

# Big Enough for Five

Willa Okati



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## Chapter One

Sometimes, life can be free and easy at "PrideWorks Publications". Nobody at the small gay and lesbian e-publishing house *has* to work on Saturdays, especially in the mornings. Marcus, AKA "The Boss", gets the whole weekend concept. People like to sleep in, sleep it off, read the paper, go to the mall or a park or a movie. Besides, there's plenty of times he'd just as soon stay downstairs in his apartment where it's cozy, crowded and warm, indulging in... the finer things.

Anyway, no one's required to come in between Friday night and Monday morning. They're mostly good at disregarding normal hours anyway. But somehow, it always happens.

One by one, like stragglers on the Ark, they drift in and make themselves at home. There's reasons. It's lonely where they are, or there's no action on the streets. Maybe they're looking for a ride to the shops, or it could be they just stayed there and worked the night through.

Or they slept downstairs. Like Marcus, Ryan, Baz or Aidan.

One Saturday morning down below, Ryan crawls out from under the embroidered duvet in a bed he's still getting used to, opens one sleepy eye, and can already tell it's happened again. The alarm clock glares a baleful "9:00" at him, and he's pretty sure that's not P.M. He can smell the richness and slightly burned taint of Madison's coffee drifting down the stairwell, along with a hint of sugar and cinnamon that suggests she stopped off for pastries. Enrico, their token straight man, is talking quietly to someone – Marcus? – and he hears the creak of what has to be Nicholas on his stepladder, getting a beat-up volume down from the highest top shelf in the office library.

Ryan crawls – hell, nearly *swims*, this bed is huge – to the edge of the mattress and swings his legs over. No worries about cold toes; the floor's padded with thick rugs that send your soles to heaven. Blearily, he bats at the alarm clock so it won't go off later and wake anyone else up.

That is, if he's not the only one left. A glance over his shoulder at the various tangles of sheets and covers, lumps and bumps, and he spies one body still fast asleep in there, hugged tight to the wall under a heating vent. Baz. Ryan's first lover, and in many ways, his favorite. Poor guy, he looks pitiful. Did he get cold when Ryan rolled away in his sleep? That's unusual. Baz has more arms and legs than a squid has tentacles when he really wants to latch on. They must have passed out before the customary death lock.

It's an arduous trek back over the soft squishiness of the bed, but Ryan makes the sacrifice, kicking duvet out of the way in his travels. He'll make the thing up later. Maybe rope Aidan into helping. He'll complain, but end up helping. Ryan doesn't even think

about asking the others because it's *so* not worth it. He's learned the hard way. Bitching from Baz and woeful put-upon looks from Marcus. Ugh.

Speaking of bitching, bitches, and the bitch-ee in question... Ryan folds himself up Indian-style at Baz's feet and lifts them into his lap. Oh, the temptation to tickle... but a quick eyeballing calculates the first thrashing kick would catch him square in his nose. No thanks. Beside, he has better things in mind.

He runs one finger up the length of a lithely muscled, tanned leg, over the fine frosting of dark-brown hair. It's growing back in nicely. He thinks Baz has almost forgiven Madison for just "testing" out her new "it's painless, really - I just want to get the consumer reaction first" leg wax, and, well...

Baz could be really, really loud at certain times. Ryan didn't realize anyone had that much lung-power. He'd scared off an ad man from a full floor down.

Good legs, Ryan decides, sliding his finger up to the thigh. Baz twitches slightly, murmuring something. "Sleepyhead," Ryan whispers. "Hey, you, snoozing the day away..."

Baz groans. "Unless that's Ryan, you're getting your ass kicked."

"It's me and you know it." One finger becomes a full palm splayed out on Baz's thigh, and is joined by a matching hand on his other leg. Balancing himself thus, Ryan leans forward and nudges at the covers over Baz's head with nose and chin. "Hey, Sleeping Beauty. C'mon. I want a good-morning kiss."

