



That  
Night  
in  
Cherry  
Grove

J.J. Cassidy

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## THAT NIGHT IN CHERRY GROVE

**By J.J. Cassidy**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may 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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is 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.

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# THAT NIGHT IN CHERRY GROVE

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## Photo Description

A beach at night, with waves showing white in the darkness. On a large rock, two rather muscular men cling to one another, both clad only in rolled-up jeans. One is very dark, with a shaved head and a close-trimmed beard, the other is lighter skinned but perhaps Latino, short-haired, with a neat stubble on his jaw.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*The people surrounding him were all saying how lucky he was, but he barely paid attention to them. He hadn't felt that powerless in a long, long while. "He saved my life," he wanted to say. But he knew nobody would understand.*

I love a good dark, angsty story, as long as there's a hopeful ending. I want either fully consensual or dubcon of the "two good people caught in a shitty situation" kind (no rape/non-con please), and I love any and all kind of power exchange. Other than that, go wherever you want with this.

*Sincerely,*

*Arianne*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary, action/adventure

**Tags:** law enforcement, PTSD, in the closet, virgin, interracial, public activity, outdoor sex, NYC, mild power play

**Content Warning:** violence

**Word Count:** 21,687

# **THAT NIGHT IN CHERRY GROVE**

**By J.J. Cassidy**

## Chapter One

Getting laid during Pride Week in New York City should have been easy. And yet, all Nero had managed to get was a sloppy, drunken blowjob at the start of the night. Hindsight was a bitch—he probably should've taken Freddy up on the invitation to Fire Island for the weekend instead of staying home.

For tonight, though—Nero checked his phone. If he left the club right now and got a cab, he could catch the one thirty AM ferry and be home in his own bed by two thirty, three at the latest.

He slid through the bumping, humping crowd on the edge of the dance floor, heading for the restrooms. Better to brave the chaos here than get a summons for public urination, thanks. He made it in and out with a minimum of craziness and then threaded his way back along the hallway to the main bar. He didn't get much warning—a closer press of a male body, a whiff of citrus cologne over sweat—and somebody pinned him up against the wall, pressing their hard-on into his ass and using their chest to try to hold him still.

As if. Nero ducked and shoved, elbows, feet, and shoulders making room for him to switch places, and jacked the surprised guy's wrist up as high as possible between his shoulder blades. Then he took a look. "Oh—it's you."

Tallish, Very Dark, and Sort of Handsome had been eye-fucking Nero all night, and two hours—an hour—ago Nero would have happily gone a round or two. Now he was just pissed. He kicked the asshole's feet apart, digging his free hand in above a hipbone covered in muscle underneath the khakis. Nice ass, hard and round, and nicer thighs, thick and curved. Nero's dick approved, and he rolled his hips.

The guy made a noise, a protesting grunt, and the dark eye Nero could see practically shot fire. Just for that, Nero did it again, and the guy bucked, pushing with his free hand to lever himself off the wall. "No," the guy said, and Nero let him go. Lesson number one.

Once they were facing one another, Nero stepped right up in the guy's space, taking in the clenched clean-shaven jaw and the vein jumping around on the shaved dark head. "If you asked nice," Nero told him, "you could've fucked me blind. Your loss. If I see you following me out of here, I will call nine-one-one."



Blood fizzing, riding the edge of the shakes, Nero stalked off on trembling legs, feeling like the floor had turned to rubber under his feet. Jesus—he needed air.

Outside, he shook his head, the sounds of outdoor revelry muffled after hours in the club. God—this was why he never did this kind of thing. That, and he was terrified of having a panic attack in public. It hadn't happened, thank you, Jesus, and he'd kind of narrowed down the things he had to avoid. Guns, for instance. He'd been all right at work, after, but the second he went to the firing range to requalify, he'd had a major case of the sweating heebie-jeebies and that was that. Shaking off the memory, he automatically headed east, toward Broadway, where it would be far easier to catch a cab. The crosstown block was way quieter, and he took a deep breath as his heart rate lowered.

He was five eleven, not exactly short, and in better physical shape now after being out for six months on disability—some serious irony going on there—so why the fuck did that guy figure Nero was just going to give it up like that?

“Hey—”

The single syllable had Nero reaching for the gun he didn't carry anymore—oh look, more irony. He whirled, and the guy from the club stopped and put his hands up, his pale palms catching the light.

“Don't call the cops. I didn't mean it to come off like that, back inside.” His voice was not what Nero expected—more tenor than bass, and definitely not from around here. California, maybe, but way more Santa Monica than Compton.

“Go on,” Nero said, curious, and now he took a better look. Snug khakis, a white ribbed tank that showed off a lot of chocolate skin, no belt, leather shoes. Bulky, but still trim. Nice.

“I don't—” Broad shoulders rolled in a shrug. “—I don't do this much.”

Nero checked the street—dead as suburbia, everything closed and quiet—and moved in closer. “Do what?” he asked, thinking, what the fuck. Another step, close enough to run his knuckles along the half-hard cock under those khakis. That earned him a shudder and an indrawn breath. Nero took advantage and laid his hand on the white tank covering the other guy's chest, guiding him back into a deep recessed doorway. A nice dark recessed doorway that didn't smell like piss. Score.

“Spread 'em,” he said, “so I can—yeah, like that.” He palmed a pair of tense balls, high and round, massaging them through the fabric. “Put your

hands behind your head.” The dark made it impossible to read the guy’s face all that well, but after a second he did it, laced his fingers behind his neck. Nero leaned in so he could nuzzle along a bare tricep, getting a better grip on those balls at the same time. He liked the cologne or whatever it was, liked how it went with the guy’s natural scent. Nosing his way across the wide chest, Nero bent his head and scraped his teeth over a pointed nipple, tasting the faint trace of fabric softener.

The guy sucked in a surprised-sounding breath. Nero got the same result on the other side, plus a needy little sound that sent a rush of blood south. He rubbed his tingling balls on the guy’s hard thigh while he listened to the rapid breathing next to his ear, and put two and two together to get seven. Or eight. He spread his fingers out, measuring the cock flexing under his hand. Eight, for sure.

He fished two condoms out of his front pocket with his free hand and held them up, still not sure if he was reading the guy’s expression right. It looked a little like somebody realizing that, yes, the rollercoaster was going down the big-ass drop and they were going with it. “One for you, one for me,” Nero explained. “Plain, no lube.”

The guy frowned. “I’m—I get tested. I—”

“No.” Shaking his head, Nero got busy opening those khakis. “That’s not really negotiable.” With the zipper out of the way, Nero slipped his hand through the fly of the boxers underneath and rubbed his thumb along a damp shaft.

“Oh Jesus.” The guy curled his hips forward, the cock in Nero’s hand stiffening and bumping his palm. Nero jacked him once, a good hard tug, and then let go to open a condom. The guy shoved the boxers down, snatched the condom out of Nero’s hand and rolled it on, his bared teeth very visible against his dark skin.

Taking a deep breath, Nero dropped to a crouch, pressing his face alongside the guy’s bobbing cock and licking the strip of bare skin just below the latex. From there, he sucked his way up, one hand curling around and steadying things until he reached the mushroom head and swallowed it.

Nero could get off just on the low sounds the guy made—not quite whimpers, not quite whines, but oh, Christ, needy, with a hefty dose of desperation on top. He tried to set a rhythm, using his hands on the guy’s hips, but that wasn’t happening. How long had it been since this guy had gotten off?

Nero gave up on drawing this out and just sucked—took that fat head as deep as he could, closing his eyes and breathing through his nose. The guy came a second later, hips bucking, cock jerking, the hands twisting in the shoulders of Nero's shirt accompanied by incoherent curses.

Nero pulled off the moment the guy let go, up and wiping his mouth before making short work of fumbling his own pants open. Getting the condom on was dicey—he was that close—but he managed it. Barely. With no warning—this guy had to work on his etiquette, seriously—the guy squatted and tried to take all of Nero in one try. Not that Nero was huge or anything. He was just thick, with a wide head, and that could be tricky for a beginner to manage.

The awkwardness of it, the press of lips and tongue and the hungry groan as Nero shoved in to the root, hot breath steaming his briefs—it was all good. The guy managed one convulsive suck before Nero went over the edge, his vision narrowing to nothing, body numb except for the exquisite pressure high up on his shaft and the rapid pulse deep in his ass as he filled the condom, toes curling inside his shoes. Whatever the guy lacked in technique, he more than made up for it in enthusiasm.

Nero eased the guy away, catching the condom before it slid off. Too late to wish he'd brought wipes; he tucked the used condom into a cocktail napkin he'd stashed earlier, slipping it into a back pocket for disposal later. He was focused on tucking everything away and zipping up, and obviously missed *something*—when he leaned forward to offer a good-bye kiss, the guy turned his head away, jaw clenched.

“Right,” Nero said, a little disappointed. Fuck—a lot disappointed. He nodded. “Get home safe, asshole.”

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Nero got a cab to the ferry terminal and then had to wait for the two o'clock boat. He bought a bottle of water, checking out the rather mixed crowd. Not so many tourists this time of night, but a fair share of people coming home from work or from after-work fun and games. A few wore rainbow T-shirts. Nobody he knew; then again, he hadn't really been out when he'd been a cop, and he'd never socialized—okay, had sex—with anyone on Staten Island. The other four boroughs, yes, and out on Fire Island when he visited Freddy, but no place close to home.

He wasn't like Freddy, who stayed friends with his exes. Hell, that's how they'd met—Nero hooked up with Ravi, who'd hooked up with Freddy a couple of summers earlier, and Ravi brought Nero out to Fire Island.

God—Ravi. Gorgeous dark skin, big doe eyes. Nero had a thing for dark-skinned men, so what? Like the guy from the club. God help him—he had the worst luck. He always hooked up with men who were great fucks but assholes in every other way. It was his superpower. The one exception was Freddy—who had his own issues. Infallible gaydar and a great friend, and completely committed to remaining commitment-free for life. Oh, and he never slept with anyone over thirty, which now left Nero out.

Over by the rest rooms, he thought he saw a familiar face. Hard to tell with the cell phone stuck to one ear, but he'd swear it was Justin, one of the kids he coached at the gym. Justin was with a slender fluttery person who was probably male despite the mass of long blond hair, given the lean muscles on display and the pierced nipples catching the light through the armholes of the loose tank.

Interesting. Nero edged out of Justin's line of sight and uncapped his water. Last winter he'd caught Justin making out with another boy in the locker room. Not a huge deal, in his opinion, but Justin had a meltdown—Nero would tell his grandmother, Nero would ruin his life, Justin wasn't *really* queer, he was just—

Nero had cut off the kid's protests, annoyed by the whining denials. Sure, Nero was hardly the poster boy for being out and proud, but he'd never lied—he just kept his mouth shut, figuring it was nobody's business what he liked when it came to sex. "I don't care," he'd told Justin and the other kid, David. "Fuck who you want, just make sure they're not over eighteen until you are, and use condoms—got it?"

The boarding doors opened then, and the crowd in the terminal surged forward like a single entity. Nero angled through the mass of people, trying to get one last look at the maybe-Justin. The kid turned, heading the opposite way—it was him, Nero was positive. The blond with Justin was talking a mile a minute, and Nero realized they weren't getting on the ferry, they were staying in the terminal. With a shrug, Nero joined the rest of the passengers and walked toward the waiting orange boat. Not his problem if the kid stayed out all night.

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## Chapter Two

Nero woke up horny and restless around nine AM, replaying last night's weird interlude with the guy from the club. Jesus—he hadn't even gotten a name, and that was so not like him. What the fuck had he been thinking? The odd mood stuck with him the rest of the day, and then he went through Monday distracted and annoyed at himself.

All of which sort of explained why, when he noticed the car in the parking lot at seven AM on Tuesday morning, he immediately reached for the gun he didn't carry anymore. At this point, the irony was annoying instead of whatever it was irony was supposed to make you feel.

Aside from the gym, nothing in this strip of stores opened until nine. Nero was here to open the gym, and the other staff wouldn't be here until eight, so—no cars, other than his. The driver's side door opened, and Nero tensed. Impossible not to, not after—

“Señor Jimenez?” The driver was short, female, and at least twice Nero's age. He breathed out, and his fingers stopped twitching. She stepped away from the car, and something about her struck him as familiar.

“*Buen' día. Busco mi nieto,*” she said. “Justin Avila—*de su clase?*”

Nero blinked. Something about her grandson—oh shit. “*Lo siento, señora. You're Justin's grandmother?*”

She frowned at him. “You no speak Spanish?” she asked, clearly skeptical.

