped on the sofa. “I just don’t think it’s safe, Jason. I’m sorry.”

Jason only nodded and then returned his attention to the blonde bimbo reporter gabbing away about something.

“What’s up, Jason?” Eric asked, knowing something was wrong.

“Nothin’.”

“I’m a good listener.” Eric prodded.

“Morning,” Jerome said, entering the room.

“Morning, Jerome,” Eric returned the greeting.

Jason didn’t say anything.

“You shaved?” Jerome asked standing in front of Jason.

“Yeah.” Jason answered him. He didn’t look at Jerome. If he had, he would have seen the frown followed by the surprised look on his face.

Cameron walked in carrying Eric’s ringing cell phone.

“Olsen,” Eric said, after taking the phone from Jerome’s younger look alike. Looking up at Jerome, he said, “Got it. We’ll be waiting.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“It’s done,” Special Agent Eric Olsen said to the other three men, all of them naked except for Jason.

“What do you mean ‘it’s done’?” Jerome asked.

“The raids were carried out a few hours ago.” Eric explained. “The port was surrounded and taken over. They haven’t said what all was found yet. Your uncle’s law offices are still being searched and all employees are being questioned.” Eric looked at Cameron. “Both your grandfather and father have been arrested, Cameron. I’m sorry.”

Cameron didn’t say anything as he sat down heavily on the sofa, his eyes cast downward.

Eric looked at Jason. “Your cousin Ana’s firm here, has also been raided.”

“What?” For the first time Jason looked like he was paying attention. “Why?”

“I don’t have the details, Jason, but it seems that a few lawyers in her firm were also involved,” Eric said. “A senior partner and a Charles Whitcomb have been arrested and charged with collusion, so far.”

“So now what?” Jerome asked.

“Right now we wait,” Eric answered.

“If it’s all done and over with, why can’t we leave?” Jason asked.

“I’m waiting for an all clear from the higher ups,” Eric replied as he pulled Cameron close. “They want to make sure that the hits that were taken out on you have been negated.”

“Any idea how much longer?” This time it was Jerome asking.

“No, but it shouldn’t be long,” Eric said. “What’s the matter, Jerome, you don’t like vacations?”

“I don’t like bein’ cooped up is all.” Jerome grimaced as he turned to get some more coffee.

“Not so’s you’d notice,” Jason mumbled.

Jerome stopped and turned to look at Jason, his mouth open. “What’s that supposed to mean, Boy?”

Before Jason could answer, Eric’s phone chirped again.

“Olsen,” he answered. After a brief pause—“I’ll be right down.” Giving Jason a puzzled look, he stood up. “Breakfast is here,” he announced. “Wanna eat poolside or bring it up here?”

“Pool works,” Jerome said, having refilled his coffee. He looked perplexed as he watched Jason walk out the door, the first one to leave, heading downstairs.

Eric looked at Jerome. “What’s up with him?”

“I have no idea,” Jerome said, still looking puzzled.

The other three men, still naked, saw Will walking towards one of the poolside tables, his arms full of carryout bags. By the time they arrived, Jason had already chosen a breakfast sandwich and was sitting on the other side of the pool on one of the lounges, totally skipping the beignets that had been special ordered just for him.

Will looked at Jerome, frowned, and whispered, “What the fuck did you do, Jerome?”

“What are you talking about?”

Will nodded towards Jason, who was eating and ignoring the rest of them. “He practically bit my head off.”

Jerome frowned. “I have no idea, but I’m about to find out.”

Disregarding the food, Jerome strode purposefully over to Jason. Jason continued eating, never looking up.

“You wanna tell me what the fuck’s goin’ on?” Jerome demanded.

“Nothin’,” Jason answered simply, as if Jerome were asking about the weather.

Jerome’s eyebrows shot up. “Boy, you are trying my patience.”

“I’m *not* your *Boy*. You’ve made that crystal clear!” Jason finally

looked at Jerome, his eyes hard. Jason stood up and started to walk away, but Jerome grabbed his arm, keeping him from turning.

“What the hell!”

Both Jason and Jerome whipped around, hearing the clatter of a metal chair hitting the pavement and Will’s yell. Cameron was lying on his side, a red pool of blood spreading underneath him.

“Shooter!” Eric yelled, pulling out his Glock, and aiming towards the shooter. He let loose a few shots. “Get down!”

Jerome threw Jason and himself into the pool, keeping them close to the side, out of sight of the gunman on the roof.

“Keep down,” Eric yelled as he ran, taking aim at the shooter on the roof. He pulled off two more shots. Seconds later, a figure fell, landing with a splat close to a potted fig tree. Eric kept his gun trained on the prone figure as he approached slowly. A rifle, with a silencer attached, had also landed, but out of reach of the body. Eric turned the person over with his foot.

“Call nine-one-one,” Eric called to Will, who had ducked into the office entrance. Looking at the two men in the pool, he asked, “You guys okay?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Jerome answered him, pushing Jason flat against the side of the pool while covering his back with his own body.

Eric ran to Cameron, grabbing a pool towel on his way. “Cameron... Cam,” Eric said quietly, as he slowly turned the man onto his back.

Cameron’s eyes opened, his lids fluttering. A brief smile formed on his lips when he saw Eric.

“Cameron, lay still, help is on the way.” Eric pressed the towel to Cameron’s shoulder.

“What happened?” Cameron asked, dazed.

“You’ve been shot, Cam, so please, just lay still for me,” Eric returned the smile. “It’s just your shoulder, so you’re gonna be okay.”

Jerome, dripping wet, knelt next to Cameron.

Reaching out, he was suddenly stopped when Eric growled, “Mine!”

Jerome looked at Eric, astonished to see his teeth were gritted, and his eyes silently dared him to move any closer to Cameron. Withdrawing his hand, a smirky smile on his face, he said, “Down, boy, I’m not gonna hurt him.”

Eric’s face cleared as if he was coming out of a trance. “Sorry man, I kinda lost it there for a minute.”

“Hey, I get it.” Jerome smiled with a new appreciation for Eric.

“Is he going to be okay?” Jason asked, his clothes soaking wet, plastered to his body.

Jerome turned his head to look up at him. “Boy, get in the office.”

“I said I wasn’t—”

Jerome growled. “Boy, I ain’t gonna tell you twice. Get. In. That. Office. *Now!*”

“Do as he says,” Eric said with complete authority. They could all hear the sound of sirens drawing close.

Inside the office, Will held out a towel to Jason.

“No thank you.” Jason turned his back on Will to look out the window at the scene going on poolside.

Will jerked Jason around. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“You, for one thing,” Jason yelled in his face.

Will threw Jason against the doorframe, his forearm across his neck. “Boy, you better tame that tongue of yours before someone rips it outta your fuckin’ head! Now you tell me what the hell is going on.”

“I saw you and Jerome.”

“You saw me and Jerome what?”

“This morning,” Jason spat.

Will took a step back, his arm dropping. “And here I thought you were a smart guy,” Will said, shaking his head.

“It doesn’t take a genius to know what’s going on when two naked guys

are making out!” Jason yelled, his hands balled up into fists, tight against his sides.

Will couldn’t help it. He started laughing.

“What the fuck? What’s so funny?” Jason asked, glaring at the other man.

“Man, you don’t know me from shit.” Will said, still laughing. “You think that me and Jerome? Oh, that’s good. Wait ’til Jerome hears that one!” Will doubled over laughing, his hands on his knees.

Jason stood there, his eyes wide and mouth hanging open, not believing he was being laughed at.

Looking up at Jason, Will tried to compose himself. “Jason, I was... well never mind what we were actually doing, but trust me, it sure as hell wasn’t anything sexual. Man, I was telling Jerome that it was *you* that he needed in his life, and not to fuck it up!”

“Huh?” Jason was truly shocked.

“He was... well let’s just say he was letting go... of...”

“Toby.” Jason squeaked.

“So you know about Toby?”

Jason only nodded.

“The whole story?”

“I think so,” Jason said in a hoarse whisper.

“How he died?”

Again, Jason nodded.

Will let out a deep sigh. “Jerome was saying good-bye this morning. We both were, I guess,” Will said, a faraway tone to his voice.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” Jason said angrily, shaking his head. “I really am a total dumbass.”

The buzzer to the intercom interrupted them. Will pulled on a pair of shorts that were hanging on a peg just inside the office door, and pushed the towel at Jason.

“We good?” Will asked Jason as he walked past.

“Yeah, Will, I’m sorry.”

Will smiled at Jason. “Not a problem, just make it up to Jerome.”

The rest of the morning was a blur, as the New Orleans police invaded the compound along with the EMT’s. It wasn’t long until more FBI agents swarmed the place like ants on an ant hill. Eric had pulled on a pair of Will’s poolside shorts, which were so skin tight water couldn’t even have gotten between him and the short, very short, shorts.

Several hours later, Jerome and Jason made their way back to their rooms, completely exhausted. Jerome still hadn’t put on any clothes, only wearing a towel around his waist. If anyone had looked closely, they would have seen remnants of Jason’s cum embedded in his chest hair from the previous night.

It was strangely silent after all the ruckus that had been swirling around them the past few hours. Jerome dropped heavily onto the sofa.

“Um... Sir, can I talk to you?” Jason asked, as he knelt in front of Jerome on the floor.

Jerome didn’t even look at Jason, his head tilted back as he stared at the ceiling. “What?” His voice was blank, showing no emotion at all.

“I owe you an apology,” Jason said, his voice sounding a bit scratchy, even to himself.

Jerome slowly looked at Jason and waited.

Jason sighed, looking down at the floor. “I saw you and Will this morning by the pool. I... well I kinda thought... I jumped to some conclusions that perhaps might not have been...”

Jerome started to chuckle, then gave a full out belly laugh.

Jason looked up, startled by Jerome’s laughter.

“You thought that Will and I...” he laughed even harder. “That Will and I were getting it on?”

“I’m sorry, Sir,” Jason said, starting to sound a bit irritated.

“Oh, wait ’til Will hears this one!” Jerome said, wiping the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand.

“He knows,” Jason told him, his face turning red. “He said the same thing about you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah... well he kinda set me straight.” Jason admitted.

Jerome stood up and held his hand out to Jason, who took it readily. “Come on, Boy,” he said gently. “I don’t know about you, but I think I’m in need of a nap. I’m exhausted.”

Jason grinned. “Sir, yes, Sir!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“It’s nice that things have finally gotten back to normal,” Jason said, before taking a long drink of his ice cold beer. “This beer tastes so good!”

“Yeah, it is. Glad that we finally got that job done,” Jerome answered after taking a long swig of his own beer, nearly drinking half. “I didn’t know that we’d ever get done with everything that’s happened.”

“You think we’re gonna get that new client?” Jason wanted to know.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure. They were happy with the price I quoted them, and I doubt that there is anyone around who can actually do it.” Jerome sounded confident. “That will keep us busy for the next two years if they do everything they want done.”

“Here y’all go,” Marie announced as she set the plates down in front of them. “I’ll checks on y’all in a bit,” she said as she scurried off to take care of other customers that packed the small restaurant.

“Watch out! Gun!” seconds before a shot was fired, the bullet whizzing by Jerome’s head, barely missing Ant who was standing at another table behind them.

Screaming and chaos broke out in the small restaurant as diners hit the floor, scrambling to get out of the way. Another shot exploded, sounding like a cannon in the small, confined space.

Jason reached across the small table to yank Jerome, whose back was to the shooter, to the floor. A loud “clunk” sounded moments after the second shot was fired. Jason and Jerome looked up to see Marie standing there with one of the large yellow mop buckets they used to serve oysters in her hand, and a grimace on her face. She was staring at a woman who was now sprawled out on the floor, unconscious, covered in oyster shells.

“Bethany?” Jerome asked to no one in particular, clearly surprised.

“Who dat?” Marie huffed slightly, kicking the woman, the bucket raised above her head ready to strike again.

Jerome looked up at Marie and started laughing. “She’s my cousin David’s wife,” he explained to Jason and Marie.

“Why would she want to kill you?” Jason asked. “Damn, that whole side of your family is just nuts!”

Someone must have called the police, because a police cruiser pulled up just then in front of the eatery, sirens blazing. Two of NOPD’s finest came rushing in, their guns drawn.

“Y’all kin put them things away now,” Marie said, still holding the bucket in one hand, her other hand on her large hip. “I dun took care of ’er.” Marie rolled her eyes at the two policemen.

Ignoring her, one of the policemen jerked Bethany’s hands behind her back, getting ready to handcuff her as she started to regain consciousness. The other officer didn’t put his gun away until the woman was cuffed and sitting on the floor.

The woman looked a little dazed, a cut on her cheek bleeding slightly. Shaking the cobwebs from her head, her eyes narrowed when she focused on Jerome. “You!” She screamed. “You ruined everything! You are *evil* and should be sent to hell!”

“What the hell?” Jerome asked shaking his head at the woman and looking at her like she was crazy. “Bethany, what are you talking about?”

“You are a sinner,” she continued her screaming. “You belong in hell with Satan. Reverend Bishop was right when he said you would be the ruin of us all!”

“Reverend Bishop?” Jerome snarled. One of the officers put his hand on Jerome’s chest to keep him from approaching the woman.

“You even took my only son and turned him into one of *your* kind,” she spat. “How does it feel to know you’ve ruined so many lives, Jerome, huh? How does it feel? Your own family is in jail because of you!”

“Woman, you bes’ hush yo’ mouf ’fore I knocks them teeth right out yo’ head!” Marie raised the bucket again. “An’ you kin tell that so-called Rever’nd that he don’ know shit an’ he shore ain’t no Christian!”

Jason couldn’t help it. He started laughing. It was just too outrageous to be imagined. By this time, Ant and Antoine were standing behind Marie,

Antoine with a large chef's knife and Ant armed with a hammer. Everyone looked at Jason as if he were insane.

"What?" He asked them. "You couldn't make this shit up, it's so crazy!"

One of the officers pulled Bethany to her feet while the other read the Miranda rights to her.

"You're going to hell, Jerome, don't you believe for one minute that you're not!" she continued to scream, paying no attention to the officer speaking to her. "You and your filthy faggot friends are *all* going to burn in hell for all eternity!"

Marie swung the bucket towards the screaming woman's head again, and was barely blocked by Antoine's arm.

"Settle down, gal," he murmured close to her ear. "She ain't gonna hurt no one, so hesh up, hear?"

Marie looked at her husband and grunted, slowly lowering the yellow bucket.

Bethany Fontaine continued to rant as she was pulled away and stuffed into one of the squad cars. Not long after, she was driven away, still ranting in the back of the police cruiser.

After several hours of having everyone questioned by a detective, things finally settled down.

Ant had his mother sit down at a table in the corner, and rubbed her shoulders, doing his best to keep her calm. She still had a look on her face that would scare most people.

Jerome walked over to her, grinning from ear to ear. "You love me."

"Shut up, Jerome," Marie said, rolling her eyes at him, her bottom lip stuck out.

"You love me, otherwise you wouldn't have saved my life. Now, go on, admit it," Jerome said as he sat across from her, taking her hand in his.

"I ain't sayin' nuttin'," she protested, not looking at him, but letting him hold her hand.

“That’s all right, Marie, I love you, too,” He smiled gently as he raised her hand and kissed it. “Thank you for saving my life.”

“Jerome, you is the most bothersome man I’s knows,” Marie huffed, failing to stay mad, and eventually grinned.

“I want to thank you also, Marie,” Jason said, before leaning over and kissing her on the cheek.

Marie glared at Jason, and then broke into a large smile. “I did it for you, not Jerome’s sorrowful butt.”

“Who’s this Reverend Bishop?” Jason asked innocently enough.

Jerome looked away, not saying anything.

Marie looked up at Jason, her face blank. “Toby’s daddy.”

“Oh,” Jason said quietly.

“He blames me,” Jerome said, just barely above a whisper.

“Now, Jerome, if you thinks we’s gonna go through this again, I am fo’ shore gonna take you out back an’ whoop yo’ ass, an I’m jus in the mood, too,” Marie said seriously, yanking his arm to make him look at her. “You didn’ have nuttin’ to do with Toby or yo’ daddy gittin’ kilt.”

Jason stood there shaking his head... again. “Is everyone around here crazy?”

“They’s ain’t so much crazy as just passionate,” a baritone voice behind him said softly.

Jason turned to see Antoine standing there.

“I don’ thinks we’ve been properly introduced,” the gentle voice said as he took Jason’s hand in his. “I’m Marie’s husband and Ant’s daddy.”

“Nice to finally meet you, Antoine,” Jason replied as he looked into the man’s gentle light-brown eyes, thinking he looked familiar somehow.

“It is my pleasure, I’m shore,” he replied with a smile.

Jerome stood and took Antoine into his arms, then kissed him on the cheek, then hugged him again.

Jason stood there with his mouth hanging open, unable to process what he was seeing.

Jerome turned to Jason. "He's also my half-brother."

"Huh?" Jason asked dumbly.

"Honey, wha' he's tryin' ta tell ya is we's all related," Marie said tenderly. "We's family, an' family looks afta family, even if they's stupid."

It was Jason who sat down then. "But... how?"

Marie chuckled, shaking her head. "Jerome and Antoine's daddy had a likin' fer brown sugah nows an' agains."

"Oh, I see." Jason blushed. He studied Jerome and Antoine, who were standing with their arms over each other's shoulders. They had the same eyes. Looking a little closer, it was obvious that they were related; only Antoine was darker skinned.

"Ant," Marie hollered toward the kitchen. "Come on out here an' brings that bottle o' whiskey wit'cha!" Ant had disappeared without Jason even noticing.

A moment later, Ant appeared with an unopened bottle of Jack Daniel's and several glasses on a small tray.

Jason looked around at the group and smiled. "I'd be mighty proud to have you all as family."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Sampson is going to be here this afternoon,” Jerome said.

“Mmm, mmh,” Jason replied contently, his head resting on Jerome’s chest. “He’s staying over at the Phoenix with Will?”

“Yes,” Jerome answered as he played with Jason’s ear. “It’s good to be home.”

“Mmm, mmh.” Jason sighed.

The room still smelled of sex and cum, the result of their earlier antics.

“Your ass is bright red,” Jerome chuckled as he looked down at Jason’s butt.

“Mmm hmm.” Jason agreed, sighing.

“Maybe I should add some stripes to that ass and put you in chaps for the reception tonight,” Jerome said as he smacked Jason’s butt, leaving a hand print.

“M’kay,” Jason said after a quick yelp.

Jerome smacked Jason’s other cheek, leaving a similar handprint. “Sometimes you’re just too easy.” Jerome pouted.

“Anything... for you, Sir,” Jason said, looking into Jerome’s eyes.

“Okay, we need to get up and shower,” Jerome said pushing Jason off him.

“So soon?” Jason whined, trying to keep Jerome from leaving the bed.

“Yes... now, Boy. Have you forgotten that we’re supposed to be helping out Will?”

“No, I’ve not forgotten.” Jason grumbled as he got out of bed. He looked at the new clock on the nightstand. “We’ve got a little extra time,” he said, wagging his butt at Jerome.

“Boy, you’re gonna be the death of me yet!”

“Yeah, but what a way to go!” Jason teased Jerome, staying just out of his reach until he got to the shower. “Ouch!”

“Don’t tease the bear, Boy,” Jerome growled after grabbing both of Jason’s very sore butt cheeks and squeezing hard.

“Wow, Will, this place looks *great*,” said Jason, looking around the pool area, clearly impressed.

“Of course it does, he has *me*!” Ricky exclaimed, snapping his fingers before he turned on his heel and walked off.

Jerome and Jason both laughed as they watched the Latino boy walk away in his neon pink thong.

“What are you laughing at?” Will asked Jason, one eyebrow raised almost to his hairline. “He isn’t the only one around here wearing pink.”

Jason turned and wiggled his butt at Will. “You like?”

Will laughed. “Yeah, and the three stripes really sets it off. Nice chaps by the way.”

“Thank you,” Jason said grinning as he turned around. “They’re borrowed.”

“I have several pair.” Jerome shrugged.

“And here is our guest of honor,” Will said, drawing their attention to the gate.

“Well, well, it seems the gang’s all here.” Master Sampson strolled across the pavement toward the small group. His long blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

“Hey, buddy,” Will said, hugging Sampson then kissing him on the lips.

“Great to see you, Will.” Sampson smiled at his old friend. “Jerome?”

Jerome also hugged his friend then kissed him. “Great to see you, Sampson.”

Sampson turned to Jason, who was down on one knee, hands behind his back, head down, giving a full honor present. “What a good boy,” Sampson said as he petted the top of Jason’s head. “Stand up, boy.”

Jason stood, a smile on his face, but eyes still cast down. “Sir, it is good to see you, Sir!”

“I’ve heard many good things about you, boy, since you’ve been here.” Sampson pulled Jason into a big hug, and then whispered something in his ear.

Leaning back from the hug, Jason nodded his head at Sampson, a full blush rising to his cheeks.

“Let’s get this party started,” Will said as Ricky set up a bottle of champagne and some flutes on a table.

“We have a lot to celebrate,” Sampson said looking directly at Jerome.

“A toast,” Will proclaimed, holding up a glass of champagne. “To a great Southern Decadence Weekend!”

“Here, here,” they all joined in the toast.

“I’ll want to get changed in a moment, but before I do…” Sampson said looking at Jason.

Jason blushed again, looking first down at the ground and then at Will.

Will smiled smugly as he pulled an envelope from his back pocket and handed it to Jason. Jason took the envelope, then dropped to one knee in front of Jerome, extending the envelope to him.

“What’s this?” Jerome looked from Jason to the others before taking it.

“Please, Sir?” Jason asked softly.

Jerome took the envelope, ripped it open and started reading the letter inside, his eyes growing larger as he read. He stopped briefly; looking from Will to Sampson, then went back to reading the two page letter. Jason never moved.

When he was finished, Jerome’s hands dropped to his sides, the letter in one hand, the envelope in the other. He looked at Will, who smiled and nodded to him. He then looked to Sampson. Sampson raised his eyebrows expectantly.

“I… I don’t know what to say,” Jerome stuttered.

“Well a yes or no would work about now,” Will said sarcastically, almost glaring at Jerome.

Jerome finally turned to Jason, who was still on the one knee waiting patiently. Jerome took Jason's chin in his hand, raising his face so that he could look into his eyes.

"Is this really what you want, Jason?"

"Yes, Sir, more than anything I've ever wanted before, Sir."

"I don't... umm. Well, I don't have one..." Jerome faltered.

Sampson leaned over and pulled a box out of his carry-on bag which he handed to Jerome. "Here, Jerome. I brought this for you." Sampson smiled.

Jerome opened the black velvet box. Inside was a heavy sterling silver chain with a sterling silver and gold lock. Two keys lay next to it.

Looking up at Sampson, his mouth open, "You knew?" he asked.

Sampson only nodded. Jerome looked at Will, who also nodded.

"I... I don't know..." Jerome started.

"Don't make me kick your ass, Jerome," Will growled.

"It's okay, I understand, Sir," Jason choked out, starting to stand.

Jerome put his hand on Jason's shoulder holding him down. "That isn't it, Boy. I just want to make sure that *this*," he said indicating the collar "is what you really, really want. That you want to be collared to *me*!"

Jason looked into Jerome's eyes. "Yes, Sir. I do, Sir. Anything for you, Sir."

"Then yes, I will accept your petition for my collar, Boy. *My Boy*." Jerome stroked the side of Jason's scruffy cheek.

He took the heavy chain from the box and opened the lock. Holding it up for all to see and admire, he slowly draped it around Jason's neck. He then took the lock and threaded it through the two end loops of the chain. He looked deeply into Jason's eyes, and paused, hesitating. Jason nodded his head. Taking a deep breath, Jerome firmly snapped the lock in place.

"Mine," he growled into Jason's face.

Jason smiled broadly. "Sir, yes, Sir!"

There was a round of applause from their friends. Will and Sampson both slapped Jerome on the back, congratulating him, and then did the same to Jason.

“Oh, it’s just like a wedding, except there’s no bouquet or cake!” Ricky sniffled, dabbing at his eyes with a paper cocktail napkin.

The others all looked at him and burst out laughing.

THE END

Author Bio

Max Vos is a classically trained chef with over 30 years of food service experience. After retiring in 2011, Max found himself with time on his hands and turned his talents to writing. “Cooking English”, a short story, was his first published work. He has two others currently in publication, three others due out this year, and he has just completed his second novel. First novel with MLR Press is due out later this year.

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The

SONG

Eric Alan Westfall

THE SONG

By Eric Alan Westfall

Photo Description

He's mid to late thirties; black hair/eyes; fringe beard, mustache. Muscular, hairy. Gold neck chain. No shirt, black shorts, black trainers, no socks. Legs spread wide, seated on a nondescript couch. A slender, muscular, dark-haired man, also with a mustache/beard, very short hair, possibly naked, rests his head on the seated man's thigh. Three fingers of the seated man's right hand are curled into the sleeping man's mouth.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Here I was: thirty-six, closeted, virgin, in Berlin for a conference. In what moment of craziness I had booked into the hippest hetero-friendly hotel (as opposed to gay-friendly) I don't know... but here I was, surrounded by hot men, from the concierge to the hotel guests. But none tempted me as much as this couple: From Paris, they were on a week's vacation as well, and I would run into them almost every night, at the hotel's health club. One was shy and spoke little English. The other was a hunky doctor with a deliciously hairy chest and piercing eyes that wouldn't let you go. Watching them cuddle, nuzzle, exchange loving glances all the time drove me to voyeuristic distraction. His husky voice and flirtatious banter would make me harder than I would have thought possible. And he knew it! His young lover seemed bemused by it all. And then on my last-but-one night, after a frustratingly erotic display of foreplay at the rooftop jacuzzi (all apparently for my benefit) the Hunk beckoned me over and invited me up to their room...

Sincerely,

Dilton

Story Info

Genre: contemporary with a twist

Tags: a church's lawyer/chief financial officer, a doctor without borders or boundaries, a wounded warrior, a three-way, a downstairs darkroom, a delicacy of dildos, several first times, strands of glowing color twining in the dark, many songs, but only one song

Content warning: mentions of past/off-screen child molestation and rape.

Word count: 50,447

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Acknowledgments

Thanks to Averin for setting me on the right road and making this a far better story than it would otherwise have been; to Enny for her above and beyond efforts in creating a fantastic cover, and to Kaje, for recommending Enny.

Dedication

Off and on for thirty years, you encouraged me with your gentle, “Just sit down and write, damn it!” The “I know you can do it,” was often silent, but always there. Eighteen years after the aneurysm took you away, I finally did. Some of us take longer to listen than others. This is for you, my love.

THE SONG

By Eric Alan Westfall

what's past is prologue

Then—Saturday afternoon

JONATHAN

I walk in the lobby, trailed by a bellman with my bags. Dieter and Horst are close by. I resist looking at them, touching them, giving the crowded lobby a chance to guess what will be happening soon.

The taxi driver was unhappy about making a side trip on what should have been a twenty-minute or so drive from Tegel Airport to the Berlin Grand Hyatt, particularly since the neighborhood where Dieter was waiting is not exactly the city's finest. I don't think it was a mistake... quite... to have a look around before we left, and Horst caught my eye. I'd already paid for Dieter's services for a week, but there was something about Horst. Probably the fact he was longer, though more slender. I'd shrugged. It was only money, of which I have a more than ample personal supply. I've never spent the Brethren's funds on this, and won't start now. Horst joined us.

The driver's disapproval was obvious, but since the church hadn't hired him, I really didn't give a fuck. I wouldn't be seeing him again, since when I leave, Dieter and Horst will be staying behind, and I'll use a different service to get back to the airport. He was slightly mollified by the size of the tip, but not enough to completely silence some rude mutterings under his breath about Americans.

I enjoyed the expression on his face when I handed him the money and explained in fluent German that I was not a mother-fucking American, but probably more of a father fucker. Not that Father was aware of that. Or Grandfather. Or brothers.

The trumpets of the "Ride of the Valkyries" sing out of my jacket pocket. Joshua's ringtone. It annoys him, mostly because he doesn't know

why I selected it. Now what? I unfortunately have no choice about ignoring it. I stop, wave the bellman on to the front desk.

“What?” I don’t bother hiding my annoyance.

“Is that any way to greet your favorite brother? Or show the proper deference to the heir to the throne?”

I snort in his ear. “Prince Charles is what, mid-sixties, and he still isn’t king. You’ll probably be in your eighties by the time Grandfather and Father are gone. Now, what do you want? I need to check in and I have work to do.”

Dieter work. Maybe Horst work as well. Not that I’ll be saying anything about that to Joshua. What he and the rest of them don’t know won’t kill me.

“I’ve decided,” he begins, which, translated from Brethren-speak into ordinary English, means that Father told him, “to attend the conference. I’ll be there on Tuesday.”

Well, shit. I can’t have Dieter and Horst around in the suite with Joshua there. Double shit. Triple.

Then there is the “what the fuck?” factor. The Amalgamated Brethren of Christ, third-largest denomination in the States, is expanding into Europe in a big way, including the acquisition of a number of Protestant churches in England, Germany, France and Denmark. This conference is essentially a meeting of finance ministers and legal advisers to hammer out the final details about money and the law. And to lay the foundation for a later meeting of heads of state, to formally announce the acquisitions—though the press releases will probably refer to mergers of spiritual kin or something similar—and for the new hires to swear fealty to Grandfather. There is no need for charisma at this particular conference table.

Except now there is. Andre de le Becque, the head of the linchpin church in Marseilles, the domino that will topple the rest of the French churches into line, has become nervous. He plans to arrive on Wednesday, a surprise to his own people, a greater surprise for me, particularly since he plans to take charge of his delegation. I start to ask how Josh knows this,

but don't because I don't want to sound like an idiot. Frank Harmon, Father's chief of security, is excellent not only with protection, but with intelligence gathering that rivals the CIA at its peak. I sigh. Even with this warning, a semi-hostile pastor accustomed to swaying people with words and emotions, rather than facts and figures, is something I lack the equipment to deal with.

God must have substituted the queer gene for the charisma gene when Father's sperm and Mother's egg did their little dance. I was born Joshua Charles Priestley IV. Great-great grandmother Estelle had named her first-born son Joshua Charles and apparently raised him to believe that a man whose initials were "J.C." could be, if not the second coming, the next best thing to it. As evidenced by his creation of the Amalgamated Brethren of Christ, at the time the consolidation of his own small congregation with another small congregation, with great-Grandfather naturally the man in charge.

"Father had charisma in spades," Grandfather has often said. He has it as well, as does Father. By the time I was sixteen, and my next younger brother, Jonathan Charles (traditional name for the second son) was fourteen, it was clear that it would take a major archeological dig to unearth any charisma in me. Jonathan, on the other hand, was an endless fountain of the stuff. His charisma cup ran over constantly.

So Father switched us. Charisma was the reason he gave, but I have always suspected the real reason was otherwise. Not that I ever have, ever will, ask.

The memory of Mike surfaces. I push it down, hold it under until it no longer struggles to come up. I push again. The memory sinks, down and down and down, until it's gone. For now. Always "just for now." Never forever.

I legally became Jonathan; he legally became Joshua. My eventual boss if I stayed with the church. As I had. So I curse only in my head, as the Brethren do not approve of public or private obscenity or foul language, and then agree I understand why Joshua's presence is required. Though he is only there to deal with "Muh-sure dulla beck," he assures me, and I am

still in charge of everything else. This will probably include translating if M. de le Becque decides to play the language game and insists on speaking French when he is thoroughly at ease in English. I also got the language gene.

He gives me his arrival details, and asks me to arrange a limo. Heirs travel in style. I agree, flip him off (a consummation devoutly to be wished but not actually done), end the call, and move on to the desk.