"No, what you want is a kick in the nuts," Baz grumbles. His face emerges, squinty-eyed in the near-darkness. "It's not even ten a.m., and on a Saturday? That's a crime."

"So? When has the time of day ever stopped you from getting up and taking what you want?"

"Well, it hasn't ever, really," Baz admits. "I was just having the most lovely dreams. You and me in New Orleans on a nice warm summer night..."

Ryan kisses him softly, mouths closed, sweet touches across his lips. "Sounds great," he murmurs as he withdraws.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

"Me?" Ryan gives Baz his patented innocent stare. "I'm hungry. I was thinking breakfast."

"I'll show you breakfast," Baz growls. An arm snakes around Ryan's waist and pulls him down flush against Baz's body. He thrusts up, letting Ryan feel a morning erection hard in the crease of his hip. His grin is savage. "How would you like some of that instead?"

Ryan undulates against him. "I'd love some, and you know it." He kisses Baz again, mouths open this time. Baz's tongue sweeps his palate, cat-licking over his lips. He makes such a satisfied noise that Ryan has to ask:

"What the hell, Baz? Am I suddenly made of chocolate or something?"

"Nah." Baz lies back on the pillow and reaches up to card his fingers through Ryan's hair, fingering the long, tousled locks tipped with purple. "It's just the taste of you. Last night's toothpaste and pure Ryan." He pushes his erection gently against Ryan a second time. "No Aidan, no Marky-Mark, just you and me. You know how good that feels, how much I love it, love you..." Through with being gentle, he grabs Ryan's hips and grinds against him in the best, nastiest way imaginable.

When the little birdies stop flying around Ryan's head, he takes Baz by the shoulders and kisses him back with all his might. "Glad you like it."

"Best of all."

"But don't you lie to me, mister. How many times have I seen you searching for Aidan's tonsils? Let's not even mention what I've seen you do with Marcus. It looks like you're fucking his mouth with your tongue."

Baz subsides a little. "Well, yeah," he grumbles. "Our package deal isn't all bad."

"You love the other guys too and you know it."

Baz gives a heavy sigh. "Fine, I love them, but I adore you." He presses a hard kiss on Ryan's mouth. "God's honest truth."

"Yep." Ryan smirks, pecks Baz's lips in return, rolls his hips just enough to tease, then bounces back up on his heels.

"Hey! I thought we'd had this out about you taking off. Where do you think you're going now?"

"Well, you reminded me about our better halves. I should go say good morning to them too, you know."

Baz gives a heartfelt groan. "God, Ryan —"

"Tell you what. If you're up for it, meet me back here in fifteen minutes."

"Up, he asks? When I could damn well pound rocks?"

"So stay that way. I'll be back in fifteen." Ryan starts crawling out again. Hell, this really is a journey going the long way. Maybe he should start tucking pouches of trail mix behind the headboard. Nice and ornate, good for tying things to. All sorts of things.

He can still remember, like he'll ever forget, the day they bought that bed. Baz gleefully bounced on mattresses to test them – "Got to have good springs, love! How else you gonna know?" while Aidan hid behind a pillar declaring that no, he didn't know that guy. Ryan stood with a boggling saleslady and earnestly discussed standard versus adjustable. Marcus just sighed, bribed the manager not to have Baz arrested, and bought the biggest damn bed since the days of the French kings. Room for four and plenty left over.

Of course he'd had a fit when they got home over its cost and the likely price of sheets that would need constant replacing. So they'd smeared him with jelly, utterly destroyed the cracked and crowding bed they were getting rid of, and as soon as the deliverymen were gone convinced him how much better extra leg room really was.

Ryan licks his lips, remembering. Now those were the good old days. A couple of months ago, wasn't it?

He carries on, lingering to inhale the scent of Aidan's cologne and Marcus's soap on their pillowcases. Baz whines all the while, but Ryan just laughs at him.