He shrugged and shook his head. This was not the time for a discussion on why his Spanish language skills sucked so badly. “He was in class on Thursday. Um—” What the fuck was that in Spanish? “*Jueves. Si?*”

“*Si. Jueves. He—él no llegó a casa.*”

The kid never came home after class. Four days ago. Shit. “Did you call the police? *Llamó usted la policía?*” That phrase he knew.

“*La policía? Ay, no! Tenío muchas problemas las policía en el año pasado*—he has trouble. Last year.” She was practically wringing her hands. Oh yeah—Nero could just hear that conversation. Teenage Latino boy with a history of problems disappears for a few days? Yeah, like the police would give a shit.

“Okay,” he told her. “I’ll ask the other boys—um, *voy a preguntar los otros muchachos*—if they saw him leave. If I find out anything—how can I get in touch with you? *Su número de teléfono?*” He pulled out his cell phone and entered the number she gave him. “Have you tried calling his cell phone?” He blanked, and then said, “*Llamó su celular?*”

Justin’s *abuela* let fly with at least thirty seconds of angry Spanish, and all Nero caught was that Justin did not have a cell phone. Which wasn’t true, because—Christ, he’d totally forgot about seeing Justin in the ferry terminal on Sunday morning. The kid had a cell phone then, and he’d seen Justin texting before and after class. And it was an expensive phone, too, slim and shiny and much newer than Nero’s.

The hair on the back of his neck prickled as he thought of one explanation for that. This neighborhood was not obviously gang turf, but that didn’t mean shit. If Justin was working for somebody... It might explain the two AM trip into Manhattan, it might not. Either way—did he want to try explaining that to Justin’s very pissed-off *abuela*? The same woman Justin was terrified of?

“*Lo siento, señora,*” Nero said when she paused for breath. “*Me falta.* It must’ve been another boy I was thinking of.” He smiled. “I’ll call you if I hear anything.”

Five minutes—fuck, five seconds—after Nero got inside, the guilt set in. The kid was a minor, and Nero was a mandated reporter. He should have said something about seeing Justin in Manhattan. Then again, he didn’t want to make more trouble for Justin—it was obvious Grandma had no clue Justin was gay, and Nero had no intention of being the instrument of the kid’s outing. Uncloseting. Whatever.

From there, Nero’s morning went completely to shit. He usually enjoyed coming in early on Tuesdays and Thursdays, too. The gym offered two classes for kids on those days; one from nine till eleven, and another, for older kids, from one to three in the afternoon. A little boxing, some stretching, basic lessons in how to use free weights, a little tai chi—the rates were reasonable, and it got kids away from the TV. Nero liked running it, mainly because most of the kids were pretty cool and didn’t piss him off the way some of the adult clients did.

Try as he might, he couldn’t shake the idea that Justin was in trouble, more trouble than just a sixteen-year-old deciding to avoid going home for the weekend. If it wasn’t for seeing him in the ferry terminal, Nero would figure

he'd hooked up with somebody after class last Thursday and... what? Had a sleepover?

By one PM, Nero had decided to question David and Sean, a couple of the boys Justin hung out with, and depending on what he found out, he'd call Señora Avila and give her an update. Or not.

First he cornered David—figuratively—and asked if he'd seen Justin since last Thursday. The way the kid blushed, you'd think Nero was asking something completely inappropriate.

“He... um... you know he's...” David's voice broke, and he looked around, apparently making sure no one was listening. “You *know*.” He made a frantic gesture, and Nero remembered that David was the kid Justin had been groping that day. Nero nodded, and David heaved a huge sigh. “Okay, so he had a chance to go out to Fire Island? For the weekend?”

Why was that a question? “You're saying he's on Fire Island? Since Thursday?”

“No. I mean, he was supposed to go out there this weekend. I don't know when he left.” David swallowed, his pointy Adam's apple bobbing. “Don't—Sean doesn't know. About—” Another frantic gesture—Okay, Nero got it.

“Don't worry—that's all I needed to know.” Nero smiled and nodded, and David looked like he was going to faint with relief.

Now what?

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Three

Nero walked the last couple of yards along the boardwalk to Freddy's house, wondering what the fuck he was doing. Getting somebody to cover his classes at the gym wasn't a big deal; the summer was slow, and everybody could use some extra money. He just needed to know for sure if Justin had come out to Fire Island or if that was all bullshit. The bonus was getting to spend a long weekend with Freddy and whoever was playing houseboy for the summer.

Nobody who'd been invited here ever used the front door that faced the boardwalk, so Nero let himself in the side gate to the back deck. "Yo, Freddy? You here, man?"

"Nero?" The lithe ginger-haired Adonis who popped upright in the deck chair was *not* Freddy. "He's inside. Remember me? Derek—from last summer?" he added when Nero just stared.

"Yeah." Nero grinned, bemused. "I remember. You, uh—"

Derek smirked, his blue eyes darkening a little. "I'm the new record—two summers in a row." The smirk turned into a smile. "Freddy's a little freaked, you know?"

"Freddy's a little—Nero." Freddy Jones came out onto the deck and stopped short, and it was not Nero's imagination that he paled under his tan. "I didn't..." His face, which was a bit long and dominated by a beak of a nose, rearranged into a smile. "I thought you were coming out in August."

Nero raised his eyebrows at Freddy—what the fuck? Even Derek was frowning. Nero shrugged. "I was, but something came up—it's okay, right?"

Freddy waved a hand, and this time his voice was closer to normal. "Sweetie, you are always welcome, and you know it."

"Do I get to share a room with Derek?" Nero asked, widening his eyes. He thought Derek snorted.

"No," Freddy drawled. "You do not."

"You mean... Derek's with you? How is this possible?"

Freddy shot him an evil look, and Nero sighed with as much drama as he could manage, shaking his head. "Freddy, Freddy, Freddy—see what happens when you celebrate being thirty-nine one too many times? How many is it—?"



“Twelve,” Derek said helpfully.

“Eleven,” Freddy growled. “My birthday isn’t until the end of July.” His black eyes narrowed to slits. “And that has nothing to do with—”

The doorway to inside darkened, and someone stepped out onto the deck, right behind Freddy. Nero wasn’t sure who was more appalled—him or the guy from the club. Because that’s who it was, even though he’d grown a short, neat stubble to frame the mouth Nero hadn’t gotten to taste.

And it wasn’t Nero’s imagination this time, either—Freddy was doing an excellent imitation of a deer in front of an eighteen-wheeler, and the guy from the club had gone stone-faced.

Nero dropped his duffle onto the deck and stuck out his hand, trying to smile rather than bare his teeth. “Nero Jimenez. I didn’t catch your name.”

“RJ Martineaux.” The guy wrapped strong fingers around Nero’s hand, but didn’t turn it into a wrestling match. “I could say the same.” The goatee-thing he had going suited him. Nero’s own short stubble was for hot weather only, when he couldn’t stand shaving.

Freddy’s eyebrows were halfway to his hairline. “You know each other?”

“Not really,” Nero and RJ said at the same time.

“And who’s this?” Another guy stepped out onto the deck, sliding a pair of expensive sunglasses down over his eyes. Light-blue polo shirt, pressed khakis, model-skinny, and too pale and pretty for Nero’s taste. He stood next to RJ and offered Nero a surprisingly firm handshake. “Terrance Keith.”

“Nero Jimenez.”

Terrance leaned possessively into RJ while keeping his sunglasses trained on Nero, who tried not to frown. Seriously—these two were together? On what planet? Freddy, meanwhile, looked like a man watching toddlers play with chainsaws. What the fuck?

“Nice to meet you,” Nero said, more than a little pissed and not sure why. He picked up his duffle and slung the strap over his shoulder. “Gonna go get changed and take a swim.” He shouldered past RJ and Terrance and went inside. He’d talk to Freddy later—how the hell did these two know Freddy, whose only use for a closet was clothing storage?

The house wasn’t huge, but it did have four bedrooms and three baths. The two upstairs bedrooms were small, with a pair of single beds each and a shared

bath. Freddy had the largest downstairs bedroom and a private bathroom, while the other ground-floor bedroom had two full beds and a bathroom across the hall. No way was Nero sharing a room with Pretty Boy and Captain Closet, so he headed upstairs.

He picked the right-hand room because it faced east and stayed cooler in the afternoon, and dropped his duffle on the bed closest to the door. He shrugged out of his T-shirt at the same time he toed off his sneakers, and dropped his shorts and boxers together, stepping free and pushing them to the side. His bathing suit was somewhere in there—he was bent over, rummaging in his duffle when he heard a noise in the doorway.

Under other circumstances, Nero might be flattered by the way RJ was staring at his ass. And maybe a little turned on. He stood up but kept his back to the door. “Yeah?”

“This isn’t what it looks like,” RJ said, after a pause.

Nero found a pair of swim trunks and decided that if Mister Martineaux wanted to stare, he would put on a show. “How do you know Freddy?” he asked as he turned around. He actually heard RJ inhale. Nero pulled the Speedo up, and RJ followed the brown bit of Lycra with his eyes.

Long black lashes with a decided curl to them outlined brown eyes several shades lighter than his skin when RJ looked up. He licked his lower lip and blinked. “I don’t really know him. Terry met him in LA last year. He said Terry could stay here if he ever came out, so...”

“Interesting choice of words,” Nero said, slipping his feet into a pair of flip-flops.

“What?” RJ frowned.

“*If he came out,*” Nero repeated, and shook his head when RJ squinted at him, obviously confused.

“What? He lives in California—” His expression cleared, brown eyes widening. “Oh—you thought I meant—”

Nero waited for RJ to finish that sentence, and when he didn’t, Nero sighed and picked up his Ray-Bans. “Never mind. Later.” He stalked out of the bedroom, RJ stepping out of his way at the last second. If Terrance was gay—never mind out—Nero would eat his favorite Yankees cap.

Reuben was going to fuck this up. Oh, wait—too late. Of all the men to turn up here, why did he have to be one of the only two men in the world Reuben had ever done more than fantasize about? And on top of that, Nero Jimenez was *sharp*—he noticed shit.

They'd all counted on nobody in New York knowing Reuben and Terry, and especially nobody on Fire Island. The delicious irony of it all was that the two of them were here not so much because they'd been after Chickie Casero for the better part of six months, but because they were straight. Well, Terry was. Reuben still had his back up against the closet door, so to speak, although nobody knew that and never would. Except that one guy in college and Nero, and Reuben wasn't going there.

He walked down the boardwalk, looking for the bistro where he was supposed to meet Terry for lunch, and found his partner seething on an outdoor patio. "Hey," he said, leaning down to air-kiss Terry's cheek.

"Hey," Terry said back, and the wiry shoulder under Reuben's hand was so stiff it was vibrating. "I've been waiting here *forever*." He was trying for bitchy queen—why, Reuben had no idea—and pulling it off just fine. Terry took shit all the time for being the pretty boy on their team, good-looking and skinny enough to be a model for one of those outdoorsy clothing catalogs for people who never went outdoors. The polo shirt and pressed khakis were totally wrong, but Terry refused to walk around half-naked. Or even partially naked. Terry laid his cell phone on the table, right next to Reuben's elbow. "I ordered already."

"Okay." Reuben opened the menu, and a waiter magically appeared. Black Lycra bike shorts and a loose tie-dyed tank showed off everything he had to offer—including multiple piercings and the fact that he wasn't circumcised. Not that Reuben noticed. He glanced over at Terry, who was staring holes in the back wall of the patio area.

"What can I get for you?" the waiter asked, tilting his head so his highlighted brown hair flopped over one blue eye. "Or do you need a moment?"

"Bison burger, medium rare, and sweet potato fries," Reuben told him. "Unsweetened iced tea." He watched the waiter glide away, idly comparing the twink to Nero. No. That was over, a one-time deal, and he—

"Do you need to stare?" Terry hissed at him, sounding jealous if you didn't look too closely.

“Yeah, I do.” Reuben sat back in his chair, playing his part. “You got a problem with that?”

“I just think if you’re supposed to be here with me, you shouldn’t be flirting with the help. That’s all.” Terry sniffed and took a drink of something that looked a hell of a lot like a Cosmo. At eleven thirty in the morning.

“Why you getting yourself all worked up like that, boo? You gonna give yourself high blood pressure or somethin’ if you ain’t careful.” Reuben sprawled a little more, stretching his legs out under the tiny table. He had absolutely no problem pretending to be Terry’s piece of ass from the wrong side of town—his walk on the dark side, if you wanted to be crude about it. They’d been doing okay so far, but Nero Jimenez could ruin everything.

His iced tea arrived, along with another drink for Terry, and Reuben waited until the waiter left to pick up Terry’s cell phone and open Messages. One text.