Herr Adler, the assistant manager, introduces himself with a wide smile. The Brethren's American Express Black card tends to have that effect for its authorized users. As I pick up the pen, I am resigning myself to having only a few days with Dieter and Horst. And no refunds, but then that was always going to be the case, no matter how often or how well they get used. The resignation changes when Herr Adler assures me everything is in perfect readiness. In fact, Herr Gunter had personally checked the suite just that morning.

It isn't paranoia if they really are out to get you. Or keep track of you.

I am sure the suite is indeed in perfect readiness. When you handle the finances of a business that rakes in large multiples of a hundred million a year, something as important as the fact that Frank Harmon had hired a German team for the conference, headed by someone named Gunter, inevitably crosses your desk. The fact that I have designed some programs that get certain types of information to me almost as soon as your fingers lift from the last keystroke, rather than waiting until it makes its way to me through normal channels, or even, God and Father forbid, gets lost along the way, might also have something to do with it.

I also got the computer gene. Frank has access to my records, knows I minored in computer science, knows that I wasn't very good at it, thereby adversely affecting the Priestley perfection statistics by getting Cs while everything else I did was an A or better. A few times asking the IT department for help with programming I should have been able to do, and I became the computer dilettante who posed no threat to his control of security.

He doesn't know that, as Picard might have said, I made it so. And the arrogant bastard can't conceive of the possibility that someone like me has

hacked his systems and added private bells and whistles. And so are they all, all arrogant bastards.

Yes, Gunter would indeed have seen to that perfect readiness, as well as to the discreet placement of cameras and microphones, which would be equally discreetly removed later. Did Father or Joshua really believe I would go along with this? I am merely a lawyer and the Brethren's chief financial officer. The threats have nothing to do with me.

None of the annoyance appears on my face, of course. The Priestley sons follow the example of Father and Grandfather. Public calm at all times, private fury as required. "Do you know, Herr Adler, I think I would prefer a different room. Something smaller."

I am sure Herr Adler is annoyed at the impending loss of income since the suite and the originally requested extra amenities would have been beyond the upper end of their price list, but there is no visible sign of it. He of course makes the effort to change my mind, starting with the ploy of uncertainty over the availability of anything else, what with the rooms the church has booked for the conference, a convention, summer tourists, a charity football match tomorrow at the Olympiastadion that has brought many visitors to the city. My suggestion that perhaps the Adlon Kempinski, where Father always enjoys his stays, though I had hoped to persuade him to use the Grand Hyatt...

My voice trails away. Perhaps, my expression says, you might check to be very sure you don't have a room, a very nice room, the hotel's equivalent of a theatre's house seats. His fingers dance over the keyboard. He looks at the screen, and then smiles in an almost flawless imitation of true surprise.

I smile back. I am better than he is at imitations of a true smile. The gay gene? The lawyer gene? The church gene? All of the above?

I hand him a personal credit card, an account I am sure Frank had someone hack into very shortly after my secretary found it in the wallet I "accidentally" left behind in my office about a week after it arrived. Gunter has probably been given temporary access in order to track my spending over here. I don't particularly care.

The room switch is made; I have the new key card. I choose to make his day.

I tell him that Joshua will be attending the conference. He allows himself the hint of a smile. Joshua is not as good as Father, much less Grandfather, but it is possibly the start of a beautiful friendship, or at least a lucrative one. I authorize him to continue charging the Brethren for the empty suite until Joshua's arrival forty-eight-plus hours from now. To assure its continued availability, of course. I suspect he will rent it out for the next two days anyway, making an even better profit with the double-charging.

Despite my eagerness to get to my room and be alone with the cocks that are bought and paid for, I cannot help but notice the way the hotel uniform molds the chest of the concierge, or the bulge, a very noticeable bulge, when he steps from behind the desk to call a bellman for me. Naturally the man who has carried my bags and laptops in from the entrance cannot be allowed to continue the trip all the way to my room. Tips must be spread around. And then there is the delightful, shapely ass of the bellman. I wonder what he would taste like if he was on his hands and knees, my hands spreading his cheeks and my tongue working its way up inside.

My cock is leaking again. Which is precisely why I don't go commando. Too embarrassing to have that happen. And someone in the family would inevitably ask me to point out the woman who got that reaction from me.

The room is indeed a nice one. Also at the upper end of the price list. The view is better than nice. I decline the bellman's offer to unpack for me, preferring for a wide variety of reasons to do it myself. A ten euro note later, he is gone, the door is locked, and I slowly turn around, giving them time.

Yes!

Dieter and Horst are sprawled out on my bed. Naked. Hard.

I admire the length and girth of Dieter's uncut cock. The cut length of Horst that will get so much deeper inside whatever hole it uses. Both slits

are quickly drooling. Their hands smear the thick clear liquid around the crown, milk themselves for more, begin to make their cocks slick and shiny. Father insists that all Brethren who travel on business, travel dressed for business. That means I have far too many clothes on. I tug open the tie, slide it out of my collar, slip off the jacket, turn toward the closet to hang them up.

“Drop them.”

I am in charge. I bought and paid for these two. It is what *I* want that is important. *I* will give the orders.

But when I look over my shoulder at Dieter’s glacier blue eyes, at the stern line of his thin lips, I do what I am told.

“Strip.”

This is not a “Let Me Entertain You” and tease you before getting down to the real good time strip. This is a get-the-fuck-on-with-it strip. A now! strip.

The Armani is off quickly, but without popping buttons. I don’t pop buttons when they’re sewn onto three hundred bucks. The tee. Shoes yanked off without bothering to untie them—a little touch to show my eagerness. Unbuckle, unbutton, unzip, thumbs inside the waistband of the boxer briefs, fingers grasping slacks, bend, shove below the knees, and then that awkward little dance to get them down to your ankles. I step out of them. Look at the stroking men.

“Socks.” The “you idiot” is heard but unspoken.

I flush. Socks, the old-fashioned black, hold-up-with-a-sock-garter kind... the MenAtPlay kind... are a turn on for me. Wearing them, seeing them. A little late now to explain to Dieter. Although I doubt he would have been interested if I had. He doesn’t strike me as a suit, tie, and socks kind of man. The socks come off and I straighten up, hands at my sides. If I touch my cock I’m going to come. A week without jacking, thinking about, waiting for, this moment will do that.

“Suck.”

I like a man of few words. Especially when the words are what I want to hear.

Dieter is sitting up now, his golden-furred legs spread wide, his fat balls dangling over the edge of the bed. I kneel, bend forward to suckle first one ball, then the other, my hands on his thighs, my thumbs caressing. I run my tongue up his length, lapping at his knob, licking the precome, and then his hairy thumb pushes his dick down, and his hand pushes my head down, and the twain finally meet.

I used to have a gag reflex. Henri in Paris, Roy in Amarillo, Leon in San Francisco cured me of that. I take him all the way down to his belly, to the thick, gold-tinged-with-flame pubes, sniff the scent of just a little man-musk, pull up and almost off, working his slit as if I'm trying to fuck it with my tongue. Then down again. And up. And down. Working his cock as Horst drops to one knee beside me, jacking himself, his left hand caressing my smooth ass, as I lift myself up, spread my knees a little for balance. His thumb finds, lightly pushes on my hole. I push back to let him know fucking, finger or otherwise, is fine with me.

Are they going to take me this way? On all fours on the floor, Horst pounding my ass, Dieter fucking my face?

“Up.”

Apparently not.

Dieter leads the way to the bathroom. Shower on, the water so quickly hot I can see the steam curling up and away. He makes me step into it, get myself wet, while he stands and watches. He turns me around, shoves me against the wall. A soapy finger breaches my ass.

Fuck. I hate soap as lube. It burns. But it's not as if Dieter is giving me a choice. Two fingers, middle on top of first to get in, then spreading, scissoring as he fucks. Three. The triangle first, then side by side inside, twisting, turning, stretching me.

Horst turns off the water. Dieter gets into the tub, turns me again so I am facing the mirror. I don't need to be told to bend forward. He leans against the wall, getting his dick at just the right height.

“Fuck yourself on me.”

I reach behind. He is hard, leaking, but mostly dry. I take the risk of anger, and pick up the shower gel the hotel has so graciously provided. I

twist awkwardly, squeeze the bottle, work it on until he's slick. I'd rather not use it on my hole, but I know he won't buy the delay for "let me just get some really good lube out of my shaving kit, hmmm?"

Both of us lubed, I twist back again, watching my right arm stretch behind my back to grab his cock and hold it as I push my ass back, relying on my leg muscles and the precarious balance of my left hand on the tub's edge. I gasp as the wide knob pushes in and my ass clamps down on the top of the shaft. A moment, that's all I need, just a moment to get used to it, to relax just a little, but a sharp slap on my right butt cheek lets me know I'm stalling and he's not going to allow it.

I push back. Hard. Breach the second barrier as the pain slices up inside me. I can see the combination of agony and ecstasy on my face as he orders me to open my eyes and keep them open and watch as I fuck myself on him. And yes, I steal book titles during sex.

Bastard makes me do all the work, not caring how awkward the position is for me, the muscle strain for a not-strong-to-begin-with thirty-six-year-old. But if I want it, I have to do it. And I do. Overriding the pain, I pull my hips forward so he's still inside but just barely and then slam back down. I hope the fucker's balls hurt as they bang into mine.

I fuck myself harder, watching the sweat grow at my hairline, the way my face grimaces with lust, with an impending come, with something I don't want to recognize and so ignore, as the speed increases. I can see Horst out of the corner of my eye. Watching us. Jacking. Twisting his nipples one after the other.

Dieter starts muttering brutal obscenities in harsh German, knowing I will understand. He brings me closer and closer, until I scream "Fuck!" inside my head. And then I remember there are no Brethren to hear and report me, no Father, Grandfather, brothers to censor and censure me, I scream "Fuck me!" long and loud and come in large spurts that slime the curve of the tub, arc out and land on the bath mat. The hard clamping of my ass as I come brings Dieter off inside me. Horst's seed lands in his hand.

I see Horst start to lick his hand as I stop, panting. Both hands on the edge for balance now. I work through the not quite so painful process of

getting his cock out. I want to collapse but he won't let me. I'm ordered to clean him. Screw it. Horst can take care of himself. I pull the curtain, turn the shower on. Wash us carefully. Ignore the pain inside me, from the depth, from the roughness, from the fucking soap.

I open the curtain, put one foot on the mat to stretch for one of the extra large, extra luxurious towels the Hyatt provides when you're spending as much money as I am. My sole naturally lands in my cooling come. A muttered, "Well, shit," leads to a snicker from Dieter. I wipe my foot on a spared spot on the mat. Step back in and dry us as carefully as I washed us.

We step out. I'm holding onto Dieter with my left hand, the towel dragging on the floor from my right.

And then I stand and stare, just stare, at what I see in a mirror that is stubbornly too unfogged to hide me. Six two. One eighty. A round face. A widow's peak receding hairline above a round face, the former a family trait that looks far better on the charismatic, the latter a sharp contrast to the chiseled good looks I alone did not inherit. Dark brown hair more than a few flecks of grey. Brown eyes that are unfortunately not so near-sighted that I can't see us all clearly. Clean-shaven. A nose that shows it was once broken. At fourteen. Father did not think the nose itself was sufficient punishment for being so stupidly inattentive that I tripped over my own feet and went head first into the wall of the boys' bathroom. Ten whacks with his favorite thick belt were appropriate. It would have been five had I been able to provide a reasonable explanation. I couldn't exactly bare my soul and explain I'd been distracted by the bulge in Mr. Jackson's slacks when he came in to yell at us for taking too long and to get out and back to class.

I blink, refocus my attention on my inventory.

An ordinary amount of hair under my arms, nothing to attract a man with a pits fetish. A bit of hair circling wide nipples that are, I discovered long ago, directly wired to my dick and balls. A slight treasure trail from belly button into the same dark brown pubes. Also with more than a few flecks of grey. Damn it. A slight belly, the definite beginning of handles, both of which will go away as soon as I start exercising again. Although with no one to impress... I watch myself shrug.

Item, two balls, indifferent size; item, one cock, the same. Hairy legs, narrow feet with hair curling on the toes, just as it does on the back of my hands. Thank God (though only silently) that the hairy palms thing is a myth.

I look down at Dieter, over at Horst, up to eye myself as the letdown begins. As it always does when the first round of sex is over. As it did with Henri, Roy, Leon. With the others I'd bought on other trips.

I look at Dieter in my hand again, and then step forward and set the dildo on the counter. Flat, not standing on the suction cup.

Every time before, I have sworn that it would not happen again. But it always has.

This time is different. This time I do not swear. I know only too well that Dieter and Horst will use me as often as possible in my week here, though they will be safely locked away when I am out of the room. Perhaps they will use me at the same time, one in each of my holes. Perhaps one right after the other. A silicon mini-gang bang if I can work up two climaxes that quickly.

I have a rich fantasy life about the men I have sex with. Another God-given gift to offset the lack of reality.

At least no Brethren are here to hear and report my language offenses, to see and report the sexual offenses that would destroy me.

I have gotten good at hiding. Very good. Two point four decades of hiding from the day I first knew to now. And an infinity of hiding stretches out before me.

It is far too late. Nothing is going to change.

Too bad what Tony had, however brief it might have been, will never happen to me. No air humming, nothing coming. I know. Oh how I know there's nothing just out of my reach, somewhere else, on a beach. There's nothing tonight.

Nothing ever.

I am so fucked.

Which is, of course, the fucking point. I haven't been. Ever.

Except for the likes of Dieter and the others. But afterwards I abandon them, in hotel dumpsters, trash bins in airport toilets before boarding, other places. I've often wondered if any of them were found. Cleaned up. Adopted into a good home where they would be appreciated, used lovingly and well and often.

I pad naked into the room. Pick up the guest packet the bellman put on the desk. Open it. The usual glossy bravura about what I could do, would find, might appreciate without ever having to step outside into springtime in Berlin. I repress the urge to hum that song from *The Producers*. Even carefully hidden queers can enjoy musicals, provided they do so in the closet.

Okay. Club Olympus on the roof. I'll start my workout regimen. Soon.

An envelope slips out of the folder. I pick it up. My name is handwritten on the front in beautiful calligraphy. Inside is an invitation. The Deutsches Historisches Museum is having a fund-raising gala in the main ballroom. A silent auction (no hot young men, unfortunately) with the results announced at midnight. An open bar, as well it should be when the tickets cost five hundred euros apiece. I am, however, to be a guest of the hotel if I wish to attend. Black tie is preferred but not required.

The Priestley men automatically carry black tie attire with them. Perhaps I'll go. Getting drunk in my room will cost me; playing dress up for free booze is a much preferable alternative.

Then—Saturday evening

JEAN-LUC

My head itches.

Well, fuck. Or since I am once again French, and currently a Parisian, perhaps I should think “*Bien, merde.*”

But I have become so accustomed to thinking in English over the years, and then translating the words into my other languages before they hit the air, that perhaps it should be a combination thought. *Well, fuck! et bien, merde!*

The witches had their pricking thumbs to warn of incoming wickedness. Others have hair on the nape of the neck stand up, or along the arms, or just a hollowness in the gut, a certainty of... something... imminent.

I can't even be like Tony and just have the feeling, *believe* the feeling, that I have a miracle *due*, that it's out there, only just out of reach, somewhere near, coming here, maybe tonight.

Instead, my head itches.

It has served me well, that itching. In the wars. In my work. In simple survival. And long ago, but far too late, I learned not to give in, not to scratch, no matter if it feels as though my scalp has been rubbed with a thousand poison ivy leaves, with no Calamine lotion or other soothing liquid or paste at hand. Poor Franco learned my tell, relied on it, believed that if I was not scratching nothing was headed toward us, he was safe, we were safe. And one night after I had sworn to myself I would not scratch, would remain dignified but alert to whatever was inbound, one night after I had sworn an oath that I did not share, Franco darted ahead of me, all eagerness to get home. My enemies sprang the trap on him instead of me and he died for my sin.

No one since has relied on that signal but me.

It began when our Air France jet touched down at Tegel, at an amazingly on-time 11:50 this morning. I thought at first something would happen at the airport, but realized the itching was far too mild.

It has merely gotten progressively worse through the day. If it did not quite go away entirely as I fucked Philippe into the mattress in our room, requiring us to shower again, to another mutual satisfaction, at least it was not distracting me.

As it is now.

Ah, well, at least Philippe does not suspect.

Or perhaps he does. My warrior, my wounded warrior, notices more than he lets on.

The lobby is nearly full. Some church or other is having a conference here; there is a business group having a convention, and the museum is having a fund-raiser tonight. Dr. Jouvert gave me his ticket when he decided to stay in Paris and work, preparing to be prepared for our next mission. I wonder if somewhere in this loud, glittering mob with its Babel of tongues—would Miss Heyer call this a sad crush?—is the something, the someone that is headed my way. I refuse to search.

The refusal lasts perhaps fifteen seconds. I am at least subtle in examining my environment.

Philippe looks good in the Boss tuxedo I insisted on buying for him once I was certain the vacation was possible. He didn't want it, didn't want me to spend money that would only go to waste, since we will part soon. The little Swiss gnomes who keep a good part of my money secure know I have more than enough to buy a thousand of these tuxedos and not feel a pinch, and money on a tuxedo that molds itself to a man as ruggedly handsome as my Philippe cannot possibly be wasted, even if, as is likely, he will only wear it this one time.

We click our glasses, sip. Smile just a little. You would have to be incredibly stupid not to see us and understand we are together, not merely standing side by side. And while he is still mine, I do not care who knows. His brothers in the Brigade des Forces Spéciales Terre knew and did not care what made his cock happy, so long as he could kill and kill efficiently, when needed. Médecins Sans Frontières, my current employer, has as little care, so long as my medical skills, and they are many, save lives and limbs

whenever possible, regardless of the conditions which surround us. Actually, I believe that if Dr. Jouvert saw a horse fucking me the night before we were scheduled to fly out, he would merely inquire whether I would be able to sit comfortably on the plane or would I need a special seat.

I save a great many lives, so he has reason not to care about how my cock is entertained.

Jouvert is unaware, I believe, that at times I ease certain ones into death when they do not wish to be brought back from the brink, when their voices or their souls beg, "Let me go." And then there are the others. I do not wish to bring trouble to him, to MSF, as I do what needs to be done, what must be done. Would he balance the scales and look the other way, if he *knew*, not merely suspected? I will not put him in that position and so I exercise the caution that has been a part of me for all these years.

For a moment my thoughts distract me from the urge to vigorously scrub my fingernails, or perhaps a floor brush with stiff bristles, over every inch of my scalp. This has not happened in a long time. And the times before that were this intense always involved imminent danger, which I at least understood, since I was in a war zone, or heading to one, or doing something for my then government (I am serially patriotic) that would or might put my life at risk. Though it is very hard to kill me. Very.

Business wars, social wars, sports wars, the wars of every-day life swirl around us, around the hotel, the city. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing that hints of personal danger. And given the guest lists at the events tonight, the various law enforcement and security bureaus, departments, and agencies overt and covert, are not going to permit a terrorist attack on the hotel.

Damn. I am not used to uncertainty.

Philippe leans into me a little, just a quick brush of his arm. Not so very long ago that affection would have been impossible. We sip again. My eyes are restless, though with long practice, my searching is not obvious.

Very well, more obvious than I had believed, as Philippe whispers in my ear, "Moving on already?"

A flare of annoyance goes up and off in my mental sky as I look up at him. Part of it is the looking up. I am forever fixed at precisely five feet eight and three-quarter inches, naked and barefoot, which is, of course, the best way to be for measuring anything. Philippe is six four.

The annoyance vanishes as I realize he has seen something. Something the security teams—men and women who are so very visible to Philippe and me, and invisible to everyone else, well, except for the soldiers in uniform, carrying the most recent Heckler & Koch assault rifles—should know?

No. He tilts his head just slightly, directing my attention across the room, assuming I will understand, and see what he sees.

I do.

Philippe murmurs in a tone I don't quite understand, "Yon Cassius has a not-quite lean, and well-fucked look, don't you think?"

The "Cassius" on the steps, his tux as well-tailored as ours, is looking out over the room, his face illuminated as if the lighting designer for this little scene had created a special effect that would probably not be noticeable to anyone other than someone standing where we stood, and only there. For just an instant I see a kind of wistfulness, a kind of loneliness, and then it is gone, replaced by the look of a man accustomed to power, poised and in complete control.

He inhales, turns his head, and stops. He looks at me. I cannot possibly know it is me, not *us*, not at this distance, but I am utterly certain.

And the itching stops.

JONATHAN

This is my day for what-the-fucks.

Even at this distance, the man is impossible to ignore, primarily because of the contrast. Shorter than the man beside him, the Cassius-looking-one poured into that tux. My starrer—is that even a word?—is five eight, five nine. Thick, wavy black hair. From here, a wide, black Magic Marker slash of eyebrows in a straight line parallel to that wide mouth with its thin lips.

Deep-set eyes. With that coloring, are they black? Brown? I cannot tell. Up close I could. But I won't. Get close.

Features hewn from a collection of rocks dug up from nowhere important and crushed together, to make a face a peasant mother was undoubtedly the first to love. The basic rock formation goes well with his broad, broad shoulders, which make him look shorter than he actually is. A big chest. Huge, I think in my best *Pretty Woman* knock-off tone. That chest *has* to be hairy. God would not be so unfair as to provide this new reality-show jackoff fantasy to me, only to give him a smooth chest. If Cassius was poured, someone painted *his* tux on.

The man should be in a field, with leather straps around his naked chest, *pulling* the damned plow himself, not here. He is nothing like the men who fill my fantasies, whose imaginary cocks fill my ass and mouth, or come on my face, chest, belly, back. Nothing I admire or lust after. And still I keep staring, wondering who he is.

He is definitely not one of the inbred aristocrats with which Europe is littered, in business and out. Nevertheless, his presence shouts money. Old money. *Very* old money. With a bullhorn. In a silent cathedral. A Priestley *always* recognizes money. The one gene we all share.

Are they strangers happening to stand together, drinking? No. There is something more. Friends. Lovers, perhaps. Lucky bastards. And with that beside him he's staring at *me*?

Thus my what-the-fuck.

Odd.

A flash must have gone off somewhere near. The light reflects off "my" peasant's eyes.

JEAN-LUC

Philippe steps in front of me, blocking my view. I'm ready to snarl at him, until he says the magic words.

"Tes yeux, mon ami."

I close my eyes for the shortest possible interval, to regain the control I

do not ever recall losing before tonight, the control I was not even aware I was losing tonight.

I open my eyes, silently express my appreciation. Philippe knows me unusually well. He steps aside.

“My” man is gone.

Well, fuck, *et bien merde*.

And also... what the fuck! My warning signal does a Hradani berserker on me for that?

“Your head doesn’t itch any more.”

It is a statement, not a question, and I barely manage not to show my shock. I slowly turn to him.

How does this man know me so well? Only six weeks since he’d shown up at my home, exhausted, thin, grey-skinned, shaking. Begging me, the moment I opened the door and confirmed my name, to kill him as I had killed Bernard, his sergeant, in that Syrian hovel, three months earlier. To ease him into death as I had eased Bernard forever away from the agonies the IED had left behind.

I denied and declined, but let him in, in case I changed my mind. And now we are here, and he is tall and strong and clear-eyed. Yet we both know we have so little time left together. This week, a few days more at most. The dam is weakening, and there is no hot young Dutch man to plug the first leak. Or the rest that will quickly follow.

He takes my look when I turn as a question. He shrugs. “Until today, you have never touched your head once you are dressed. Hell, not even after sex when I’ve managed to thoroughly mess it up. Yet you started the moment we landed. You were getting up, head bent to avoid the bin, and you stopped. Held still, lifted your hand, fingers curled as if to scratch, and then you paused, flattened your hand, stroked your palm over your hair.”

He smiles at my deliberately bland expression. Winks. “You’ve done that off and on throughout the day, and you never seem to be aware you’re doing it. Though you are always so aware of your surroundings otherwise.”

Aware? Given my life, it is dangerous *not* to be aware of what is around me, not to be aware of what I am doing at all times.

I shrug as if the matter is no importance, turn to get the bartender's attention, and order us another pair of drinks from my bottle. Philippe shakes his head. Fine. No need to share.

It is an insult to fine whiskey to gulp it down. I insult the last of the Old Pulteney 40 Year Old single malt in my glass. Then hold the glass out for a refill to the brim with the last of my sixteen hundred euros. This time it is a two-gulp insult.

I briefly wish that once, just once, the alcohol would do something more than taste good, bad, indifferent, beyond brilliant. My wish is not granted. It never has been. But I have long since perfected the appearance of being a bit squiffy, as Bertie used to say he was, right before he dropped his drawers and I put it to his royal arse. There is a fine distinction between squiffed and well-sloshed. I have perfected that distinction. I signal for the bill, sign, pull out my money clip, and hand three hundred-euro notes to the bartender. From his expression, I've grossly over tipped for the service of opening a bottle of whisky and pouring a few drinks. But he doesn't offer to refund any of it. Smart man.

"Shall we dance?"

He lifts one eyebrow. Peasants never seem to have the innate ability to do that. Or perhaps aristocratic shits are taught skills like annihilating the hoi and the polloi, the riff and the raff, with an eyebrow. By supercilious cunts in a secret school somewhere, like Luxembourg.

He smirks. "Who leads?"

I do my invisible single eyebrow lifting. "Who the fuck do you think?"

We head to the ballroom.

I'm sure he'll be there.

Then—Very early Sunday morning

JEAN-LUC

Philippe is asleep. Deeply so. Coming in his mouth, coming in his ass, certainly helped. He loves being used, my warrior, temporarily giving up the visible control and authority he always has to maintain as a captain, even a former captain, in the French special forces. I eased him deeper into sleep before I dressed and left. But I cannot leave him alone too long.

I am hungry. I snacked a little in the ballroom. A little here, a little there. But I need, no, I want something more.

I find it, just off the kitchen, where no one notices what I steal. Not a full meal, of course, but enough to take the edge off the wanting.

Enough to help me deal with the other wanting.

Then—Late Sunday morning

JONATHAN

This is bullshit. This is not happening.

We saw each other. That should have been it. I got some jackoff material, he got whatever it was he got or didn't get out of that look. End of story. Life and the Brethren, the peasant and his lean and handsome Cassius, me and my jackoff fantasies, we just go on.

They did go on from the lobby. To the ballroom I was in. I felt something tug at me, turned my head, and there they were. Weaving their way through the crowd towards me. They stopped only a few feet away, the peasant staring across the empty space between us. I have seen Father stare at people in that way. The stare of a greedy collector, a stare that says "Mine!" before he moves in for the kill, adding a new donor, a new member to the roster. But I am not his, won't... can't... ever be, so even though my cock hardens with the additional fantasy of "he wants me", "he came looking for me", I deny myself the pleasure of checking his groin to see what I can see.

Peripherally, I see Cassius watching the two of us, a subtle Ping-Pong serve and return of glances, a slight smile on his lips over whatever it is that he sees in the ping and the pong.

The song that had been playing ends. In the silence the peasant says, without looking at Cassius, "Shall we dance?"

The man, who should be in one of the camouflage uniforms with the large weapons scattered around the edges of the room, replies with a mocking, "*Pourquoi, je pensais que vous ne demanderiez jamais. Mais attendez, vous avez déjà fait. Dans le hall d'entrée. Et je l'ai déjà dit oui. Faire en sorte que d'une chose sûre?*"

In my mind, I translate it into a sarcastic Southern drawl. "Why, ah thought you'd nevah ask. Oh, wait. Y'already did. In the lobby. And ah said 'yes.' Makin' sure of a sure thing?"

The peasant growls like... well, just like you'd expect a peasant to growl. And at the first notes he spins to his right, Cassius neatly side-stepping to avoid being knocked to the floor. He puts his left forearm out, parallel to the floor, Cassius lays his right on top, and they head to where the other dancers are beginning to get in place. Moses could not have parted the Red Sea of the rich so well as they move to the center.

Flaunting themselves. Dancing! In public. And the peasant probably paid the orchestra to play *The Blue Danube*. It should have been laughable. A peasant and an aristocrat waltzing, with the shorter peasant leading. It should have been humiliating. Both to dance and to watch.

I was appalled by it, offended.

And as mesmerized as everyone else.

They might as well have been Fred and Ginger dancing the Continental, the way the crowd pushed back to watch them. And it wasn't that competition ballroom crap with elbows out, and head tilted just so, bodies even more so, and the faces expressionless because rigor mortis has long since set in. Shades of *Strictly Ballroom*.

This, however, this was... *real*. Breathtakingly real. They moved together as if the sole reason for their existence was to dance this dance, and there was nothing the slightest bit absurd or effeminate about the taller man following, though Joshua would have mocked them to his entourage had he been there to watch, and then built a sermon around them. Not an affirmative one.

They looked the way you expect a waltz to look, an easy one-two-three, one-two-three rotation, starting to make the circle of the open space. But that was only the first minute or so, as if they were settling in to themselves, to the rhythm of the pairing.

And then they... exploded. It wasn't dancing just for fun, or to shock the crowd. This was two men having sex, standing up, not even touching except for the three primary points: the peasant's large hairy left hand holding Cassius' more slender right, Cassius' left hand on the peasant's shoulder, the peasant's large right hand splayed just left of center on

Cassius' lower back. The patronesses of Almack's were right so long ago, believing the waltz to be obscene, refusing for so long to permit it. It was disgraceful.

It made me hard.

Think of two people dancing the most beautiful, complex waltz you have ever seen, ever heard of. Amplify that by several orders of magnitude and you might, you *might* come close to what we saw last night. Just the two of them, circling that space in figures and patterns, filling it so well you knew instinctively there was no room for any other dancers. And then the circling became a spiral, tighter and tighter and tighter until it ended back at the center where they had begun, with the peasant bending Cassius back and back and back into a dip, his head nearly touching the floor, motionless.

The bastards might as well have been kissing, they were so close, and they held it forever, before my peasant straightened them up precisely far enough ahead of the last strains of music for them to separate, left hand still holding right, release, and a brief bow to each other on the very last note. A brief nod to the watchers before they turned to walk off the floor, side by side, to thunderous applause, even shouts and whistles from this crowd of wealth and jaded sophistication.

I managed not to be Lesley Ann Warren when Victoria turns out to be Victor, controlling myself and allowing only a single "bravo!" to escape my lips, despite a momentary urge to make it a mocking "brava!"

I stopped clapping long before the rest, before they even reached the space that had again opened up for them, an exit aisle with an invisible red carpet. I realized what a fool I had been. How many phones were in that room? That dance would be on YouTube in minutes. Viral in hours. And I did not need to be seen by any of the Brethren cheering and applauding two men dancing. Especially not *that* dance. I can sell my presence as unwitting, unwilling; I can make them believe that excuse if they call me on it. But there is nothing the Brethren generally, my family particularly, will accept as an excuse for my approval.

I wiped my expression, leaving nothing that would draw attention to me as the peasant and his partner reached the edge of the crowd. I reminded

myself I was disgusted by their behavior. Not jealous of their freedom. Not jealous of Cassius for being where... I did *not* want to be except for a mental aberration a moment ago. How could I be jealous? I did not know the peasant's name; I knew nothing about him except that look we shared earlier. And the more recent one.

Then I laughed at myself where it wouldn't be seen. The reality is, had I been Cassius in my—no, in *the* peasant's arms—I would have tripped or stumbled or done something unsurprisingly, for me, awkward, and we would have been flat on our asses with the audience in hysterics somewhere within the first minute.

The other reality is that even if I could dance that way, *that* dance would have destroyed me, devastated my family, damaged the Brethren. Father's listing of the priorities of concern would of course put the Brethren first and me last.