When he reaches the edge, he slides off, twists, and looks back, his dark eyes nearly gleaming. "I want you so ready when I get back here."

"Fucking tease," Baz mutters. Still, he's already stretched languorously out in the covers, petting his upright cock with an easy hand. Ryan swallows hard at the sight of all that beauty on display, then backs away. *Plan, Ryan. Stick to the plan.*

A few feet away from Bed Heaven, he starts to hear the shower running. He's definitely heard Marcus upstairs, so it must be Aidan in there. Ryan's smile turns sly. Perfect.

He snicks the door open just a crack and peeks in. Yep, it's Aidan - his back turned, one hand resting on the wall. At Ryan's insistence, they'd gutted the old tub-and-stall and turned this one room into a mostly open shower space with four separate jets close enough together to have your own jet stream and still reach for someone else. Just like the one at the gym, but so much better, and they *\*did\** usually come there after good old fashioned exercising.

Aidan's propped under the showerhead in the corner. Water must be blocking his ears, because he doesn't seem to hear Ryan tiptoeing up behind him. What's that other hand doing? Ryan wonders. Is it up to no good? A man can always hope...

Then, he sees that the hand braced on the wall is white-knuckled, the arm shaking. Aidan's wide hazel eyes stare at nothing, focused inward on an attack of pain.

"Shit!" Ryan yelps. A migraine. He manages to jump forward just before Aidan drops hard and fast. Steaming water mocks them now with pseudo-comfort, pelting off their skins as he cradles his lover and murmurs nonsense to him. "It'll be okay, baby, just hang on..."

It was moments like this that had brought them together when Baz and Ryan first arrived on the coast. Baz and Marcus had known each other way back in their college party days, and there wasn't any love lost between them. Still, Marcus had a successful gay publishing business rocketing off the ground, they knew he was looking for help, and where better to go?

During the middle of the huge Fighty McFight that involved Baz explaining how things would be better if Marcus would just stop yelling and let bygones be bygones, the quiet, all arms-and-legs, plainish man standing by Marcus's desk had suddenly gasped, grabbed his head, and gone down.

Ryan still doesn't know how he was quick enough to catch him, just that he did. If he hadn't, Aidan would have bashed his head on the desk's edge as he fell towards the floor. Every time he thinks about it, his blood pressure ratchets up and not in a good way.

Once Aidan had recovered from the first burst of pain, there'd been shy smiles, and thanks. One glance of his from beneath the man's eyelashes and Ryan was *gone*, even if he didn't know it yet. He was just glad that his move warded off Marcus's wrath, and eventually, in gratitude, got them jobs and a place to stay.

Days had come, nights had gone, and he began to share more time with Aidan. He learned about how much the man longed for more than just a working relationship with his boss. Shy about that, more often Aidan told Ryan stories of a hard life and a rough coming out that had them reaching for a beer to share in sympathy. When the headaches came, sudden sharp bursts of pain that made him lose his balance, Ryan caught him before he fell.

Nothing happened for weeks. Ryan wouldn't cheat on Baz. Aidan wouldn't betray what he felt for Marcus. Then there had come the day of a really bad headache, when Baz had come across the two of them on the floor. Ryan hadn't noticed him, focused on rocking Aidan like a baby, nursing him through the worst of a real noggin-splitter.

Baz had kneeled beside them, and run his hand down Aidan's arm. "It's okay," he'd said quietly. "Once Ryan's got you, he'll take good care of you."

Ryan had looked up in panic. "Baz – no – I haven't, I don't –"

"Shhhhhh." Baz pressed his finger, then his lips, over Ryan's. "It's all right. I know. You've been true to me. You still love me, for whatever reason you loved me in the first place, bastard that I am."

"Baz, listen —"

"Shush, now. I know you love Aidan. Your heart's so big, you can't help it. Whether he'll admit it or not, he loves you too, and neither of us want to lose you. I had a chat with him the other day, only he's too bashful to blurt it out —"

"I'll kill you, Baz," came a groggy murmur from the man in Ryan's arms.