*Meet tomorrow at three. Maybe go out on the boat.*

Reuben deleted it, sucking his teeth. “You gotta stop checkin’ out all these white boys on Grindr—I know they ain’t your thing.” He skimmed the phone across the table and picked up his iced tea. Tomorrow? What the hell? Nothing was supposed to happen until Sunday afternoon.

“You don’t know any such thing.” Terry downed what was left of his first drink. “Maybe I’d just like somebody who can follow simple directions. Like what time to meet me for lunch.”

Put your hands behind your head. A chill washed over Reuben’s skin at the same time his dick swelled. He scowled at the echo in his head while he looked at Terry. “Don’t be like that, boo—I’ll be on time tomorrow, I promise.”

“You better be, boo.” Terry gave the endearment a sarcastic lilt.

Their lunches arrived, saving Reuben from answering. He didn’t like the idea of Terry going to the meet alone, but it was what it was. Terry was the one Chickie Casero knew from LA, the one with more field experience. Reuben was just backup and set dressing, even if they had been partners for over a year.

Reuben was also the one with the room at the Bonfire Guesthouse, the site for the meet with Casero, although so far he’d managed to not sleep there, thank you, Jesus. Terry had pretended to cruise him at the bar there the very first night, and since then they’d both been staying at Freddy Jones’s place.

Speaking of whom—Reuben leaned in close to Terry. “Freddy’s gone back to Manhattan. Took Derek with him.” He shrugged when Terry gave him a what-the-hell look. “Nothing I could do.”

Reuben didn't blame him, really. Freddy's younger brother, from another team at the LA field office, had set this up for them, but had made it clear Freddy could bail if things got scary.

Terry sighed and poked at his salad, putting more physical space between them. How come being close to Terry had never—not even once—done a damn thing for him, and one look at Nero at that fucking club had him ready to explode?

Reuben ate his burger, watching the eye candy stroll by and feeling nothing more than mild interest. Maybe it was because he'd let himself look that night, really look, imagining bare skin and sweat and the sounds a man would make. By the time he followed Nero into the hallway, he'd had enough to drink that ambushing him seemed like the way to go. That... didn't go the way he'd planned.

Reuben reached down and got his dick more comfortable, figuring it was in character. Pressing up against Nero's body had left him dizzy, and not from the drinks. And then Nero had taken charge, pinned Reuben to the wall with his wrist jacked up high enough to hurt—Reuben took a sip of iced tea, keeping his eyes on his plate. He would have let Nero do anything at that moment, anything, up to and especially including fucking him right there where anybody could see. When Nero grabbed his hips and rubbed his hard-on along Reuben's ass, Reuben's cock and balls fucking heaved, and he panicked, sure he was gonna come before anything actually happened. He wanted to be fucked, he wanted somebody—Nero—to show him what it was like to have another man's cock inside him—and then Nero walked away because Reuben had fucked it all up. And then—

Reuben tossed his napkin on the table and stood up, the legs of his chair screeching on the wooden deck. His T-shirt hid the erection pushing blindly at his shorts while his brain replayed the sensation of shoving Nero's thickness past his stretched jaws, saliva everywhere, his body still on fire after coming inside Nero's mouth. "I need to take a walk," he croaked and walked away, not caring what Terry thought.

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## Chapter Four

After grabbing a snack, Nero swam because it was more interesting than watching all the couples on the beach. Seriously. Maybe it was him, but everybody seemed to be paired off. While he debated what he wanted to do next, a flash of long blond hair caught his eye, totally out of place in the crowd of mostly short-haired men. He put his arms out, treading water, and got a better look.

It was the guy from the ferry terminal, the fluttery one, in a white Lycra thong that left absolutely nothing to the imagination even from forty feet away. Holy shit. And right next to him? Justin. In a little red Speedo. Fuck.

As much as he wanted to yell out the kid's name, that probably wasn't the best idea. Nero let the next wave carry him in and waded onto the beach, readjusting his bathing suit as he left the water. Okay—not everybody here was part of a couple, if the looks he was getting now were any indication. Good to know. He retrieved his flip-flops and fell in behind Blondie and Justin, trailing them along the beach. Right now he just wanted to know where they were staying. If he got an address, Freddy could tell him whose house it was. After that? No idea.

Blondie took his frigging time, that's for sure, flirting with anything with a dick that looked his way. Justin wasn't much better, and Nero didn't know if he was pissed or—No, he was pissed.

After what had to be the longest hundred yards ever, Justin and Blondie turned away from the beach and walked up onto a weathered deck. Nero stopped, staring at the sign. Of all the—shit. Shit and fuck.

The Bonfire Guesthouse was a dump, the refuge of the truly desperate. And it wasn't like the rooms were that inexpensive, either. Oh, it had a bar, and a big outside deck facing the bay—the Fire Room—and they got a good-size crowd on the weekends. Cheap well drinks, with a side helping of sleaze. It had to be the bar keeping them open all these years, because the guesthouse couldn't possibly turn a profit. Then again—Nero took a deep breath.

No point in guessing why Justin was at the Bonfire—he'd come back tonight and check it out. It would be way easier to get into the guesthouse then, and if he had to, he'd rent a room. He'd rub sanitizer all over himself afterward, but it would get him upstairs. If the kid was here with a friend, he'd talk him into at least calling his grandmother and letting her know he was okay.

As he turned, Nero caught sight of a familiar set of dark-skinned broad shoulders. RJ, walking along the beach with Terrance Keith. Who wore a polo shirt and dress pants to the beach? They both had their cell phones out, and Nero watched them for a second.

They were *not* together—no way in hell were they fucking—and not just because of what happened back in the city. Nero could maybe buy that they'd hooked up out here by accident, except something about the way they were talking together now made him think they'd known each other for a while. He didn't get it.

The two men went their separate ways after Terrance said something short and sharp—RJ heading down the beach and Terrance going for the boardwalk—and neither of them checked out all the oiled skin on display around them.

Nero waited until Terrance was out of sight to break into a jog. He passed RJ and slowed down, enjoying the way RJ startled when they locked Ray-Bans. “Hey. Taking in the sights?”

“It's different from the Pacific,” RJ said after a pause.

Nero laughed. “I meant *the sights*.” He nodded in the direction of a sculpted twink in a wet pair of board shorts.

“I—” RJ exhaled on something that failed miserably as a laugh. “I just needed to walk.”

“So what's the deal with Terrance? Somebody let him out of the closet for the week?”

“No,” RJ said quickly. “Nothing like that. Look, um, I should tell you that Freddy and Derek had to leave. Something came up, and they caught the ferry right after you went out.”

A chill ran down the back of Nero's neck and spread across his shoulder blades. He stopped walking, stood still until RJ stopped and faced him. “I don't know what the fuck is going on,” Nero said slowly, “but none of it better touch Freddy.”

“I swear,” RJ said. “It's nothing to do with him. It's all on Terry and me. And it's not anything you need to worry about.”

“I don't believe you,” Nero said, shrugging one shoulder as he started walking again. “But let's hope you're telling the truth.”

RJ put his head down and made a sound like a bull preparing to charge. When he glanced over at Nero, his sunglasses made him hard to read, but his shoulders were stiff. “I’m sorry about the other night. I know I fucked up—I’m...” He took a deep breath. “I’m not really—you know...”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Nero said, stopping short. He waited until RJ faced him again, and then deliberately slid his sunglasses up so RJ could see his eyes. “Are you bi?”

RJ’s mouth opened and shut, and he breathed hard out his nose. “No.”

“So you’re a straight guy who gets off on sucking dick?” Nero said as sweetly as he could, which wasn’t very. When RJ didn’t say anything, Nero brushed past him. “Spare me.”

RJ grabbed his arm. “Look—”

Nero jerked free and planted a hand in the middle of RJ’s chest, shoving him back. “We’ve had this conversation already, remember? The next time you grab me, I’ll break your fucking hand. You’re not out—I get that, okay? And I don’t give a shit what you tell your boss, your family, whoever. But don’t stand here and tell me you’re straight, ’cause you’re not.” Without waiting for a response, he stalked off.

Anger took Nero the rest of the way back to Freddy’s, and he must’ve looked bad because Terrance stood up from the kitchen table the second Nero got inside, blue eyes widening.

“I know Freddy’s not here,” Nero said, “and I also know that you have something to do with that. What I want to know is what. Are you cops?”

“We’re not cops,” RJ said from behind him, and Nero spun around. Without the sunglasses, RJ’s light eyes watched Nero with a kind of cool wariness. “That’s all I can tell you. I’m sorry.”

If that was the way they wanted to play it—Nero slid his sunglasses up and kept his eyes on RJ. “I’m a cop.” It was hard to miss the flicker of shock, the way RJ’s pupils contracted and the sharp inhale. “I might be out on disability right now, but I’m still a cop. And I worry about my friends.”

“Your friends are fine,” Terrance said, and the dismissive chill in his voice set Nero’s teeth on edge. “This has nothing to do with them.” He looked past Nero to RJ. “We need to... talk. Excuse us.”

The two of them retreated into the downstairs guest bedroom, and Nero heard the door lock about ten seconds before music came on from inside the



room. Listening through the door was out—those were solid oak, not crappy luan—so he headed upstairs, to the vacant bedroom, and opened the floor register.

Nothing. Well, not nothing, but Terrance kept moving around, and RJ's voice kind of blended with whoever was singing, and after about a minute Nero gave up. He took a quick shower to rinse off the salt, and then decided to go get something to eat. Last year, there'd been this tiny taco place that did outstanding fish tacos, and he decided that would hit the spot. He wasn't big on Spanish food in general—his last and longest set of foster parents were of the *we're in America, speak English* mindset, and they actively discouraged him from speaking Spanish while at the same time feeding him food that stayed far away from the cultural melting pot and used as few spices as possible. It took him until college to have anything remotely ethnic—even garlic was a revelation.

What he'd forgotten was that the taco shack sat on a patio behind two buildings, down a narrow passage. He made it three steps, and ahead of him something clattered and fell with a bang. His heart sprinted into cardio territory, and his skin chilled like he was in a freezer. Fuck. Oh fuck. He put a hand out and touched the wall. Cedar shingles. Other wall. Cedar shingles. Not concrete painted institutional green and gray. Wooden decking underfoot, not linoleum tiles. Sky overhead. Salt air. Fuck this. He refused to do this here—

One foot in front of the other got him out in the open, onto a pretty stone patio with a ton of bright flowers and a half-dozen tables. He sat down, ordered a Dos Equis and drank half of it while he waited for the trembling in his hands to go away. The shrink he'd seen had given him Xanax, which was great because it let him sleep, but he couldn't live on that shit, you know? He was on Fire Island, in Cherry Grove, for fuck's sake, and how likely was he to get out of an elevator and have two guys open fire on him? Not fucking likely. No elevators, for one thing. The panic attacks were rare now, thank god, but he still shook too bad when he handled a gun to requalify. And the one time he'd flaked out in the station house was what landed him on disability.

The waiter—adorable and tanned to a lovely dark copper—flirted with Nero mercilessly and watched him eat his tacos with the kind of avid interest usually reserved for porn. Nero went with it—he flirted back, licked spicy mayonnaise off his fingers with unnecessary care, and found a phone number scribbled on his bill. So all in all, he was in a lot better mood when he got back to Freddy's house.

No sign of RJ or Terrance, so Nero went up and took a nap. Whatever was going on with those two, he realized he didn't want to know about it. He'd find Justin, convince him to call home or go home, one or the other, and then tomorrow he'd call the delicious waiter and get laid. So there.

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Dressing to go to the Fire Room was easy. A pair of jeans with some strategic rips, flip-flops, and a ridiculously tight white silk T-shirt Nero scrounged from the dresser in the bedroom. Everybody who stayed here ended up leaving something, and by now there was a good stash of clothes up here. Boxers or briefs were not required—it might even say that on the sign outside the place. He took the boardwalk instead of walking down the beach, checking his pockets multiple times for the necessities—ID, phone, some cash, and the credit card he only used in emergencies. No condoms or lube. He didn't plan on hooking up with anyone, not at the Fire Room, in any case. Tomorrow, though...

The thump of bass and the babble of too many people was audible long before he reached the guesthouse, and the reality was louder and drunker. Maybe, a long time ago, he would have dove into the crowd and not cared. Drunk, stoned, wasted, it didn't matter so long as they were over twenty-one and didn't tell him no. Now... now he preferred his partners sober and definitely closer to his own age. He thought of the waiter. Or at least in the ballpark.

It took ten minutes to reach the bar, another five to get a beer, and already he wanted a shower. Nero wedged in along the railing facing the beach and watched the crowd on the deck from behind his overpriced and none-too-cold Corona. He'd be damned if he'd risk a mixed drink, though—god only knew what kind of cheap-ass liquor they'd use.