The circle was slowly refilling, reshaping itself as another song began and dancers moved in to reclaim their territory. The peasant turned and looked at me. No hesitation, no searching, just a turn and stare. Not long, just long enough for him to know I knew he was looking at me. Marking me somehow. The bastard winked, turned, and they were gone.

And now he is here. Behind me somewhere, though I will not look. Alone. Have I suddenly acquired p-dar—the “p” for “peasant” of course—that I can tell he has arrived, and without Cassius glued to his side? My *harumph* is of course mental. Yon Cassius, the lean, is probably well-fucked in their bed, too exhausted to move. I wonder how...

I turn my attention back to the senior member of de le Becque's delegation, still unaware of what is descending on him, and the treasurer from the church in Hamburg. They are both handsome men. So much so that it is almost as if I called them this morning to be my guests, so that if my peasant showed up for breakfast he would see that I, too, have not one, but two, handsome men admiring me, listening carefully to my every word. He does not have to know it is more the subject of millions—a mark, a yen, a buck or a pound—that focuses their attention.

I insert myself back into the conversation as if I had not mentally vanished for a little time, and... *religiously*... do not look at the man

somewhere behind me. Though if I did turn, I could find him without having to search for the peasant I can't have, whose every move adds another layer of complexity and depth to the fantasies I will weave about him with a dildo in my ass that will be, in my mind, the precise size of his cock.

JEAN-LUC

He knows I am here, even though his back is to the entrance. I don't think he realizes that he stiffened just a little the moment I came in.

The one seated to his left is tall and ruggedly handsome in a gym-rat kind of way. The other, opposite him, is more on the beautiful side. It is some remark of his that has my very own Cassius—an inauspicious name but Philippe planted it in my mind and it won't leave until I know the real one—speaking animatedly, his face alight.

Some brief interruption from Tall, a few words from Beautiful, and then Cassius laughs. A rich laugh, not loud, not intended to fan out across the restaurant, but it does in one of those odd moments when everyone in a room stops talking, other noises vanish, and the space is utterly quiet.

That laugh rings like a great bell, bringing smiles to the faces of everyone here, guests, staff, and the three people who are at just that instant passing behind me. For the length of his laugh, for a moment longer, we are somehow a family sharing joy. But no such sharing can last, not among strangers, and so they all turn their heads back, resume conversations, glasses clink, silverware clatters on china, the observers, all but me, sharing a slight sense of shame over public openness.

My Cassius has no such shame. That laugh is going to sing in my dreams, and I do not dream. Have not for more years than I care to remember.

I select a table close enough for my excellent hearing to be useful.

Ah. His name is Priestley. An unusual enough name that I should be able to track him down even on my own. Better yet, there is nothing between these men, given the formality of the Monsieur Priestley from Tall; Herr Priestley from Beautiful.

They are talking... money. Church money. My Priestley, whose first name I will discover, is not a priest, of that I am certain, yet even if... I can make him break his vows, become so very un-priestly in all but name. It is not as if I haven't done it before.

They are going to services soon. I contemplate following them only briefly. I want to enjoy this week, not be responsible for damaging a church with the inevitable bolt of lightning to indicate the Lord's displeasure at my crossing one of His thresholds.

They are getting up to go. I rise and accidentally, so very, very accidentally get in his way. He steps back to avoid an imminent collision. Too bad. It would have been an enjoyable collision. For both of us.

"Mr. Priestley." I hold out my hand, not palm down so he can grasp it as a lover, a might-be lover, should, just an ordinary handshake.

The others do not notice the fear that flashes briefly in his eyes and then vanishes beneath the control. "I beg your pardon?"

His voice is a model of an icily professional "Who the fuck are you and why are you talking to me?" Although I could give him lessons, plan on giving him lessons, in ice... and other things.

I leave my hand where it is. "We met last night." Seeing each other from opposite sides of the lobby. Last night, when he looked at me and applauded the outrageous display I made of myself with that dance after I felt his presence, after I paid the orchestra to play *The Blue Danube*. When I walked us up to him, to make sure he knew where his attention should be. When I winked at him after all was danced and done. "We were not properly introduced."

If my hand stays untouched much longer, Tall and Beautiful will believe I have invisible leprosy. He has no polite choice. He shakes it, a business shake, as brief as possible. No swelling of music in the background. No Hitchcock fireworks to symbolize one or both of us coming. But still. Something. And he knows it.

Well, hell. The bastard, lovely, lovely bastard that he is, has the eyebrow-lift down pat. Did he go to school with Philippe? They are of an age. "And you are...?" his eyebrow inquires.

“Jean-Luc.” Only a slight pause, but I do it often at present. “Picard.”

That surprises a smile from him, quickly guillotined.

“No relation. And unfortunately, I do not command a starship, just a medical team. I work with Médecins sans Frontière.” I do him the courtesy of expecting him to understand the French, rather than offering him the English version.

“Ah.”

The universal noise when someone does not know precisely what to say, precisely how to escape.

“I could not help but overhear you are on your way to church. I wish I could accompany you. It would probably do my soul good, but unfortunately I have other... *plans*... this morning.”

He notices the tiny accent on “plans.” The other two do not. I nod politely to Tall and Beautiful, including them but not seeking introductions.

“Perhaps we will meet again. I would like to learn more about... your work.”

The man who is not yet mine, but will be soon, again picks up on the hesitation, this time the one that converted “you” to “your”.

“Yes, well, anything is possible, even if improbable. I will be very busy today, and with the conference all week, luncheons, evening meetings, before returning to the States.”

Busy, busy man. He has accounted for all his time, leaving no time for me. There. He has put me in my place. And without offering me his first name in return. But he isn't thinking about dinners, especially late and private ones. I am. A bed in someone's room, his or mine. A toilet stall if we are quick enough, but with him, I do not want quick and quasi-public. Although, now that I think of it, if he is at all adventurous behind the church-driven façade, it could happen. I could make it happen.

Another polite smile from me as I step aside. A slight gesture towards the escape hatch, though fortunately he will not be required to slide down, merely walk. “Enjoy your day, gentlemen.”

JONATHAN

Bastard!

I chant it several times as I make my... as I leave the restaurant.

Picard? Really? He is more of a Lieutenant Worf, with the shoulders and the chest.

Him and his damned plans. Plans to refuel himself and then head back to his Cassius, plans to walk in and strip off his clothes, tossing them anywhere. He'll let Cassius kiss him, play with the thick fur on his chest, before turning Cassius on his belly, dropping spit on his hole, and...

Damn. Triple damn. A hard-on heading for church is not a good idea.

I evade their polite questions about Dr. Picard, fobbing them off with having met so many people last night as Father's and Grandfather's representative, that I simply did not remember him. I force a chuckle over how I would have remembered him, given his name, if we had in fact been introduced.

Then—A little after ten, Wednesday evening.

JONATHAN

I manage—just—not to slam the door in their fucking collective faces.

I did *not* order room service. Which is what I open the door to tell the waiter after he knocked and announced himself. And here they all are. The waiter with his serving cart, covered in a crisp white cloth, holding a linen napkin, two small crystal flute glasses, and a cooler filled with ice. And a bottle of Stoli Elit, just starting to show moisture as it had obviously been in a freezer.

My favorite vodka. A subject I have mentioned to no one since my arrival.

Behind the waiter, my peasant and his Cassius.

I focus on Cassius, standing to the right of the waiter, directly in my line of sight. He is indeed lean, now that I see him without his tux. He is wearing a white T-shirt that showcases his pecs, his nipples visibly straining at the cloth, and picks up every ripple of his abs since he is standing perfectly still. Muscular in a Cassius-appropriate lean sort of way, but there is a hint of gauntness about him. It's in his eyes, too, and in the slight hollow of his cheeks. Low-slung leather pants so soft and so tight the whole world can see he dresses right and isn't circumcised. Boots of some sort, black, naturally.

His eyes smile at me, just a little. I guess the exhausted-looking lawyer, with his tousled hair, wireless reading glasses, barefoot in jeans with a carelessly left-open robe that reveals his lack of pecs, lack of abs, and presence of slightly furry belly in all their *not* glory, calls for some amusement.

I do not look at the peasant. Refuse to look at him. A moment ago, my eyes slid past him en route from the waiter to Cassius, without ever seeing him or acknowledging him, and they can do the same on the way back to the waiter. They do. I'm almost through with this.

I begin to explain to the waiter in German that there has been a mistake, I did not order room service. But I get only a few words in when Picard the Prick, my new name for him, interrupts with a very faux “*Quelle surprise*, Monsieur Priestley. Is this your room?”

A Chinese child of two, with no knowledge of English or French, would understand how *faux* that surprise is.

“What do you want?” My tone is surly, in part because I’m pissed (glad?) that he’s stalking me, in part because I have no choice but to look at him.

And drool. A disgusting amount of drool that only I can see and feel slobbering out of my briefly gaping mouth.

Yes! He does have a hairy chest. Much of it is visible since he’s wearing a faded blue plaid shirt—who the hell wears plaid?—that’s only buttoned one button up from the wide black leather belt with the intricate silver buckle, a belt that has no functional reason for being on his body since someone... Cassius?... got out the so-pale-blue-it’s-practically-white paint, and brushed on a pair of faux jeans. An excellent painter. He got the image of ripped knees just right. And the tiny, tiny, will-it-rip-bigger-tonight-or-not rip just where his dressed-left, clearly commando, uncut cock rests a good number of inches down his thigh. Black trainers, no socks.

“Why, nothing, Mr. Priestley. Jonathan. We just... happened to be passing by when you opened the door.”

“Happened” my aching ass. Well, the ass that would *like* to be aching from his cock. Cassius, too. Does that make me a slut?

He looks down at the vodka, the cart. Absent-mindedly one thick-fingered hand reaches up inside the shirt to scratch a non-existent itch by his left armpit, and then the fucker twists his left nipple. Someone gives a slight gasp. Thank God it’s the waiter.

I spare a glance at the waiter whose loose trousers are nevertheless visibly tented. Not as well-tented as Picard the Prick and Cassius would be, of course.

“You still haven’t answered me.”

“I don’t want anything, Jonathan.”

And how does he know my first name? We’ve never been introduced.

“But since we are here, do you have plans this evening? Perhaps you’d care to...”

Another fucking faux pause as he “realizes” there are two glasses on the cart. “Oh, you do have plans. Someone is joining...”

“Yes!”

Okay, that was just plain stupid. Pathetic, even. Like I didn’t want him thinking that I was so... what was that word? oh, yes... pathetic that I couldn’t even find a man willing to spend an evening, a night, with me.

“Well, then, how about asking him to throw on some clothes and the four of us can go have some fun together?” He even managed to make it sound like he meant it.

Fucker.

At the rate I was swearing since the first moment I saw him, even just inside my head, I was inevitably going to do it in front of the Brethren.

And the fucker knew... *knew*... there was no one inside my room. Knew I didn’t order room service. Probably set it up this way just to humiliate me.

So with as much dignity as I could muster, I answered him. “Thanks, but I think... *we’ll* just stay in tonight. You two have fun.”

I could swear that just for a moment there was regret in his eyes. Regret that a staid lawyer accountant with a body to match wasn’t going to join two rugged, handsome men as they went cruising for fresh meat? I’m imagining things.

I open the door wider, tell the bewildered, still-stiff waiter to bring the cart in. If he is hoping for anything other than the indecently large tip I give him, considering I am somewhat visibly plumped up, too, from the mouth-and cock-watering display in the hall, he is doomed to modest disappointment. I’d have to look like Picard the Prick or Cassius to rise to the level of great disappointment.

I have to get up early to start another day of religious and financial infighting, as well as dealing with my brother. As tempting as the full, still extremely cold bottle is, I only have a couple of shots. Perhaps three. Or four. It relaxes me enough that with Horst buried in my ass, and my mind pretending it's my peasant, I manage to come enough to take the edge off and actually slide into a reasonably deep sleep.

Marred only by dreams of me on the outside, always on the outside, no matter what "inside" consists of.

Then—Four a.m. Thursday morning

JEAN-LUC

Philippe is asleep. The gentle, deep sleep of the insanely well-fucked.

Not that I can lay claim to be the cause of that sleep. I was only the last, although by any reasonably objective standard, his best fuck of the night. That comes with knowing his body, his soul, so very well.

He decided Wednesday afternoon when we talked about what to do for the next few days of our stay, deliberately avoiding the main issue, that he wanted to go cruising tonight. To Tramps, where men in leather and jeans and uniforms gather; Tom's Bar, with its infamous basement dark room, and the Greifbar with its equally infamous winding dark room, and cabins that look like American portable toilets.

He wanted to be a slut for a night. And as I am his personal wish-granting foundation, I agreed. It's not as if he can be hurt by it, not any more, not any long-term hurt. And I will be there to prevent anything immediate. He does not have the strength he did before the ambush, before we met in the desert, even I cannot work that kind of miracle in the time we have had, the time we have left. But he has enough strength to do this.

Most important of all, it is something he wants. He has had sex with multiple men before. Who has not? But always in charge. Tonight he wants something different, to feel what it is like to have the attention of those multiple men, whose only interest in him is in getting their rocks off.

My beautiful Philippe. He got all that. And more.

Tom's Bar was unusually crowded for the middle of the week, and the doorman decided, since we were unknown to him, clearly not regulars, that no matter how well our images, our *reality*, fit in with the place, we should be the recipients of the restrictive and humiliating door policies the guide books warn about.

No one restricts or humiliates me. Ever. Long ago I had sworn, without any god as my witness, "Never again." I leaned in close, placed my left

hand on his shoulder and squeezed. People assume because of my size that I am strong. They have no fucking idea.

I kept my voice low, so only he could hear me, as I explained the new facts of life, *his* new reality; that if he whimpered or called out, I'd rip his fucking arm out of its fucking socket, or just crush it; that we were going in, and were going to enjoy ourselves, without trouble from him or anyone inside; that if there was trouble, even if he was not responsible, I would track him down and make sure he understood the meaning of "Don't fuck with me, boy." All in perfect German.

I don't think the next few men wanting to get in had any problems, but I am sure he took out his humiliation on others later. Not my problem.

We stopped for drinks. Beer for both of us, assessing the crowd as they assessed us, chests, bellies, arms, thighs, cocks, asses. We passed muster. As if there was ever a doubt. We emptied half of our bottles, and I put my hand on his crotch, squeezed enough to make him squirm, starting the show. Curtain's up. Dim the lights. We've got nothing to hit but the depths... as in the darkroom down below. As I lead the way, Philippe's now-larger bulge still attached to my very large hand, I briefly acknowledge two men I had picked out. If they were too stupid to figure out where I was going, what I was offering (whether Philippe only, or me, or both), and didn't follow, they were too stupid to include. They weren't too stupid.

The darkroom was almost literally that, but with enough very, very dim red or blue lights to allow a hint of visibility to the proceedings. Men tend to be visual when they're having sex, although also perverse enough to enjoy total darkness where no one can actually know it's you doing all those obscene things.

"He needs to be fucked," I quietly told our followers, whose mouths had dropped open as my Philippe peeled off his tee and handed it to me, then unbuttoned the pants, shoved them to his ankles and bent forward, hands on his knees. He has a mouth-watering ass, even if you're not into rimming. They grope themselves, look to me.

"Mouth or ass?"

Two holes, no waiting. No fighting, either, as one says “mouth” and the other says “ass.” No argument, either, as I hand the ass-fucker a condom. Philippe is already well-lubed.

The ass-fucker moans a prayer of thanksgiving to Christ and whatever god he believes in, for the tightness and the heat. The mouth-fucker joins the litany of praise for the skill with which he’s getting sucked. Aware that a man who looks like the meanest motherfucker in any valley on the planet, a look enhanced by the darkness that hangs around my shoulders, could change his mind at any moment and deprive them of their pleasures, they make the logical decision that right there, right then, a fast come was required.

The ass-fucker was considerate, though. He reached around and began stroking Philippe’s hard cock, but I stopped him. “Just use him. He’ll come when I tell him to.” He nodded and began stroking faster, as did the second man. In a minute or less they were exhausted and panting, and pleasantly surprised at how their evening had started. Although from the way the one who got the blowjob was almost frantically putting himself back together, perhaps he had had second thoughts, and so this was the beginning and ending of his night out.

Philippe straightened up, twisted to relieve the inevitable muscle tension from the position. I rubbed his only slightly puffy lips with a thumb. “More?” I ask him quietly, ignoring the men who had followed and watched and were hesitant to move in, to ask for a turn.

“Yes, please.” The smirk in his eyes told me the tone of a little child begging for another treat, a second, third, twelfth, lolly, was deliberate.

I picked another two men, a pair that Philippe might never have tricked with, prowling on his own, men who in all likelihood would not have much of a chance under normal circumstances to sex a man who looks like my Philippe. I sometimes extend my grant-a-wish benevolence to men not under my direct care and protection. These two took turns on his ass, one with Philippe bent over, nuzzling my crotch and grabbing onto my hips for balance; the second with Philippe up against the wall.

Another two were offered his mouth, my temporarily submissive

warrior down on his bare knees on a floor that wasn't likely to have been clean to start with, but was unlikely to be the kind of mess it would be later.

I ended it then. Surprisingly, the last man to get sucked offered to take care of Philippe. He almost... *almost*... made it sound like an altruistic offer, instead of being the offer of an experienced sucker who liked the feel and taste and smell of cock down his throat. We put ourselves back together, went upstairs to drink another beer apiece. Twelve euros was a reasonable price to pay for that much sex.

Tramps was next. Not quite as active, no darkroom, but a toilet stall worked quite well for the bear who fucked him while Philippe sucked me.

We wound up at Greifbar, with its winding darkroom, and the cabins that look like bright blue plastic porta potties. I opened the door to one of the cabins, took his tee out of my back pocket, folded it, put it on the floor in front of the folding chair, and made him kneel there, his naked ass toward the hallway, his ankles and feet outside the door frame. Three men in—two ass, one mouth—he began to slump and I knew he'd reached his limit.

I put my hand on the shoulder of the fairly bulky, bulging muscles, not-well-inked, shirtless man who had just slid home. "*Es tut mir leid, mein Freund, er hat, zu stoppen.*"

Drink makes stupid men even more stupid. He snarled at me, "When I'm done with the bitch's cunt."

There in the mostly dark, amidst the smells of men and sweat and beer and piss and come and poppers and pot, were there any witches and warlocks whose thumbs pricked just then? Any whose hair, nape or arms, quivered and stood on end? A gut that told its owner it was time to get the fuck outa there?

Humans gave up their sensitivity in exchange for their humanity, but sometimes the animal just beneath the surface comes up and warns of a nearby predator. An imminent predator. An eight hundred pound monster if a *Smilodon populator*, pissed off and ready to use the long, curved fangs to rip your body open from chest to belly and enjoy your entrails. The animal

had no chance to warn stupid. My hand was around his throat and I squeezed, with a surgeon's precision backed by that saber tooth strength. Not enough to crush his larynx, not enough to rip out his throat. Though I could have, even without claws.

My voice was soft, deadly. I didn't know if those who had been waiting in line could hear, but given that the nearest ones had shoved their way back, though still sticking around in case there was a major or even a minor train wreck to watch, I doubted it. "This *man* is mine. Not a bitch. Not a cunt. And no one touches him if I say no. What do you think I just said?"

From the awful sounds trying to fight their way out of his mouth I understood him to repeat my "no" with some degree of fervency. Over the years I have become well able to translate strangled noises when a hand, usually mine, is on a throat. Or a garrote. I squeezed again, just enough to make certain he would have difficulty speaking for at least a day, perhaps longer.

I released him and he fell back on his ass, scuttling backward on hands and butt and heels, his soft, condom-covered cock dangling, getting away from the suddenly, terrifyingly *real* bogeyman. I stepped out of the cabin, felt Philippe pulling his legs up, sliding onto his side. I did my best Cerberus imitation, and the watchers found reasons to look elsewhere for sex.

I gathered my Philippe up, tilted him against the wall, got his clothes back on him. Put my arms around him, even allowing him to rest his head on top of mine, letting him absorb strength from me. "*Je suis tellement désolé, mon ami,*" he whispered.

"*C'est ne rien. Pas besoin d'excuser.*"

He inhaled slowly, exhaled. Again. Straightened. I loosened my hold. His smile was back, visible to me in the dimness. "Do I look as well-fucked as your lawyer?"

I shook my head. "How would I know?"

His turn to shake his head. "As that so very butch SEAL said just before I buried my cock in his ass last year, 'Go for it, ya fucker!'" He let out a soft little *huff!* of air. "You don't need to wait."

I shut that line of thinking down with a kiss.

And when we got back to our room, he stripped before the door was closed, got on the bed on hands and knees, and though I could see the tiniest bit of trembling I did not embarrass him by mentioning it. “Fuck me, *mon cher* Jean-Luc. Make the evening end well.”

I did. Balls-deep in a single stroke since he had been so frequently opened, both hands working his nipples, then holding his shoulders as I power fucked, then folding over him, my lips and teeth working the joining of his neck and shoulder, my damp fur soaking up a bit of his sweat, my callused hand working his cock, squeezing, twisting, stroking until he came with a loud shout, and I followed, coating his innards with my seed.

I made him sleep in the wet spot.

I look down at him again, caress his hair, his face, and in his sleep he nuzzles my hand, just a little. I lay back down again, and fall asleep, too.

Then—A little past noon, Thursday

JONATHAN

The fucker is stalking me. I have seen him again and again since Saturday night. Four “agains,” actually. Sunday breakfast. Early Monday evening when the first day’s session was ending, though he didn’t say anything, just glanced my way and smiled. A cock-stiffening smile for a sick pervert like me. I dutifully turned away as if I hadn’t noticed.

Tuesday, late, in the spa upstairs. I figured wearing myself out with exercise would get me to sleep, and rest up for Wednesday. Instead I wore myself out jacking in a toilet stall in the locker room. Picard the Prick was on his back on a bench, wearing nothing but thin cotton shorts that bulged alarmingly, just as his arms bulged alarmingly from the amount of weight he was lifting. Cassius, whose name I *still* did not know, and really, I didn’t want to know it, much, was spotting him. If the plates were in pounds not kilos he had to be lifting four hundred pounds.

And then he raised his head, spotted me, winked, and put on an even better show. I told myself I couldn’t really smell that warm man-scent from where I stood. Told myself that the erection that crept down the left leg of his shorts, the side away from me goddamn it, lifting the fabric’s edge, wasn’t because of me. A few more lifts, and then he stopped. Sat up, straddling the bench, and calmly adjusted himself so that the length of him rose up and pointed to his left hip bone.

“*Bonsoir, monsieur avocat!*” he called out, and the few other men there turned to look at me. I hoped they missed my all too visible hard-on, the painful one because it was bent by a freaking jock strap. The Prick did not.

“*Bonne nuit, Monsieur le docteur,*” I grated, spinning around and getting the fuck out of Dodge. Though only as far as the toilet for a quick come, an unusually quick one, brought on in part by how fucking sexy he was, they were, in part by the fear he’d follow me and taunt me, humiliate me. I am usually neat if I have an “EE,” also known as an erectile emergency, that calls for self-abuse and the risk of hairy palms in a public

toilet, either spreading my legs and forcing my cock down to spew in the water, or carefully wiping up the spurts and blobs if I just let fly. Tuesday I grunted loudly, set a long-distance come-shot personal best, and walked out, having let the globs and blobs fall where they may. Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke.

Then that whole charade last night.

And now he's interrupting my lunch. My *working* lunch. Not as in working with someone else, but working at the desk in my room, with some sandwiches and gone-cool tea nearby. He's standing in the doorway. Bulging. Fucking *bulging*! I'll just shut the door in his face; we have nothing to say to each other. There is definitely nothing I want to do with that bulge. So, no talk, no action. He opens his mouth. I hold my hand up, palm out, and he nicely stops whatever he was about to say. This *has* to stop. If the tales were true, I'd be needing a hedge trimmer to deal with the hair on my palms by now.

I brace myself for whatever it is he is up to, as I am not stupid enough to believe that shutting up just now actually means stopping. My "C'mon" is far from welcoming but that doesn't stop him from coming in.

I walk back to the desk. The slight *click!* as he closes it makes my breath hitch.

I sit behind the desk, gesture him toward the chair opposite so I'll be in the position of power, of authority. The bastard does takes the chair, a heavy chair, picking it up one-handed the fucking peasant show-off, and carries it around so that when he puts it down and sits, he's facing me. Very closely facing me. I don't swivel toward him; if I did we would be knee to knee, our crotches on display. I turn my head, just enough to take in those dark eyes, and the way they do something to my insides that is both unnerving in a "head for the hills" way, and warming.

"We have to talk."

Our words are simultaneous. Politeness demands that we each say, "No, you go first," and then resolve the issue of priority. Which is what I say, while *he* says, "I'll go first."

Bastard.

“We need to fuck.”

My mouth drops open.

“You don’t agree? Then why have you been stalking me, arranging these little meetings that appear oh so accidental?”

“But I haven’t...”

“You’re a church big-wig; I’m an atheist doctor who’s going to get his ass shot off in the near future, or at least they’re going to try, so it’s unlikely we’d ever have met under ordinary circumstances. You don’t cruise the bars, do you?”

“I...”

“I didn’t think so. Baths?”

“I...”

“No, you’re not the type. So that lets out cottaging, too, or what do you Yanks call it? Ah. Tearooms. Which means with all this conference shit you have going on, you’re not getting any.”

“And you are.”

Christ, could my voice sound any more childishly resentful?

Bastard doesn’t even break stride. “Yes, I am. My Philippe is a glorious fuck.”

I don’t look at him, even turn my head away, but I can’t prevent the blurt: “Then why would you want *me*?”

Well, bloody, bloody hell as his British pals might say. It appears I *can* sound even more childishly resentful. Vastly more.

There is a silence. Not a long one. Then he sighs. “I have no fucking idea.”

It’s his turn to put his hand up, palm out, to shut me up, to block whatever words of hurt would have come hurtling out just then.

“This is... new for me. Something I have never experienced. Perhaps I am not handling it well. But I know there is something more to... *this*... to

whatever the hell *this* is... than just the fact that I want you on your knees sucking my cock, getting me wet so that I can bend you over a bed, a couch, a table, this desk, and shove my cock so far up your ass I'm going to come in your mouth from the back, and pound you until you scream my name and bring us both off.

"So, first things first. I'm sitting here with the hard-on from hell, which you're trying not to look at. And you got stiff the moment I said *fuck*."

I open my mouth to lie, figuring he'll go on cutting me off, only the shit sits there. Grinning. How can a grin on a face of crags and crevices and sharp angles make my erection even worse?

I manage to regain a modicum of control over my voice. It only shakes a little as I tell him, "No."

"No, you're not hard and leaking? Stand up and prove me wrong. No, not here and now? I am not exactly a dumb-shit twink ruled by his dick, since you have to be back at your conference at one. Tomorrow."

"I have..."

"Yes, my Jonathan, and you *are*, somehow, some way, *my* Jonathan, whether you know it, or just aren't willing to admit it, and I already know you have meetings tomorrow and a banquet at seven. Meet us in Club Olympus at eleven-oh-one."

The curiosity over how he knows so much is overridden by my cock. Apparently I am not so evolved as he is. "It closes at eleven."

Smug of face, smug of voice. "Not for me."

"And... and you said meet *us*?"

"Of course. Philippe thinks your ass and mouth are nearly as fuckable as I think they are. He's hoping your cock fucks equally well. Preferably inside him."

This is not happening. This is *not fucking happening*. I'm actually asleep with Dieter up my ass, fantasizing all this. Only now, well, now I'm starting to fantasize about the exercise room, the showers, the hot tub, whatever else, with the two of them, naked, hard, and wanting me.

I can't do this. Somehow, some way I'll fuck it up and Father, Grandfather, Joshua, the fucking world will know what I am. But oh how I want this. Not the romantic deflowering in a modern Regency, but something hard and nearly dirty. Just this once. A memory to keep hold of.

My silence has gone on too long. He scoots the chair, leans forward, rests his large hand over my right wrist. His thumb strokes the hair on my arm, just below where my cuff is rolled up. I never knew you could get third degree burns from a thumb.

"Oh, my Jonathan, so lonely, so afraid. You don't have to be. Ever again."

I have heard of words warming you, just never experienced it before. Yet still, I want to lash out, a preemptive strike to push away the hurt I expect, that I always expect. I want to lash out. I want to cry. I want to just... let go.

Softly, softly. "Jonathan. What do you have to lose?"

"My virginity."

I clench my eyes shut to hold back the tears that start to well up. I've just admitted to a complete stranger not only am I queer, but I'm nearly as bad as that stupid movie. Just four years younger.

He doesn't laugh, gasp, snort, mock. No judgment as Father would judge. No sneering as they all would sneer. Only a tiny moment of silence, a moment of stillness, and then his hand squeezes in a light caress, and his thumb starts that hawk making lazy circles in the sky kind of motion.

"With a gift like that, you will never regret what we three will do. You'll..."

This time it is his turn to stop. In the stillness that follows, he raises his head, tilts it only slightly toward the door. Why do I think some great cat is in the room, its tail beginning to lash?

Then I hear the sound of the lock. Someone is coming, and there is only one someone who would fucking get a key to my room, and just fucking walk in without a knock. I start to panic, to struggle to get away from this

compromising position, but he squeezes again, not to the point of pain, but as a complement to his words. “Don’t worry, *mon cher*. I won’t let you come to harm. Not now. Not ever.”

And with that, I do it. I simply let go. Cede control. Let myself be amazed by how warm and *protected* I feel. For the first time in my life.

“Jonathan Charles.”

As in most families, when someone your senior in power or rank, even if not in age, uses all of your given names, you immediately understand that you have fucked up. The tone tells you the degree of fuckedness. Joshua’s tone did not... *quite*... indicate a hanging offense. Perhaps only a flogging. I am, fortunately, far too old for Joshua to try the blows to my ass, to my back, that he sometimes used after our names changed, after he was anointed heir. Or... that other. That one time. He prefers, these days, to flay my soul.

It’s only Jean-Luc’s fingertips... I can’t in good conscience still call him Picard the Prick any more... invisible to Joshua beneath my wrist, lightly pressing and releasing, that tether me to a semblance of sanity. He stands with a leisurely lethality, all jungle cat grace. I don’t dare look. Either he doesn’t care if Joshua sees the erection he told me about... and damn it, *I* didn’t get to see it... or he has far more control than I. But then, most do.

Jean-Luc, alone, fills the room as he and Cassius did in the ballroom last night. He looks at Joshua, the weight of that presence making my brother back up a step. My brother never backs up, backs down.

“And you are?” Jean-Luc pauses and while I cannot see his eyes, I know they are raking Joshua, and not being at all impressed. “Ah, you are M’sieur Priestley’s younger brother. Do you make it a habit of entering a room that is not yours without consent? *Comment très grossier.*”

I smothered a snort at my brother being told how very rude he is in a language he does not understand, in a tone that tells him all too well that he has just been insulted.

“Or perhaps it is only because your brother allows it? I think, as part of my prescription, I shall require privacy, and freedom from intrusions. *Un moment, s’il vous plait.*”

He pulls his cell phone out of his pocket. I recognize it, and from Joshua's slight inhalation, he does, too. A Ulysse Nardin Chairman. Father wanted one, but the cheapest model is fifteen thousand dollars, and the top model is in excess of one hundred and thirty thousand dollars. Even Father was forced to realize that a cellphone like that was overly ostentatious for a minister, no matter how wealthy the church he controls. It doesn't glitter, so the many diamonds of the top tier aren't present. I suspect it's about as pricey as you can get without adding in the jewels. Fifty thousand? Sixty?

He punches what is clearly a speed dial number, speaks briefly in German, asking for a Herr Grunewald. The manager of the Grand Hyatt. Jean-Luc shifts to English. "My apologies, *mein Herr*, for not speaking in your language, but I have someone here who needs to understand. It seems one of your staff gave a keycard to Jonathan Priestley's room without his, as his lawyer might say, prior knowledge or consent."