"Later, if you like." Baz kissed Ryan again, lingering sweetly. "Neither of us have to lose you. What comes next just depends on what you think of... sharing."

Ryan had swallowed, hard.

After the shock wore off and he learned what it meant to be devoured by two mouths at once, have two sets of hands on him in love and lust, and (ka-ching!) a total of three cocks to play and be played with... he'd thought himself the luckiest man alive.

He snaps back to the present as Aidan shivers, letting out a dry sob. "It's okay, it's okay, baby," he soothes. "I've got you."

Shaky nod.

"One of the worst yet, huh?" Ryan guesses. He fumbles above them for the spigot, to turn off the now-cooling water. Aidan shudders. He can't manage words yet, just a nod of the head as he buries his face in Ryan's chest. Ryan holds him close, kissing the soaking strands of his hair, gently rocking him back and forth.

They can't stay there for long. Aidan's already shivering from the cold. "Can you stand?" Ryan asks. "Walk?"

Somehow they get Aidan to his feet and over to the vanity. "We look like drowned rats," he says shakily when he catches a glimpse of them in the mirror.

"And you care since when?" Ryan teases. He finds a towel, vast and soft and fluffy. Thank God Marcus insisted on those, when he and the others would have just bought the bulk lot at a thrift store because thinner's better for snapping and starting towel-fights. These are almost like blankets. Stroking gently, he gets the water off Aidan's skin and watches it start to pink back up.

"Back to bed with you, mister," he scolds, with a light swat to Aidan's ass that turns into a caress. He runs the flat of his other palm down the man's sternum and lightly over his cock, which begins to rise.



Aidan's soft groans turn into a laugh. "You're killing me here."

"Not yet, and only if you're good." Ryan pulls Aidan's face to his for a deep, lingering kiss. "Go back to bed. Baz is still in there. Make him cuddle you until I get back. Tell him I'll punish him by refusing to punish him, whatever you have to do."

Both laugh, if softly. They know Baz puts up a front, but once he sees Aidan hurting this way, Aidan will be lucky to get out of bed before dark without Baz's Internal Nurse throwing a fit.

Aidan totters to the door, then glances back over his shoulder. "You're coming too, right?"

"In a minute," Ryan reassures him. "I'm going to go talk to Marcus first."

Aidan nods and heads off. In deference to Madison's sensibilities and so he doesn't have to listen to Enrico hooting, Ryan throws on a pair of sweatpants. No bothering with a T-shirt, though. Let only he who has no muscle tone be afraid to show it off.

Still, Madison drops a bite of fat-free bagel into her coffee when she sees him bolt up the stairs two at a time. She dabs at the beige splashes on her white blouse and makes noises that promise No Good. "Jesus, Ryan!"

Nicholas, another member of their team, mostly hidden behind a local gay newspaper, lowers it a bit. "Madison, count your blessings. At least he did wear pants this time."

"Small blessings," Enrico gibes. Ryan flips them all off as he makes for Marcus's office.

At the sound of pounding feet approaching, Marcus has already erupted out of his desk chair and headed for the door. They almost collide on the threshold. His eyes are huge and worried. "Aidan?"

"Migraine."

"A bad one?"

"Bad enough. I caught him."

Marcus's palm skims down Ryan's arm. A brief kiss is pressed to the underside of his jaw. "You always do," he whispers.

Whistles and catcalls come from the office area. "Keep it in the bedroom, you two!" Madison complains.

"Oh, now you went and said it. After that, where you think they're gonna head?"

Nicholas blinks calmly. "Aidan's ill again?"

"Yep. Marcus, you go on ahead, he's –"

Marcus hesitates. "There's a lot of things to do for this week's releases..."

Madison flicks up an irritated glance. "Oh, please. As if we can't handle some editing and file stripping. We all know what you four are inevitably going to end up doing now –"

"And to whom," Nicholas mutters, nose-deep in his paper.