There were maybe half a dozen guys that stood out—younger, better-looking, expensive jeans. They were also not drinking, unless their bottles of water were just a front. The crowd shifted, and there was Blondie, eyeliner, nipple rings and all, rubbing up against a man who had to be way more than twice his age. Sure enough, off to his left was Justin, draped over a forty-something guy who was smirking like he'd just won the lottery.

All of Nero's good intentions burned to a crisp as his temper flared white-hot. What the fuck was the kid playing at? He left his beer on the railing and waded onto the dance floor. He fended off sly fingers aimed for his phone,

shuddering when more fingers found the hole in the back of his jeans and stroked his thigh. Someone else tried to get a hand down his jeans in front—he twisted out of reach and got a nipple pinched instead.

“Hands off,” he snarled, and Justin’s face jerked in his direction. Their eyes met—Nero’s probably shooting flames, and Justin’s wide with shock. He bolted—no surprise there.

Nero fought through to the edge of the crowd and slipped into the lounge, which was only marginally less packed. Nero followed in Justin’s wake—a couple of spilled drinks and annoyed looks made it easy—all the way out of there and into a short hallway that led to a room with couches and chairs and a stairway. Nero paused, and when he replayed the last few seconds, he knew what he’d heard was the slap of a screen door, not feet rushing up a set of stairs. Out the door, then. He checked up and down the boardwalk—no Justin. Not even the sound of running feet. Fuck.

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## Chapter Five

Nero let himself in the house and headed right for the upstairs bathroom. He stripped while the water heated, skin crawling, and more tired than he wanted to think about. He'd spent over two hours waiting for Justin to reappear, first at the Fire Room and then trolling the boardwalk and beach nearby. By then he knew for sure that the half-dozen or so pretty boys weren't just there as eye candy—but had zero idea of what to do with that knowledge.

He rinsed the sweat and smells of the night off under hot water, washing his hair twice before he stopped twitching. He switched the taps to cold right before he got out, and once he dried off, he was wide-awake again. Dammit. Well, he knew more than one cure for that, although he doubted option number one was available. Booze it was, then.

Nero didn't bother to get dressed, just settled on a lounge chair out on the deck with a tumbler of Gentleman Jack over ice and listened to the waves while he sipped. He could call the local cops and let them know what was going on at the Bonfire, but he had a good idea what would happen after that. Nothing. By the time they got there, either the boys would all be gone or the management would trot out some excellent bulletproof story—the boys had ID showing they were over eighteen, there was no law against renting them a room, who they partied with was their business—and as for finding anybody willing to say the boys were taking money for sex? Not a chance in hell. Tomorrow he'd check around some more, maybe strong-arm Blondie and ask some questions. If he did get a chance to talk to Justin, maybe he could convince him that he had no interest in outing him—provided Nero hadn't already scared the shit out of him and the kid was on his way home. Which would actually be a plus.

Swirling the last of the ice, Nero decided against another drink and heaved himself off the lounge chair. He left the glass in the sink and went back upstairs, realizing as he passed the bathroom that RJ or Terrance must have come in after him. The air in the upstairs bathroom was still vaguely steamy, and fragrant with that citrus and musk scent.

Sure enough, when he walked into the bedroom, there was RJ, a towel wrapped around his hips and a surprised look on his face. His bag was on the floor next to the other bed, so obviously he wasn't sharing a bed with Terrance. Okay. Nero had no idea why he did it, but he walked right up to RJ and stood there, hands at his—naked—sides, waiting. When RJ didn't do anything, or at

least nothing violent, Nero took that for permission and settled his hands just above the top edge of the towel.

RJ inhaled, not making eye contact, the smooth skin of his chest gleaming with leftover drops of water. Slowly, he lowered his head until his forehead rested on Nero's shoulder. A moment later, his hands came to rest on Nero's bare hips, but lightly, as if they would fly away if Nero made a wrong move.

Well, Nero wasn't exactly the Man Whisperer, but he knew how to talk somebody out of a closet. At least for the moment. His thumbs slowly traced the hard edge of RJ's obliques until RJ exhaled and relaxed the least bit. Nero left one hand in place and slid the other up a nicely muscled back before sliding down again, fingertips finding the damp towel and slipping underneath. It didn't take much to loosen the towel and send it to the floor. Their cocks bumped, and RJ breathed in, cool against Nero's skin—and then breathed out with a hint of a moan. His hands tightened on Nero's hips as he shifted his stance, feet a little more apart now. If that was an invitation, Nero accepted.

He sketched the outlines of RJ's very fine ass with his whole hands, skimming over the hollows and finding the curves that led to those muscled thighs. He squeezed, one cheek in each palm, pulling them apart just a little. Again, kneading the muscles, listening to RJ breathe a bit faster, and again—he fell into a slow rhythm, filling his hands with smooth, warm flesh, and every time he parted those cheeks he let his fingers drift farther into the cleft between them. When he finally reached puckered skin he only stroked, circled, finding the center and teasing it into relaxing.

RJ curled his hips and pushed his cock along Nero's thigh, and then he tipped his ass back and took Nero's finger up to the first knuckle. He shuddered, leaving a sticky trail on Nero's leg, and Nero did what he'd wanted to do from the first time and put his mouth on RJ. Not a kiss—he wasn't going to push that far—all he did was suckle on RJ's trapezius with a hint of teeth, tasting his skin. RJ moaned for real, and Nero slid his mouth up so he was right by an ear.

“Get on the bed,” he murmured, making it an order and not a suggestion. “On your back, hands above your head, legs flat.” He stepped back, and the instant RJ moved, turned, Nero had a hand in his toiletry bag, grabbing a strip of condoms and the lube. He doubted they'd need all six condoms, but sometimes shit happened—you dropped one, you ripped one getting the packet open. He did not want RJ to have time to think about this and decide to—

Fuck. Nero's cock lurched when he got a good look at the man on the bed, and he reached down and gave it a squeeze. Oh yeah. He knee-walked up the bed between RJ's spread thighs, swallowing a rush of saliva. RJ was watching him, and the moonlight coming in the window made his eyes gleam. Nero dropped the condoms and lube on the bed, freeing his hands. He straddled RJ, deliberately dragging their balls together, his eyes closing of their own accord as he rubbed his taint on the base of RJ's erection.

"Oh yeah," he whispered, opening his eyes. "I want that. I want all of that." The hips under him rose, the cock he was sitting on stiffening even more. Using both hands, Nero pinched RJ's nipples, drawing them up into blunt points while RJ made a sound like he was being strangled. He was panting, arching his back, so Nero kept it up—tugging and rolling both nipples, learning how hard to pinch and how much to tug and wondering how long RJ could keep quiet.

Quite a while, apparently. Nero stopped with no warning, smiling when RJ cried out in frustration.

"Don't stop," RJ growled.

"What about Terry?" Nero licked his thumbs and flicked them over both swollen nipples, making RJ hiss and then moan. "How come—"

"No. Told you—it's not like that." RJ moaned some more when Nero ground down on his dick. "I want you to—" His thighs spread some more, startling the hell out of Nero.

"I want you to fuck me," Nero told him, and RJ froze. Closed his eyes. Nero huffed. "That okay with you?"

RJ swallowed. Opened his eyes. "I—yeah."

"Huh." Nero tore a condom packet off the strip and opened it, held the corner in his teeth as he popped the top on the lube. "Ever done this with a woman?" He drizzled a thin line of the stuff along RJ's cock, making it jump. Carefully, he slicked RJ up while he waited for an answer. He took the condom out of the cellophane and paused. "Well?"

"I've had sex with women," RJ said slowly, watching the condom like it was a poisonous snake.

"That's not what I meant."

RJ shook his head. "I don't understand."

Nero tipped his head to the side, drawing his slippery fingers up his own shaft, already sitting up and begging against his belly, and swallowed hard. “Have you ever had anal sex with a woman?”

Even in the dimness, Nero could see RJ’s face close down, go blank. “No.”

“Okay.” He was about to say, *A little more enthusiasm would be nice about now*, but then he moved back so he could unroll the condom onto an impressively hard RJ—who shuddered from head to toe and closed his eyes. More lube, for both of them, and Nero purposely kept the grimace off his face when he shoved two fingers inside himself. “You keep your hands on that headboard, and don’t move unless I tell you. Got it?”

RJ nodded, blinking and breathing a little faster. “Yes. I un—” Nero rose onto his knees, and RJ’s teeth came together with a click, cutting off the rest, as he shuddered again.

Nero twisted from the waist so he could get an arm behind him to steady RJ’s cock with one hand while he gave himself a good tug with the other. Breathe in, push—he groaned, loving the burn as that fat head spread him wide, taking it in as fast as he dared. God, yes—the buzz as RJ slid past his prostate had him clenching his teeth on a hiss. He rose enough to do it again, hands on his thighs now so he wouldn’t be tempted to rush things.

A longer stroke, and he bared his teeth at the sight of RJ arching back, throat exposed, pecs jumping as his hands tightened on the slats of the headboard. Nero wanted this to last—no, that wasn’t true. He wanted to tease RJ until he begged, lost it and pleaded for *more, faster, harder*—something.

He found a slow rhythm that worked for him, sliding that flared, fat head in and almost all the way out, a steady build of pressure and pleasure every time, pausing at the top of each stroke to breathe. A nice heavy buzz collected in his balls, and all he’d need to do to come would be one squeeze, a slippery fist around his cock. Underneath him, RJ tensed his thighs, lifting them off the bed, and his quiet panting changed to a low, choppy moan. The next time Nero sank all the way down, RJ bucked, twisting his hips and spreading his legs until his feet were almost hanging off the edges. Nero went with it, ground down for a second and then sped up the pace.

RJ whined—and let go of the headboard, one hand pinching his own nipple while the other flattened over his abs and slid down his body. He fucked Nero hard and fast, breath hissing through his teeth, eyes wide open and fixed on Nero’s cock.

Nero took RJ by one wrist, wrapping RJ's strong fingers around his cock—god, he loved the way that looked, his pale crown pushing up through RJ's dark fist. Nero's ass clamped down, and he shuddered, painting RJ's belly with white streaks.

RJ stopped breathing, one heartbeat of stillness before his cock jumped inside Nero, jerked and twitched while RJ lay there, breathing hard and shivering. Nero caught his own breath, trying not to wince as he dismounted—from the looks of things, RJ wasn't going to be any help.

He stripped off the condom and tossed it in the trash, the polite thing to do. Nothing from RJ, not even a grunt.

Well, no way was he sleeping with lube all over his ass. Or his dick. Nero rolled off the bed and onto his feet. "I'm getting a shower."

More nothing. RJ just lay there, breathing slowly, one arm tucked under his head.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Nero muttered, tempted to smack him just to get a reaction. He stalked into the bathroom, jaw set, and then snarled at his reflection in the mirror. That's what he got for fucking around with a closet case. He rinsed off as fast as he could, and after a half second of debate, decided to go sleep in the empty room next door.

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What did he just do?

Reuben listened to the shower start up across the hall, and traced one finger through the come drying on his stomach. Not his. Another man's. He'd orgasmed inside another man's body—inside Nero's body—gripped tighter than a fist, hotter than he'd ever allowed himself to imagine. That was bad enough. What was worse was the gnawing... *space* inside him, the part that wanted to be filled. Even now, his spent cock pulsed at the idea, almost the same way he could get hard just imagining a man's cock stuffed in his mouth, pressing on his tongue. That's what got him off a few moments ago—Nero's thick cock shoving through his clenched fingers, and remembering how it was to stretch his jaw around it, nearly choking, but so, so—

Reuben squeezed his eyes shut and rolled onto his side, drawing his knees up. He should never have touched Nero, not that night in the club and not tonight, either. It had just made everything worse. That one time in college, that one blow job? Easy to write off as anything other than what it had really



been—him dying to touch a man and know what it was like. Because now? Now he wanted the rest of it, wanted all of it.

When Nero came back from showering, he'd tell him. Confess.

The water turned off. Reuben could imagine Nero beaded all over with water, smooth copper-olive skin running with it. He could go in there, kneel on the bathmat, and Nero would—

Reuben rolled over, shoving his face into the pillow. He couldn't do it. Any of it. Couldn't imagine saying it out loud—*Fuck me. I want you to fuck me.*

When Nero didn't come back, he slowly relaxed his grip on the pillow. Maybe Nero was in the other bedroom. Maybe Reuben should go in there, just man up and say what he wanted. Oh Jesus, now laughter came bubbling up, and it didn't sound right. Even he could hear the sharp edges in it.