A pause. "No, I have no idea which staff member, but the, ah, gentleman who did the persuading is apparently Mr. Priestley's younger brother. I am sure he was most persuasive. He is, after all, one of those American evangelical preachers..." his tone says double-dealing con artists, "...but I am certain it is not your policy to provide room access merely because someone asks for it."

A pause. "Yes. A family member, but still, your policies surely do not..." A pause. "Quite right. Mr. Priestley—Jonathan, not the other, of course—will be expecting him." He ends the call, turns his head to look at me. I am still sitting.

"Herr Grunewald is most apologetic that someone gave away your room key without authorization. He is sending someone up right now to change the computer code on the door, and he will ensure that for the remainder of your stay, only you will have keycard, without your written permission otherwise. Well, aside from housekeeping and hotel management, of course."

I have seen Father in apoplectic mode, Grandfather, too. Never before Joshua. It is delightful even if I will pay for that delight some way in the future.

The start of Joshua's "Who do you think you are," only gets as far as the owl sound before Jean-Luc interrupts—by turning away from my brother. For just a moment I wonder whether the turn is enough to qualify as a cut direct, or if he has to give Joshua the full back for it to be effective. If that happened in front of the window, it would block off most of the sunlight and plunge us into near-dark.

"M'sieur Priestley, your pulse is a little weak, and you are clearly under a high degree of stress. I will send Doctor Neumann up to confirm my diagnosis."

He looks over his shoulder at Joshua. "I am more qualified these days for battle medicine, you see." He takes in Joshua's somewhat dazed expression. The heir is not used to being ignored.

"Ah. You do not see. I am with *Médecins Sans Frontières*." A pause, a tiny smile that I am sure Joshua misses. In a "hello, is anyone in there?" tone, he adds, "Doctors without Borders?"

I assume Joshua's blink is enough acknowledgment, because Jean-Luc ignores him again in favor of speaking to me. I *enjoy* him speaking to me. "I believe Dr. Neumann will agree that you need to take the rest of the afternoon off. Spend it quietly. Here. *Alone*. You have been working too hard."

He lifts that heavy chair in his left hand again, as if it were a beach chair of canvas strips and aluminum tubes, carries it around to put it in its original position. There. The evidence of our dissolute intimacy is gone, but I will remember it. He walks the few steps to Joshua and puts his right hand around Joshua's left bicep. My brother flinches. "And now, M'sieur, I think we need to leave your older brother to get some rest. Don't you agree?"

Another flinch, and a brief flare of fury. I can read the promise of retribution in the flare. Joshua has no chance to agree or disagree, because Jean-Luc just doesn't let him go, and marches him to the door, holds out his left hand for the keycard, which Joshua reluctantly surrenders. He twists, and left-handed, tosses it to me. No one in the room is surprised when I clutch at it and miss, watching it flutter to the floor.

I don't care. Joshua is being marched out of my room. Damn. Piqued, repiqued, and capot!

I don't realize I said those last four words aloud, until Jean-Luc, Joshua all the way out, puts his head back in, wearing a wide smile, making me wonder what those smiling lips would feel like if *he* was on his knees, working *my* cock, and says just loud enough for me to hear, "As Miss Heyer might say."

My brief shout of laughter is to a closed door.

JEAN-LUC

The heat, even the heat left by the air-conditioning, drains out of the hallway. I don't slam the asshole against the wall, handling him as he deserves to be handled. But he feels the chill. And knows its source.

"Don't even think about going ahead with it."

He shakes himself, brushes the sleeve that I had slightly crushed. Straightens. Dons the mantle of what he thinks is power. It isn't. He should be thankful his arm isn't pulp inside the sleeve. He opens his mouth to avoid, deny, excuse, make a pitiful attempt to stand up to me.

I cut him off again. "Or do you want me rethink the donation, the six-figure donation, your brother had just about convinced me to make to the Brethren?"

I am not above bribery to keep a bully at bay, until we have resolved things, my Jonathan and I. I will have to call Jonathan, and disturb his rest to let him know. Although I suspect his rest is going to consist in part of making good use of one or both of the dildos Herr Klein found when he checked the room yesterday. The Hyatt's Onity locks are not as secure as the hotel allows everyone to believe. Will he be thinking of me as he uses the dildos? Of Philippe? Of both? My warning is because it would not do for Jonathan's mouth to drop open when his brother mentions my imminent gift. As he will. Much better, much, *much* better to have Jonathan's mouth open so that Philippe or I can put something far better than silicone in it.

Joshua's father or grandfather might have been a little more difficult to deal with, but they are not here and this little tyrant is. And if he ignores the

order, ignores the bribe, he will just have to learn the very hard way that I am indeed not someone a little pissant like him messes with.

Then—Friday night. Shortly before 11:00

JONATHAN

I'm not going. He's just playing a trick on the poor pathetic virgin queer. So I'm getting my hopes up to match my hard-on and when I walk through the doors, even assuming they're unlocked, he's not there. *They're* not there. Or they both are, and they suck and fuck and do all the shit I want to do, just once, with someone willing. With no one unwilling. Except, it just them doing the doing because they get off on having someone watch, but not touch, jack but not join. Get off on my humiliation as I watch and jack and then get told to leave. All those are more likely to happen than their truly wanting *me*.

So. It's decided. I'm not going, not going to put myself at risk this way.

Five minutes ago I was going. Certain this will be the best night of my life.

Five minutes before that, I'm listening to Banjo singing in the back of my head, asking me if I had the feeling that I wanted to go, asking me if I had the feeling I wanted to stay. Go to the spa? Stay in my room?

Five minutes before that...

I have to make a choice. Yes or no. Stay or go. Traipse through the hotel halls in my exercise clothes which are kind of sweat-smelling from my two uses of the club, knowing everyone who sees me will know I'm off to do something wicked and perverse and unnatural, since they will all know that Club Olympus is closed at this time of night. Or change again, into something I can strip off easily if they're not mind-fucking me, and are instead going to pick a hole—at the same time? sequentially?—and shove a cock in. I can carry my gym clothes wrapped in a towel in case it's only exercise after all.

Fuck it, fuck them.

I put on my sweat-stained tee with ragged holes instead of sleeves, the shorts I picked because they're tight enough, thin enough to emphasize

what bulge I have, and hey, that's okay, that's not faggy, Joshua, Father, Grandfather, guys, real guys, real men, do that all the time. Commando. The worn trainers I carry with me for exercising comfort, ASICS low-cut socks that are almost invisible. Shaving kit, cell inside because even heading out for maybe sex they have no qualms about calling whenever it is most convenient for them.

I exit, lock the door, tuck the keycard into the bag. I must be hitting a traffic lull, as I see no one between my room and the elevator that goes to the spa. A young man is standing beside the elegant doors to Club Olympus. If you're going to name your spa after the home of the gods, you have to have the good taste to go with the name. The management had the good taste to hire this one.

Twenties, for sure. Compact, muscular, wearing a strained short-sleeved shirt in the hotel's colors and with the Olympus logo on his chest. Shorts not quite as tight as mine, and a better bulge, though obviously encased in a jock or a cup. Trainers and socks. Tanned, fit. Look at what you, too, can be, if you only get with the program while you're our guest for two days.

He holds out his hand. "Good evening, Herr..."

His voice trails off to give me the opportunity to fill in the blank. I don't. I just shake his hand, with a "*Guten Abend*" of my own, let go, and reach for the door.

The "letting go" process is a little longer than it should have been.

"Sir..."

I look back at him. He oh so casually brushes his hand across his crotch, absent-mindedly, as if flicking off crumbs. It certainly isn't to draw attention to the bulge that is a bit more noticeable. He smiles when he notices where my eyes go to. He pulls a business card out of his shirt pocket, extends it to me.

"My card, sir, in case you, and the other gentlemen, the ones who are waiting, should need me. For anything. Anything at all."

I naturally take the card. It wouldn't do to offend the help. It has a handwritten number on it, in addition to the official information.

The little slut.

Well, right now, *I'm* the only slut, or slut-wannabe, that's going into action here.

"I'll be sure to let them know."

Which leaves him with no choice but to go to the elevator. I enter the spa and the door clicks shut behind me. I hope it is locked, as I have no way of knowing, short of going out and shutting it and yanking, which would then leave me with no way of getting in, since I have no cell phone numbers for either of them. If they even carry phones when they're... maybe... planning on having sex with a stranger.

Where would I go if I were the one planning that sex? The weight room? Too much equipment with handles to put your eyes out, and the benches are too few, too small. The locker room? All sorts of fantasies to go with that, plus longer benches, but the floors are damned hard. Steam room or sauna? Not to start with. Obviously not the lobby or someone would be sucking already.

Ah. The hot tub. Stress-relieving heat, followed by *stress-relieving heat*.

I make my way through the dimness, open the door. Almost right. They're by the pool, seated on hopefully very sturdy lounge chairs, dressed in the thick, ultra-soft white robes the hotel provides. All closed and belted unfortunately, but if you can't hope that things will get better, and robes will magically evaporate, where are you?

As I get closer I notice the two ice buckets. One has my vodka, and the other... my vodka as well. Gentlemen, gentlemen, no need to get me drunk.

I stop to admire the view. What there is of it. Jean-Luc looks up at me and smiles. "Don't you have too many clothes on?"

Shades of Dieter, though a little more wordy. And how hot is it for a man whose body isn't "all that" to get naked while two Vesuvius-hot men are covered and watching?

Very.

The one who is not Jean-Luc, whose name I think I was told, but which I cannot recall, sits up, swivels to his right, stands, turns to me. A hint of

chest at the top, sides overlapping all the way down to mid-calf. Below, he's bare. His feet are long and slender with just a dusting of hair on his instep and toes. I wonder what they would be like over someone's shoulders, curling as he gets close to coming.

And then there is a puddle at his feet. A white puddle of expensive cloth. My head quickly lifts from its moment of floor-oriented admiration, recording the image as I go.

Long, long, long muscled legs, layered in straight dark hair, except, holy fuck, for a thick, ridged scar curving down his left thigh. I gulp, and gape. Both at the scar and the cock that is indeed uncut, a long foreskin that covers an arrowhead shape. A lush, deep-brown, almost black bush at the base of his cock, fat balls in an up-close sack, which is also hairy. I'd like to visit for a while but the tour director is going to get impatient.

Very little hair above his pubes, except for a slight treasure trail. An unquestioned six-pack as my accountant side quickly calculates. Small nipples, more thick hair curling out from his armpits. But what holds my attention are the scars. Small, large, in between. Short, long, straight, twisted. Three, count 'em, three puckers that have to be from bullets. And another long scar from beneath his right pec slanting down toward his left hip. It seems... newer than the rest.

His long-fingered hands, with curly hair on the knuckles as well, hang loose at his side. No nervous movement, no hip-tilted and flaunting pose. But still, a pose. He knows it, I know it, and his brilliant eyes, a startling blue, confirm that he knows I know, once I manage to get that far. His upper arms and upper chest have a marked strength. On someone bigger those pecs might have been a shelf, shading what was below.

Close-cropped hair. Straight full lips. A beard around his jaw, a mustache, neatly trimmed. Even I can recognize a warrior when I see one, though I have never been so close to one, and certainly not a naked warrior. My instinct was right, in the lobby. He did indeed look like he belonged with the men in their uniforms.

But no. I look into his eyes, notice their depths, notice the hint of tension at the edge of his eyes, the slight gauntness I saw on Wednesday.

He does not belong with those men after all. They are watchdogs trained to bark and frighten intruders away. He is a sleek Doberman, trained to take the intruder down in swift silence.

He opens his mouth, but my—did I really say that out loud?—“Cassius,” wins the race.

He blinks, and the pose falls apart as he tosses his head back and laughs, turns his head towards Jean-Luc, laughs some more, and waves his left hand in a clear, “Tell him, tell him,” gesture.

Jean-Luc hasn't laughed but a broad smile agrees with the laughter. “That's his name for you.”

“What?”

“Until I told him your name, of course. But the first time he saw you, he said, ‘Yon Cassius has a not-quite lean, and well-fucked look, don't you think?’”

I flush. Almost do that Venus and foam bit and try to cover my belly and bits, the latter being not dangly at all, but definitely in the mood, or heading there.

“Were you, Jonathan? Were you indeed freshly fucked when I... when we... first saw you?”

I wonder if the flush is worse. Don't... can't answer.

His voice is harder. “Whose cock had been in your ass?”

This is absurd. There is no possessive tone. I don't hear a silent strong voice, most definitely not my own, whispering, “Mine.”

Is there? Do I?

“Jonathan.” I hear the silent “Tell me, damn it, tell me now.”

Does Cass... no... Philippe. Now I remember.

Jean-Luc apparently has no patience, since my brief side trip down memory lane to collect Philippe's name went on too long. “Did you lie to me last night?”

The snarl tells me he doesn't like being lied to. It's clearly a preliminary

snarl, though, indicating more, many more, to come if the circumstances warrant.

A swift side-ways glance at Philippe nets me a “Son, you’re on your own,” look, straight out of *Blazing Saddles*.

“It... it was just Dieter.” I can’t tell him. It’s just too damned embarrassing.

“Dieter.”

How does he make a single word sound like “I’ll grind his bones to make my bread?”

“Where is he? Who is he?”

Okay. Embarrassment is good. Better than having him arrested because he’s damaged the first Dieter he finds in the hotel.

“He’s, uh, well, he’s, uh, it’s just a dildo.”

With that, the tension drains away. I don’t dare look at Philippe to get a soldier’s sneering opinion of a nerd who names the dildos he fucks himself with. It’s bad enough when Jean-Luc says, “Jonathan, really, you *name* your dildos?”

What I *hear* is the sneer I expected from Philippe, but somehow, not from him; what I *hear*, is the arrogant judgment of an outsider.

I am unexpectedly angry, speaking well before my mind catches up with the actuality of gentle, just-us-guys, maybe that’s kind of hot, teasing.

My turn to snarl, or what passes for a snarl in someone like me. “Who the *fuck* do you think you are, and what *fucking* business is it of yours if I have no...”

This is the first time I have ever used that word aloud, to anyone, about anyone.

And then the reality of his tone and the realization of what I have admitted catch up with me at the same time. The self-inflicted humiliation, a pattern of my private life, is too much.

“This was a mistake.”

I turn my back on them, drop to my haunches, scrabbling for my shorts and the bag. That's all I need to get back to safety. Fuck anyone who sees me in the halls or elevator. Fuck the rest of the shit.

Jean-Luc is in front of me, on his haunches as well. How did he get there without my noticing?

Oh. Maybe my eyes being shut while I "looked."

Those huge hands, with their rough-textured fingers and palms, are gentle on my wrists. Just enough of a hold to stop the grabbing, not enough that I don't understand that if I pull away he will let go.

He leans and his forehead touches mine as we stay still. "I am sorry, *mon cher* Jonathan. *We* are sorry."

An utterly inappropriate "What do you mean *we*, white man?" almost escapes. *We*? Philippe didn't say anything so there is no "we" unless Philippe sneered, and if he did he gets a free pass since I didn't check.

"Forgive me, *mon petit chou*?"

At that I do look up, tug my hands loose, and then give him a shove he is clearly not expecting. He lands on his ass. As do I, what with all that action, reaction, equal, opposite physics crap.

"I am not your fucking little fucking cabbage! And what is with you people calling people cabbage like it's a compliment or something? Cabbage is unpleasant. Nasty. There is nothing at all nice..."

His "Shut the fuck up, Jonathan!" is accomplished by looming up and over me, knees on either side of me, immobilizing my head with his left hand, starting my very first tongue-fucking, pulling me up and to him, and putting his right hand to work on my very interested cock.

Geez, guy, all ya had to do was ask. But I prefer his Plan B.

I sort of sense Philippe moving in, not paying all that much attention since mouth-work plus cock-work from Jean-Luc equals no focus left for the fact that he is removing Jean-Luc's robe.

Both naked now, he maneuvers us so that we're on our sides, and then just keeps on moving until he's on his back and I'm on top of him. His

heavy thighs and knees nudge my legs and I get the message. Whoever will be watching this later on the security cameras I am sure are running, is going to see some ungainly geek sprawl with my legs outside his, spread like I'm going to try for a split.

Sprawl is good. More so when you feel warm breath on your ass. Or more particularly, your hole. Strong hands kneading your cheeks, and then a tongue just licking around and around. It isn't possible for my asshole to be sensitive. It's had too many dildos up it; the nerve endings are shot.

Like fuck.

Something sizzles inside when his thumbs tug and my hole gives way, just a little, kind of like it does when it notices Dieter or the rest getting ready to go on in. And then his tongue is inside. Not all the way, just a little, slurping, lapping, making me whimper into Jean-Luc's mouth. A little deeper, deeper, and then there's a finger joining the lips and tongue. Just the tip.

Tongue out, finger slick with spit, straight on in. Just a mini-mini-dildo. No big...

Oh fucking deal. So damned much difference between your prostate being worked over because you've juggled and jiggled the dildo into just the right angle, no matter how contorted you have to be to get it there. A world... a galaxy... of difference when what's inside is not controlled by you.

Then both of Jean-Luc's hands are back there, clamped tight, forcing me to grind my cock against his, sudden sweat and precome lubing me. Two fingers inside me, stretching me, then none, and Philippe's mouth on me, exploring me, wetting me inside, emptiness, the buzz building.

I try to pull away, to explain I don't want to come, I can't, only my thoughts are skittering away, three fingers, pushing, twisting, turning, my eyes shut, my mouth moaning into his, and in the darkness behind my eyelids colored strands, ribbons, something, begin to twine, the fingers move faster, his hands control my hips and then he breaks the kiss long enough to say into my mouth, "Come, Jonathan."

I do what I am told, soaking both our bellies with shot after shot of seed.

I shake, trying desperately not to be a wimp and cry. This isn't what I wanted, what I hoped for. A variation on a dildo fuck, fun, yes, and making me come long and hard. Too long, too hard. I can't come again soon, so my evening is as good as over.

Jean-Luc doesn't let go. He strokes my back, soothing me. Long strokes from shoulder to lower back to ass and repeat. Philippe's hand joins his.

When the shaking stops he gently slides me off to his right, rolls left, gets up, turns and looks down at me.

JEAN-LUC

Such a beautiful man, though it's clear he doesn't think so.

I lean forward, hold out my hand. "You getting up?"

He shakes his head. Whatever it was that troubled him when he came appears, if not gone, at least gone away.

"I just want to admire the view for a while."

Many men over many years have "admired the view," which has always meant admiration centered on my cock. It is unquestionably worth admiring. All nine point two-five inches of it. I prefer precision when I am asked, as I am always asked, either before or after they have it in one or both of their holes.

Except... Jonathan is not looking at my cock. My cock is hard to overlook, especially when I am standing over someone and it's this hard, the skin pulled back from the leaking, dark purple knob.

He is actually looking at my face.

I suspect that what I denied on Saturday night is true.

I am fucked.

Even without a dick going up my ass tonight.

JONATHAN

I like the view very much.

The nervous-making cock, of course, that looks like it's about to do a

Niagara on me, is worth admiring. I do admire it. And consider the technicalities of getting that much man up inside me, even with years of dildo preparation. I've never had the guts to try one that large.

It's his face. Oh, yes, the harsh angles, the eyebrow slash drawn with a level, the mouth and jaw that look as though they are capable of chewing granite and spitting out dust, the impression that his head was originally shaped like a block of stone easily able to hold up a pyramid, and then carved down into oh-so-rugged humanity, all of that adds up to the peasant I saw that first time. And dismissed.

Stupid, stupid Jonathan.

It isn't merely that I've grown accustomed to his face when we've seen each other this week, as if I were "forgiving" his peasant origin as his face became familiar, the way your nose becomes "accustomed" to a foul stench and eventually you don't notice it.

Part of it is the "mine!" I see in his eyes when he looks at me, even though we both know that if I am his at all it's only for this one evening, part of an evening. We each have our separate realities in which to immerse ourselves in the morning. Mine, a church and mergers and millions. His, more missions of mercy. And Philippe. Certainly Philippe.

The other part or parts, the rest of the why his face is so very special, I have not figured out. Eventually, perhaps, I will, though not until tonight is long in the past.

His extended hand is beginning to exhibit signs of impatience with my lingering on the floor. Is it itching to give my bottom a hard *whack!* for being such a bad boy?

I examine the thought, and after a nanosecond of careful consideration conclude that as a joke it's fine, but I am definitely not going there.

As I lift my own hand to take his, even though I am perfectly capable of doing it on my own in a Fred and Ginger, pick-myself-up, start-again sort of way, I start to offer a prayer to a generally non-responsive God. Just a small one that maybe, just maybe, my balls could generate some new sperm far more rapidly than usual so that I might perhaps come again, but this

time with a cock inside me, or my cock inside someone else. I don't think it counts if all you get is rubbing yourself off against someone, especially someone who didn't bother to come himself.

For a moment, the pull of that massive hand and arm makes me feel like my soles are actually on air before settling down to the deck, and as I reach my feet I recall Father's? Grandfather's? thundering words that the Lord *their* God does not hear the sound of a sinner's voice. Being a fag is fairly high up on the sin list.

Jean-Luc rumbles at me, my hand still in his, "Let's get cleaned up."

I restrain the sigh. Right. Come and done, clean me up, send me on my way, and they can enjoy themselves. I turn toward the locker room and showers, he turns the other direction. We stop, look at each other, and simultaneously say, "Where are you going?"

"Uh, the locker room? Where the showers are?"

The tug this time is more of a yank as he heads toward the end of the pool. I do a quick little double-time step or two to get with the rhythm.

"The hot tub will be better."

"But you're supposed to be clean before..." Now I'm nearly trotting, which is ridiculous because I'm taller, and my strides should easily match his.

We get to the side of the tub, which is large, lit from the inside, sending up curls of steam.

"Here's a new accounting formula for you. Heat plus chlorine plus I give a fuck with what I'm paying equals clean enough. Stop worrying and get in."

I stand there in my admire-the-damned-view-and-make-a-mental-video mode as he steps up and bends forward to rest his right arm on the edge, giving me a glorious view of his large, not-at-all-fat, hairy ass, of his heavily muscled legs as he lifts the left one, showing me just how low his balls hang, and then he's over, in, standing sideways, and easing himself down.

Philippe follows, all scarred and sleek and dangerous.

Their contented sighs are orgasm-making. I blink when my cock twitches in response. Only a little, not Lazarus risen quite yet. But it could also be just a taunt, giving me a rising expectation only to ultimately leave me deflated. God... or Someone... has done that before.

I stop worrying and get in. Seated, slumped so that the bubbling water is up to our pits, our arms extended on the sides, but not quite touching, we form a neat triangle on our separate shelves. We sit in silence, enjoying the heat. But not for long, as Jean-Luc and Philippe move in on me, sitting now on either side.

Philippe pulls my head to his for a slow, deep kiss. The second time in my life a man has kissed me is only the tiniest measurement less than my first from Jean-Luc. All seventeen, perhaps eighteen, of their hands—I seem to have lost some of my ability to do basic math—are caressing me and contributing to the moans I'm breathing into Philippe's mouth.

He breaks the kiss, leans his head back, rubs a warm thumb across my wet lower lip. My mouth doesn't want to close. "Such an adorable mouth, *mon cher*. It will look so good with my cock inside it, with Jean-Luc's. Shall we take turns fucking your face and teach you deep-throating?"

My enthusiastic "Yes!" comes out as a strangled whimper.

"But first, you should feel it yourself, know what will be expected of you when it is your turn."

I can't find any words to use for a response, in large part because of the hairy thumb on which I am practicing my sucking technique, such as it isn't.

He swaps his tongue for his thumb, and I find I am a natural tongue sucker. And then it is Jean-Luc's turn.

They'll have to remake *The Day the Earth Stood Still* just one more time. With entirely new subject matter. By the time he lets me go I am amazed that the hot tub hasn't boiled dry.

JEAN-LUC

It is a far, far smarter thing I do than I have ever done before, breaking that kiss. A second or two longer and we would have boiled off the water and shorted the tub out.

I put my hands back underwater, on his waist, lift. He rises, dripping, and I plop his ass down on the edge. He shivers at the sharp contrast between the water of the tub and the air. He'll heat up again soon enough.

"Suck him, Philippe."

I actually need not have spoken as Philippe was already in motion, not quite shouldering me out of the way so that he could get to Jonathan's not-dangly-at-all bits, more... a missile in launch mode waiting for the countdown. Jonathan groans as Philippe swallows him and thus stays there, nose buried in Jonathan's wet pubes. Philippe has marvelous staying power, both holding his breath and otherwise. Jonathan groans again, louder, as Philippe swallows and swallows and swallows again, his throat muscles stroking Jonathan's cock.

I like seeing my Jonathan being pleased, even if it is only for this night. Or perhaps this last weekend. I cannot and will not let it be more.

It is time my own cock is buried in heat other than the water.

Philippe is of course already in place, his left hand bracing himself on the edge of the tub, leaving his right free to work Jonathan's body. His balls at the moment. His legs are bent at just the right angle to allow me the easiest entry.

"Watch me, Jonathan."

His eyes had been closed, his head thrown back, his mouth open and panting, so very vulnerable. He opens them now, raises his head, looks down the scarred length of Philippe's back to the slender waist, to the stark white ass checks, to my cock. I fist myself, make my cock weep in joyful anticipation, smear the slick fluid on my knob, on a little of my shaft. He looks up at me.

"I'm going to shove my cock inside Philippe, Jonathan. Deep and fast, a single stroke. By the time this night is over, I will do the same to you."

I unlock his eyes from mine, let him look down, let him watch as I keep my word. The force of my hip thrust makes waves in the tub, that slap up against Jonathan's knees and Philippe's face.

"Do you like having your cock sucked, Jonathan?"

"Christ, yes!"

He does not notice his blasphemy. Philippe is an inordinately talented distraction.

"Do you want to fuck his face?"

Jonathan manages a grunt.

"Hold his head in place and skull-fuck him, controlling him, using him to get your rocks off?"

He is nearly delirious with the pleasure Philippe is providing. His "yes" is drawn-out and quivering.

We will do more later, in a bed. For now, I pull my cock out of Philippe, who understands the point. He slides Jonathan's cock out of his throat, into his mouth and then into the air.

Jonathan's "no" is even more drawn out than the "yes" a moment ago.

Philippe and I change our positions, and Philippe is once again bent over. The waves we make splash over the sides, making a mess that someone else will have to clean. Jonathan finally understands and makes waves of his own as he almost lunges off the edge of the tub, manages to avoid slipping, and then is standing in front of Philippe, who immediately places his hands on Jonathan's ass and draws him closer. His tongue darts out and licks Jonathan's slit.

"Shall we fuck him together, Jonathan? Balls deep in a single stroke at both ends, trying to make our cocks meet somewhere in his belly?"

Jonathan's grunt as Philippe laps around the knob and nibbles just a little is affirmation enough.

"Hold his head in place, as I hold his ass." We do, getting our cocks seated at the entrance to the holes we are about to use. "On three."

It is a fast count, and then we are in. I tell him to hold still, let himself get used to the feeling. Let Philippe get used to the most recent intrusions inside him. Jonathan shudders, pauses, gathers himself. I can tell he is about to start fucking.

“Did I remember to tell you that whatever you do to us, for us, whatever we do to you, for you, you will also do?”

That gets his attention. “I... don’t think you mentioned that.”

I do my best, or some reasonable facsimile of my best, to make my “I must have forgotten” seem believable.

He doesn’t believe me.

“If I, ah, skull-fuck Philippe, ah, he...” Jonathan interrupts himself with three little noises. Philippe is letting Jonathan know he is getting impatient.

“He... or I... will skull-fuck you.” I think Jonathan hears the “by George, I think he’s got it” sarcasm.

He did. “I think I’ve got it.”

He starts moving his hips, slowly and carefully, easing in and out of Philippe’s mouth and throat. Too bad. But it is his choice. And Philippe gives superb head, whether fast or slow.

After a few strokes during which he is concentrating on the view of his cock making use of Philippe’s mouth, he looks at me. “Skull fucking, huh?”

He speeds up a little. “Am I skull-fucking yet?”

I smile and shake my head. I also modify my own speed to match his.

Another increase. “Am I skull-fucking yet?”

Another head-shake. Two more small increments and then a final one, and he is moving at what a Roman war galley captain would have called ramming speed.

He manages to lift an eyebrow above the grimacing men do when they are enjoying the warm wetness of a hole that is giving them pleasure and they’re about to fall over the edge. “I think I can live with that.”

Moments later we are erupting inside Philippe, whose hand is moving frantically under the water until he finally shudders, too, and lets go.

Jonathan and I ease out of Philippe who straightens up, raises his hands above his head, clasps his hands like a boxer declaring victory and twists and turns for a moment to ease the strain of his position.

“This time, Jonathan, I think a shower is a good idea. Although we could, if you wish, since this is your night to lose as many of your virginities as possible, stay here, instead of adjourning to the king-sized bed in our suite. It’s up to you.”

He smirks. “I can live with king-size.”

Smart aleck bastard.

JONATHAN

I have never showered with another man before. Much less two.

I don’t count gym showers in school, or the occasional country club locker room shower after an obligatory round of golf because of some financial negotiation for the Brethren. That was just get naked, get scrubbed, get rinsed, get dry, get dressed, get out, all without overtly noticing the cocks and balls and asses, the chests and thighs and feet, of the men around you.

It is wonderful to have two men washing your body, or really, the three of us alternating pairings to wash the third. When we’re done, Philippe is hard again, and he gently pushes my shoulders down. I suppose I will acquire more grace in getting on my knees the more cocks I suck in that position.

I’m nervous about going directly from the very first dick in my mouth to getting skull-fucked with that same dick. But I’d given my word. Philippe, however, is gentle, and I do manage to get all of him down my throat. Perhaps I have a special queer gene, or perhaps playing “let’s pretend we’re really sucking dick” with silicone trained my muscles. Either way, he fills my mouth and I swallow every drop.

I like being a cocksucker.

I tell them so. Their laughter is friendly as I swivel on my knees, making a mental note to investigate the cost and longevity of kneepads for use when giving blow jobs, to see how well I can do with Jean-Luc.

He just hauls me up, though, kisses me briefly and strongly, gives my ass one swat that echoes against the tiles, and tells me to get my ass in gear.

We head toward their room. Those two wear skimpy swim suits, not quite bikinis but enough to emphasize more than cover, and I'm in my shorts again, no shirts, towels around our necks. I'm not certain whether I'm glad or disappointed that our trip is uneventful and we see no one.

JEAN-LUC

Jonathan actually wins the race that wasn't, by being the first one naked as the door to our suite shuts behind us.

He heads directly for the bed, plops down on it, legs spread wide, feet on the floor, cock alert and checking the surroundings for incoming activity, leaning back a bit and supporting himself on his palms.

The bastard actually bats his eyes at me as he says, "I believe I owe you a blow job, Jean-Luc."

He pronounces my name perfectly, but there is something subtly erotic about the way he does it.

"I believe you do."

He starts to slide sinuously down to the floor and onto his knees, but my "no" startles him, and sinuous winds up sloppy, and on his ass.

"Fucker," he mutters.

"Impatient, my Jonathan? You will be soon, if it's your ass you are talking about. If it's your mouth, that will be even sooner. On your back, head over the edge."

Apparently when you are breaking in a virgin, the eyes-widening thing is a frequent occurrence. But with Jonathan, wide eyes are for the most part accompanied by acquiescence.