"And loudly," Enrico snorts.

"So go!" Madison flaps a hand at him. "But for the love of God, put the soundproofing flap over your door this time!"

If Marcus was a blusher, he'd be red as Ryan is. They exchange very guilty looks... then realize they've been given a free pass for the morning – hell, the afternoon. So what exactly are they waiting on?

In a flash they're heading down the stairs, forgetting the flap, Ryan's right on Marcus's heels. He can feel the concern for Aidan rolling off the older man in waves, and his heart reaches out to him. Just as Aidan had always longed for Marcus, Marcus had always longed for Aidan, and he'd been just as stubborn about not admitting it, while his yearning was perhaps even stronger.

Getting Marcus to accept their group, much less be in the middle of it, wasn't easy. Those are the bad memories. Marcus finding the three of them tumbled in a heap like puppies, and the look on his face when Aidan struggled up out of the middle. The arguments. Aidan's tears when he couldn't take it any more. Baz's fist through a wall.

There came a time when they'd said nothing for days. Then, the three lovers began to feel Marcus's eyes following them around in a different way... first on Aidan, with as much longing as ever, but now with hope. At Ryan, with reluctant admiration and the beginnings of curious desire. Between himself and Baz, their mutual dislike changing into a slow-burning heat.

Then, one night, there came a cool hand on Ryan's ankle as he, Baz and Aidan snuggled up, for once too worn out from a hard day's work for sex, just content to sleep in each other's arms. They'd all looked up to see Marcus, tired beyond words, reaching out to them in the only way that he could.

It was Ryan, as ever, who'd broken the tension by reaching back. "Come here," he'd said softly. And Marcus had come.

They hadn't gone for the full sex experience at first. Not for a while. There was too much between them to overcome. But there was touching, yes, and stroking, suckling, Marcus' re-learning what another hand felt like on his cock. Fear of jinxing their tentative truce kept orgasm at bay until the night when, with Aidan at his mouth and Ryan at his cock and Baz behind him, Marcus had shouted, spasmed and come hard enough to nearly crack his spine in two.

After that, it hadn't been easy, but each day had been better.

Now, life is pure gravy.

They're almost at the bottom of the stairs when Marcus pauses to turn to Ryan. "You're sure he's OK?" He touches Ryan's face, stroking with the ball of his thumb. Ryan kisses it softly as it passes. "You too?"

"I'm fine." He leans over to kiss Marcus the way he's wanted since they collided upstairs. "Waiting for you. We all are."

The ghost of a wicked smile flitters across Marcus's face.  
"Naked?"

"It's Baz and Aidan. What do you think?"

"I think I'm lucky you bothered with the sweatpants."

Ryan presses up against him. "I don't know about that. Maybe unlucky?"

Marcus's eyes dilate at the pressure of erection against erection. He reaches around to squeeze the taut mounds of Ryan's ass. "Not for long," he rumbles. Then he pulls the basement door open. "Get in there."

"Hah!" Ryan slaps him lightly on the back of the head. "Tag team!"

He bolts away, swan-diving into the middle of that glorious bed. Baz and a slightly-pale Aidan, the pain looking to be mostly gone - Baz will have seen he's swallowed a good dose of painkillers - are laughing at their eagerness. And would you look at that, wandering hands already. Bad boys. They'll have to be punished... but hey, there go the hands wandering over him, and one of them is Marcus', so maybe he'll put off being bad and just be very, very good for right now.

The slam of the soundproofing flap is the last thing Ryan's clear on before they lose themselves in each other. That and Madison's shouted obscenity that would raise blisters on a basilisk.

But that doesn't matter, when there's so much of so many good things, all right here for the taking...

\* \* \*

He was wrong, earlier, Ryan thinks as he wraps around his sated, snoozing better thirds and lavishes all the love he has to give on them with gentle kisses and pats. This – this is heaven.