He buried his face in the pillow again, and he'd swear he didn't do more than close his eyes for a minute, but then he woke up gritty eyed and sticky, regretting not taking a shower at some point. He staggered across to the bathroom, realizing it was before dawn, but only just. Under the hot water, all he could smell was sex, the mixed scents of come and sweat rising off his skin along with something ranker, earthier, and his cock stiffened as he breathed it in.

He lathered his hands and let them linger as he soaped his chest and belly, drawing little sparks of pleasure from his nipples and his balls. He washed his ass, for once allowing his fingers to tease the opening to his body, breathing harder as he remembered Nero's dry finger piercing him. He rinsed off, making sure his cock was clean with a minimum of contact. He was hard, not all the way but almost, curving up past the horizontal, and the pulse in his balls echoed in his ass. There was lube in the room, still, at least he thought there was. He had an idea of what he wanted to do, something to get rid of the ache so he could get through the rest of the day. Get his head back where it belonged.

The little tube wasn't on the bed, or the floor. Reuben's cock wilted a little as he searched. Maybe—he opened the nightstand drawer and froze. Oh god. Lube, yes, that was in there. And with it...

It was a butt plug. A big one, but maybe that was just him. Not that he cared; as he lifted the cellophane-wrapped toy out of the drawer, he was hard enough to hammer nails. The cellophane tore easily; Reuben stuffed the discarded wrapper back in the drawer and took out the lube, dropping it on the

bed. The plug was pale pink, and five, maybe six inches long. Dreamily, he brought it up to his mouth and parted his lips around the fairly slender tip. It tasted of plastic, but once he slid more of it into his mouth, all that mattered was how it felt pressing on his tongue. Not as much of a stretch as swallowing Nero, but good—Reuben stood there for a long moment, mouth around the toy, eyes closed and breathing through his nose while his cock bounced and twitched, and the needy pulse in his ass made him clench his cheeks.

He withdrew the toy, shining with spit, and slowly, reverently, spread a generous helping of lubricant all over it. One knee on the bed, the other foot on the floor, he reached around behind his back and prodded his hole with the slick end of the toy. He heard himself whimper and liked it, could imagine Nero forcing that sound out of him, shoving him face down onto the bed with his ass in the air, moving his knees apart and rubbing his cock along Reuben's ass exactly the way Reuben was doing with the toy. He lined it up and pushed, harder this time, pressing back, shuddering when his body parted, opened, breathing harder as the burn ramped up. Another whimper, louder—he shoved, not caring how much it hurt, and then crouched there, panting after the toy slid all the way inside.

Oh god. He straightened up, exquisitely aware of the way it shifted, brushing something that had him seeing stars. His prostate—he saw Nero's face earlier, the way he shuddered and groaned while Reuben fucked him—this was what he felt.

“Reuben.”

He whipped the towel back around his hips and whirled, the plug tugging and pushing, pleasure and torture at the same time. Terry pushed the door open, frowning a little. “I heard the shower, figured you might be up. Where's Jimenez?”

“Other room.” His voice came out normal, thank god.

“Come downstairs so we can talk.” Terry didn't go anywhere, though, just turned his back—listening for Nero, probably.

Reuben gritted his teeth and snagged a pair of loose nylon basketball shorts off the floor, slipping them on under the towel. It took some concentration to keep the plug in place, but it wasn't impossible. His erection had subsided a little—fear of discovery was not one of his kinks, apparently. He crammed his palm over his mouth until the urge to laugh subsided. A XXL T-shirt over the shorts, one that hung down past his hips, and he figured he was good to go. He

followed Terry down the stairs, blocking out the sparks of pleasure from the toy.

In the kitchen, they both made coffee without turning on any lights other than the one over the sink. Terry leaned back against the counter, eyes on the dreary weather outside as he sipped from his mug. “I’m going to head out to the boat in about a half hour. We should know by noon if they intercept Casero’s guys. I’ll text you as soon as I know one way or the other.”

Reuben nodded. They’d gone over this ad nauseum days ago, and this was just Terry thinking out loud. In the same vein, Reuben said, “I’ll go out to the marina around noon, meet you on board.”

Of the two of them, Terry was the sailor. He’d come out to Fire Island by boat, something sleek with a monster motor—most of their artillery was stashed onboard, along with radios and tactical gear. Reuben had been on the boat twice since he and Terry had supposedly hooked up, getting to know the layout and the basics of driving the thing. It had also been a way to talk without anyone overhearing, although Reuben heaving over the side after fifteen minutes made that pretty much impossible.

Needless to say, he was not looking forward to a repeat performance.

“You have the wristband?” Terry asked, meaning the anti-nausea acupressure thing he’d gotten for Reuben to wear.

“Damn thing better work,” Reuben grumbled, and got a small smile out of Terry. One of these days, Reuben would figure out how to make Terry actually laugh, which was about as likely as a zombie apocalypse. Less likely, given that in the three years they’d worked out of the same field office Reuben had yet to hear Terry so much as crack a joke. Even so, despite the fact that Terry was so stiff he creaked, they worked well together. On bad days, though, Reuben wondered what the fuck Terry was hiding.

“See you in a couple of hours,” Terry said, dumping his mug and rinsing it out. “Remember—high tide is at two.”

“Got it.” Reuben waited until Terry pulled on a rain slicker and left before he dared move, reaching around and settling the plug back in place. He could ignore it so long as he stayed still, mostly, the painful stretch from earlier having faded into an oddly calming fullness. The Zen of butt plugs. How to attain satori in six easy inches. He smirked.

As he crossed the few feet to put his mug in the sink, the body rush when the toy bumped against his prostate left him gripping the edge of the counter,

head bowed. Reuben reached down, cupping his balls, squeezing them, aware of clenching his buttocks and what that did inside him—what would this be like with something fatter, longer? He shuddered, his cock flexing madly, tangling with the silky fabric of the shorts as it tried to go vertical. He didn't want to come, not yet—this was all there was going to be, this was it. After this, he'd be back in LA, and the next time he visited his parents down in Costa Mesa, he'd let his mother fix him up with Ileana or Ilena, whatever the hell her name was, and he'd—

The floor creaked overhead, and Reuben snatched his hand away from his aching balls. Without thinking, he opened the refrigerator and took out a package of bacon, tossing it on the counter. Frying pan. Burner on. Don't think about Costa Mesa or his eventual marriage, just concentrate on cooking breakfast and figuring out how to get Nero to fuck him before noon.

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## Chapter Six

RJ's bed was empty when Nero went in to get some clothes. It was raining, coming down in buckets, meaning going out for breakfast was a shitty idea. There was a damp towel on the bed, and when Nero picked it up, he saw the lube under it. The sex had been good, but more than a little frustrating, and not in a first-time kind of way. He was missing something here, and he usually wasn't that clueless with guys he fucked.

Nero caught a whiff of bacon cooking, and figured RJ and Terry were awake and in the kitchen. He put on a pair of nylon shorts and a tank and headed downstairs. "So I guess you're not Muslim," he said, admiring the view despite his best intentions. "Or Jewish." Was that a smile? That would be a good start. No sign of Terry, and that was good too.

"No," RJ said, not looking up from the pan on the stove. "Baptist."

"Okay." Nero went to the counter opposite the stove and poked around the coffee selections. Fifty kinds of flavored crap—where was the regular? He didn't get Freddy's fascination for weird coffee at all. While the coffee machine spit out a cup of the plainest stuff he could find, Nero considered how to handle the inevitable awkward morning-after conversation. After awkward sex. Fabulous.

"I was going to make eggs," RJ said, and Nero nearly spilled milk all over the counter.

"Great. Eggs would be great."

"It's just you and me—Terry's gone out. Scrambled okay?"

*Oh, for fuck's sake*—"How about poached with Hollandaise?" No response. Nero turned around, and caught the hint of a smile from RJ.

"I can do poached," RJ said, deadpan, "but you're shit out of luck on the Hollandaise. I don't even know what's in it."

"Egg yolks, lemon juice, and clarified butter," Nero said. Not that he could make the shit, despite watching food porn on TV sometimes.

"You're shit out of luck." RJ's mobile mouth curved in a real smile, although he didn't look at Nero. "There is no butter in this house—I checked. We're lucky there's eggs."

Nero nodded. “Or bread for toast. Last summer, this place was a carb-free zone. Absolutely sucked.” He sipped his coffee. “Scrambled’s fine with me.”

RJ transferred some of the bacon to a plate on the counter, moving with an odd stiffness. “I had a roommate in college who was vegetarian, and made sure everybody knew it.” He laughed, but not like it was funny. “Total head case. He put up all these posters over his bed, right? Stop animal testing and don’t wear fur, that kind of thing, you know?”

Nero propped his ass against the edge of the counter, cradling his mug of coffee. “Okay.”

“These posters were *graphic*—I mean, pictures of bloody, dead animals—and they were the first thing you saw when you walked in the room.”

“Tell me he used his middle name,” Nero said, smiling when RJ snorted. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, he did.” The rest of the bacon went onto the plate in the oven, and then RJ got out another pan.

Nero watched him combine eggs and milk in a bowl, alternating between admiring the muscles under the gray T-shirt and thin shorts and being impressed by the way RJ used the wire thing—a whisk?—on the egg mixture. “You can cook,” he said, taking a piece of bacon to have with his coffee. Nice and crispy, exactly the way he liked it.

“A little. My mother’s not big on men interfering in the kitchen, but I worked at a diner during college and learned some basics. What about you?” Reuben left off whisking the eggs and ate two pieces of bacon at the same time.

“Nah,” Nero said, taking another piece for himself. “I mean, I worked restaurant jobs, too, but busboy and waiter, not kitchen staff. I cook sometimes, but just burgers and shit like that. I make a mean smoothie.”

RJ smiled at him, a real smile, and Nero ignored the catch in his breathing. “You don’t make Spanish food?”

Nero snorted. “No. I don’t even really like that stuff. I mean, yeah, I go to this takeout place near the precinct that does great *pernil*—roast pork—but I’m not so into the other stuff, oxtails and the weird fish stuff.”

“Any particular reason?” RJ asked, cocking his head. Point to him for perception.

“Yes and no.” Nero shrugged. “My foster parents were... ethnically neutral.”

“Why doesn’t that sound good?” The eggs went into the pan, and without those sharp brown eyes on him, Nero could breathe. And answer the question.

He took another piece of bacon. “I don’t know. It... wasn’t good or bad. Sunday dinner was roast chicken or pot roast, gravy, mashed potatoes, canned vegetables. Yellow cake with chocolate icing. Pizza. Fish sticks. No Tex-Mex, no Chinese food. Coca-Cola. My foster father drank Budweiser or Coors, Jack Daniels on special occasions. Want me to go on?”

RJ stopped stirring the eggs and turned the heat down. “Where the hell did you grow up?”

“Staten Island—which is not all that white-bread, believe me.” Nero got plates out of the cabinet and set them on the counter next to the stove. “They were just older, and really conservative. They let me stay with them while I went to college, and they didn’t have to do that—I can’t really complain too much. You said you were from LA, right?”

“Now—I grew up in Costa Mesa. South of LA.” RJ stared at the pan of eggs. “I went to USC and never left.” After a pause, he said, in a completely different tone of voice, “Whenever I go home for a visit, my mother always has a date set up for me, for some event or other. My sister got married three years ago, and she already has one boy, with another due this fall.”

It wasn’t all that hard to connect the dots—Mister and Mrs. Martineaux thought their son was straight and expected him to produce grandchildren for them. The sooner the better. “So, bringing home a guy—”

“—Is not an option, and is never going to happen.”

“Glad we cleared that up,” Nero said mildly, wondering if he’d get in trouble for breaking a plate. Over RJ’s head. “Because here I was, thinking I’d get an invite to the next family dinner.”

That got a reaction—RJ’s head snapped up, eyes narrowed and jaw clenched. Maybe he preferred talking around the edges of a subject, but Nero had never been a fan.

“Look,” Nero said, walking over to the sink, “you do whatever you think you need to do to keep your parents happy—that’s nothing to do with me. You want to get married to some woman, pop out some grandkids, and fuck guys on the side? Fine.” He turned on the water and rinsed out his coffee mug, setting it in the sink. “But don’t pretend that—”

It was embarrassing how fast RJ whipped him around and had him face down on the table with one arm twisted up between his shoulder blades. Nero

breathed out, letting that arm go slack. He didn't mind some manhandling—pun intended—so long as the other guy understood the rules. Which wasn't a given with RJ. To help things along, Nero shuffled his bare feet sideways on the cool tile floor and tipped his ass up. The instant he did it, the dick pressing against Nero went from not-quite-a-semi to can-I-fuck-you-now? RJ ground into him with a flattering moan, and then he yanked Nero's shorts down. His own as well, apparently—Nero used his free arm to brace himself on the table while he rubbed his ass shamelessly up and down RJ's hard-on.