Philippe's eyes do not widen, as for him this position is been there, done that, couldn't find the T-shirt, definitely doing it again. It is, indeed, one of his favorite positions for me to use his mouth. It is also one of my favorites. He knows that I know, and I know that he knows, and so on, which is why I

am not surprised when Philippe strides over, steps up on the bed, walks toward the other side, drops on his ass, and then falls back to land almost shoulder to shoulder with Jonathan. There is just enough space between them for someone's knee, a large knee. Mine. Philippe wiggles his ass to move himself just a bit further up and then drops *his* head over the edge.

He grabs on to Jonathan's left hand, intertwines their fingers. He looks sideways and says, "The peasant with the big dick over there is *un grand artiste* at this." And then he tilts his head back again, with a "Well?" expression on his face.

I smile at the two of them, enjoying the sight of two mouth holes with bright neon signs above them, signaling "Open for use. No waiting."

So far, I am certain Philippe does not feel himself to be an outsider in this. But he knows there is something between my Jonathan and me, a connection that appears to be more than the usual "I'm a top, you're a bottom, let's fuck."

I fuck Philippe first. He opens his mouth and throat and takes me in. It was not something I had to teach him when he got well enough to be used for some payback. I was curious about who trained him, but not enough to question him. I just enjoy the benefits.

His mouth is like what I imagine one of those flashlight-looking jackoff devices to be, though I've never used one, or had a need for one. The difference is that my device is intelligent and eager to be of service. I pump slowly and steadily, drawing my cock out until his lips are barely on the end of my knob, and out of the corner of my eye, I watch Jonathan watching. And learning.

When I am good and slimy I withdraw, move over to Jonathan. His eyes show eagerness and fear. A good combination.

I tease him by rubbing my spit and precome slick knob over his lips. "You've sucked a dildo before."

It is not a question, but a certainty. Nevertheless he nods.

"All the way down. Training yourself."

He can only grunt a little in affirmation because my knob and a part of my shaft are in his mouth. And then the only thing he can concentrate on is

relaxing and accepting all the rest of me into his mouth and throat. There is a moment of panic, and another as I move in. I am as inexorable as a glacier, just not *that* slow. When he has all of me, when my balls are draped across his head, I pause to admire the joining.

And to maintain some control. I am nearly ready to come without ever actually fucking him.

Jonathan whines around my prick and I look up. Philippe is sucking him, but has no intention of letting him come that way. Not with the sucking alternating with sucking his own fingers and working them into his hole. I ease back a little to distract Jonathan. Short, easy movements. Then a little stronger as the mattress moves with Philippe's rising up and straddling the prone Jonathan, then getting to his knees, his strong hand holding Jonathan's cock upright, guiding it to Philippe's spit-wet pucker, pressing down just a little to be sure it is in the right position, and then Philippe opens himself and slides down. Jonathan has another set of balls on his body.

Philippe has strong legs. He has no need to brace himself on the bed. He begins fucking himself on a living Jonathan dildo, head momentarily thrown back, eyes shut, his hands working his own cock. Jonathan moans again, more loudly, as he instinctively begins fucking Philippe's talented tail, and the vibration in his throat as I fuck faster moves me closer to the breaking point.

He is taking all of me, every damned inch, even the last quarter. I speed up. Not enough to be the kind of power fuck that would be the repayment I'd warned him about. Philippe is looking at me now. His left hand is twisting a nipple, his right is furiously jacking. We stare intently, off temporarily in a space where we use the man between us for our exclusive gratification. A use the man... my Jonathan... enthusiastically cooperates with.

Philippe has the pained expression of a man about to explode; Jonathan's grunts and moans and his desperate hip thrusts that nearly throw Philippe's rhythm off tell me he is close as well.

I deliberately drop my voice into its lowest register. After all this time I know the effect it has on the men I am using. "Come. Both of you."

“Jean-Luc!” Philippe half-shouts, not the way he screams when I am fucking him into oblivion, but an expression of almost-love, of gratitude. If Jonathan is trying to scream anything there is no way anyone can know.

And then I am coming, letting my seed release in a long faucet-on flow.

We are done all too soon.

Philippe half-sighs, half-laughs as he lifts himself up and off Jonathan’s wilting dick. He swings his left leg over and is kneeling beside Jonathan. I slowly ease my cock from Jonathan. He gulps several times, shudders. He did well, for a virgin. Better than well. I tell him so.

The little shit looks offended as he lifts his head to ease the strain from that position, then rolls. I half expect him to roll *away* from us, a subtle withdrawal that is not entirely unexpected. He surprises me by rolling *toward* Philippe, getting on his side and scooting himself further across the bed so he can rest his head on his elbow-braced palm.

He says nothing for a moment. And then sighs. And smiles. He looks up at me. “That went pretty well, don’t you think?”

Philippe and I both chuckle. “Yes, you are a fine cocksucker. Although you need to practice your new-found profession. Often. I will be happy to help.”

My slight sarcasm briefly dims the light in his eyes, then he pushes the slider back to full. He is, I am sure, thinking of this only as a one-night stand, a memory for when he goes back into that closet which is being so briefly unlocked here in Berlin. I suspect he is in far more than a closet.

He hides himself in a windowless room, barred by layers of locks, in a dark corridor in the lowest level of a reverse Empire State Building. Occasionally, but only occasionally, he lets himself out, but only where no one can see.

I get into the bed, put the pillows against the headboard so I am comfortable, which leaves none for them. That doesn’t seem to bother my men as they move up beside me, Philippe on my right, his head on my shoulder. Jonathan sort of sprawls half on his side, half on his belly, the right side of his head resting on my chest. The fingers of his left hand play with the fur on my belly, and with my pubes.

I see his lips twitch in a slight smile, and I ask him. He moves his head, not really breaking contact, so that he can at least somewhat see both of us. “I was just thinking that I had expected to be bored Saturday night. A charity ball with expensive tickets just to get in, and then no free booze after all, just extremely over-priced cash bars everywhere, all of them willing to put the tab on your room bill.”

“Ah, yes,” Philippe says in the ennui-laced tones of a bored aristocrat, “a sad crush, but one does...” He stops. Flushes. I think perhaps he intended to only think those words.

“You read Regency romances?” Jonathan’s voice is all amazement. “*You?*”

Philippe doesn’t bother with denial, just jerks away and sits up. “And what the fuck...” I am sure the rest of the sentence is going to be “business is it of yours?” But Jonathan interrupts him, bolting upright himself.

“So do I.”

I pray for a lightning bolt to come down from the suite ceiling. No, a pair of lightning bolts. Express delivery just for them.

They’re sitting cross-legged now, my legs between them, my no longer quite as interested, but not entirely *disinterested* cock plainly visible. And ignored. They start with Heyer, enthusing on particular favorites (*Frederica* and *The Grand Sophy* for Jonathan, *The Unknown Ajax* and *Devil’s Cub* for Philippe), momentarily move on to Cartland (some good, some bad, but so prolific you’d have to wait a few years to read anyone else), and are about to embark on the Bridgertons and the Cynsters, when I put a stop to it.

If God actually existed, I would readily pray to Him, Her or It to deliver me from romance novel fanatics, as I find myself saddled with two of them. But since there is no “One” to handle this I take care of the problem myself.

“Jonathan needs to be fucked. In both his holes at the same time.”

That shuts them up. And starts to get them up.

“All fours, Jonathan, head toward the foot of the bed.”

Jonathan eyes my cock nervously. He has already had it down his

throat, so he shouldn't be that concerned about it going in his other end. But he is.

He will get over it.

Despite the air conditioning, we are all sweating. As Philippe kneels in front of Jonathan, Jonathan leans in and inhales deeply through his nose. If there were going to be another time, and a small part of me has begun a minor clamor for one, I would remember that and use it. I *will* remember it, though there will be nothing more than this night.

Will there?

JONATHAN

Showtime.

I'm going to get what Philippe got earlier. I am not sure I can handle it, because I suspect Jean-Luc is not going to be as gentle as he was with my sore but satisfied throat earlier. I will have to have a touch of laryngitis tomorrow from all the conference talking. I cannot exactly tell Joshua and the others I'm hoarse because I'm pretty damned good for a newbie at getting my throat fucked.

I gasp. Loudly. I'm not certain why it is a surprise that Jean-Luc is rimming me. With a tongue that I had not noticed when it was in my mouth as being longer and thicker than Philippe's. And with having had my ass in use already, it is far easier now for him to get well inside me. My hard-on aches. I have no idea why or how I'm getting hard and coming so often tonight, but I won't stop to count my blessings in case the counting cuts them off.

When Jean-Luc has me whimpering, and kind of moaning, "Please, please, please," he lifts his head away and then the other head is in position. I can feel the smooth flesh of his knob touching me, getting ready.

Wait. *Smooth* flesh? I have never used a condom, never had reason to, never experimented. But that is bare skin gently tapping, tapping at my asshole door.

So I clamp my all-too-eager asshole tight, and drop it out of reach. Sit up, twist to look over my shoulder.

“Whoa. Condom.”

I don’t understand the look in his eyes. “Why?”

I start to name off the reasons, starting with total fucking strangers, but his next words kill that.

“But you have already fucked Philippe bare. You trusted him.”

My voice is definitely in self-righteous-shit mode. “I definitely did...”

His expression stops me, and I pause, thinking, replaying the sensations of that incredible fuck.

What I just said was true, just in a way other than I thought. I definitely did fuck Philippe bare. But that doesn’t mean I have to compound that act of stupidity.

His rough hands are gentle on my shoulders. “I promised I—we—would not harm you, Jonathan. You haven’t been harmed. You won’t be. Trust me.”

Those words always trigger the memory of seeing Jackie Mason, and hearing him tell what became my favorite joke:

“How do you say, ‘Screw you’ in Yiddish?”

“Trust me.”

I never have. Trusted, that is. I have always examined everything between me and the person speaking, whether the speech was personal or professional, involving the Brethren, far more closely once the words were out.

And yet... and yet there is something about this man I will never see again after this week is over. I feel... safe. I feel... protected.

I agree. And the expression on his face is not one acknowledging my having given in, but one acknowledging a gift. The gift of my real-cock-virgin ass, the greater gift of my trust.

He is obviously concerned, when I am once again on all fours, that this delay has made me go dry, where I most need to be slick. He remedies the situation, so long and so well that he has to swat my hand away when I try to jack myself.

Then he is in place once more. I have never had reason to pray during sex, not since... I shove that thought away, bury it. I make a joyful noise unto the Lord, if a sort of shout of “God, yes!” when he breaches me counts.

He lets me gets used to him. Get used to the fact that for all my preparation with dildos I’ve never had the nerve to use one in his size. His length and breadth are definitely going where no man has gone before, although I will never, ever say that aloud. However, his definition of “get used to” and mine are clearly somewhat at odds, because I am certain it is only a hemidemisemiquaver of time before he’s moving on down that road, pushing and rearranging to suit him.

It turns out that what suits him suits me, once I feel his balls resting against mine.

Philippe turns my attention away from my so-full ass back to the cock at hand, or rather, the cock at mouth, by tapping it on the top of my head. I raise up and obediently, eagerly, spread my lips wide. As he slides all the way in, all at once, he gives me some good advice. “If you’re going to get a blow job from someone while he’s getting his ass fucked, wait until the cock is all the way in that ass before inserting your cock in his mouth. The wrong fucking technique and you’re minus a dick, or part of one.”

The semi-sarcastic “*Oui, oui, mon capitain,*” is of course only in my head. My mouth is otherwise occupied.

As they start to use me, understanding wordlessly that that is precisely what I want and need, my mind is off on a jet plane, no idea when it will be back again. I am nothing more than pure sensation, every atom of my body somehow sizzling, or whatever it is that atoms do when excited. I let myself go, a full surrender to Jean-Luc, letting him take me wherever I need to go, wherever he wants me to go. The cocks sliding in and out of each end of me manage a rhythm that is either fortuitous or from frequent repetition.

I shove that moment of jealous speculation (who? when? how often?) away, sink back into mindlessness. They begin to speed up, heating me from the inside out, making my balls feel fuller, making my cock desperate for release. Faster still, a ruthless rutting that has my eyes and cock weeping

in ecstasy. And faster still, the sound of flesh on flesh, the scents and tastes of sweat and sex and body fluids sending me into near-delirium.

The explosion, when it comes, takes me entirely unaware. No one has touched my cock but it is spewing all over the bedspread, and I am gulping down Philippe's seed, while I swear, I swear I can *feel* Jean-Luc's semen splattering and painting the walls of my ass.

And we are done.

Philippe slowly slides his only slightly softened cock out of my throat, out of my mouth. I tiredly lap at it, but I am too exhausted to do him justice. I feel each callus on Jean-Luc's hands as he caresses my sweat-slick back, my waist, my ass, my hips, and then slowly, carefully, leaves me empty and adrift.

But only for a moment. He moves so he is to my left as I collapse on the bed, my feet nearly in his face. I look over my shoulder. He is rearranging the pillows in a potentially sharing arrangement.

"Come." His voice is soft as he settles on his back, his right hand gesturing me to move to him.

I manage to do it without kicking him in the face or any pertinent part.

Philippe joins us.

We are silent, our bodies lightly touching.

A part of me wants to just stay here, satiated, until someone on the housekeeping staff finds my desiccated remains.

I have fucked a stranger without a condom. I have let another do the same to me. I should be terrified. I am not.

Not now. Yes, perhaps later. But now...

I get up, turn yet again, and they shift to give me room.

I sit cross-legged between the two men who have fucked me so well. I can taste Philippe's seed in my mouth. I mourn the fact that I cannot taste the seed Jean-Luc has buried so deeply inside me.

I admire the pair who have given me far more than I ever dreamed of.

No fantasy lose-my-virginity-with-a-willing-man scenario was ever remotely close to the joy I have had tonight.

I stretch out my left hand, curl my fingers around the length of Philippe; reach out with my right, curl around the girth of Jean-Luc. Their cocks stir, lengthen, even if only a bit.

Philippe sighs. “These former virgins, they are insatiable, no?”

Jean-Luc’s sigh is as false as Philippe’s. “Insatiable, yes.”

I continue stroking them... stop... realize... start up again, and as they harden, chuckle under my breath.

Jean-Luc notices not merely the sound, but my expression. I seem to have abandoned my control of the façade. Actually, more than “seem to.” The façade vanished, I think, the moment I came all over Jean-Luc’s belly on the spa floor.

“What?” he asks

“I was just thinking about how Joshua... how Father, Grandfather... might react to my interpretation of the Bible.”

I enjoy the puzzlement on their faces. I hold their cocks upright, my thumbs rubbing at the base of each head, lightly, lightly smearing the somewhat sticky remains of our sex, the hint of precome starting again.

“The twenty-third psalm.”

Jean-Luc’s eyes light. I squeeze his cock first. “Thy rod”—and I squeeze Philippe—“and *thy* staff, they comfort me.”

They burst out laughing. I have never made anyone laugh before. Not real, spontaneous laughter, as opposed to the necessary reaction to a joke, a quasi-humorous comment made by someone (me) from whom something is wanted.

My own cock is hard again. I might as well be thirteen and secretly, obsessively jacking and fantasizing, again and again in a single day. But this is my moment. My hands still.

Their laughter fades. They look at me, only concern in their eyes.

I struggle with the realization. This *is* a moment... a moment out of time. An interval between the tick and the tock, between the end of one second and the beginning of the next. It will never exist again. Tomorrow, no, sometime soon, later tonight, later this morning, I go back inside the shell that is the chief financial officer of a powerful American-heading-for-global church, who is so dedicated to his job, to his family, to the Lord his God, that he sacrifices marriage and children. What is the line that ends that book whose title I cannot recall? *I enter into hell*. Or go back to it.

My smile is tentative, rueful. “I was just... thinking.” What the fuck. I have a decent voice, a joyful noise unto the Lord and all that shit. I sing softly to them, making no attempt to do a Jim Bailey on Garland’s voice. It’s just my voice, telling them that this, here and now, is *my* moment, *my* destiny, and though it may only be just this once in my life, I *will* do great things.

And one of those great things is to get fucked again. I think they will cooperate.

They do.

Then—Early Saturday morning

JEAN-LUC

“I have never seen you dither.” Philippe’s voice is amused. “Not that I have known you all that long, but I am certain this is unlike you.”

“I do not dither.” How very arrogant I sound.

He laughs at me. My normal reaction to laughter at my expense is pain—for the one who laughs. We have become too close, a closeness I never wanted, but I do not regret changing my mind and letting him into my home, my life. Letting him learn... what he had to learn if I am to do anything for him. As I will. As I have promised.

My smile is rueful. “Very well, *mon capitan, mon cher capitan*, I grant you a slight dither.”

“Go to him.”

I know he can see nothing on my face, but he has in such a short time acquired something of an ability to read me, despite that. It is not entirely unpleasant, although I have never experienced it before, and would have expected it to be impossible, had I ever thought about it.

“Tell him.”

Tell him what? Some of it? Most of it? Everything? *Truly* everything?

I decide.

Then—Later Saturday morning

JONATHAN

“I called you last night. You didn’t answer. Where were you?” Joshua’s voice is cold, accusing.

I regretted the necessity of letting him in the moment I knew it was him knocking on my door. “I turned my phone off.”

“I came to see you. You weren’t here.”

Liar.

“I was.”

“No. I came in and checked.”

I lift an eyebrow at him.

“I was concerned. You were not answering. I thought perhaps you were ill.”

Liar.

He would be believed by anyone who did not know him as well as I regrettably do. He might even fool Father and Grandfather.

“I was here, Joshua, as I said. I would have heard you. And besides, how could you have gotten in? Has Herr Grunewald changed the hotel’s keycard access policies?”

I am bluffing for all I am worth, but Joshua fortunately breaks.

His voice is almost little-boy sullen as he says, “But I did come by. And knock. Loudly.”

I can imagine Joshua in a temper, banging his fist on my door.

I was here, asleep, I heard nothing. That is my story and I’m sticking to it. I make my voice slightly exasperated at having to go over the obvious yet again. “Joshua, if you did all that, I’m truly sorry. I was asleep, and apparently so deeply I didn’t even hear you. What was so urgent it could not have waited until now?”

He has not thought far enough ahead. He probably did call, and there will be messages on my cell when I check. He probably did make a near-scene hammering on my door. Joshua has always wanted, gotten, what he wanted, when he wanted, by suasion or coercion, whichever is most convenient, most effective at the moment. But even he would have realized in fairly short order the kind of image he would present, of himself, of the Brethren, if he were discovered in a near-shrieking rage attacking my door, so I am sure he cut it short before that could happen.

So he expected I would simply cave, and provide him with information he could use against me in some way, not immediately, but eventually.

I haven't caved. I won't.

Now he has no fallback. He is not going to cross-examine me on my whereabouts when he cannot prove my absence. While in any he-said-he-said competition where Joshua is one "he" and I am the other, Father and Grandfather will generally believe him, this little incident would not win him any points if he tries. And he will not try, if for no other reason than that he had no reason, or at least no reason he could tell them, for why it was so urgent to speak with me late last night.

"And you wanted to see me last night because..."

He has regained control. The scowl is only a slight one. He waves the "reason" away. "It is no longer important."

"Then if you will excuse me, I have some final preparations for the lunch meeting. I think their representatives will be pleased with the figures."

I am grateful that he is out of the room when the house phone rings. It is Jean-Luc.

Then—Mid-afternoon, Saturday

JEAN-LUC

“You didn’t tell him.”

“No, I didn’t fucking tell him. I never got that far. Have the two of you been having some secret Regency romance festival this morning, making me the big bad rake who proposes marriage while keeping a mistress on the side? Or perhaps doesn’t bother with marriage and instead of an heir and a spare wants two goddamned mistresses?”

Philippe falls apart.

I glare at him but it has no effect on his laughter. Laughter is indeed good medicine, unparalleled at times, but not enough for him, not now.

His eyes are slowly reacquiring the haunted look I saw that first day. The pressure has been building, and tiny cracks are showing. I promised him that if he worked, got better—not well, well we both knew was always an impossibility, but better was achievable—I would make his final days worthwhile. Unfortunately, the end time is near. Just two more days. He knows the date. Has known since the day after his arrival at my door. He is far too much of a warrior still, not to be told the truth.

The bastard shithead finally stops laughing, wipes the tears from his eyes, holds his aching sides. “Wh-what happened?”

Years upon years of experience and I almost have no fucking idea how to answer. Except for one possibility. Jonathan’s outrage over my proposal that he come live with me, relocate to Paris, begin a new life, started when he asked about Philippe and I told him Philippe was not an issue, would not be a problem, we could be together, just he and I. Philippe’s story was not, is not, mine to tell, not to anyone, even to Jonathan.

It seems my proposal was not sincere, that what I was asking was for Jonathan to be my bit on the side, to sit and wait for the dribs and drabs of my attention in a flat paid for by me. To be my fucking mistress! Or no, wait, I was just kicking poor Philippe to the curb, dumping him for

Jonathan for no other reason than a promiscuous prick that wanted what it wanted. How dare I?

But the rapid rise of his outrage held the tiniest of false notes in the angry aria. As if he'd latched onto those foolish thoughts so he wouldn't have to tell me the real reason. And the real reason... what I understood once I put the little grey cells to work... is that he is afraid. Terrified of letting the world in general, his family in particular, discover that he likes to be fucked. Gently, slowly, hard and fast, anything between or beyond. Although we wouldn't have to take out an announcement in the papers, or blog it on the Net. We wouldn't even have to be that specific. All he has to do is take that one small step, that one giant leap for Jonathan-kind, out of the closet and into the glorious sunshine. Where I can protect and care for him.

I finish telling Philippe all that. He understands there is more.

I explain that I tried again. Came near to humbling myself, to begging him to listen, but Jonathan began to shake, and tell me, "I can't, I can't, it was great, what we had, uh, what we did, and I'll always remember, but, no, please, stop, just go, just go, just go!"

So I did.

"I did ask him if he was sure. I did tell him that I didn't give anyone a second chance, that no one was worth that. But he told me to go. I did want he wanted."

Philippe's smile is far too understanding. "You are going to give him another chance. Find him, tell him."

"Yes, damn you."

We sit in silence until it is broken by the sound of Olivier's voice saying, "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more." Jouvart's ring-tone. Philippe recognizes it, too, becomes still as a sniper in the final moments before his target arrives.

"*Oui.*" Curt. To the point. I don't waste time on politeness when Jouvart calls unexpectedly.

I listen. I could say no, could walk away. I only volunteer. But I promised him. I do not break my word.

My “*oui*,” this time is agreement. I turn it off, look at Philippe. He already understands.

“When?”

“I have to meet the team in Brazzaville as soon as possible. Overland to the interior.”

“Then... tonight?” For the first time in weeks he sounds unsure.

“I promised...”

He waves an impatient hand at me, cuts off a reminder that I had promised him two more days. At least. His voice is stronger. “*Oubliez ça. Ce n’est rien.*”

He looks down. Inhales slowly, slowly, slowly. Looks back at me. He has brought the warrior back, dressed in his warrior’s armor. He understands orders. A colleague, a brother, has been called into battle, though it is not the kind of battle he could wage. He cannot go, but he will not delay me. Hold me back. Will not give me anything to look back on with regret.

“Now, then?”

It is partly a question, partly a demand that I fulfill the real promise.

“Now.”

He is already naked under the sheet. He tosses it back. His cock is... hesitant... for a moment, but when Philippe sees that I am not, that I am nearly naked, then fully naked, hard and weeping, his cock joins me.

I get on the bed with him, kneel with my large, hairy thighs spread wide, my cock standing tall. I pull the back of his head and he lets himself be pushed down until he has my cock all the way in his throat, breathing through his nose, smelling my pubic hair, the ordinary man-sweat and funk of a not quite ordinary day.

He pushes against my hand. I let him lift his head. Those gorgeous eyes look up at me. He licks his wet lips. “Fuck me. Harder, faster, deeper than you have ever fucked me. Come inside me so that when I cough it will be in my mouth and I will give your seed back to you in a kiss.”

I reach over to turn out the light, to dim the room even further. He stops me. “Don’t put out the light.” He smiles, and if I had not abandoned tears so very long ago, I would have wept at its beauty. “And then, put out the light.”

I give him what he wants. My fingers nearly bruise his thighs as I lift his legs high and wide, dive for his ass, begin eating him out with all my experience working to open him up, to have him shivering and begging as my tongue pushes its way inside and fucks him.

“No more!” he gasps, demands. “Fuck me now. I want your cock inside me.”

I rarely follow orders. I follow this one. I breach him with a stroke that takes no prisoners, plunging roller-coaster fast down and down and make him shout. I fuck him hard, fast, deep, as he demanded, as he needs, but as we build, I realize he needs something more. A reminder.

We are music lovers, he and I. I do not allow myself to be distracted by the thought that Jonathan is, too, of his voice as he sang to us last night. My own voice will never compete with Bryn Terfel, a favorite of Philippe’s, but I slow the pace, and when he opens his eyes from his furious contemplation of completion, I sing *Miss Saigon* to him.

We share that song with the solo saxophone, the brass that makes such a lonely sound, telling us still that love goes on and on, telling me I that should hold him tight, telling me, telling... *us*, that we should... dance. As if the world might end tonight.

“Oh.” His eyes fill with tears. Of joy, gratitude. He is not a warrior too proud to weep. “Oh, yes, *mon cher*, dance with me as if it’s the last night of the world.”

And so we dance. Gently, slowly, at first, hearing that solo saxophone playing tunes that only we can hear inside our heads, and then a rising urgency, and the saxophone fades into silence, letting us move on. We fuck. As hard and fast and deep as I promised him just now, as he promised me. We use each other to pleasure ourselves, to pleasure each other.

I don’t silence him with a kiss as I might have done with someone else. His eyes are closed, but he has no need to see. He knows where he is, what

is happening. His voice is all wonder, tremulous, starting to lose control. “*Merci, merci, mon Dieu, mon coeur.*”

Faster still and he writhes beneath me, his hands bruising my biceps, if I bruised. “I see... I see *strands, mon cher*. Such colors, so many, many colors against the dark, twisting, turning. Untwining. And I... dear God, sweet Savior Jesus, Bernard! Bernard, my heart, my love!”

He calls out “Bernard!” a last time as he comes, spraying us both, and I follow him over the edge.

I loom above him, panting, ease myself down, still inside him, clasp him to my chest as the last two days shimmer... and fade away. He eases into that good night, as I promised. I hold him, though he is gone and will not know. And only I will know. But I hold him so that *I* will know that for a while, so brief a while, I cared. Even loved.

I ease myself out of him. Straighten him gently. Pull the sheet up so that to the unknowing the relaxed, peace found at last expression is of a man sleeping well.

Duty.

I rise. Get my cell. Punch in the call to the Paris number I memorized. I tell Philippe’s colonel, “It is time.” I give him the hotel name, our room number.

I had told him, weeks ago when I gave my word to Philippe, that his warrior had only a few weeks, a month, a month and a half to live. That his heart had been damaged by the explosion. I did not tell the colonel that Philippe’s *heart* had been damaged by the explosion. I had not the right to share that. I did not care whether the colonel truly believed me, so long as he acted as if he did. He knew I would be with Philippe to the end; we agreed I would place this call.

I got dressed. Not the kind of clothes one throws on after a good fuck because someone is dropping by. Not formal wear. But clothes that honored the still warrior on the bed.

They are quick, these colleagues, these brothers of my Philippe. I can see in their eyes they are indeed his brothers, not merely men on a distasteful assignment from the embassy.

Their leader looks at me. He has to know but neither judges nor condemns. Instead his eyes ask a question, since to speak it aloud would be a form of betrayal, an insult to my warrior by doubting what the answer will be, instead of knowing without asking. I smooth his uncertainty. Tell him what he wants to know. Tell him the truth. “He died with honor. Not with the one he wanted and lost, but with one who cared.”

And then I recognize him. He had been at the base when we brought back Philippe and the remains of Sergeant Bernard and the others. His nod... acknowledgment, appreciation, even approval... is a nearly invisible tilt of his chin. Mine back is also brief.

They treat him with care, with a warrior’s love for another warrior, and remove him from the hotel with no one knowing a body has left. Perhaps back to the French embassy, or perhaps directly to the airport where military transportation awaits. No one will know he died here. The newspapers, the media, the Internet, will tell the nation, the world, that one of France’s heroes died tragically young, of a heart weakened in battle.

I hope he is indeed with his Bernard.

Later—Six weeks, Monday, late afternoon

JEAN-LUC

Powerful Priestley the petty prick. Powerful Priestley the petty prick.

I've got the rhythm right as I follow Joshua over the river and through the woods of the Brethren's New York complex towards Jonathan's office. All I need is Dorothy and her friends doing that precision step with me to have a bit of fun at his expense. *More* fun at his expense.

Though I freely admit he has an admirable ass, it's my opinion, long-held, over many years and based on an inordinate amount of experience, that a straight man whose slacks are tailored to show off his gym-honed butt isn't all that. However, it's not like I'm interested in tapping it. Not with Jonathan available. Not even if Jonathan plays hard to get. Again.

This is his second chance. I have never given anyone a second chance before.

Joshua of course makes his point—*my* turf, my right—by opening Jonathan's door without knocking. I already knew he had not called ahead.

Now to get rid of him. Unfortunately, picking him up and throwing him through the floor to ceiling windows behind Jonathan's desk, purely as a scientific experiment to determine the effects of thirty-three stories of gravity on an ego inflated with copious amounts of hot air, was not a viable option.

Just as punching him had not been a viable option when he showed up in the lobby just after the receptionist, a more-than-a-bit uptight little faggot who ought to have known better than to work for people like the Brethren, explained to me that Mr. Priestley never saw anyone without an appointment. I would have to call tomorrow. The response and the once-over, accompanied by the restrained sneer, were not unexpected.

I looked precisely as if I had just traveled directly from Brazzaville to Newark in a bit over twenty-two hours, and then had the limo he couldn't see bring me here. My travel attire consisted of beltless, worn 501s, a

comfortable but equally-worn plaid shirt hanging open over a grey tee, sandals, a scarred leather shoulder bag, and a floppy hat most recently used for warding off African sun. My appearance was therefore not conducive to a belief I actually *belonged* in this building. Except, perhaps, through the peasant's entrance, back and behind, if I was applying for some menial job as a janitor.

The security guard, young, serious, ready to leap in the fray to defend God and the Priestleys and the Brethren from this uncouth invasion, had his hand hovering about the gun I wasn't at all confident he knew much about.

"What's going on, Royce?"

Royce-the-receptionist, also known as the self-important twit, relaxed. He could hand off the very large problem in the lobby to a higher power. He opened his mouth to explain, but I cut him off. "I'm 'going on,' Joshua." A little security-receptionist gasp at my first-name audacity. "I assume your older brother is still here."

That "older brother" remark annoys him. It is why I use it so often.

"So you can con him again into believing you intend to make a donation to the Brethren?" He uses that fucking eyebrow crap to look me up and look me down, mostly down, given his height advantage.

He is actually entitled to an explanation, much as I would prefer the punch and then roaming the hallways floor by floor, doing a not-very-good Brando imitation, with T-shirt, without being soaking wet, pathetically yelling, "Hey, Jonathan."

"I had to go on a mission. It was unexpected."

Another sneer. "And did you manage to save the world, muh-shoor le dock-tour?"

The man doesn't even realize what he is doing to my original language.

I keep the reins on my temper. If my temper had been a horse right then, it would have been a furious Clydesdale, ready to rear and drop both those hooves on his skull, followed by a dance that will never be seen in a Budweiser commercial.

“Not at all. Just several hundred young African children, and their families, from a cholera outbreak.”

“Ah.” That useful noise, as he tries to figure a way to regroup after that hit.

I make it a little worse.

“Not just me, of course. I was part of a multinational volunteer medical team. Doctors Without Borders.” I give a side glance to the quiet twins to make sure they get the point.

And a little worse still.

I don’t tolerate cretins well, especially ones wanting to stand in the way of my getting something, *someone*, I want. “About that donation...”