Curling into Marcus's shoulder, Baz's arm thrown over his waist, and Aidan's head resting on his chest - life couldn't be better.

But there is one thing...

Ryan's been thinking lately, about the others at PrideWorks. Madison? Frequently annoyed with their antics when she's all business, but she tolerates their group because deep down, she loves them. Besides, the first outsider to complain would get a designer shoe upside the head.

Enrico? Straight but open-minded, casual about who he fucks and when, not really into relationships. He's in the business because he believes in what they're doing, providing good literature to a community that needs it and those that like reading about it. So far as he cares, you can fuck whoever you want whenever you want. Just stick by him and he'll stick by you. Enrico's a good guy that way.

But then there's Nicholas... and that's a different story.

He's changed since they first met him, a shiny new graduate with a Ph.D. in Literature, green as grass, shy as hell, never exposed to the world outside academia. Ever since being in the trenches he's slowly learned how to be casual, and looks all the better for it.

More, Ryan's noticed that when Nicholas is meant to be reading manuscripts, sometimes he's watching the four of them... and there's a look of loneliness and longing on his face that a blind man could read.

The others have seen it, too. They've talked. Haven't quite come around to it yet, but admitted it might not be a bad idea.

After all, a bed this size?

It's big enough for five...

## Chapter Two

The office of "PrideWorks Publications" has that end-of-a-party feel to it: cluttered, finished and done with. Shoes lie abandoned here and there as their owners have kicked them off; here a pair of stiletto heels, there a battered set of sneakers with "Ryan's Worst Pair" inked across their backs. A couple of coats lie in empty, abandoned heaps by the door. It's been a hell of a day, launching five e-books by authors both familiar and new, filled with last-minute emergencies and not thinking they'd make it on time. But made it they had, and now it's time to celebrate.

Faint rattling noises from the kitchen below their office signal the resident horde of monsters, otherwise known as the PrideWorks team, picking over the bones of a well-earned pizza feast.

All of them, that is, except Nicholas.

Too tired for dinner, he's begged off after trying, and failing, to consume a slice of Ryan's favored horrific pineapple pizza. Rather than stay for polite conversation and watching them all eat in comfortable company, he came back upstairs for a bit of peace and quiet, not so much minding the dejected air of the place... truly.

Alone, he's collapsed on the sofa with a Styrofoam cup of tea in his hand, and has absolutely no plans of getting up any time soon. Perhaps sometime next week he'll be able to move again, if he's lucky.

If only he'd been hungry - but no, he couldn't have stomached a bite. His stomach rolls at the thought of greasy cheese, dripping red sauces and dense crusts. They'd ordered a myriad of toppings to suit a variety of palates, but none of them his own.

He doesn't know what he's craving.

No... He does. Not food. Not tonight.

He hears noises from down below: the scraping of chairs back away from tables, and the rustle of coats being slung over shoulders. The party, with Madison and Enrico invited downstairs as well, appears to be breaking up. Is it time for him to go, then? If he heads home, he could download files to his laptop and examine the new submissions that have come in that day. He's been put in charge of a new line, a great honor, and he wants to do the company proud. The company... and Marcus.

While he's pondering this, Madison and Enrico come up the stairs, all sharp jibes and good-natured teasing. "Ride home, lady?" Enrico jingles his keys at Madison.

She arches her eyebrows and taps one stockinged foot. "It depends. Do I get shotgun?"

"Now *that* depends on how good you treat me."

Madison locates her heels in the tangle by the door and slips them on, groaning slightly. "Remind me again why I wear these?"

"Cause you gotta be Action-Hero Barbie," Enrico says just as Nicholas volunteers, "Your mission: to keep the world provided with lesbian literature, stylishly?"

She flashes them both an irritated look. "Okay, that's it. Last joke at Madison's expense tonight. Enrico, you're taking me home."

"Never said I wouldn't." The darker man turns easily to Nicholas. "You want a lift, too? Be a tight squeeze but I think we can all fit in the front."