There were condoms somewhere in the kitchen—over by the coffeemaker? Lube, too—the entire house was well stocked, if you knew where to look.

RJ let go of Nero's wrist, and Nero made a point of staying still. Two warm hands slid along Nero's ribs down to his hips, accompanied by the sound of rapid breathing. RJ's thumbs parted Nero's ass, spreading him wide, and Nero waited to see what would happen next. He wouldn't mind—

“Oh Christ.” Nero went up on his toes, palms flattening on the table. He arched his back, and RJ's tongue made another tentative exploration of Nero's hole. Not what he'd expected. Lower, licking along his taint, finding the crease between his balls and licking that, too. Down further, tracing the underside of Nero's cock, hot breath and hotter tongue exploring while the spit on his ass chilled in the breeze. Nero moaned, long and low, when RJ polished the head with his tongue, probing the slit before giving it a light suck.

RJ tugged on Nero's hips, pulling him up from the table and turning him around. “Condoms?” RJ asked, still crouched between Nero's knees.

“Drawer by the coffeemaker.” Nero closed his eyes—and opened them as smoke stung his nose. “Fuck—”

He lunged and shoved the smoking pan into the sink, cutting off the gas to the burner with one hand and turning on the water with the other. Steam billowed—so much for breakfast. When he turned, kicking free of the shorts tangled around his ankles, he didn't know what he expected—an apology about the ruined eggs, maybe, or a joke—but not for RJ to drop his shorts and turn around, bracing his hands on the counter and presenting Nero with his bare ass.

RJ spread his feet wider, and it took Nero a second to understand that the luridly pink oval peeking out between the muscled ass cheeks was the end of a butt plug. Nero crossed the few feet between them and drew a hand down RJ's lower back, fascinated by the way RJ was trembling. He pressed lightly on the base of the toy, and the moan he got in return made his balls ache. “You want me to fuck you.”



RJ lowered his head to the counter. “Yes.”

Nero remembered the way RJ had spread his legs the night before, and the whole episode suddenly made more sense. He worked two fingers around the base of the plug and tugged until the wider part of the toy slid into view, working it gently in and out. RJ stopped breathing and then panted, short and too fast, tipping his ass up further. Nero pushed the toy all the way in again—slow and easy—and smoothed his hands over RJ’s flanks when RJ shuddered and grunted in what sounded like disappointment.

“Upstairs,” Nero told him. “I’m not fucking you in the kitchen.” And cleaning up afterward—he was not spending the day getting come off kitchen cabinets, thanks. He picked up his shorts off the floor and didn’t wait for RJ to respond. Either he’d follow him upstairs or he wouldn’t.

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Reuben reached the second floor landing out of breath and vaguely off balance. He’d expected to be taken right there in the kitchen, for Nero to pull out the toy and plunge inside him. Now that he’d had time to think, maybe this wasn’t—

He stopped right inside the doorway to the bedroom, riveted by the sight of Nero waiting for him. Naked. Fat erection in hand, arm muscles moving under his skin as he polished the head and stroked the shaft. Reuben didn’t need to think about what he wanted right then. He crossed the room and sank to his knees in front of Nero, spreading his legs so he could sit on his heels, hands on his thighs.

Nero cupped Reuben’s jaw, tipped his head back. Still holding him, Nero used his other hand to push his cock down, rubbing it across Reuben’s slack mouth. Reuben opened wide and gratefully licked the blunt head, explored the delicate weeping slit and the curve of the crown, and then he leaned forward and took the whole thing to the back of his throat, eyes tearing with the effort of not gagging or choking at the pressure on his tongue, his palate. Between his spread thighs, his own cock bobbed and flexed, and the involuntary contractions around the girth of the toy left him hovering on the edge of orgasm. Nero pulled back, slowly, and Reuben whined deep in his throat, wanting more.

“Just the head now,” Nero told him, almost out of breath. “Nice and easy.”

Reuben used his lips to play with the edge of the crown, all the way around, his tongue dancing between the salty slit and the little ridge right underneath, breathing through his nose and gripping his own thighs.

“Now,” Nero said, petting his head, “fuck yourself with that toy a little.” Reuben’s eyes flew up, wide with alarm. He’d come—god, if he did that he’d come, he’d—“And don’t come,” Nero added. “Do it.”

Reuben fumbled behind himself for the flat base, finally got a grip, and tugged. It slid out, stretching him, the burn of it echoing in his balls. Back in until it bumped his gland, and out again. Back in. His thighs shook with the effort of keeping still, of wanting to—needing to—

Nero’s hand tightened on his chin. “Stop. Get on the bed. Like last night, on your back.”

Panting, Reuben did as he’d been told, writhing a little when his dick touched his belly.

Thank god—Nero didn’t make him wait. He was on the bed, lifting Reuben’s thighs, pushing them apart and back. He’d put on a condom, and while Reuben watched, rocking his hips, Nero added lube until it was dripping. When he drew the toy out, Reuben arched helplessly, biting off a moan, and then Nero was there, stretching him open again, sliding inside without slowing or stopping. Reuben reached over his head and grabbed the headboard, laying himself out for Nero to do whatever he wanted.

Nero fucked him slowly, deliberately, working his thickness over Reuben’s prostate while he held Reuben’s thighs back, holding him wide open. All Reuben could manage was raw panting, hanging over the edge of pleasure and dangling there, tensing his abs to urge Nero deeper, faster, harder. Nero let go of Reuben’s thigh and skated his palm up his cock, spread the slippery strings dripping onto his belly all over the head, and squeezed—

Reuben knew he was making sounds, but couldn’t hear, couldn’t see anything past the glowing inside of his eyelids. His entire body convulsed, every muscle impossibly rigid, the electric burn in his cock and balls hot enough and bright enough that it should leave marks on his skin. He knew the second Nero followed him over the precipice, felt the gasp and grunt in his core, and then he was drifting, disconnected, until Nero finally, eventually, slid out and left him empty.

He could barely move, had trouble letting go of the headboard until Nero helped him, rolled him onto his side and pulled a blanket over them.

Nero fell asleep almost at once, and Reuben lay there and stared at the wall next to the bed until his arms and legs belonged to him again. He slid out of bed carefully, gathering his clothes and the rest of his things in silence and setting

the duffle out in the hall. Then he went back and stared at Nero, memorizing the curve of his skull under the dark hair and the neat lines of his short beard and how his neck curved into the powerful shoulders.

And before he gave in to the urge to lean down and see what Nero's skin tasted like, what his mouth tasted like, Reuben turned around and left.

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## Chapter Seven

Oh god—Nero woke up tangled in the sheets and sticky as hell, with no idea what time it was. That—They’d—*fuck*. He stared at the ceiling, squeezing his temples with both hands for a moment before he sat up.

No sign of RJ in here, and the house was quiet. Nero thought about that, listening carefully while he searched for his phone to check the time. One PM. He couldn’t hear anybody moving downstairs, just the rain pattering on the roof.

The bed across from his was made, and RJ’s small bag was nowhere in sight. Well. Looked like that was a farewell fuck, after all, and dammit if he wasn’t more than a little pissed. He... okay, RJ wasn’t out, and probably never would be, and getting involved with someone like that was more or less a direct route to being miserable. It didn’t mean Nero didn’t feel anything, though, because he did. He’d like to sit down and have a couple drinks and talk, see if they had something more than some quirky sexual chemistry and a mutual appreciation for crispy bacon.

Nero rolled onto his feet. That was more than enough regret for one day, thanks. Time to get moving.

He pulled on a pair of jeans and cuffed them up over his calves, added a gray sweatshirt and pulled out his windbreaker. He needed to check out the Bonfire, rent a room, and look for Justin. That was the priority—not wondering where RJ was.

Downstairs, the guest bedroom stood open, and Nero stuck his head in. The beds were made, and there was nothing in here—no luggage, no clothes, nothing. Halfway to the kitchen, Nero jumped about a foot when the dishwasher came on. The kitchen was clean, everything put away. The whole thing should have been peaceful—the dim light, the rain, the faint sound of the waves, the clean house—it made Nero’s skin crawl. No idea why, either, except it was easy to believe, for a split second, that RJ and Terry had never been here at all.

He headed out into the rain after taking a backpack from the coat closet and stuffing some random clothes in it so it bulged realistically. His jeans were soaked in about a minute, and his sneakers, too. The only reason they didn’t fill up with water was on account of the mesh. By the time he made it all the way

down to the guesthouse, he seriously hoped Justin was worth getting soaked to the skin.

The lobby was empty, and Nero stood there dripping on the ugly mock-oriental runner for about thirty seconds before he realized the desk clerk was apparently AWOL. Not really a surprise on a day like this. Slipping around the check-in counter, he saw a simple array of hooks, some with keys. Before he could think of why not, he snatched one at random and headed upstairs. About half the hooks were empty, maybe nine in all, and given the size of the place, the rooms must be miniscule to fit eighteen of them on two floors.

The stairs were carpeted, and so was the upstairs hallway. Nasty, stained carpet with a whiff of mold. Awesome. The only plus was that his wet footprints didn't show. He'd grabbed the key for number twelve, and that looked to be one more flight up. The stairway was stacked, meaning he had to walk the length of the hall to go up again. He slowed his steps, listening at doors as he went. He passed number eight. Stopped. Went back. He thought—

“You queers are all alike,” a man said from inside the room. New York accent, with a hint of something else. He sounded... pleased. Smug. “Show you some dick and you're on your knees.” A pause. Nero heard a familiar noise that he couldn't quite place, metal sliding on metal, a sort of snapping click, like a spring, maybe, like a—

His shoulder hit the flimsy door and it crumpled, flew open and bounced back off the wall, nearly smacking Nero in the face. A guy—Latino, not that tall, baseball hat on sideways, black tank top, jeans and boxers around his thighs—twisted around, the gun in his hand pointed right for Nero's chest. Nero saw two more things before he snatched the wrecked door closed and dove for the disgusting carpet—a Dominican flag tattoo on the gunman's hip, and a mostly naked Terrance Keith kneeling on the floor looking shocked.

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Terry was late. That's what Reuben kept telling himself, except he knew it was a lie. Terry was congenitally incapable of being late for anything—ever—so that meant something had happened. The problem was that Reuben had no idea what. Maybe Casero had texted him with a change of plans, changed the time or place of the meet. Except then Terry would have texted Reuben.

Terry had gotten here, obviously, stashed his bags in the space below the front deck, and then left, leaving his tactical vest—the same fucking vest he was supposed to have on under his fucking rain slicker—*here*, on the boat. No signs of a struggle. No sign of anything, period.

The only other possible place he could be was at the Bonfire, even though he wasn't supposed to go there until three. Reuben made one more search of the cramped space under the deck. He'd already retrieved his gun and his backup piece, put on his own vest and his slicker. Whatever else was going on, he needed to meet the boat coming in on the ocean side, so he needed to head across to the beach near the Bonfire and wait.

Terry's guns and badge were still here, everything he should have had with him was still here—including his cell phone. Why? What the fuck happened? He doubted Casero knew about this boat—why would Terry tell him about it?—so him ambushing Terry here was out as a scenario.

Reuben slipped Terry's cell phone into his slicker, just in case, and stepped out onto the deck. The rain hadn't slacked off any, and he'd be soaked by the time he made it to the Bonfire. No help for that. He broke into a jog once he left the slick boards of the dock... and his body immediately reminded him of what he'd been doing all morning.

He couldn't think about Nero right now, couldn't afford to. That was for later, for some point in the future when he could be alone and drown his regrets in peace and quiet and alcohol. He was breathing easily when he reached the Bonfire, despite the run and the ache in his ass, and jogged along the paved walk alongside the guesthouse that led to the beach. He slowed down before he hit the sand, and that was when he heard the gunshot.

He had no doubt that's what it was—there were no cars on the island, and not like anybody was setting off fireworks in the downpour. Not thunder, either. He went for the patio entrance, figuring that would be open, and tore through the empty bar to the lobby. That was empty, too—what the fuck? Another shot, right overhead, and somebody barreled down the stairs at a dead run. Reuben had his gun out and up, ready for anything—just not for Nero to be the person on the stairs.

Nero ducked past Reuben's gun arm and grabbed his slicker, spun him around and dragged him through the lobby for a few steps until Reuben got with the program. The two of them pelted outside, away from the beach, into the scrubby bushes and tall grass behind the building on the side facing the bay.

Nero crouched next to a storage shed, panting, and gripped Reuben's wrist. "Terrance—Terry is in there. With some Dominican guy who's got a gun. What the fuck? Does he *like* giving blow jobs at gunpoint?"

Reuben's brain cramped. "Terry had a gun?"