His turn to interrupt. “Yes. Six figures, I think you said?”

Asshole. He had forgotten, or not noticed, the Ulysse Nardin cell in Berlin. He has not noticed the Patek Philippe on my left wrist, which I’d put on en route from Newark, dropping the everyday Timex (takes a licking and keeps on ticking even in jungles) in the bag. An aggregate of six figures right there, and still his subtext is, “And where would a peasant like you, a doctor who *volunteers* to do shit for poor people instead of setting up a practice with the right people and getting rich, get six dollars to donate, much less six figures?”

I reach inside my bag, and the idiot child with the gun actually puts his hand on it. As if he could possibly get it out of the holster and do anything with it before I pulled the mini-Uzi out and started spraying bullets. He flushes when all I retrieve is the trust’s Black Card. Joshua flinches.

Baby boy get a spanking if papa and grandpapa find out he disrespected a man who carries the same card *they* flaunt? I put it back.

There is something about that flinch. Something more than “My God, a wealthy sucker on the line and I didn’t even know it.”

“I did make a promise, if you will recall. When we spoke in Berlin. You might even call it a bargain. You certainly did not believe I would break my word.”

A question masquerading as a statement.

The fucker did.

Another question-statement masquerade: “And of course you honored your part of the agreement as well.”

The fucker did not.

Whoa, Thor. I yank very hard on the reins of my imaginary Clydesdale. He will get his chance to stomp later, whether real or metaphysical.

I wave off the formal answers he hasn’t given me. “I’m here now. I’d like to see Jonathan.”

“If you’ll come this way, I can see to...”

“Jonathan. Now.” My voice leaves him no choice.

And thus we begin the powerful-Priestley-the-petty-prick walk.

Which ends with an open office door, me just a step inside, Joshua off to one side after announcing on the way in, “Someone to see you, brother. About money.”

And there is my Jonathan, head down, frowning at a spreadsheet printout flat on his desk, his hand holding what is probably a red ballpoint given the red notes and marks and slashes on the page. “Tell him to come back later. Make an appointment. Better yet, deal with it yourself, Joshua. I don’t have time.”

“Not even for a six-figure donation?”

Jonathan’s head whips up at the sound of my voice. His face flushes, losing control, letting Joshua see there is something here, there, somewhere, that makes him furious. His fist clenches on the pen, and then forcibly relaxes. He plasters a pointedly fake smile on his face.

“Do you need a pen to write a check? We also take MasterCard, Visa, American Express and Discover, although we do request that you add two-point-five percent to your donation to cover the cost of the credit card transaction. Will you need a receipt now for tax purposes, or may we mail you one?”

I step further into the room, against the sensation of a portcullis being lowered in front of me to keep me out. He really does not want me here. But I want to be here. Joshua wants me here, and when it comes right down to it, in terms of power, this office is more Joshua's than Jonathan's. I look at Joshua.

"Reverend Priestley." His eyebrow lifts again at the unexpected courtesy. "As your older brother is the chief financial officer for the Brethren, I would like to consult with him on the terms of the donation. I have some specific proposals on how the funding should be used, but I don't want to run afoul of American tax laws or the mission of the Brethren."

Joshua hears the underlying, "Run along now, little boy, let the men get down to work." But he can't do jack shit about it.

Duty *versus* personal preference. I understand Jonathan's dilemma all too well. And we both know which one trumps the other. With a breath that doesn't quite manage not to sound put-upon, Jonathan says, "Thank you, Joshua. I'll handle the paperwork. If Dr. Picard has any questions about policy I will of course refer them to you, or Father."

The door shuts behind me and I stay still. He takes off his glasses, pinches the bridge of his nose, puts them back on. He gestures toward the chair opposite the desk, and something in his eyes tells me there'll be hell to pay if there is a repeat of Berlin's not-quite-musical chairs.

As I sit, he slides a paper form across to me. "*M'sieur le Docteur*, if you would be so kind as to fill out this donor information sheet..."

"Jonathan..."

He interrupts me as I interrupted him. "Sir, this meeting will progress more efficiently if the Brethren have your donor information. Do you need a pen?"

I nod and he hands one to me. I finally look down at the form. His hand is nearly flat on the upper edge. Between his thumb and forefinger is a pale Post-it, almost unnoticeable against the white of the paper. A single word is written on it. "Cameras."

“You are right, Mr. Priestley. Let me fill this out.” As I lean forward to write, his hand withdraws and the note vanishes with it. Smoothly done. Did he want to be a magician as a boy, practicing sleight of hand?

When I am finished, I hand him the form. He puts it in a folder. Obviously the data entry into the computer will be later. “Now, sir, what ideas do you have for how the funds might be used, consistent with the mission of the Brethren?”

I slouch back in the chair, allowing the bag to slide off my shoulder and onto the carpet. I deliberately raise my right hand and run my fingers through my hair. It gives him a nice view of my just slightly sweaty pit. I remember how much the scent of a man, of two men, turned him on. He remembers it, as well, if the “you bastard” in his eyes is any indication.

All the watchers will see is a slightly less than fully filthy, rich fucking traveler, scratching his head.

I drop my hand to my lap. Unless the cameras are directly over this chair, it’s unlikely the fact that my thumb is touching the right side of my cock, near the base, and my forefinger is touching my balls, the other fingers resting on my thigh muscles with only the tiniest of caressing movements, will be seen. Jonathan can’t see me, either, not across that desk, but the repeat silent “bastard” lets me know he knows what I’m doing.

“You know, I just flew here from the Congo. Layovers in Amsterdam and Paris. Been *up* for about thirty hours.” No hard-on innuendo there, no, indeed. “I’m too wired to rest right now, and the meals on the plane weren’t exactly haute cuisine. Let’s discuss this over dinner.”

His lifted eyebrows, both of them, ask whether I plan on treating him to McDonald’s, given what I’m wearing.

I stand up, grabbing the bag, taking his agreement for granted. With six figures in the offing, so far as he and the watchers behind the cameras know—does Joshua get off on this? their father? grandfather? fucking all of them?—dinner is a not unreasonable request.

“I have Charles waiting in the limo. I can stop at the hotel and get changed. A nice car, the Mercedes S550-Rolls Royce edition. Perhaps the

Brethren should consider it for someone? I bought it last year. Today is the first time I've ridden in it. Nice. Excellent, actually. I think you'll enjoy the ride." No, not a fuck innuendo in the paragraph. Not at all.

Pretentious pricks. I'm enjoying rubbing it in. Are the watchers checking Google, finding out that the MSRP was one hundred and sixty thousand dollars? Understanding that I can afford a fucking pricey car like that and let it sit, with all the attendant New York costs for a year, without using it?

I watch patiently, if deliberately bland of face, as Jonathan meticulously rolls down his sleeves, puts the gold cuff links carefully back in, adjusts his tie, turns his computer off, takes his jacket off the hanger on the coat rack, puts it on.

Our conversation as we leave the complex is mundane. I am certain they will get nothing out of it. I have far too much experience, and for all his youth, my Jonathan does well. There is nothing even remotely unprofessional about our demeanors, our stance. Nothing to indicate that not quite two months ago he was drooling on the linens as Philippe and I took turns fucking him until he finally passed out.

Inside the cool dimness of the car, he sags, letting everything drain out of him. So to speak. The real draining will be in the not too distant future. The limo moves, Jonathan inhales, gathers himself for the next round of battle.

"It can wait, Jonathan. Berate me later. For now, let's just deal with food... and anything else that might arise." I smirk at him as I push the button. "Charles. White's, please. Side entrance."

He looks amused. White's is one of the finest restaurants in the city, and I'm sure it's tempting for him to tell me I'll never get a reservation: (a) looking like I do and (b) this late. He refrains. A smart man, my Jonathan.

En route I call Michael, who is waiting to greet us. I let Charles know we shouldn't be more than a few minutes, and get out, dragging Jonathan behind me. He snatches his hand away from me the moment our feet touch ground. Holding hands with a man in public? Another *quelle horreur!*

Michael is a little terrier of a man, a whole two inches shorter than me. But he fits the stereotype of the small man who is feared. He offers a formal handshake in light of Jonathan's presence, but I lightly bat it aside, grab him up and twirl him around. It has been several years since I have seen him.

"Michael, one of your best private rooms for a moment." He looks upwardly askance at me. "Get your mind out of my crotch, Michael. Jonathan needs to see the room. Oh. Jonathan, Michael, Michael, Jonathan."

Introductions complete, Michael takes us to Room 1. It is intimate, elegant, and suitable for dining... and entertainment. Think of the room where Nicky Arnstein tells Fannie Brice, "You are woman, I am man, let's kiss." Then make it classy.

I tell Jonathan to remember the room because there might be a quiz later, then turn again to Michael. "We arrived at seven at the private entrance; you greeted us, took us here. I ordered my usual. Jonathan, would you eat, let's say, French onion soup to start with, a small salad with raspberry vinaigrette, boeuf bourguignon, and a nice merlot, but you don't recall the name?"

"What?"

"If I ordered that for you would you eat it, enjoy it?"

"Yes. Fine. Wait a minute. What? Take-out? From *White's*?"

I ignore the latter part, and tell Michael, "We stayed until eleven. You personally served us since I'm a good customer and we were talking some sort of business the entire time. You think you overheard us saying something about brethren, but you aren't sure."

"I understand. When should I expect them, and whom shall I expect?"

I turn to Jonathan again. "How soon will they check up on you?"

He hesitates, reluctant to admit that someone *will* be checking. Gives in. "Tomorrow, most likely; the day after at the latest. Someone from the Brethren."

At Michael's puzzled expression, Jonathan elaborates. "The Amalgamated Brethren of Christ. The church I work for."

"Ah, a church." Michael gives a dismissive wave of his hand. It is an authentic Gallic wave, which Michael has perfected in the years since he left Des Moines.

"Michael, I think we'll finish off the evening with a Bollinger Blanc de Noirs Vieilles Vignes Françaises 1997." I smile as his eyes light up in anticipation. I'm going to enjoy what I say next.

"No, actually, we'll take it with us. That way you won't have to suffer the pain of drinking it all by yourself, so that your inventory matches the tale."

He smiles with only the slightest regret at lost alcoholic ecstasy, nods, and is soon back with the bottle.

In short order, we're in the limo, heading to my place. Poor Jonathan is suffering in silence, at least for the moment. I can sense the several repetitions of "What the fuck?" building up inside so that when he finally lets them all out, one right after the other, the last will be a roar. The eruption... the *wrong* eruption... is imminent when Charles drives into the garage below my building. The trust actually owns it, through several layers of companies. I pay rent on a very comfortable apartment, though it is not leased in my own name.

I tell Charles to be back at 10:45 and to ring me when he arrives, escort Jonathan upstairs, open the door and for all practical purposes, shove him through. He does that little stumble-dance, recovers, and turns around to unleash the WTF barrage.

I've already carefully set the wine down. Care is indeed in order for *that* vintage. My tongue down Jonathan's throat stops the incipient explosion. My left hand is pulling his head down, holding it in place so I can devour him. Six fucking *weeks*! My right hand is on that just-right ass, clamping tight, and pulling him close so that our cocks grind together.

I let his ass go so I can get my hand between us, unzip him, force my hand inside, then more forcibly through the fucking boxer briefs, and work

his cock out. He whimpers. He likes the roughness of my hand against the smooth flesh of his dick. Likes the way I work it. Likes the way I stroke him, with that special twist around his knob on the out-stroke. Likes it enough to work his hands up between us, heading for my nips.

Only he doesn't like it enough to keep his mind on the task at hand. Getting off. He pushes and the surprise is enough to make me let him go and step back. It is not an off-balance stumble. I do not stumble.

It is, indeed, a "What the fuck, Jean-Luc Picard!" that rushes out of his mouth.

Mission partially accomplished. My estimate is that this is mid-range in intensity and volume, so I'd tongue-fucked the initial WTF out of him, and jacked the really loud one away, too. I reach out for him and he kind of dances back. The fucker is well aware of my reaction to the still-hard prick standing out and proud from his business slacks. It would look even better if accompanied by his balls.

Still holding my hand out, wriggling my fingers just a little as if I'm enticing a reluctant puppy to come closer, closer, closer, so he can be grabbed and not get away again, I offer him a deal.

"I talk, you listen, I jack, you don't come yet."

"The last condition is unacceptable. 'Yet' is too imprecise. Define the time frame."

"Goldilocks time. Not too short, not too long, just right."

He reluctantly twinkles at me, pretends to give the matter deep thought, and nods. I continue my hand-wriggling, "here, cocky, cocky, cocky," gesture. He steps right up and gets with the program. Prick well in hand, I lead him to the couch, let him go for a moment, reclaim my other dick (one on me, one on him, both for me), and start gently working it. Fingers over the top of the shaft, thumb rubbing the bottom, pausing to caress that very sensitive spot just beneath his slit on the up-stroke.

"I decided you decided you didn't really want to waste our time having dinner in public when we could be together in private doing, well, shit like this. But you still have to have that public dinner where we talk about my

donation so that you can explain the details when you get cross-examined. Your brother? Your father?"

Three little huffs of breath before he can answer. I do good work. "Father. Perhaps Grandfather. Six-figure donations, particularly from someone with enough money, despite his ostensible job, despite his generally poverty-stricken looks combined with ostentatious displays of the material things the Brethren inveigh against and wallow in... you're slowing down. If you're slowing down, I'm not talking."

I resume my more capable stroking. Even my ability to multitask seems affected by the nearness of him.

"Those kinds of donations, from someone who might be persuaded to let us dip the bucket in the well again, are rare. They'll want to know."

"And they will. If I asked, could you describe Room 1 at White's?"

A snort of mock indignation and a little groan are my answer.

"Michael? The fact he personally served us? What you ate and drank? The crudity with which I devoured my twenty-four-ounce sirloin?"

He's panting now. "Uh, yes, yes, of course. Just a little faster. *Please?*"

"Tell them whatever they want to hear about the course of the negotiations, I won't deny anything. Hell, I'll refuse to talk to them if they ask."

He's nodding his head just a bit frantically now. "Uh, Jean-Luc, please, uh, I think, dear God I think, well, the time is just right... *right now!*"

I drop my head, clamp my mouth over his knob, and swallow every tasty drop he gifts me with. He can't go back with come-stained pants, after all.

I make a point of smacking my lips as I raise up and he swats at me. "Tell me, Jonathan, does talking about food and money make all Priestleys come, or just you?"

His "bastard" is accompanied by a little smile.

"We have a few hours alone, Jonathan. You know and I know I'm going to fuck you, but it's your choice. Sex now and talk later, or the other way around."

His light dims, and his eyes shift away from my face. He looks so very sad that for a moment there is a temptation to say the hell with everything on my schedule, and just hold him, comfort him. I resist. I'm giving him a second chance. I don't give anyone a second chance. My memory is flawless and so I know that I never have, no matter the pleading, no matter the reasons given. But for him I am.

And if this does not work...

If this does not work, as I am beginning to fear it will not, I will be patient. A great cat can be patient, lying motionless, waiting for its prey. Though Jonathan is more than prey for reasons that are still mostly incomprehensible to me. But not completely so. I wait him out.

He looks at me again. Finally. His voice is hesitant. "Sex... sex now. After we talk... you, you may not want to."

I hold out my arms; he moves into them, sighing as I enfold him. "I will always want you, my Jonathan. Even after talking."

The sex is gentle. He climaxes twice more. I come once. He tries to prolong it, so that all the time that is left will be enough, just barely, for a mad dash through a shower and getting back into his clothes in order for Charles to pick us—or him—up, and return him to his own home by eleven. I don't let him get away with it.

We shower, dry off. I give him a soft robe, almost floor-length, but fitting perfectly. I ordered it that Saturday morning, just in case. I don a robe of my own. I know he will not want to talk naked, although I often find it fascinating to do so.

But not this time. Not with what is at stake.

We sit in silence for a while. I let it build as he is certainly never going to break it.

I remember, watching him breathe, watching the rise and fall of a chest so recently flushed with passion, that I have... stolen... things in my life.

Sometimes what I steal is words. Why try to paraphrase "How do I love thee?" when the words, good words, great words, words of unparalleled magnificence are all there, waiting quietly in their pages or pixels, eager to

be spoken, to be given the gift of life, by someone who understands them, understands their nuances. Someone who will take that gift and cherish it.

I am putting myself at risk. But I have to try again. Though I know with unfortunate certainty that this is not likely to end well.

He is not looking at me now. We are sitting close enough that he can feel my presence, but not so close I overwhelm him. Or at least not entirely. I can only do so much to make myself temporarily *less* than all I am, and that temporary never lasts for long.

“I said when I left in Berlin, well, not merely left, more... walking away after you told me to leave, after you told me, in essence, that all you were interested in was losing your virginity and you got what you wanted with a hot three-way, but now you had to get back to the real world, to your life... I said when I left that I would not be back. That no one was worth a second chance. That *you* were not worth a second chance.

“But you are. You already know what I’m going to ask you. I think you are already certain what your answer should be, must be, whether you want it to be or not. So I’m not going to screw you senseless as I might just have done, muddled your mind so thoroughly that you would be willing to agree to whatever I ask, and then have no recourse but to follow through on your word because you are that rarity, an honorable man.

“And no, there is no subtext of ‘so are they all, all honorable men,’ in what I say.

“So let me steal some words, twist and twine them in a different pattern, to say what I need to say, what I need you, want you, to hear, understand, accept.”

Philippe told me I must tell him. I can’t tell him all, but if he accepts part, the first part, then the rest can follow. All I risk is my pride; the possibility of being mocked. I do not take blows to my pride, I do not take mockery, well. There are, have always been, serious penalties for inflicting either on me.

He sits very still, head and eyes still averted. I haven’t sung for him before; I’m not certain I should now, but still... He sang for me, for Philippe and me. I sang for Philippe. And so...

I sing my own version of “If I Loved You,” telling him that since I love him, I have tried, over and over again I have tried to tell him all I wanted him to know.

He is looking at me now, lips parted, not quite breathing.

But because I love him, and never having loved before, I couldn’t find easy words to say, no words at all, just my mind going around and around in circles, wanting to tell him, but too uncertain... I will not admit to fear... to try. And so I almost let my chance for him pass by.

He is crying. I have no idea whether that is good or bad. Damn the gods to the nethermost hells for making me this unsure of myself!

I don’t want to believe I am actually begging him not to go, but I must, since the song and I so clearly are. And if he walks away, leaves in the song’s mist of day, or brilliant noon, or midnight dark, how would he ever know how I love him? And I do love him.

And then there is just silence but for the sound of the tears he tries to stop but cannot. Endless silence otherwise. The length of all of Scheherazade’s tales, and more, all without words.

Except the ones in my head. *He’s going to say no.*

“I can’t.” He puts out his hand, as if to touch me, but pulls it back.

He dries the tears on a sleeve.

“I... I am sorry, so very, very sorry, about all I said in Berlin. I never believed it about you. But *you* frightened me. And my feelings *terrified* me.”

He inhales and exhales slowly and carefully, bringing the trembling that had accompanied the tears under control. The lawyer and accountant are not yet back, but they are entering the room, starting the walk toward him. But at least for just a few minutes more, he is just *my* Jonathan.

Yes. Even if I want to shout it and grab him and shake him and kiss him until he understands, and I cannot... he is still *my* Jonathan.

“They... they are, still and all, and after all, my family. They are all I have ever had. It would destroy them to know... dear God... to know what

I am. The humiliation and the scorn that would be heaped on the Brethren if the world finds out Father's oldest son, even though he is not the heir, is a cocksucking faggot. I cannot do that to them. I am... I am just too weak, and you, you would come to hate a weak man."

I open my mouth, but he stops me. "No. No protestations. What you would say is what you have to say. Just let me get through this. I... believe you. What you said... sang, I will remember and cherish for as long..."

His pause lets me know he hears the words, too: "...as we both shall live."

"...for as long as I live. But I can't. And even if I could, J—"

He stops. Flushes. Visibly pulls himself together. "I—I'm sorry, Jean-Luc. I need to get dressed. Leave. I will—I will tell them that despite my best efforts you changed your mind." I can see him reaching out to the lawyer and accountant, frantic to bring them all the way to him, to hide him.

No. To hide *something*.

That "J" sound. Every fucking male in the Priestley family has a first name that starts with a "J."

Joshua. Fucking, fucking Joshua.

"And even if you could, Joshua... would what?"

He freezes. Then crumbles, folding in on himself. Shaking his head in a silent "I can't, I can't, I can't."

My size... *all* that I am... has so very often inspired fear. Frequently, terror. Only rarely, trust. But my Jonathan trusts me when I move to him, close my arms around him, hold him as he sobs, the great, gulping sobs that are never pretty to look at.

"Tell me."

He starts to shake his head against the wet robe, but stills. Only my excellent hearing allows me to hear him say, his breath soft on my fur, "Even if I could, Joshua will... will tell the world I molested him. When he was sixteen. And I was eighteen. Statutory rape."

Somewhere there is a great cat squalling, rage shaking the night sky. But there is no hesitation when I say, “He lies.”

He looks up at me, wonder in his eyes. “You... don’t... wouldn’t believe him?”

“Of course not.”

“But I did.”

I make myself chuckle, a soothing noise while the cat stalks, finds its prey, leaps, holds it carefully by the throat, and disembowels it with his claws.

“Now *you* lie.”

Another head shake. Anguish on his face. “No. I did. I... I sucked him, swallowed him. He... he fucked me. So, oh, Jean-Luc, I didn’t give you and Philippe anything at all in Berlin. Just another queer who wanted to be in your bed. Pre—pretending then, all this time, that I was a virgin, that I wasn’t, that I hadn’t...”

I squeeze him. I am not used to comforting squeezes, they’re mostly the “you’re going to hurt now, fucker,” kind, so he squeaks a little. I quickly let go, but he snuggles back in.

“How did he force you?”

“Me being weak. He came to my bedroom one day, when I was stressed out over... *things*. At school.”

“Another boy.”

He nods, doesn’t look up at me. Talks to my robe and my chest. “I... we had never done anything. Not for lack of my wishing, but because I knew what would happen if I did. Besides getting punched out by him, and then beaten to a pulp by his teammates.

“I was so unhappy right then, that when Joshua, my wonderful little brother of whom I was so proud, came into my room and told me he knew what I was, I didn’t let him finish. Didn’t let him say the rest of the words he said to me later, about how my being a queer disgusted him, but we had to think of the good of the Brethren, the family, the Lord.

“I thought he was comforting me that instant he held me in his arms after I threw myself at him. I thought he was going to tell me that he loved me, that everything would somehow, in some the Lord works in mysterious ways fashion, everything would be all right.

“Only he didn’t. And it never was. He explained coldly, clearly, that he felt he should let Father and Grandfather know, that it was his duty, no matter how much it would hurt them. But if I would pray to God for forgiveness, if I would abandon my sinful desires and sinful ways, if I would do... just *one* thing... he would never tell.”

“And that one thing, two, actually, was to give him a blowjob, and let him fuck you. Your first time. The bastard fucker.”

“A man had to know the sin he was fighting, he said, had to understand it in all its seductive depravity. He was... overjoyed... to learn I was a virgin. That he could soil me and make me understand how depraved I was. That he had this power since I had confessed my sin and no one would take my word against the word of the anointed heir. And he promised that it would only be once. Never again.”

“He kept his word. But he told you he had pictures.”

Jonathan looks up at me in shock. “How did you know?”

I carefully do not shrug. It is what I would have done had I been like Joshua. Predators recognize each other. I just had not fully recognized this one. Not until now. I smile a smile Jonathan would not like to see. And sometimes one predator destroys another.

“Doing it again was too risky to him. Once he could get away with. Twice and he would have been suspect. And you have never seen the photographs, the ones he has kept hidden in a safe place, because they don’t in fact exist.

“If they existed, and did not show his face, then they are just photos of you having sex with another male, who probably didn’t have ‘I’m only sixteen’ tattooed on some visible spot. He would have no proof that it was his dick in your mouth or ass, except his word. And the world would think it more than a little weird that he was trumpeting ‘That’s my dick, that’s my dick!’

“More likely than not they don’t exist and never have, because the risk to him is even greater, once someone asks why the pictures exist at all, why he didn’t do something at the time if his older brother had in fact molested him.

“And there was one thing more, wasn’t there?”

A confirming blink.

“Shall I tell you?”

“No, oh great Carnac. You can take the envelope away from your forehead.” His smile, so very, very small, was wobbly, but there. “I’ll tell you. I agreed to stay with the Brethren.

“And now, I am so used to my cage, I know I cannot cope with freedom. So I jack and pretend, and for one glorious evening actually *did*. And then I returned to my cage, and pulled the door behind me, and latched it again.”

We sit quietly. I am grateful that he cannot hear, cannot see, the great cat finish off its prey. Prey that looks suspiciously like Joshua. I think if I had ever visited the Oracle at Delphi he might have welcomed me as a fellow seer. A prophet extraordinaire.

Our silence, a quiet one now that the tumult has passed, stretches out. But reality is on the verge of intruding.

I lift him away from me, carefully, so that he knows he is not being rejected.

“First, you *were* a virgin in Berlin. Rape—a knife at your throat, metaphorical or not—can’t take that away from you. In fact, I would have to say, that in a long, long line of virgins...” I lie so very well, he was the first. “...you were by far the best. A blue ribbon winner.”

He smiles at my teasing. Seems to absorb the more serious part.

“Second, I will make this right. No, I am not going to grab the antique Colt handgun, the Army’s M1911 that’s over in that drawer, and load it, and blow your fucking brother’s fucking brains out. As much as it would give me pleasure to do so. But I have my Hippocratic oath to consider.”

It is good that he cannot read my mind, cannot realize that it's the hypocritical oath I am swearing. An oath to do... if not precisely that, then something. A *long*, and *very painful* something.

"I will protect you, and you will not need to fear him again."

I do not ask him to trust me on this because his fear is too great.

"Third, and I promise last, I will give you time. Time to think and consider whether the rest of your life will be cabined, cribbed and confined, bound to the rock that is your brother. Time to decide.

"But Jonathan, you have to understand. I do not give second chances to those who refuse me anything, vast or infinitesimal. But I did tonight, for you. And I will try again, one more time. A final time. I promise you that when I ask you to make a choice, that will be the last choice. I will not do this ever again."

"Okay."

I make my tone brisk. "Good. Now we have to get you cleaned up, and do something about your eyes. Michael is terribly broken up by his clumsiness."

"Wh... what?"

He is back to being confused and adorable, with red, red, puffy, puffy eyes.

"You remember, don't you? How could you forget? He was bringing in a small silver serving dish with one of those tiny silver spoons, filled with his special blend of Malabar, Tellicherry, Lampong and Muntak peppercorns, freshly but not too finely ground, when the idiot tripped, tossed the dish in the air, and the mixture blew into your eyes. He should market it. It's far more effective than pepper spray or Mace. He was devastated."

My Jonathan grins at me. "Don't you mean he *will* be devastated when you call to let him know what he did last night?"

I smile back.

"And you'll owe him even more for making the owner of the world-famous White's seem to be a temporarily clumsy oaf."

True, so very true. Michael will make me pay for this. But what are friends for, if not to use and be used when needed?

We shower, get dressed, are ready when Charles calls. My Jonathan leans into me for a quiet kiss, the merest modicum of tongue. He looks nervous for a second. "How... how will..."

I soothe him with another kiss, a little deeper this time, with the inevitable immediate results down south for both of us. But we are, regrettably, in control. He lets it drop.

We ride in quietness back to his condo, Jonathan thankfully oblivious to the great cat with bloody paws batting that head around, playing with it, playing with that special, hugely-better-than-catnip toy.

A final chaste kiss in the car, the windows so well-tinted no one can see, and I let him go. Watch him, though, until he is safely past the doorman.

I tell Charles to drive around for a little.

I need to think.

The great cat needs to think.

We need to ponder on how best to get that head in play. The one that oddly enough looks so much like Joshua.

Now—Saturday evening

JEAN-LUC

“You gotta be kidding,” he says.

He stands inside what I am sure the Priestleys call a cabin, only a house this large is anything but. He holds the door open, the screen door (in winter!) the only visible barrier to my entry. Tendrils of house-warmth reach out, wrap about me, each coil alternating with bands of moon-cold bouncing off the snow on ground and walk and steps and the porch railing behind me.

I shrug, smile, not bothering with seduction or domination. *Before*, there was no need of either. Poor peasants keep their heads down if they want to survive. *After*... ah, *after*, when I learned... all that I needed to learn... I have always had what I wanted, whom I wanted, when and in the ways I wanted.

Except for Jonathan. Yet here I am, as I promised. A third time. A last time. I promised that as well.

It ends tonight. One way or another. I will do what is required. And then... and then I will leave.

My hopefully only temporarily dead rental car, the one I was assured was just the thing for a Montana winter, including the storm I had hoped to beat, is a mile? two miles? behind me. Fighting through snow that is three and four feet deep in places has depleted me. I draw on my reserves. Stand quietly. Let the chill swirl around me but not feed off me. Wait.

JONATHAN

I look at him, wonder why I am about to do what I am about to do, and simultaneously tell myself, convince myself, that I am not going to do just that: invite him in. It's not as though I don't know why he is here. He told me. One more time; he'd come to me one more time. And then... no more time. He made a promise, told me he always keeps his word. But still, there was the possibility that this time would be that one time that he didn't.

I did not run that first time, in order to be some damsel in need of pursuit and rescue. Perhaps with pillaging and raping along the way, just to keep his hand in. I did not tell him “no” in New York so he would follow and stroke my ego and my cock again.

Or perhaps I did.

I stare at him, cataloging all the reasons why I should: intelligent; handsome in that *peasant* sort of way, that is now so damned hot; hung; wealthy, cultured, everything my formerly secret romance novel fetish tells me a hero should be. The man *sang* to me, for God’s sake. A love song, not some flat, out-of-tune, no-tune mockery. What’s not to like? Love? Tell him “take me, I’m yours!” and rip my bodice before he can?

And for all that he’s “swave and deboner” as I told him in Berlin, he doesn’t have that kind of well-bred European arrogance that would set Father’s teeth on edge and have him sharpening the verbal fileting knives if they ever meet. Which they won’t. Not Father, nor Grandfather. Not Joshua again. Oh, definitely not Joshua again.

I don’t think he knows I saw the expression on his face. Is he really angry enough to take action against Joshua? Beat him to a fucking pulp, perhaps, in such a way that he doesn’t know it’s Jean-Luc, or so he knows but somehow can’t do anything about it to him? To me? I’m not a violent man, okay, well, perhaps a little rough when I’m getting fucked, but the thought that someone, that *Jean-Luc*, actually cares enough to be angry on my behalf is... Well, hell, another two seconds of this and I’m going to yank on my Empire-waist gown, fan myself delicately and fucking swoon.

But he has done nothing. I would have heard. Though he has been on missions since then. Africa. The Middle East. The aftermath of a typhoon in the Far East. I have become a groupie for MSF. Perhaps... perhaps he is just biding his time.

“Well?”

The word, neither patient, nor overly impatient, with absolutely no subtext of “Make up your fucking mind!” snaps me out of my fog.

He stands there in the cold. Controls the shivers he has to be feeling given the temperature outside and the fact his suit, a fucking Dolce &

Gabbana, is soaked. No gloves. Hands at his side. He just stands. Silent. Watching. Waiting.

Dear Lord, give me a fucking break!

The screen door is patently not locked. I am standing here holding the door open for him, just as patently shivering with the arctic air groping me here, there and everywhere, and he just stands. What is he? A fucking vampire waiting for an invitation?

He's insane. Completely, fucking batshit crazy. And he did the same thing in Berlin.

I'm not going to freeze my balls off, so I end the goddamn game.

I open the door the rest of the way, holding it with my left hand, while with my right I make a sweeping gesture to indicate he is free to enter.