He shouldn't ask, but... "Why all in the front?"

"My collection of burger meal toys is arranged in the back."

Nicholas blinks, trying to envision that. After a moment, his brain gives up. It's tempting to run away from reminders of the cozy scene below, but... "No," he demurs at last. There's a comfort to the workplace that bests his Spartan apartment. Besides, if he's to be wakeful - and he's certain of that - he might as well get some real work accomplished. And he *can* do that best here...

Enrico shrugs. "Your loss. Coulda let you ride the middle over the gearshift."

"As much fun as that sounds, I'll have to decline." Nicholas favors them with a tired grin. "Run along. I'll see you here tomorrow."

"That's for sure." Madison tosses her hair back over her shoulders in an auburn fall. "I mean, do you ever leave?"

Not as often as he should. That, however, is his own affair.

The two clatter out, noisy and laughing. Nicholas watches them go, a little envious of their odd but genuine friendship. He'd like to be that close, to either of them, really, but there's something indefinable there, the thinnest of small wedges, that keeps him separated from 'Lady M' and Enrico.

He takes a sip of his tea, and makes a face. It's gone cold, sliding thick and syrupy over his tongue and bringing up his gorge. Foul. Very well, that's it then. He'll start the office coffeepot to going and log some hours on his office machine with submissions.

Madison's forgotten to turn off her preferred office laptop. Likely it's been on all night. Her database of authors and titles is up and running, waiting for him to access it. Too tempting by far.

A little awkwardly, not a graceful man no matter how he might wish it, he gets up from the couch and puts his tea aside. He prepares the coffeemaker with water and grounds and flicks the switch on. A good, familiar routine.

Next he heads over to his desk, snagging Madison's laptop on the way, where a little cross-checking leads him to investigating similar ideas done before, which leads him to hotlinks on the web with different companies, which leads him to...

He's not sure how much time passes. Minutes, hours? There's a vague awareness of continuing noise from the basement apartment, but nothing of a loud crash-and-bash nature that would indicate a need for help or the desire to turn down the soundproofing flap, cover his ears and hum. It's peaceful here.

If lonely.

But he'll not think of that just now. Better to get lost in the words on his screen.

A heavy tread signals Marcus's approach up the stairs. Nicholas scarcely notices, lost as he is in his work. The Nordic-fair man gives him an odd, *oh, it's you?* look, then a slight smile and a nod.

It barely registers. Nicholas is studying the screen very intently, examining each phrase and bit of dialogue in a promising piece with laser-keen acuity. He is deliberately not looking back at Marcus. He is not thinking of Marcus's presence in the office with him. Not thinking about being alone together. He is not.

For his part Marcus's starts moving about, picking up leftover detritus. Picking up a fichus plant Ryan knocked over, wiping down some spilled coffee grounds, and pushing desk chairs back in. He hesitates at Nicholas's tea.

"Do you want this?" he asks hesitantly, holding it up.

Nicholas allows himself a shake of the head and keeps his eyes focused on the screen.

"Ah." Marcus casts about for a place to dump the liquid and finally, with a shrug, pours it over the roots of the much-abused fichus. "I guess that won't kill it."

Moving past, Marcus pauses by the computer chair, briefly peeking over Nicholas's shoulder. He frowns. "You're working? This late?"

"Someone has to do it." That comes out a bit more sharply than he intended. Nicholas rubs at his eyes. "I apologize, Marcus. That was uncalled for."

"It's all right." Marcus reaches out to pat his shoulder. "Look, you're worn out. Why don't you... um, stay here tonight? There's plenty of room."

His generosity warms and alarms Nicholas. It's too... he shouldn't... "I might," he says slowly. "I believe I'm onto something here. We may be looking at a hot new author with truly original ideas. I want to cross-check some things."

"Oh. Good." Marcus nods, looking uncertain. "Lots of room for you. Just don't work all night."