“No, asshole,” Nero hissed, “the Dominican had the gun. And he tried to shoot me.”

“How do you know he’s Dominican?” Reuben asked—stupid question number two, as it turned out.

“He had the fucking flag tattooed on his hip, that’s how. What the *fuck*, RJ?” Nero was shaking, shivering like a dog, and his eyes were too wide. Maybe it was the light, but his lips were an odd color.

Reuben tucked his gun away for the moment. “Are you okay?”

Nero shook his head, and shit, his color was not good. “No. No, I’m not. I-I-I’m about this c-c-close to—to—” Reuben’s wrist twinged where Nero was still squeezing it. Nero sighed heavily, and then breathed in through his mouth, pressing his other hand to his belly.

Oh shit—Reuben shoved his own hand under Nero’s windbreaker, probing, expecting a wound, not expecting to have his hand slapped away with a curse.

“Not sh-shot,” Nero told him. “P-P—I have panic attacks.” He took another, deeper breath, slower this time, and another. “What the fuck is going on?” He let go of Reuben’s wrist, and Reuben immediately wished he hadn’t. “What the fuck are you guys?”

“FBI,” Reuben said, because, really, what the hell was the difference at this point? “The guy with the gun is Chickie Casero. Terry and I have been after him for almost six months. This... was not the plan.”

Nero laughed, short and sharp, and his lips were their normal tempting shade again. “No shit. What *was* the plan?”

“Terry and I would meet on his boat at one, and then he would go to the guesthouse and meet Casero at three. Casero had a boat coming in around then—except another team was going to intercept that before it got here. Terry would be with Casero the whole time, and I was backup for when we arrested him—once they had the boat.” Reuben hunched his shoulders against the light rain. “If they couldn’t get the boat, or missed it, we wouldn’t do anything. We needed the boat as evidence.”

“Did any part of that plan involve Terry offering sexual favors to Casero?” Nero asked, sounding more like himself.

“No. Terry’s—no.” Terry was straight. Pretty liberal overall, wound maybe a bit tighter than Reuben would say was healthy—and yes, that was a definite pot-and-kettle kind of thing—but a good partner. Steady. And straight. Definitely.

“Then I think we need to get back in there and see what the fuck is going on,” Nero said. “I’m not sure I can handle a gun, but I can watch your back.”

There was no time to ask for clarification on the no-gun part, and Reuben didn’t even think he had the right to ask, not after everything. “Okay,” he said, and took a deep breath. “Back inside.”

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Nero had no idea if the other guests were hiding or had fled, and discovered he didn’t actually care. He and RJ padded through the lobby, listening hard before they crept up the stairs. He kept his breathing steady and deep, reminding himself not to hold his breath. No guarantee he wouldn’t freeze if the shit hit the fan, but no way could he let RJ go in here alone.

RJ flattened against the wall next to room eight, where the ruined door was closed as much as it could be. He bent his head, listening, while Nero went around to the stairs leading to the third floor. Sure enough, when he looked up, he heard the faint murmur of voices overhead. He switched his attention back to RJ, who looked absolutely grim.

RJ turned his head, met Nero’s gaze for a moment, and jerked his head at the stairs. *Get them out*, he mouthed. Nero nodded, and two seconds later he was up the stairs. More disgusting carpet. More flimsy doors. And another set of stairs leading to the roof deck. *That* had access to the metal stairs on the outside of the building, and it also served as a fire escape.

Okay. He tried the door of number ten, and when it opened, he was facing one of the pretty rent boys. Not so pretty close up under fluorescent light, and if this kid was twenty-one, Nero was fifty.

“Go up to the roof,” Nero told him, keeping his voice barely above a whisper, “and use the outside stairs to get out.” It was a measure of how terrified the kid was that he didn’t argue, just finished shoving clothes in a big backpack and fled past Nero into the hall. Number eleven was locked, and Nero rapped softly, trying to remember which rooms had been vacant. No answer. He had the key for twelve, so he moved on to room fourteen, rattling the doorknob. He could hear breathing on the other side, so he leaned in right up against the jamb, murmuring, “Open up.”

The instant the doorknob turned, he shoved inside the room, grabbing Blondie by the arm before he did anything stupid. Across the room, Justin was up against the wall, wide-eyed—fuck, was he wearing eyeliner?



“Get your things,” Nero said, “and go up to the roof. Use the outside stairs—just get away from here, all right?” He let go of Blondie and advanced on Justin. “Do what I said, you hear me? Get to the ferry, go back home—”

“I don’t want—” Justin protested, and Nero nearly slapped him.

“You are sixteen,” Nero growled, too angry to play nice. “Go home, make peace with your *abuela*, and jerk off to porn on your phone for two more years—okay? After that, you’re an adult, do whatever the fuck you want. But you get busted for solicitation now? You are so fucked, and that shit will follow you forever. Got it?”

Blondie shoved a duffle at Justin and grabbed his arm. “I’ll get him home,” he said to Nero, sounding so dead serious it almost might have been the truth.

Nero came out in the hall and saw four more pretty boys flee up the stairs. The other doors were all open now, including the bathrooms, and Nero’s work was done here. He tiptoed down to the second floor... and no RJ outside room eight. Peering around into the stairwell, he caught RJ waving him back down to the lobby.

When Nero reached him, RJ leaned in, keeping his voice low. “Got a text. They didn’t get the boat, but they’re following it in.” Nero nodded, and RJ gestured toward the beachside covered patio area. “We need to watch.”

“Terry?” Nero asked, and RJ’s face turned to stone.

“I could hear him talking. Him and Casero. We don’t do anything until they have the boat.”

Nero settled against the back wall of the Bonfire and checked his phone. How could it only be two thirty in the afternoon? It should be midnight by now. The sky was dark gray, clouds rolling overhead even as the rain let up. Out on the beach, the waves had halved the width of the sand. High tide, or close to. RJ propped himself next to Nero, and after a long bit of silence, he looked over, ducking his head. “Sorry about running out on you,” he mumbled.

“We’re not having this conversation,” Nero told him, staring at the nonexistent horizon. “Now is not a good time.”

“Now is all we have,” RJ growled. “After this—”

“Lights,” Nero said, pointing. “There.” The shitty visibility made it impossible to tell if it was one boat or two, but the lights were moving, bouncing, and getting closer. And closer. “Two,” Nero said. “Definitely two.”

A bigger boat in front, it looked like, and something small and sleek behind that.

“Yeah,” RJ agreed at the same time the smaller boat disappeared behind a bright light—a miniature deck-mounted sun flaring through the light fog. It lit up the boat in front, and also lit up something—a person? Two people?—flinging themselves into the water out of that boat.

“Fuck,” RJ said, and then he said it again, louder. Nero stared at the oncoming lights, wondering why they weren’t stopping, why they were still coming straight at them. *Fuck*. RJ shoved him, and Nero hit some prickly bushes when he dove off the patio, scrambling onto his hands and knees so he could keep running. The boat bounced once, still headed right for the patio.

Nero knew jack shit about boats, but he did watch *Mythbusters*, and he figured the worst thing that would happen was that the Bonfire would end up with a boat in the bar area, because boats exploding only happened in the movies.

Apparently not.

The boat turned into a sliding fireball with a vicious *whump*, and the underside of the patio roof went up in flames. By the time Nero dared turn around and look, the cedar shakes on the inside of the bar were already beginning to burn. There’d been more than enough time for everybody to get out, or at least he fucking hoped so. Oh shit—Terrance.

RJ blew past Nero, running like an NFL receiver who’d caught the ball with five seconds left on the clock. He hit the metal stairway on the side of the building with Nero three steps behind him—if RJ was going in there, so was he. No way could he sit out here, waiting to see if they made it out.

They pounded up one long flight, onto the catwalk that led to the next length of stairs. The only things on this side of the building were the bathrooms—which were in an ugly concrete-block wart, with windows big enough for access to the fire escape. RJ tore the screen out of the second window they came to and climbed inside. He had his gun out the instant both feet were on the floor, and burst out into the hallway. He ran around the inside stairs and hit the door to number eight like a freight train.

Nero’s brain still hadn’t caught up to his body, which turned out to be a good thing. Because when a shot rang out—deafening in the enclosed hallway—and RJ staggered backward, stumbling, Nero’s hand reached out all

on its own and took RJ's gun before it flew off into uselessness. RJ landed flat on the floor, and Nero planted his feet, raised the gun, and emptied the clip into Chickie Casero's chest.

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## Chapter Eight

Taking a round to the chest was a lot like getting hit with a sledgehammer, and it drove all the air out of Reuben's lungs and dropped him on his ass. Right before his head bounced off the rancid carpet he lost his gun somehow, and then he had stars to go with the sparkly gray stuff around the edges of his vision. Nero stepped up next to him—where the fuck did he get the gun?—and fired through the open doorway of number eight.

One, two, three, four, five—Reuben lost count of the shots fired when he tried to breathe. Christ on a crutch—that hurt like fuck, even with the vest. He rolled onto his side, taking shallow breaths, and shoved onto his feet using the wall, clenching his jaw until it creaked. Once Nero stopped firing, he strode into the room and checked Casero for a pulse. Under other circumstances—like, say, Reuben hadn't just been shot at and probably cracked a rib, and the building they were in wasn't on fire—all that calm competence would have had him hard and leaking and ready to beg. Later, if there was a later, it would be something he could recall when he needed to get hard.

For now—"Terry?" he croaked. "Is he in there?"

Terry appeared in the doorway, shirtless and barefoot, with a bruised mouth and a bloody furrow across one shoulder. "We need to take him with us," he said, jerking his head at Casero.

"Fuck no," Reuben said. "Let's go."

"No," Terry snarled. "We need proof he's dead—our luck, he'll burn to a crisp, and then it'll turn out he doesn't have dental records."

"Shut up and go," Nero said, and in one smooth heave he had Casero's body on his shoulder in a fireman's carry. "I got him."

Getting out was harder than getting in. Terry was hurt, enough that he had trouble climbing over the windowsill, and Reuben wasn't any better—he couldn't catch his breath. Nero... Nero dumped the body through the window onto the catwalk and climbed out after it, grunting with effort as he got the body over his shoulder again and got moving. One goddamn flight of stairs might as well have been twenty, and the entire time the heat from the fire kept curling around the side of the guesthouse, instantly drying the sweat on Reuben's skin and threatening to crisp his beard stubble.

The three of them staggered away from the Bonfire Guesthouse, lit by the combined glare of the fire and the searchlight from the other boat. Nero dumped the body in the sand, and made it a few more yards before he leaned on a sofa-sized rock and gingerly sat down.

Even from where he was, Reuben could see he was shaking, shaking *bad*. And for once in his life, he didn't stop and weigh the consequences—he crossed the sand to the man who'd filled more or less every fantasy he'd kept hidden for his entire adult life and sat down next to him, wrapping an arm around his shoulder.

Nero flung him off with a strangled cry, frantically trying to strip off his windbreaker. Reuben helped; the thing was soaked with blood, and so was the T-shirt under it. He took off his own slicker, thinking to wrap it around Nero, who slapped it away.

“No. I—I don't want it.” Nero tugged at Reuben's vest, his hands trembling. “You got shot. We need to check.” He helped Reuben with the Velcro straps on the vest, and the T-shirt under it, dropping both items onto the sand. “I thought he killed you.”

“Just bruised,” Reuben said, catching his hands and drawing him close. “You—”

They ducked their heads as the helicopter slid by overhead, and wrapped their arms around each other, providing shelter from the stinging sand as it landed a ways down the beach. Nero's head rested over Reuben's bruised heart, warm breath on his bare skin and hair blowing against Reuben's cheek. They stayed like that long after the rotors stopped, long after there was any excuse for it.

Someone ran toward them, the letters FBI on their windbreaker reflecting the light and leaving Reuben no doubt what was coming. “Special Agent Martineaux?”

“Yes.”

“Can you come with me?”

Reuben let go of Nero and walked toward the lights.

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## Chapter Nine

Wearing a uniform again was... strange. But good. It took two months, but after that night in Cherry Grove, Nero made himself go to the range again. He'd gone home and thrown up afterward the first time, but he'd requalified, finally. He had a month of desk duty to look forward to now, but that was okay.

Any time the memory of the incident—god, what a lame word—that had landed him on disability threatened, any time the ghostly echo of gunshots in a narrow corridor threatened to shut down his air, he thought about plucking RJ's gun out of his hand and knew with absolute certainty that he had done the right thing, the only thing he could have done—and that the same was true of the gunfight in the apartment complex hallway almost a year ago.

Granted, thinking about anything to do with RJ came with its own baggage, and he'd gotten good at tossing that shit right the fuck out of his head. If RJ had wanted to, he could have called, something, anything, and he hadn't. He'd walked away, and that was it.