The bastard stands there.

Okay, okay, *fucking okay!*

"C'mon in."

He does. Precisely as he did at the Hyatt.

I wonder, briefly, if he will play his game as he did in Berlin. Leave the moment I tell him to, no arguments, nothing except an immediate exit. I did it then, I can, I should, do it again, now.

Because I already know. I've made my decision. I just have to tell him this will never work, I'm not strong enough to uncage myself, to let him uncage me. Maybe Toulouse had it right, that the greatest thing *is* to love and be loved in return. But not if you're not strong enough to do both.

Except... except he seems to think I can.

Dear God in Heaven, if You even fucking exist, what now? I am no nearer a decision than I was in New York. Than I have been all these weeks.

I can just... tell him to get the fuck out of here, out of my life. Go die in the snow. He would have to go, wouldn't he? If he's going to be consistent in this subtle, silly game. And then I wouldn't have to make a choice.

Only... that *is* a choice. Making him, if I even can, go or stay. Which just leads to another choice and another until I reach the one I don't want to make.

I am insane.

I am the world's greatest idiot. I am standing in front of a still open door with my balls begging for mercy, pleading for a match to light a fire in my jeans, and I am fantasizing about having just invited a fucking vampire into my home?

The man has no fangs. I have had my tongue down his throat exploring where his tonsils used to be. I worked over every perfect tooth, providing a cleaning with my saliva a dentist would envy. So I know. A perfect syllogism. All vampires have fangs. Jean-Luc has no fangs. Jean-Luc is not a vampire.

That settled, I slam the fucking door. Pause long enough to decide I don't really need to put up a quick sign outside that says "No Vampires Allowed" in English, French ("*Aucun Vampires Autorisés*") and German ("*Keine Vampire Erlaubt*"). Romanian is probably as close as I can get to Transylvanian, so I could get to my computer, use Google Translate. Just to be thorough and keep the bloodsucking hordes away.

All of which is stalling.

I'll just go tell him I know the weather outside is frightful, and my fire is so, well, delightful, and I know he has no place to go, so, there's not going to be any let-it-snow, stay-here shit, and I'll just tell him, "Jean-Luc, please, just get the fuck out!"

Yeah, right.

All of my jittering has given him time to unerringly walk down the hall and turn left into the living room. Time to walk past the large leather couch. Time to reach the fireplace, and get warm. Since he isn't, well, undead and can therefore feel it. Maybe.

I stare again. Well, shit.

Time to get naked, too. His clothes have just been dropped in piles that are starting to puddle, as if it's his home and he has the right to be messy.

He probably toasted his front first, just a bit, while I was in my second fog, before turning his back on the fire. Before planting his legs wide, his arms down and slightly spread, his palms toward the flames. The flames that silhouette him in bright red-orange-yellow.

I gulp, turn my eyes away. Begin doing host-like things, turning on lights, not too many, not too bright, this is not a party, this is just sex. That's all it will turn out to be. Sex, and then, and then, I'll tell him again I cannot do what he wants. And then he'll go. This time forever.

And I'll die.

Damn... not, not damn *him*, damn me!

I shake my head, more of a twitch, turn on the CD player. I'd forgotten I'd put *that* disc in last night. Well, why not? I straighten little things that don't need to be straightened, not looking directly at him. Glance quickly at him so he won't notice me doing so, but he does. There is nothing the slightest bit shriveled about him.

On the contrary. His cock thickens, rises until it is pointing at me. My cock tries to join the pointing game, but it's all tangled up in the damned denim.

"My beautiful Jonathan." His voice is low, caressing.

I just stand there. "Am... am I?"

"Are you what?"

"Ei... either?" I hesitate. "Both?"

When did I get so needy?

When haven't I been?

"Both." His turn to hesitate. "You are mine, aren't you, Jonathan? You ran once more, didn't tell anyone where you were going, but I tracked you, ran you down... and now we are through with the games, the fears, the rest of the bullshit that has had you running since Berlin?"

I think my face tells him I *want* to say "yes," but even though his face is in shadow, I can see the warmth of his eyes fade into a slight chill, as I say, "I... I don't know."

How can he want someone so weak?

I somehow manage to avoid the I'm-so-misunderstood wail of barely a teen, when I tell him, "You don't understand."

Hell, I don't really understand.

"Explain it again."

"I can't be gay."

"But you are."

"That's beside the point, goddamn it!"

The chill is lightened, just a little, by his smirk. "And a very nice point it is, too. I remember it well, so Hermione has no need to correct me."

When did we get only a few steps apart?

And now he's in front of me, his hands grasping the front of the shirt I'd thrown on and loosely buttoned when I heard his knock. Although it sounded more like Thor's hammer slamming into the wood, than the ordinary knock-with-your-knuckles variety.

He's going to do it to me again. I can't. I won't stand for it. He can't manipulate me this way.

He can.

He uses his thumbs to slide between the sides of the shirt, and doesn't use much strength at all to pop the buttons off. His thumbs gather up the fabric, pushing toward my shoulders, pull it off, down my arms. A tug and he disposes of it. Nothing dramatic like flinging it away, just dropping it out of the way.

He pauses, looks down at my hard-on, reaches down, twists his hands so that his palms are towards me, hooks his fingers between the buttons on my jeans.

He doesn't exactly ignore the hands I clamp on his wrists, just holds still. Inside my head I can hear the bastard saying, "Choose, Jonathan."

I choose. Lift my hands away.

With a single yank the buttons do their best fast-as-a-speeding-bullet imitation. I think Father will be pissed about the one that loudly hits his

Hommage á René Lalique Boulouris vase, and chips it. I can't find it in my heart or conscience to care, not when my jeans are now at my ankles, my cock is angling up, and he's on his knees, lifting my feet one by one to peel the denim off. Shove it aside.

Then his mouth is on my cock.

It's acceptable to thank Jesus for winning a football game, to praise the Lord for making that basket from the far end of the court, launching it a millisecond before the final buzzer sounds. It's blasphemy to thank either of them for a blow job.

I blaspheme. Loudly.

He is sucking like there is going to be no possibility of a tomorrow. What's that song? Oh, yeah, like's it's the last night of the world. Warm breath, hot mouth, as he takes me all the way down. Show-off. He slides up slowly, clamps on my knob until the suction is almost painful, his tongue lapping, teasing my slit. Then down again and up; down and up. A pause to get his forefinger wet with spit and a dollop of precome I eagerly provide.

I spread my legs, knowing the destination of that finger, welcoming it. He shoves it inside, and pushes my button, perhaps the best of my buttons that he pushes so well. Not what I want up there, but a reasonable substitute. For now.

Christ! Is having sex—what? I count quickly—fourteen times enough to create a slut? Fourteen? I recount, peripherally aware of my whimper when a second finger joins the first. Yes. Ten at the Hyatt, four at his apartment. Of course I didn't come that many times myself, but applying what I remember of my class in tort law, I figure if I caused or contributed to cause a come, each one counts. So, yes, fourteen.

The climax-postponing distraction of this legal and numerical analysis ends when three brethren fingers, none of the capital B variety, plunder my hole. Repeatedly. With a great deal of skill. My whimper becomes a moan, a long, drawn-out one that in turn becomes a babbling “oh please, oh! please! ohpleaseohpleaseohplease,” over and over again until I scream “Jean-Luc!” and he swallows my cock and my seed, stopping the sucking

and easing his fingers out at the instant before both would have become painful.

I stand there, my hands resting on his shoulders for balance, my breath coming and going in great gulps. He has dropped back on his haunches.

I look down at him. He looks up. Smiles.

Smug bastard.

JEAN-LUC

My smile generates another “bastard!” in his head. It’s his pet name for me, though I don’t think he realizes how often he says it, thinks it. I wonder what adjective he has put with it this time? For my money, it’s “smug.”

I rise smoothly, none of the bending forward, hand on the floor for balance, ass in the air, straighten-up crap. Jonathon starts downward. An excellent thought, but I stop him. Eventually he will learn that sex is not always a contract, a *quid pro quo* transaction, a come for you, a come for me, two for you, two for me.

I reach up to tilt his chin so he’s looking at my eyes and not my leaking prick. I realize—for the first time in more years than I care to remember—the ever-present tiny twinge of resentment that I am not taller, was not unusually tall when before became after, is not present.

“You want my cock inside you.” Not quite a question, not quite a statement. A nod is his reply, that and a quick suck of my thumb tip as it caresses his lower lip.

“You’ll probably get it.” His eyes widen just slightly at the possibility of *not*. “But first we have to talk.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. You blew my cock, you blew, well, *part* of my mind, so I’ll expect you to take care of the rest later, but first we have to *talk*?”

He is far too eager for sex, my Jonathan. Not that I don’t appreciate it. I do. But still, his fear is using sex as a way to postpone. The way he did in New York. Ah. I can see he remembers New York. *His* choice.

My turn to nod.

The lawyer and CFO, so pleasantly absent for so short a time, leach back into his system. “I don’t negotiate naked.”

He backs away, reaches down, grabs his jeans. Left foot in, a tug, right foot in, a tug, a little hop, a wiggle, and the well-worn fabric slides up over his hips. He routinely tucks himself inside left and only then realizes he has no buttons. “Bastard.”

I admire the little belly, the treasure trail down to the grey-brown... ah, no, I’d best think of it as brown-grey since he’ll be thoroughly annoyed if I put the grey first... pubes where so lately I nuzzled.

“Fine!” He peels them back off and pitches them onto the floor with only a pinch of pissed-off petulance. “And you’re not negotiating naked, either.”

“What makes you think...”

“I’m not a complete fool. Foolish in Berlin? I still don’t know. Foolish in New York? More than likely. A possible, no, more likely probable, fool for letting you in here? Definitely. But don’t even bother trying to claim that besides planning on fucking what few brains I have left, right out of my fucking skull, that you’re not also here for negotiations, discussions, the fate of nations rest on our shoulders, decisions must be made, talking.”

He stalks away. I’m admiring that only slightly sagging, mostly muscular ass, waiting, waiting...

He stops. Turns back to me.

The smile I don’t smile is nevertheless visible to my Jonathan, given his glare. The light has dawned! Enlightenment has set in!

I give him another careful not-smile, gesture at myself, at him, silently pointing out the now obvious. I’m wide and short—shorter; he’s tall and thin. *Thinner*. My clothes are soaking wet. Why, I could get a chill, catch a cold, pneumonia even, if I put them on. He has no clothes that could possibly fit me.

This time I let the smile out. “I guess we’ll have to talk naked, after all.” I move my hips from side to side, and my only slightly softened cock waggles, too. “Surely my dick won’t be a distraction.”

He just glares at me. And then that Warner Brothers cartoon brush pops into the frame and quickly paints a Eureka!-style light bulb over Bugs' head. Or is my Jonathan more Daffy?

His turn to smirk as he turns again and quickly moves out of the room, down the hall. I hear the clattering and banging of doors and drawers, and gentle words of love he doesn't realize I can hear.

"Smug bastard. Arrogant damned bastard. I'll show him. I'm not fucking negotiating fucking anything with his fucking dick fucking waving in my fucking face."

I have clearly corrupted him. A consummation devoutly wished for—and achieved. Five fucks in a single eloquent sentence. I give myself a mental high five.

"Ah, ha!"

He actually says, "Ah, ha?"

Another bang. Bare footsteps on the smooth wood floor. He comes straight for me, carrying colorful, *brightly* colorful... towels? Stops. Throws one at me and I give him the satisfaction of letting it hit me in the face instead of plucking it out of the air. Beach towels. Mothball-smelling beach towels. He throws another of the evil-smelling things at me. This one I catch.

"One around your shoulders. One around your waist."

I let him have his way, instead of tongue-fucking his mouth, his mind, his cock and his ass into submission. In short order, our dangly bits are decorously covered, except my bit still isn't cooperating with Jonathan's just-dangling agenda. Our shoulders and, for me, *part* of my chest are covered. Too bad his supremely sensitive nips are hidden by his upper towel. Ah, well, not forever.

Tonight will not be a repeat of New York. I learned truths then. Truths I have yet to fully deal with, though that has begun. It is his turn now for truth. Tonight he will accept the truth of what we are to each other. Learn the truth about me. Accept those truths. Or not. But he *will* choose.

I make my cock soften so he cannot claim distraction. We sit on the couch... and I tell him everything.

Well, not everything. If I told him everything I'd finish somewhere in the summer of 2961 and Jonathan would have crumbled into dust centuries earlier. So, not all, but enough for him to make an informed decision.

Not surprisingly, he doesn't believe me. At first he laughed, and then he began to withdraw from me. Physically, emotionally. Expected, but still hurting. I had not expected how *much* it would hurt.

What he feels for me, though perhaps that is now past tense, battles with what my words tell him, with what he *knows* with the certainty of universal truths like sun/east, sky/up, gravity/down, is an utter impossibility. A violation of the laws of God and nature, a denial of Darwin.

There's another battle as well. Between primal fear and the garden variety fear that a variation on Norman Bates or Hannibal Lecter is at large in his home. The home he willingly opened up to the monster.

When I stop, he takes several deep, slow breaths. A calming device. It doesn't work very well.

Eventually, while the music waxes and wanes, the logical lawyer, the accountant with an obsession for ensuring that everything adds up, reappears.

One more breath.

JONATHAN

Batshit crazy. Certifiable. Neither comes close to the reality. Joshua, Father, all of them who have shown I am not good enough, will never be more than marginally good enough, are clearly right. Only someone like me would have let someone like *him* in my life. And now I'm trapped here with a psycho on my couch.

A psycho whose soul touched mine, or so I thought.

One final... no, bad word choice... one more breath. I look at him, hoping he will believe I am actually calm.

"So, let me get this straight. You love me. You've loved me since our eyes met across that lobby. And ever since. You want me to give up everything to be with you. Leave my family, my work, my freaking *life*." Just as he wanted in Berlin. In New York.

I pause, take another breath, and then practically shriek, “And you quoted a good part of ‘Come live with me, and be my love, and we will all the pleasures prove’ at me just now!”

I think the shriek, no, the *almost* shriek covers the fact that his bass voice rumbling those words at me made me want to go into puddle mode.

Another breath. Another. He sits silent, as he damn well should. Another.

“And then... and then, it’s oh, yes, ‘in the interest of fairness and honesty,’ you’re a vampire.”

“Yes.” Another basso almost-profundo rumbling that does things I should not allow it to do but cannot seem to help permitting.

Insane. Fucking insane. He has to be. Or just deluded. I can talk him down, talk him back from the edge. A motion for partial summary judgment on his fantasy. Establish the uncontrovertible facts. Get the judge to rule.

“You don’t have fangs.”

“You noticed.”

“Well, then.”

“Well, what? I never said I sucked blood. Life, yes. And other things.” His damned gaze strokes over my towel-covered nipples, does that tweaking, touching, down and down, to that tongue thing he does with my slit. “I suck other things... very well. Don’t you agree?”

I flush and ignore him. Ah. More proof.

“Do you get cold?” Step by step logical analysis.

“You mean us, the evil undead, generally, or me in particular?”

I blink. I hadn’t been thinking exactly those words, but still... in the interest of fairness and honesty, I nod.

His brief laughter is sarcastic, wounding, a sound that says, “Stupid child.”

“You were in bed with me. I had my cock buried inside your ass, fucking you until you screamed my name and begged me not to stop. You

had my cock in your mouth, fucking you again. Was I cold and undead then?”

It’s not really a second flush, as the first hasn’t had time to fade. How does he do this? Unnerve me so?

JEAN-LUC

So delectable, so vulnerable, so confused.

I will not just haul his ass up, bend his ass over the damned couch, and fuck him until he collapses. And then does what I want... what I *need*... him to do. To make the right choice.

At least not yet.

I will before I leave. At least once. No. More. Definitely more.

“If you prick us, do we not bleed?” I murmur. Just loud enough for the sound to float across the space between us, drift into his ears.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Vampires don’t bleed,” he says triumphantly. It isn’t exactly on a par with *cogito, ergo sum*, as an analytical breakthrough, but he acts as if it is.

I can’t help it if my “Stay,” sounds like a command to a recalcitrant puppy, as I stand, look around the room, do not find what I need. Ah, well, I brought what I needed in case this happened.

I walk over to my jacket, pull the small, sheathed blade out of the pocket, walk back, sit down. I hold it out to him, pull off the sheath, drop it between us. The blade is silver, the handle ornately carved. Niccolò gave it to me shortly before he died. Of natural causes I will swear, on any holy book anyone cares to name so long as it will not self-combust from my touch.

“If you prick us, do we not bleed?”

His mouth drops open as I hold out my left arm, elbow bent, palm up, place the still-sharp point against my skin, dig in and slice in a straight line toward my hand. The flesh parts, and blood wells up, begins to pour out. I stop cutting, which breaks his frozen horror.

He shouts, “No, you fucking fool!” and whips the towel off his shoulder, lunging forward to use it to staunch the flow.

And stops.

And stares, open-mouthed again.

There is still blood on my skin, wet streaks and blobs and spots of it on my towel, on the couch. But the skin is closing, the gash going... going... gone.

“If you tickle us, do we not laugh?”

“Wh... wh... what?” He looks away from my forearm, up at me, back and up again. He is so adorable when he is confused.

“You did, remember, you... and... my Philippe... and I tickled you back. Do you want to tickle me now, to be sure?”

He shakes his head. Shivers.

“Will got the next one wrong, but then he wasn’t writing about me at that moment, since if you do poison us we are unlikely to die.”

I don’t move closer to him. Not yet. I am already an invader deep inside his personal space. Does he see a Genghis Khan with a great pyramid of skulls behind me? When my cock is hard, in just a moment, ah, there, he notices the tent in the towel. He doesn’t want me to know he notices, but I do.

“Ah, but the next line. So very, very accurate when it comes to us. ‘And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?’”

That pulls his eyes up and away from my cock. His “*I haven’t wronged you,*” is not merely indignant but angry.

“You had to know. All of this. In—”

He finishes my sentence. “The interest of honesty and fairness?”

“Just so.”

My voice steps outside the circle of warmth around us. Far outside. In a galaxy far, far away outside. It has all the weight of my years, the cold, dark mass of what I have been and done, will be and do again, to protect myself, to protect the others. No matter the cost to me.

He has pulled the lawyer, the astute businessman, back around him, as armor. If he is tempted to shiver, to back away, to let me see the uncertainty, the beginnings of fear, the outright terror depending on circumstances, that generally accompany my tone, he does not give in.

“I haven’t wronged *you*.”

Stubborn fuck.

JONATHAN

Arrogant fuck.

He *wants* me to be afraid. Not bloody likely. Well, hell, now I’m swearing Brit-style in my head.

And ignoring what I’ve just seen. It’s some illusion, some magic trick. David Copperfield, Harry Houdini magic. Not *magic* magic. Not Harry-fucking-Hogwarts.

I can’t help myself. I move closer, reach out, snatch the towel open, grasp his prick. Apparently the undead have a temperature after all. I stroke all the way toward me, my thumb rubbing his slit.

“You’re warm.” I have to help him understand. “If you’re warm, you’re not undead. If you’re not undead, you can’t possibly be a fucking vampire. A vampire who fucked me. *Quod erat demonstrandum*.”

“I’m not dead.”

“But you say you’re a vampire.” The whole *you thorough-going whack-job* part is silent. But he understands.

He sighs. The sigh of a father having to explain things to a less-than-bright son.

“Stoker and Rice have much to answer for. Though I am finding that perhaps that whole Argeneau one true love, soul mate thing may be somewhat accurate after all.” He puts his right hand over mine, stills my stroking, lifts my hand away.

“Hath not a vampire eyes?” he mocks. “You have looked into mine, so very closely in Berlin, and again in New York. Were they empty and lifeless? Are they now?”

He pushes the towel all the way off, pitches the shoulder one onto the floor. He turns so he is leaning back, his legs sprawled wide, his large, hairy feet firmly planted on the floor, looking almost obscene as he looks over at me, and slowly strokes himself. He stretches his left arm out along the back of the couch. Just a little more, only a little, and he could, if he but would, touch me. I wonder if the thick hair in his pit will smell as good as it did that first time. Mentally I Gibbs the back of my head, pull my stare away.

“Hath not a vampire hands, organs?” His eyes flick downward to emphasize his point, look up again to ensure I’m following.

“Dimensions?” Another smirk. Bastard. Just because he’s bigger than me.

“Senses, affections, passions?” On the final word his eyes gleam, becoming... *odd*... and then the oddity is gone.

“We eat, but are not fed with the same food. We are hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases... and healed by vastly different means... warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer.”

He is pleasuring himself while he mangles and mocks Shakespeare at me.

I won’t reach down and touch my own erection. I won’t lick my lips and wonder if his cock in my throat would be as good as the last time it was there.

I do both.

Did I just enroll in Vampire Lore 101? But I can’t help myself.

“Why did I have to invite you in? I was holding the door open. The invitation was implicit. You could have walked in.”

His smile is faint. His voice tonight is without accent. “A man’s home is his castle.”

I snort at the cliché.

He shrugs. “If you want to know why we must ask, get yourself a research grant, find some test subjects and figure it out. It is a fact of life.”

“Of undeath.”

“Or that.” He shifts and his left hand pats the couch beside him.

I move closer, until we are side by side, but still not touching. I don’t sit too close. I wouldn’t want to interfere with his jacking, wouldn’t want him not to have a hand readily available if he... wanted it for some other reason than teasing his nipples.

“Think of a castle. A fortress with only one entrance, the way controlled by drawbridge and portcullis. You can only get in if someone inside raises the portcullis, lowers the drawbridge. Even in war, you may never gain entry, without destroying the castle itself. Which defeats the purpose. Your home, your true home, your soul’s home, not just the physical place you call that word, only allows us entry with your consent.”

He shrugs. Looks around. “This place? Your soul is only temporarily here so I might have come in without consent, though with you it would not have been easy.”

“And if I’d said no, when I opened the door? Told you to stay the fuck out? Slammed it in your face?”

“As you wanted to?”

“Yes.” Fortright. Firm. The prosecution’s star witness confirming the defendant killed Cock Robin.

Or not. His stare, his left hand rising to rub himself at the top of his chest, then burrowing down the fur into the thick pubes, to splay his first and second fingers around the base of his cock, reminds me. As if I need reminding.

I snatch control back, don’t look at him as I ask, “What then? What if I had?”

“I would have made a willow cabin in your yard.”

I groan. Not again. He is inexorable. I briefly consider clapping my hands over my ears, and loudly “la-la-la-ing” him in a sing-song sort of way, but give up. I look at him so I can get the full impact of the train wreck.

“Called out to my soul within your house. Written silly love songs, and sung them gleefully even in the dead of night. Shouted your name to the reverberating hills, making the air echo with the sound of ‘Jonathan!’”

The bastard smirks at me. “You wouldn’t have rested well until you surrendered, pitied me, invited me in.”

“To suck my blood.”

He laughs. Opens his mouth wide. “Look, Ma, no fangs.” He pauses. “Aren’t we past your fang fixation yet?”

I nod, but it isn’t the nod of someone who has just closed a fifteen-million-dollar deal for the Brethren. It’s far too uncertain for that.

He smiles, reaches out. Cups the side of my face, rubs his thumb briefly across my lower lip.

“But sucking you? Oh, definitely.”

His left hand lifts away, drops down across the joiner of hip and thigh, leaps the tiny, tiny chasm which was all I could make myself make when I moved. He strokes down my forearm, lifts my hand to his mouth. My body twists to follow the movement as he brings my fingers to his lips. His tongue darts out, moistening both fingertips and lips, opens, slowly, slowly, slowly engulfs my index finger, his tongue swirling about it inside the warmth of his mouth, then equally slowly pulling back until just the tip rests on his lower lip. He smiles, bends his head, his tongue pulling up an unresisting second finger, swallowing them both, just holding them there while tiny exhalations from his nostrils pat the back of my hand. I am so hard I hurt. He clamps his lips tight, bobs his head up and down rapidly for just a couple of strokes, and then slowly, slowly, slowly slides back and off and away, lifting his head to look at me.

He picks up an edge of his towel, uses it to gently wipe my fingers. “I also clean up afterwards.”

He smiles.

JEAN-LUC

He is watching me, still not fully understanding why I am here. Well, aside from the reason that is so very obvious because it is standing up and saluting him, and weeping with eagerness.

Oh, he understands the words, the idea that he has to choose, but it hasn’t sunk in.

In ordinary times, in centuries of ordinary times, I would have been here to fuck and feed. Nothing more. Two needs fulfilled, taking a year, two years from him at the most, out of the forty-three he has left.

But there is no need to feed. The man last night was enough.

He'd never been with a man before. Certainly never one like me. Only children. Young children. I rarely hate. After all this time there is no need for it, nor for any other emotion, really, especially not as motivation. I make an exception for those like him, for him. Perhaps because I was raped the first time when I was ten.

Before departing from Saint-Valery-sur-Somme for the invasion of England, my father decided to get in some practice raping and pillaging. He chose my mother. She was twelve. He survived Hastings, was rewarded with a title and estate wrested from the losing English. And when he triumphantly passed through the village again, ten years later, we knew each other, recognized the link between Norman baron and Norman peasant boy. It was in our faces, in our eyes. A reunion, a first meeting actually, that ends as that one did offered no pleasure. Well, not for me. *He* seemed to get great pleasure from using me the few days he carried me with him, but then he dumped me beside the road, his seed leaking out of my ass one last time.

Not that he realized that the repeated satisfaction was fleeting until years later. Eleven, to be exact. After my second rape. After I understood the change, what I was, what I could do. I found him in Paris, took him, used his own money to get him back to England, where I paid men he had hurt, whose children he had hurt, to use him. To fuck him, once for every time he had come inside me, a final fuck for all the children since. And then I stripped away his life. Slowly, painfully, feeling his soul howl in agony as I drained the thirty-three years, six months, and nine days he would have had, but for me.

Yesterday. Edgar. Kind, gentle, glasses-wearing Edgar, skillfully appearing to be not quite right, but a harmless kind of not-right. He was only nineteen, but had already had three. Two were dead, the third too terrified to talk. He boasted to the "fellow-traveler" I appeared to be, and then he regretted, more than regretted, his sharing, as I did for Edgar the

last thing I did for my father. Fifty-eight years, two days, three hours, seven minutes. Gone in shrill screaming where no one could hear, and in far more pain than my father had felt. With experience comes superior technique.

A satisfying, *full* meal, not just the occasional snack of a few minutes, hours, days, here and there.

I could have turned around, driven away, let someone find the body, mourn the so-sad heart attack in one so very young. Gone back to Paris. Ended that life and started a new one. I could have let Jonathan be. Except I could never be certain what he figured out, if anything at all. I had a Watergate need to know what he knows and when he knew it.

I have to be sure. Have to be certain I will not, can never be betrayed. I have to give him a chance.

Give myself a chance.

Jonathan sits so very still now, watching me stroke so intently. But lurking behind the lust is the uneasiness.

I did not recognize what “this” was in the moment when first his eye I eyed across that people-packed space. I smile and he catches it, lifts that fucking eyebrow to ask “What?”

I shake my head in “Never mind.” He pretends annoyance when I quote things at him. I’ll leave his annoyance level flat a while longer.

The music in the background intrudes.

The song.

I once had that song sung to me, just me, alone in my bedroom, while the rest of the party laughed and chattered its frantically pretended enjoyment in the rest of my suite at the Waldorf. And for those few minutes, and only those few minutes, I believed it was possible.

I am not sure I believe now.

JONATHAN

I inhale, an almost-gasp, as he turns left, making me scoot a little away. He lays his leg flat on the couch, his thickly-haired knee and shin rubbing

against my towel-covered hip and thigh. He leans and twists and puts both hands on my nipples and tugs. A bit harder, a tiny twist. The almost becomes actual. Smug bastard.

“Get naked for me.”

A little more wordy than Dieter, but then, this is real.

I start to rise up, but his left hand on my shoulder easily stops me.

In my porn collection—the one hidden so very well on the laptop Father and the Brethren don’t know about, the one sitting on the nightstand in the bedroom, open, a video probably over by now, as I hadn’t bothered to turn it off when I heard the knock—getting naked while staying seated, for the most part, on a couch, seemed generally graceful.

Reality is otherwise.

So simple. Feet firmly on the floor. Brace the back of your head on the back of the couch for leverage. Lift your hips. Tug the towel left-handed. Dispose of the towel next to you. As easy as one, two, however many.

Not that easy when the bastard stays leaning forward so he can twist your left nipple, one of a pair directly connected to your cock and balls and all your erogenous zones everywhere, and sucks on the right. Not when your back arches toward that wonderful sensation, giving you more than ample space under your ass to get rid of the towel, except that the sensation makes you forget whatever the fuck it was you were supposed to be doing. Not when his right hand leaves your nipple bereft, but travels south, to work its wiles on your cock. Squeezing, releasing; squeezing, releasing.

I will not whimper. I will not whimper.

Of course I whimper.

My asshole is twitching. Clenching and unclenching as though it’s trying to get in some last minute practice before the big game.

And then he stops the taunting. Lets me do what I was told to do. I fling the towel... somewhere. Obviously I should have looked. I wonder which of Father’s collection made that sound when it hit the hardwood floor. I never before realized it is possible to love the sound of shattering glass.

I'm panting. Just a little. But he isn't holding me down. I can still jump up, run off, grab the phone while praying that the landline isn't out. I can call 911. Have them send a helicopter. The National Guard. The fucking SEAL team that killed bin Laden.

I don't.

JEAN-LUC

What I am doing to him is unfair. A gross violation of the Geneva Convention on Sexual Negotiations.

I gave him promises. I never promised I would play fair in fulfilling them.

I grab his head, move it to me. Capture his mouth. Ravage it until he responds, until he chooses to respond, though there is no real choice, not with what is between us.

And then I stop. Pull back. Watch. Work my cock, cup my balls, my fingers disappearing as if they might, just might, work back and tease my hole.

Not fucking fair at all.

JONATHAN

This isn't fair!

He is stroking just a little more rapidly now, playing with his balls, making me remember how he and Philippe did that, getting me so hot. Is he really going to finger his own hole?

The slick smacking sound of body-lubed flesh on flesh is loud in the room where we both seem to be holding our breath. Or does he, for all the movement of his chest, need to breathe? I can't get past the undead-not undead thing.

He is content for the moment to let me think, the taste of him filling mouth, the scent of him filling my nostrils. Content to let me sit, and stare, and tentatively, tentatively, jack myself. No, not really jacking. Just... caressing. Not enough to derail my thoughts, but somehow a necessity.

Misunderstood, he said. Pity the poor, misunderstood vampire, his tone said, just another abused minority. All those myths, all those lies and fantasies, perpetuated by story after story, novel after novel, especially the last decade or so; Anne Rice knowing better but catering to the masses nonetheless. No bats, no mist, no shifting of shape; no seductive liars compelling obedience with a cobra-stare; no entry without consent, no feeding or converting without consent, but consent so easily obtained; no death but by flame, decapitation, removal of the heart, although a stake in that vicinity will slow them down.

A moment ago I was kissing this... man... so deeply both our bodies trembled, and right after that kiss, surrounded by the music and the touching and the lust, he is telling me how I might kill him.

JEAN-LUC

I release my cock, let it stand upright, or rather stand with a Pisa tilt toward my belly. I pull hard on my nipples and twitch my length. Jonathan licks his lips. I lean back again, letting my legs sprawl ever more lewdly wide once more, my eyes never leaving his. My sex is glistening and sticky.

My cock likes Jonathan. I like Jonathan.

I have never liked men like Jonathan. Ordinary men. Not warriors, not men who actually *work*, physically work, for a living. Grey-flecked hair on head and chest and pubes, not uniformly dark, not the occasional flame or sun gold. A belly, not smooth, taut abs to contrast with my own thick fur. A man you might want to hold you close, give you the illusion that not only is there a God but He's in His heaven and all's right with the world, despite the knowledge that some North Korean asshole fucker could punch a button and launch a nuclear holocaust any second now. A kind of man who, even in his first attempt to be a consummate slut, was actually making love to you. To both of you.

Damn him. Damn me for more than liking. For loving.

JONATHAN

I inhale quickly, suddenly remembering to breathe instead of wondering whether he really does or not, whether I have been fooled, compelled into believing I've seen his chest rise and fall, heard inhalations, exhalations.

Vampires, he says, are a thoroughly ecumenical lot. There are Jewish, Christian, Muslim vampires; even a vampire cardinal, he says, noted for his virulent public hatred of gays, who feeds for the most part on priests and altar boys.

Imagine, he'd said, a wide Broadway stage at night. The largest you've ever seen. Completely bare. Total darkness, not even a ghost light.

Imagine an enormous spotlight trained on center stage, opened as wide as it will go, but not quite filling the stage, the edges of the circle of light gradually fading into darkness at the wings. When you are born you are at the core of all that brightness, but as you grow, as your life creeps in its petty pace from day to day, so that for most of you your days are full of sound and fury, signifying nothing...

He just never stops. Now he's throwing the Scottish play at me.

You move, he said, slowly, slowly, slowly from the glowing center, to dimness, to death. We know your allotted span. Your three-score and ten. Or more. Or less. We know precisely how long you will live. If chance, or one of us, does not interfere.

We eat and drink as you, he said, but we live because of what we take. Seconds, minutes, hours, all the divisions of time, drinking from the end of your life, so that the distance you walk from center stage is not quite to the wings. Necessary, but not satisfying. Not like a full meal. Not like taking the life itself, every watt of it, the spotlight spiraling in and in and in so you die of natural causes, sometimes unexplained natural causes no coroner can figure out, because you look just as you are, you don't go through some CGI version of aging into death, flesh oozing away into nothing but bones, bones dissolving into dust.

But you *can* survive on snacks, he'd said.

He did not tell me how many full meals he has had. I did not ask.

We are the most minor of the minorities of the world, he said, and the most powerful. But we have no desire to come out of our closet and ask permission to exist. To be hated and feared and hunted. We are content to be a tale told by idiot humans.

Everything he said, so well thought out, so logical, even the power to alter DNA, modify genes in real time, as the way they converted, his voice mocking the images of ripped throats and veins, and blood exchanges, sounded so true, so real as he spoke. He clearly believes it.

And so I have a lunatic, a well-hung lunatic, sitting on my couch playing with himself, his eyes wide open and staring into mine.

I move closer.

I can't help myself.

JEAN-LUC

He was motionless there for a while. A fear-frozen goat faced with a great tiger, sleek-pelted, broad muscles rippling beneath the fur, waiting, waiting.

He moves closer. As if he has no choice. Prey coming to predator.

But he *has* a choice. Not the one he may be expecting, but a definite choice.

I shouldn't have told him. I should have just made the choice for him. For us.

Fuck it.

I tell him to jack for me, to work his nipples, show me...

JONATHAN

He wants me to show him. Show him whether I fear him, or want him, or both. My erection at least answers part of his unspoken questions.

I look in his eyes. He says it again. He says he has no mystic powers, no compulsion, only persuasion, but what if he lies? Would I feel any different, would I know I was being compelled?

He's crazy, he must be, or pretending to craziness for a reason I can't fathom, or has a compulsion to make himself different and noticeable, as if his looks and wealth are not enough to set him apart from the hoi polloi like me. Or perhaps he enjoys mind-fucking, knowing that as soon as a man

sees his body, feels that cock, he won't be thinking or caring about the mind that goes with it.

This makes no sense! I want to shout. I don't. I lick my lips again, watch the oozing precome slide down his shaft.

I realize: I should tell him I can't go through with this, don't feel well (never good, always well), sorry I actually have a lover, a big day tomorrow even though we're trapped here by the snow, have a headache, sorry, so sorry, but please, just fucking please, get the fuck up, get the fuck dressed and go.

I realize: He'll have to go. He said so.

Realize: I won't tell him.

Realize: I can't tell him.

Realize: I'm afraid of him.

Realize: I love him.

Realize: I want, I *need* something from him, with him, more than anything I have ever wanted, ever needed, before. Yet still I am terrified, because of all I would have to leave behind.

Realize: If I give in and help him, go with him and "all those pleasures prove, that hills and valleys, dale and field, and all the craggy mountains yield," I will destroy myself, my family, my life. A Catholic excommunication is a mere bagatelle compared to what Grandfather will do.

There is no one to explain, to tell me why this is happening, why me. No one to ask. So I ask myself. With all the men he could pick from, who would be naked and on their backs before the credit card was completely out of his wallet, or his dick was out of his pants, *why me?* And if there is even the remotest possibility of truth in his outrageous words, I ask myself again, and yet again, *why me?*

My self has no answer. Except to realize that only fools want reasons, and fool though I am for loving him, I am wise enough not to ask.

He slides further down on the couch, tells me to get up, straddle his legs, sit. I do as I am told. There is no sign he's uncomfortable with my weight as

I rest my butt just north of his knees, my balls touching the inside of his almost pressed-together thighs. He reaches behind me, grabs my cheeks, makes me scoot up until my the head of my cock slides over the underside of his own.

Both hands reach up, grab my nipples, twist *hard!* and then relax when I gasp and whimper. He pulls me down to him, by the fingers that expertly hold my hardened nipples, murmurs, “Come for me, my Jonathan, come on me, get me wet and slick.”

As he pulls me into a kiss, his cool (just cool, not undead cold!) lips push mine open, his tongue does its imitation of the German army invading Paris, entering without opposition since the man in charge had decided to collaborate. I wrap my hand around both our cocks, my thumb pressing down on my shaft, just below the head of my cock, adding minute extra pressure as I stroke and stroke, holding us both against his belly. The kiss goes on and on. He is not holding my head, but still he keeps me there, while his hands roam my chest, shoulders, back, ass, rubbing, caressing, teasing, hurting with the kind of hurt that is pleasurable.

And inside (inside my head!), inside I see... strands—hundreds? thousands? millions? I cannot begin to count the strands—glowing in infinite darkness, in a range of colors I’ve never experienced, never dreamed possible. One strand, then a second, a third, each so very far apart from the other, drifts out from all the rest, begins to twine... The image fades, vanishes.

“Jonathan,” he murmurs softly against my lips, “when you come, come just a little, only a little, not much at all.”

Ridiculous. Come *just a little* when my breathing is out of control, when his hands, oh God just his hands excite me like nothing we have done before. I tremble, then shake, and the shaking turns into tremors racing through my body. I gasp unthinking agreement, and as I begin to spew semen between us, I feel his mouth on my neck, feel my pulse thunder, feel his teeth nip, gently, gently, not even breaking the skin, I turn my head, baring my throat for the fangs that aren’t there, moan loudly as I spurt and spurt and spurt.

Unable to stop, I collapse on him, and after an infinite while, regain control, struggle to sit up, get all that dead weight... Christ what an image... off of him. His arms wrap about me, hold me to him. He is hard beneath me, his length pulsing against my flaccid cock, my fist, my belly.

I move, sit up on his knees, look down at the mess on my belly, on his, on the globs of seed smeared on his cock.

That is far more than just a little. I'd done what I was asked, told, but still... "I'm sorry. Let me get a towel."

I start to rise, but his hands above my elbows clench, stop me easily. I gulp.

JEAN-LUC

A flicker of fear passes over his face. I catch his eyes, smile, release the pressure of my hands so that my palms, fingers, are merely caressing him. "No need for a towel. We're going to need all that."

Uncertainty now. He looks at my still-rigid cock, licks his lips. He knows what I want, knows he is going to agree. "I... look, just give me a little bit... if you want to fuck me I... I can't take it right now, let me recover, it's just, I can't..."

"Do you really?" I ask him. "Do you really need time?"

My right hand cuddles his balls, my thumb spreads the last drop around the head of his cock... which begins to get, *is*, hard again. He looks down at the shaft angling up and out over my legs, looks at me, wonderingly.

He scoops up the semen from my belly, from his, smears it on me with the precome that steadily oozes out of me. With my right hand at the base, I hold my cock upright, use my left hand to bring his right to my mouth, lick him clean, suck one, two, three fingers, lapping until he shudders.

He knows. But still he asks, "C-condom? I, uh, I have..."

"No need, my Jonathan, no need. Never again."

He is uncertain, afraid. He should not be. I told him in Berlin I was safe. I do not lie.

I do not *always* lie.

He stands, shifts so that his knees are on the edge of the couch, balances himself with his left hand on my shoulder, spits on his right, moistens between his cheeks, does it again, takes my cock, guides it to him, hesitates.

“Fuck yourself, Jonathan,” I whisper. “You know you want me inside of you.” My voice coils about him as the streamers of warmth had done to me on the porch.

He winces, *gasps!* as the head pops through his opening. He holds himself still, breathing heavily.

Slowly, slowly, slowly he lowers himself, bending forward, his fingers trying to gouge holes in my shoulders from the muscle tension in each arm. My palms rest gently on his nipples, making tiny, tiny circular motions, gradually absorbing his weight as he leans further, the tautness leaving his arms until he uses them only for balance. He does not even notice the ease with which I hold him as he becomes used to my length so far into his body. I twitch deliberately. He moans.

“Fuck yourself, Jonathan. Fuck yourself well. Jack off for me, cover me with your come.”

He begins rising and falling, slowly; increasing his speed as he becomes used to my width and length once again. His dildos, some of them, have to be fatter and longer than me. But there is nothing like a cock. His eyes are shut, his head thrown back, his cock fucking his fist as his ass fucks my cock. He is so warm inside, so very hot, clinging to me. I grab his buttocks, stop him half up my shaft, hold him still, raise my hips, lower, raise, lower, raise, no full strokes just that half over and over and over again, the *smack!* of my flesh against his an isolated sound in the room. I rotate my hips, circle my cock corkscrew fashion in and out and within him, he moans, moans again, louder.

Each breath is more ragged than the last as I let him take over again, watch the frenzy coming over his face, knowing my own matches his. He rises and falls on my cock wantonly, slamming his body down hard, ignoring whatever pain I may or may not feel though I feel none. He shudders, getting close.

“Jonathan, just a little, Jonathan, so very little, not much, not much at all. Will you give me a day, one day, just that, no more?”

My words rise, drift upward one by one by one with the up and down thrusting of his body, circle his ears, slide in, melt into his mind.

And he says “yes,” a frenzied consent in words I can barely hear.

Strands... infinite strands glowing and singing in the darkness. I select two strands, gather up the strands twined not long ago while Jonathon watched me, unaware it was me, weave them together, stronger now, and as the strands and darkness fade, I grunt, shout, begin spewing my own lust... love... into the heat of his bowels, cool-by-comparison semen hissing against the volcanic walls.

That spotlight I’d told him about tightens its focus. Just a little. Only a day.

The most delicious day I have ever had.

Jonathan, my Jonathan, shouts as well, inarticulate, pumping a stream of semen in long, long spurts onto my face, neck, chest, while I match him, exceed him. And then we stop.

JONATHAN

Two climaxes so close together. I haven’t done that since... I don’t think I ever have. I know it can’t be true but I feel his seed coating the walls of my ass, sliding down a cock that has indeed gone where none has gone bare before, well, just in a Berlin before, a cock still more than half hard.

As I am.

Impossible. I am not capable of this, never have been, not even when I was young and had all the proverbial young teen energy and recuperative powers.

I bring my panting under control, raise my head from where I’d rested it against the back of the couch, look him in the eyes, see only... satisfaction, that indefinable smugness of a man who knows with absolute certainty that he has just caused frenzied, mind-shattering pleasure in another man, all the while enjoying himself to the fullest. His hands are gentle on my shoulders,

softly, slowly, pulling me down into a kiss, his lips inviting, his tongue delving into my mouth as mine does to his.

I shudder, unconsciously swiveling my hips, feeling his length and girth so wonderfully deep inside me, so wonderfully filling.

Two times close together. Of course I'm tired. But I recall his words, wonder. I pull my head back, start to speak. A cliché gesture—two fingers on my lips—silences me. He asks where the bedroom is.

A courtesy only. I am certain he already knows. Reluctant to let him out of me, I start to pull up, to show him. He easily stops me, tells me to just tell him, as he shifts his weight so he is more upright on the couch, still thrust deep into me, still more than half hard. He reaches between us, his thumb on the underside of my cock, pressing, rotating, slick with sweat and come. I start to get harder.

He sits upright, tilts me back, impossibly begins to—does—stand, his cock still buried, holding all my dead weight easily. My mind wants me to cackle out loud about dead weight, undead weight.

Impossible, impossible. I am not being carried by him, my legs wrapped around his waist, my head towering over his. I am *not* feeling his cock get harder inside me, only partially drawn out by the angle of my body. I am *not* being carried down the hall, up the stairs, through the door, across the room. I am *not* being held while he kneels on the edge of the bed, the muscles of his arms in sharp relief, then kneel-walks until he can lower me gently, gently, gently onto the covers.

Damn, but I am.

My... my man, my... vampire? is surprisingly strong. Vampire-story strong. So not everything is a lie.

I drop my legs, spreading them wide, bent, my feet flat on the bed. I stare at him as he starts running his fingers across my chest, his head lowered, staring intently at the sticky mess on my stomach. He rotates his cock, now fully hard again, and I moan softly.

I cannot stop myself. “You didn’t succeed in making me see stars, you know.”

“Oh?”

I laugh. “Well, I guess I could count the strands. Brightly colored ribbons or something. Floating in the air?”

He does another of those going-still moments.

“I’ve never done that before,” he finally says, not looking at me.

My laughter, loud and far too attention-gathering or so my family has always said, startles him, causes him to twitch and then he calms. “You just screwed what little brains I have right out of me. Again? For the three-thousand-and-umpteenth time, and you’re claiming you’re a virgin?”

He still doesn’t look at me. “No, not that. I haven’t been a virgin in, oh...” He pauses, the shape of his lips starting the word “centuries,” and then he says the word aloud. It’s shocking, somehow, to *hear* it rather than think it. More real.

He turns inward. “About nine hundred thirty-six years, actually.”

My turn to stutter a “Wh-wh-what?” again.

His face tells me the memory is not a pleasant one. “I was born nine months after Duke William headed off for the Battle of Hastings.”

I do the math. He was born in 1067? He lost his virginity when he was *ten*? His eyes look down at me and tell me unequivocally not to ask.

“I’ve never woven the strands and had someone remember. But you have.”

He is far too solemn about what should be a “well, duh!” moment since I have already told him what I remembered.

He continues manipulating my flesh, tweaking my nipples, delicately running his fingers over the head of my cock, cupping my balls. I am hard again, not with the ache of drained balls but as fresh as if I had never climaxed at all.

“Are you a vampire? Some mutation I have never seen, felt?”

I am having the most glorious sex of my life and the man who is providing it wants to know if we are vampirically related! I can’t help

laughing. All I really want is for him to fuck me again, long and slow, but my absurd sense of humor, so-called humor, has surfaced. “Well, you see, I didn’t want to tell you, but we actually *are* related. My great-great-however-many grandmother on my father’s side was Vlad Tepes’ third cousin, twice removed. Pleased to meet you.”

He does not find my humor funny. But then, not many do.

His eyes harden; something feral passes through them, as a blood-stained white tiger lopez by, nearly invisible against the snow, against the grey clouds dipping down to the horizon, against the bare trunks of vast trees in twilight, too far to see clearly, yet you are certain of two things: tiger... and blood.

I focus on memories.

I remember: The strands... twice, first in Berlin, and just now, short strands of light against endless night, the deep dark between galaxies, woven by hands I could not see, into... something.

I remember: The ease with which he picked me up, carried me here, moving with a strength more than human. Inhuman? Is this not a fantasy, a role-playing game we are enacting for mutual pleasure?

I remember: My fear.

JEAN-LUC

He is afraid again. Good. Then he won’t see mine.

Human... merely human, not some vampire able to imitate human life.

I lean slightly back, move my arms beneath his legs, use my thighs to push myself up, forward, the crooks of my arms caught behind his knees, pushing, pushing, forcing the few inches which slid out when I carried him here, back in again. I lean forward, deliberately, slowly... very, very slowly... spreading his legs wide, folding them to his body, lowering my head until I nuzzle the hollow of his neck once again, my teeth resting on his moist flesh.

He flinches... again.

Good.

I kiss my way down his chest, tonguing the slight hair, my lips, tongue, teeth, worrying his right nipple, teasing it, taunting it into its own erection yet again. With my mouth barely lifted from his skin, my lips touching it like the lightest of summer breezes, I ask, “Do you want to live forever, Jonathan?”

“What? No preface of ‘C’mon, you sons a bitches?”

I nip him, not enough to draw blood, enough to mark him. I like to mark my territory this way. So much better and far less messy than pissing on him.

I pull nearly all the way out, the head of my cock barely contained by the muscles that guard his entrance. His body quivers with conflicting urges: the instinctive urge to squeeze and expel me, the emotional urge to relax, thrust forward and up, pulling me in. I decide for him, and thrust.

I trail my mouth across his chest, wetting him, suck his left nipple hard, matching it with several rapid, deep strokes. He grunts, tries to talk, fails, moistens his lips... visibly decides not to speak.

An excellent decision. For the moment.

I raise up slightly, my arms coming around his legs, palms flat on his chest so I can squeeze and release his pecs, squeeze and release, squeeze and release, while I am moving in and out in short, easy jabs.

“Make it a philosophical issue, Jonathan,” I whisper. “Pretend you don’t believe, pretend you aren’t afraid, pretend you’re just talking fantasy to a friend, a lover. Tell me, Jonathan, shall I weave the strands again and make you live forever?”

My fingers are long, strong, my right hand snakes around to catch his cock, my knuckles against his belly, my fingers curved around him, stroking and stroking and stroking while his precome lubricates our flesh. He whimpers, gasps a little, shoves his hips up to meet mine on an inward push. His eyes are closed.

“Weave... ahhhhhhhhhhh!” He gasps again, pants, recovers. It hits him. “Weave the strands *again*?”

JONATHAN

That wasn't just my imagination? Some odd quirk of my exceedingly odd mind?

What have you done to me? I scream inside my head. Voices of coldly intellectual disbelief and primal terror fight within me. Neither overwhelms my body's desire to climax again, to somehow, some way, provide him with the pleasure he has given me, *is* giving me. I only manage a faint, "Tell me," as he begins sliding into me, slow and deep, then out again oh so very slowly, and again and yet again.

His voice wraps around me, caresses me as his hands, his mouth, caress me.

"As I said, Jonathan, dear Jonathan, the strands are... DNA. Not literally so, just an image, the way I think, the way it works. Tell me, Jonathan, are you always so erect so fast, do you always come so often, so well, so close together?"

JEAN-LUC

I look at him, see the confusion, the fear, the unwilling acknowledgment that his body has changed, see the thought quickly suppressed, the one that is nearly always asked.

I kiss him, force his lips open, force him to accept my tongue, using my length, my thickness, to ram him into submission, into eagerly returning the kiss.

"Can't do it, Jonathan," I tell him, holding his face in both my hands, unable to turn while my spread knees keep him up, my hips steadily thrusting, locking his gaze with mine. "I can't change the way you are... no extra height, no new face, new build, new body... no extra length and thickness down there."

He licks his lips; lust flickers across his face as I rotate my hips, the head of my cock deliberately caressing his prostate. "Wh... what then?"

I don't answer. Release his face, use my hands on his nipples again, increase the speed of my hips. He gasps, gulping air, lets it out in a ragged,

shuddering sigh. I nearly fold him in half as I bring his buttocks up in the air, lift myself so I have even more force, shoving in deep and hard, kissing him nearly as hard as I am thrusting, one hand working his right nipple, twisting it, pulling it, the other stroking his slick cock. I am moving faster now than I have yet moved tonight, his hips move with me, meeting me, his hands grab my shoulders, my waist, he moans into my mouth and with a scream I swallow he erupts again, coating us both.

I have not come. Not yet.

I go on, but slow once again, slow and steady. His head thrashes from side to side in post-come release, trying to get enough oxygen to satisfy his needs. He begs me to stop, to give him a chance.

I go on.

I raise myself, palms flat beside him now, his knees hooked behind my arms. I look between us at his flaccid cock, at what is for him an incredible amount of semen smeared on his belly, his chest, on mine. His cock twitches. I shift my gaze to his eyes.

“Biology lesson, Jonathan. I don’t know what this is. Don’t really care. A virus? Mystical Atlantean nanos? Whatever it is, we look as we were before the change. We just function differently. Age more slowly. Live longer. Our motto should be ‘live long and prosper.’ Because we do both. I was nineteen, twenty when I was changed. I look... what?... thirties now? Early forties?”

I bend, kiss him lingeringly, not interrupting the steady action of my hips. He is erect again.

JONATHAN

“You have a *disease*?” I fasten on that one possibility, and gift him with a shaky laugh, shaky because the humor is shaky, shaky because of what his cock is doing to me. Again. “Christ, just file suit under the Americans with Disabilities Act and get yourself protected.”

For an instant, behind his eyes the ghosting silver-white tiger lifts its muzzle, dripping blood and gore, fangs bared in a silent snarl, and then it is gone.

He kisses me again and my thoughts dissolve in jangling disarray.

My body knows what it wants—him—again and again and again. I appear likely to get my body's wish.

My mind, more importantly, my heart are... uncertain. And more than a little afraid.

JEAN-LUC

I tell him to begin stroking himself. He does.

“Let me weave the strands, Jonathan. Some of us can; you don't have to drink our blood to make the change. Let me do it, love.”

His eyes widen. I said it earlier, but he seems to be hearing it truly for the first time.

“Come with me, Jonathan. I'll weave the strands, give you more than just testicles that refill with semen almost as soon as you empty them. I can show you things you've never dreamed of, show you...”

He's laughing.

Hard.

JONATHAN

I can't help myself. I have seen how he reacts to laughter, and yet... I have this image in my mind of Jean-Luc holding my hand, leading me up a great curving staircase, telling me of all the glorious adventures we will have in India.

“Oh, God, J... J... Jean-Luc, I'm sorry. But... I just... oh, God, there's this picture in my head of a bloodsucking Auntie Mame, and little Patrick and the staircase, and...”

I dissolve in laughter, closing my eyes.

JEAN-LUC

I do not move. He is still impaled, but I stop moving. He finally becomes aware, stops laughing, wipes his eyes with the non-sticky hand, looks again at me. And becomes still, too.

Not the stillness of a pause while fucking.

Not the stillness of taking a moment to think something over.

The stillness of a mouse sensing a hunting hawk overhead, saying tiny mouse prayers in hopes of being unseen.

JONATHAN

Dear God in heaven.

His eyes.

I shut my eyes against the blaze that tries to sear my retinas. A brilliant molten gold, like looking at the sun without protection.

That... *flashbulb*... reflecting off his eyes that first night. It never existed. It was this I saw.

Dear God in heaven. It's true.

He is... what he says he is. I can't even bring myself to think the word.

So I become more stupid still. Say the thing that I am for some reason so hung up on.

"But you have no fangs."

JEAN-LUC

Sub-zero temperatures for cryogenic preservation are not nearly as cold as my voice. The darkness between the stars is not nearly as cold as my voice.

"Because I do not drink blood. As I have told you before. And will not again."

I sigh, and my eyes become less bright. I would prefer to fuck, rather than give a lesson in mid-fuck, but needs must...

"We starve, Jonathan, if all we eat is mortal food. Because whatever gives us this power cannot survive without infusions of humanity, of some of the life you mortals have as you waste it away and steadily slide down to death. To stay the same, to stay immortal or nearly so, we need that life, and we get it from you because we can't get it from each other. *Take* it from you, if you won't give it willingly."

Shall I tell him about Joshua? About the strands being cut, every slash a slice of pain, and no one can figure out his agony? I will owe Felix for that. But no, too much like bribery. See how I am ensuring your safety? And I will definitely never tell him... however long our never might be... of the unfortunate financial and other reverses the Brethren are beginning to suffer. He might remember Shylock. And if ever asked, I shall be as pure and innocent as the driven slush.

I move my hips again. An inch, no more. Out. Then in. Repeat. Repeat.

“Are you willing, Jonathan? Will you feed me until I am full? Until you are gone? Or shall I feed enough, just enough, to weave and make a supernova of your spotlight? A spotlight like my own?”

Two inches... three. Just slightly faster. My eyes hold his. I move forward, rest my weight again on my elbows, caress his chest, his shoulders, his neck, with my hands.

JONATHAN

This... is real.

Dear God.

JEAN-LUC

He knows.

He finally believes.

Farther out. Farther in. Faster.

He moistens his lips, asks hurriedly, his words tumbling and staggering over themselves as I am sure he has never before done, what happens if he says yes... yes to anything... yes to everything. Or no.

I tell him.

Tell him the strands once woven cannot be unwoven.

Kiss him.

Tell him we can be together, feed together, forever and a day... or until one grows tired of the other.

Kiss him again. Longer, harder, my hips faster, changing the angle, rubbing his gland.

Tell him I love him. Tell him he must choose.

JONATHAN

No. Not now. I can't. It's too soon, too quick, I can't, I can't.

I tell him.

Don't tell him my fear. Don't tell him I don't want others. Don't tell him, as incredibly stupid as it is, that in this moment I'd rather die than share... for fear he will agree.

Tell him... ask him, beg him, to give me a chance to think, to decide.

Tell him to stop... in a voice whose tone leaves no doubt that is the last thing I wish.

Ohgodohgod, he's pulling all the way out, all the way in. My hand moves faster on my cock, sloppily wet with body-lube and semen and sweat and fear and lust and love. His thick, hairy belly comes down, my knuckles rubbing it as my hand moves back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

JEAN-LUC

I am losing control. Not slowly. Exponentially fast.

I will *not* lose control.

"Choose, Jonathan."

In the silence the music flows around us; I have no idea how many times the CD has played.

"I can't."

My hips are moving with more speed, more power than I have used tonight. His body seems to swell with life as he responds, beginning to pant, beginning to glow as the strands glow, waiting to be woven, waiting to be unwoven.

I make my voice calm and cold, the near-frenzied thrusting of my body, the quivering in my muscles, the raggedness of my own breathing, giving the lie to the cold and calm of my words.

“Choose. Or I’ll choose for you.”

JONATHAN

I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe, Christ, I can’t breathe! My fist is a blur as I stroke myself, feel myself surging toward an end. My arms are shaking. My face and chest and soon all of me tingles as I start to hyperventilate. I am unable to look away from his face, unable to close my eyes. My mind slips, whirls, my voice is disconnected from the reality of what builds in me. “You said... You said...”

JEAN-LUC

Said what? I ask, but only inside my head.

That I will not feed, cannot feed, without consent?

That I will not weave, cannot weave, without consent?

I lied.

It is what predators do. I became a predator the night of my second rape, in 1077. Nine hundred thirty-six years have perfected my skills.

Choices, Jonathan, choices.

My hips are moving fast, fucking you hard and deep, centuries of experience used for my benefit, and now yours. You moved your legs up over my shoulders, but now they are tired, trembling. You want to refuse now, scream *no!*, but your body knows what it wants, knows what it needs. Does your soul?

You move with me, adapting to the new rhythm, more powerful still, your thrusts back at me as hard as the ones you receive. You clench as I pull out, open wide to let me back in, into your body, into your soul, shivering in ecstasy when I do.

Choices, Jonathan, choices.

But I have no choice. I cannot let you just walk away, knowing what you know, now that you believe. I cannot risk myself, risk all of us, out of love, or even lust.

I love you, Jonathan, as I have never loved in all these years. I've found you, when I never expected to find anyone. I want to make you my own. I want to not live alone. But I will not, cannot, sacrifice myself for love.

So I have no choice. Or rather, a single choice. My choice, which is all the choice there has ever really been.

To feed while I unweave the strands, draining off a second from the end of your life, a minute, then hours, days, weeks, years, your ending approaching the now at Bugatti Super Sport speeds.

Or feed and weave the strands until you become as I—and risk your hate where now you love, or say you love.

A choice to make your soul scream—in ecstasy beyond your imagining, or in devouring agony as you die. Because if you choose wrongly, I won't let you go gently into that far from good night. I'll let you go, but I won't let you go easily if you choose to abandon me and all we might have, all we might be.

“Choose, Jonathan.”

Our lips touch yet again, slick, wet, trembling. You hear the words I will not say aloud again. *Or I will choose.*

Our lips part, mine moving in gentle kisses, soft counterpoint to the savagery of my cock ramming inside you, kiss your eyes, your cheeks, your ears, nuzzling your sweat-dampened hair, gliding down and down and down until I am, this last time, perhaps only tonight, perhaps forever, touching the hollow of your neck, feeling your erratic pulse, feeling the way your flesh pulls away from me while your hips urge me on. “Choose, Jonathan,” I murmur again, barely lifting my mouth from your warm skin.

Your “no” is long and slow and faint, almost unheard above the sounds our bodies make. A choice? A refusal to choose? Or merely lust sensing a climax too soon?

The song is back. Coincidence? Omen? It falls on us, enfolds all we have been and done since that first night, that first look. We hear, you and I, the approaching last four lines, changing the pronouns in our heads before the words arrive. You whimper, and moan and cry out. You thrust your hips

up, your hands grasp my ass, pulling me deep, your cry one of... despair, sorrow, rapture? We pause, locked in place, me buried deep, so very deep in you, our chests heaving, lungs aching.

JONATHAN

Songs surround us. That song he sang just now. That was *my* song, those were *my* words. I should have sung them to him, with him, in heart's harmonies.

He has every nerve ending in my body, every crack and crevice of my mind tingling, poised on a precipice, ready to tip and fall, shattering into a trillion, trillion shards scattered among the stars.

And *that* song.

I am so very afraid.

We are a perfect storm here and now, no ship to suck down, no crew to drown, just the two of us, to survive... or not.

I... let go of that last little bit.

I lift his head away and up, look at the beloved hills and dales and craggy mountains of his face, kiss him. "Since the invention of the kiss, there have only been five kisses that were rated the most passionate, the most pure." This kiss leaves those five, and the Dread Pirate Roberts, far behind in the dust.

I choose.

JEAN-LUC

You lift my head away from your neck with both hands, fingers buried in my hair, thumbs caressing. Your sweaty legs slide off my shoulders, down until your knees are caught once more in the crooks of my arms, holding you wide and open. Tears fill your eyes. They begin to run steadily from the corners, falling silently onto the nearly flattened pillow.

You have let go. At last.

You kiss me with a hunger and a passion beyond anything tonight, and when you release me, release my mouth, you pull my head down, and whisper your choice in my ear.

I sigh.

So be it.

We are stilled no longer. We move in absolute synchronicity, the first hammer stroke making you gasp and cry out, the next and the next and all the rest are met with a ragged chant in a raw voice, of “do it do it do it!” Your cock leaks, a steady stream of precome that flies to your belly, your chest, your arms, as your body quivers with an urgent need for one more release.

Your choice, my love, your choice.

I begin to weave and as I do, I hear the voice of your soul, far and wee as the poet said, screaming.

Some
enchanted
evening.

THE END

Author Bio

In the “real world” I write for a living, in a non-fiction “genre,” in which what we write is all too often considered fiction. That same profession would not appreciate this story, thus a pen name that has a meaning for me. The dedication above should explain a lot about me. And having finished this, I am wondering whether or not I will finish the gay Regency novel I started so long ago, or that tale of starships and unicorns, or the one with a hopefully different (enough) take on elves, and changelings, and the magic of sex and death. We, or I at least, will see.

As I am not a social media person, you can reach me by email, if you have the good kind of “wow!” to share... or even other words.

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