Nero parked around the back of his condo and went around, letting himself in the front door. He dropped his duffle on the floor and slid it into the closet with his foot. He had two days off coming, and he'd deal with gym clothes and everything else tomorrow. Tonight was pizza and beer and the first game of the World Series.

He shrugged off his jacket, hung that up, and got out of his uniform shirt and tactical vest right there by the foyer, scratching his belly through his plain white T-shirt. Pepperoni. Pepperoni and extra cheese from Tony's in Rosebank, because the Yankees in the World Series deserved a stellar pie. He could even go pick it up to save time.

The knock on the door had him narrowing his eyes, and he sincerely hoped it wasn't his stalkerish neighbor from across the street, the Latina cougar who thought *gay* was another word for *challenge*. Or *bucket list*. He yanked the door open and just stared at the man on his doorstep. "What are you doing here?"

"Reuben James Martineaux." RJ tucked his Ray-Bans into his suit jacket pocket and stuck his hand out. He'd let his hair grow into a short afro that hugged the lines of his skull, and he'd lost the beard. It was a good look for him. When Nero didn't say anything, RJ dropped his hand and took a deep breath, his dress shirt flattening across his impressive—

“I asked—” Nero said, letting the frustrated anger of nearly four months bubble up, and RJ cut him off.

“We never—I never—introduced myself properly. So I thought I should come here and do that.”

“Really.” Nero swallowed, tasting acid. “Why?” Once the other agent had whisked RJ—Reuben—away on the beach, that was pretty much it. Somebody else took Nero’s statement, at exhaustive length, and did a follow-up interview, but Reuben and Terry more or less disappeared. The only thing he’d been told was that their cover had been compromised, and Casero had planned to blow up the guesthouse with Terry and Reuben in it—thus the amazing exploding boat.

“Because it bothered me that I hadn’t. And... there was something I forgot to do, before. And something I wanted to ask you.” Reuben shifted his focus from a point on Nero’s shoulder to his eyes. “Can I come in for a minute?”

“Fine.” Nero stepped back, let Reuben past him in the boxy little entryway, and closed the door. When he turned around, Reuben was right there. He licked his lips, and the contrast—pink tongue, darker lips, and even darker skin—sent a rush of unwelcome heat down through Nero’s groin. “What did you forget?”

Reuben kissed him. A little hesitation, one heartbeat of them exchanging breaths before their lips met, parted more, wider, so their tongues could dance around each other before sliding all the way inside. Nero tasted spearmint, and inhaled citrus and musk off Reuben’s skin. Without breaking the kiss, he shoved Reuben against the wall and then caught his wrists and pinned them over his head. Reuben’s groan was everything he wanted to hear and—what the fuck was he doing?

Nero pulled back, and Reuben said, running the words together, “I came out to my parents. I went to see them and I told them that I—”

Nero kissed him for that, for being brave enough to be honest, and then pulled away again, letting go of Reuben’s wrists. “I’m glad, I am, but—”

“I transferred to the New York field office. After... Fire Island, we were golden, so I asked. And here I am.”

Nero took a step back. “Please tell me you didn’t do it for me, because that...” He shook his head, stomach churning with a queasy mix of yearning and oh-hell-no. “It’s not a good idea.” He didn’t know if he liked the crooked way Reuben grinned at him, brown eyes very warm.

“I wanted to go someplace and start over. And I thought you might be able to help me do that. Maybe it won’t... work. I wanted to try, though.” He

shrugged, and Nero's body made a decision before his head did. He reached out and slid the suit jacket off RJ's shoulders, folding it over the back of a chair.

"Couple questions," Nero said, running his hands over the smooth fabric of the dress shirt before he slowly drew Reuben's wrists up over his head again. "First—" He set his mouth to the skin under Reuben's ear, licking his pulse and feeling it jump under his tongue. "—do you like baseball?"

"Dodgers fan, but I like the Yankees, too." Reuben shifted his feet, spread them, and now Nero could press closer, brush their cocks together.

"Pizza toppings?"

"If I say sausage, broccoli, and pineapple, will you still fuck me?" Reuben breathed in sharply, moaning once when Nero ground up against him again.

Nero laughed against his skin. "On the same pie? Really?"

"Really. Nero—please." Reuben curled his hands into fists and slumped down the wall, humping up into Nero. "Please."

"Maybe I need you to beg for it," Nero growled, and oh god, he was hard, flexing inside his briefs, the damp head catching on the fabric. "Maybe I need to see how bad you want it. Can you do that?" He looked down, and hissed when he saw the damp spot on Reuben's slacks, the outline of his erection stark under the lightweight brown wool. "Go into the bedroom," he said, stepping back and jerking his chin toward the doorway next to the galley kitchen.

Reuben went, unbuckling his belt and unzipping as he crossed the threshold, stepping out of his shoes at the same time. Nero paused in the doorway to unzip his boots, watching as Reuben's pants and briefs hit the floor, followed by his socks. While Reuben crawled up onto the foot of the bed, still in his dress shirt, Nero shucked his pants, briefs, and socks, and peeled off his white T-shirt.

Naked, he went to the nightstand and took out condoms and lube, running an appreciative hand over Reuben's bare ass as he went by. He tossed the supplies on the bed and tapped Reuben's hip. "Feet on the floor for now. Chest on the bed."

God, he looked amazing like that—muscled thighs spread, the hard curves of his ass tipped up and partly hidden by the shirt. His balls were drawn up, and Nero ran a finger down Reuben's cleft, over his taint, and fondled the tight bundle, rubbing up between his balls and making Reuben squirm.

"I wake up hard," Reuben said, his voice muffled by his arms, "thinking about you inside me. I-I bought a toy—oh god—"



Nero speared him again with his lubed-up little finger. “As big as me?”

“Yes. No. Almost.” The shirt strained across Reuben’s shoulders.

“Let’s get that off you,” Nero murmured. “Stand up and unbutton the shirt. Not the cuffs,” he warned. He wiped the lube on his fingers over his own aching balls before he smoothed his free hand up Reuben’s back under the loosened dress shirt. Then he slid the shirt off, over the smoothly muscled shoulders, turning the sleeves inside out and leaving Reuben’s hands trapped inside. As he wound the fabric in his hands he could hear Reuben panting. “Bend over,” Nero said, humming under his breath as Reuben did just that. “Get comfortable, this’ll take a while.”

A little lube, a condom, more lube—Nero slid his cock along Reuben’s ass, ignoring Reuben’s moan, and then prodded his hole with the fat, blunt tip. The resistance was sweet, so was the instant give when Nero moved with more insistence. Not easy, no, still tight; Nero still had to push, firmly ease his way forward while trying not to hear the sounds Reuben made into the comforter. The way Reuben bent his knees and writhed backward, trying for more, had Nero clenching his teeth and thinking about whether he’d programmed the DVR for tonight’s game.

He wasn’t going to last, not with the needy way Reuben was rocking, so he grabbed Reuben’s hips and held him still. “No moving. Not yet.” More lube in his palm, and he planted his clean left hand on Reuben’s lower back and reached under them with the other. One slow stroke, just spreading the lube all over, and another one, not even squeezing, skimming over the veiny shaft and exploring the ridge around the head with his thumb and forefinger. He could almost feel Reuben’s heart thudding, and the little contractions around his own cock, buried to the base, made him want to forget about teasing Reuben and just go, pound him until they both howled.

When Reuben whimpered, rising up onto his toes the least bit, Nero slid his left hand back so he could use his thumb to rub where they were joined, where Reuben was stretched around him.

“Tell me,” Nero said, pitching his voice so low it was a growl. “What do you want?” He swiveled his hips a tiny bit, and Reuben’s cock leapt in Nero’s fist.

“Move,” Reuben snarled—but he stayed still under Nero’s hands.

“Like this?” Nero rocked forward and back, more or less in place, and Reuben pressed his face into the bedding. “Or like this?” Nero gave Reuben one pump, fingers almost lax.

“Fuck. Me.” Reuben went up on his toes. “Fuck me. I want to feel you take my ass, I want you to make me come, you don’t even need to touch my dick, oh fuck, oh yes—” The rest was nothing but a drawn-out moan as Nero grabbed his hips and pulled back, thrust in as far as he could and did it again. Fast at first, slapping their bodies together, balls swinging with the impact, then a little faster—too fast, if the twist of Reuben’s hips and the higher pitch of his moan was anything to go by.

A little longer like that, until Reuben was panting, nearly sobbing. “Please, please, I need you to—I want—I need to—”

Nero checked his next thrust, his own balls hot and angry at the delay, a thunderstorm brewing somewhere deep at the base of his spine. Forward, then, an unhurried push instead of a thrust, rubbing deliberately past the bump he could just about feel—aiming now, making sure he hit the target absolutely right. Reuben arched his back and yelled into the mattress, his ass clamping down around Nero to just this side of painful. Nero went balls deep and shuddered, an electric chill racing down his back and exploding into red fire and white lights, his own ass clenching as he filled the condom.

His legs shook, threatening to give out, but he stayed buried in Reuben’s twitching body until his cock wilted while he untangled the shirt and freed Reuben’s hands. Then he staggered back, catching the condom before it slid off and tossing it in the direction of the trash. They crawled up onto the bed at the same time, pushing the comforter down with their feet before Nero grabbed it, drawing it over them.

It was only awkward for a second, and then Reuben rolled over so Nero could spoon behind him. “Thank you,” Reuben whispered.

Nero kissed his shoulder, and they both shivered. “Better than a toy?”

Reuben snorted. “No comparison.”

“Mmm. You’ll have to show me.” Nero found the trail of hair just below Reuben’s navel and rubbed his palm over it, enjoying the rasp of the tiny tight curls on his skin. He sighed. “You’re sure you want to—”

“You saved my life,” Reuben said softly. “Saved me *from* my life.”

“So this is a pity fuck?” Nero asked, trying hard to keep things light and thinking he really sucked at it.

“Terry has a husband,” Reuben said then, and Nero’s ears and brain took a moment to process that total non sequitur. “They’ve been married for four

years. Nobody knew. They... they kept it a total secret. But after? Terry needed to get tested because... Casero didn't use a condom. And then—then his husband, Richard, had a total freak-out because Terry told the doctor that it wasn't—" Reuben's ribcage expanded as he took a deep breath. Let it out slowly. "I was so angry at Terry. For not—for lying to me. For not trusting me. And how stupid was that?"

Nero closed his eyes and rested his chin on Reuben's solid shoulder. "I figure, straight people don't go around *saying* they're straight, right? I mean, out loud. But everybody knows they're straight because of who they're with. I don't go around telling everybody I'm gay, but I won't lie—I've never said I went on a date with a woman instead of a man if somebody asked. So yeah, I think I'd be pissed too."

"Right now," Reuben said, capturing Nero's wandering hand before it ventured further south, "I want to see how it goes dating a man. For real. Okay?"

"Okay." Nero kissed Reuben's neck, nuzzling behind his ear and discovering the texture of the short hair on his head—soft and coarse at the same time. "So what was the thing you said you wanted to ask me?"

"Oh." Reuben laughed silently, his belly quaking under Nero's hand. "I was going to ask you out on a date. Like, out to dinner. See how that went before we—you know." Nero laughed out loud, a surprised bark, and Reuben snorted. "Yeah." Reuben rolled backward, leaning into Nero. "I couldn't call you. Before this. Not until the case was closed. That's why I waited. Not because I didn't want to see you."

"Well," Nero said, propping himself up on one elbow. Reuben rolled all the way onto his back, smiling a little, and raised his eyebrows. Nero leaned down and kissed him, because he could. "How about we go pick up some pizza, and then we can watch the first game of the Series from the comfort of my sofa?" He grinned. "And for our first date, you can take me out for breakfast tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's Wednesday. I have to go to work." Reuben's answering grin was very wide and very white. "So... would making you coffee and picking up donuts in the morning count?"

"Absolutely." It was a start.

**The End**

## Author Bio

*J.J. Cassidy is counting the days until retirement, looking forward to being able to write full time without that pesky day job. She is a terrible blogger, and only posts anything when the guilt gets too much. She has two stories available through Dreamspinner Press, Wish List and Not Water Resistant, and two others through Amazon, All Romance eBooks, and her website—Handsome Beast and Dark Mirror. She also has another Love is an Open Road story, In the Court of the Forgotten, a fantasy featuring two hot Fae-Elvish twins and a Satyr. Her previous Don't Read in the Closet stories—Hard Dazed Knight, Complicated, and Dreaming of Fire, are all available for free through the M/M Romance Group's anthologies. She is always happy to hear from readers.*

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