"Don't fear, I won't." Marcus' broad hand is still resting on his shoulder. He resists the urge to shrug it off, or to pull it closer, and smiles up instead. "I suggest you return to your harem. They'll be wondering where you've gotten to."

"I could stay. Keep you company."

"Thank you, Marcus, but I think I'm best left alone with the task at hand. I mean - I'll call if I need you." Why, oh, why can't Marcus leave? Go back to his lovers and their comfortable nest. Permit Nicholas his needed peace of mind.

"Oh." Again, the slightly disappointed look. "If you're sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Okay. Just... well..." Marcus rubs the back of his neck and shrugs. "I think a lot of you, Nicholas."

Nicholas doesn't look up. He hits the return key with cool purpose. "And I you, Marcus. But if that's all?"

"Yeah. That's all." Marcus backs away to the staircase. "Goodnight, then?"

"Rest well." Nicholas replies, reabsorbing himself in comforting black-and-white digital text.

When Marcus is gone at last, safely away from any line of sight, Nicholas allows his face to fall briefly into his hands. It's always like this, isn't it? Awkward words, contact that really isn't connection at all. Having to stare at those luminous blue eyes - aching to fall into them, and into his arms, to know what they feel like closing around him.

Loving him without any hope and hiding as he must behind polite formality. All the while knowing that he lost his chance long before he realized he wanted one. Understanding in all finality that it's far too late for any sort of hope.



*Listen to me!* he snorts. *Foolish old woman. Concentrate on the task at hand.* This book here, for example, available only via a paperback re-seller, seems to reference many of the plot points in the submission he's examining...

Back, then, to the shelves at the far end of the office, lining the walls behind Madison's shoved-together freestanding filing cabinets. He's purchased and downloaded and printed so much material that they groan. Really, he should rearrange the things. Alphabetize them.

Perhaps if he grows bored...

But despite the busy-thinking-swimming of his mind, he's listening with more than half an ear to the sounds coming from downstairs. A scuffle's broken out, punctuated by loud exclamations he can't quite make out. Muffled, delighted shouts, then suddenly, heavy thwacking sounds as of pillows being hurled by the lovers at one another.

One time he'd caught them doing just that, though he'd been certain it was safe to venture down. He'd found something, some reference to a contract that needed Marcus's immediate attention. He'd thought to find them in their usual state of lazy abandon, lolling about with books and telly, perhaps with Ryan and Baz squabbling in all mock seriousness for control of the remote.

Instead, they'd been wrestling and tangling about, swatting each other with the heavy pillows from their bed. As he'd stared, one plush club burst open and showered them with goose-down that floated over their heads in heavy snowflakes. The memory of the looks upon their faces still makes him giggle, the throaty sound of a very tired man.

The noises die down a bit, and the basement door opens again. This time, the footsteps coming up are lighter, nimbler. It's Aidan, all tousled hair, long limbs, and cheerful plain face made not handsome, but fascinating, by his grin. He's wearing an oversized T-shirt and shows no sign of the suffering Nicholas *knows* he deals with on a constant basis. Migraines. They've had him examined by all sorts of doctors, but Aidan's headaches are idiosyncratic. They come as they will, and his only resort is pain pills, which he tries not to abuse.

"Still here?" he asks jovially, heading straight for the coffeepot. "Thought I smelled this. Wanted a cup before bed." Caffeine helps his head, on occasion.

"Marcus didn't tell you?" Nicholas concentrates hard and finds the slim blue volume he's been searching for. "Ah!" He blows at the thick layer of dust on it, and sneezes.

"Bless you. What, you're still working, tired as you are? Man, that's a crying shame. Ought to be heading home, or out to have yourself a beer at the bar." Coffee in hand, Aidan approaches and pops him lightly on the arm. "Here, what do you say you and I go out and —"

"Aidan, you're already dressed in your pajamas."

"Sweats and a T-shirt. And?" Aidan asks reasonably. "This is a city where someone would look twice?"

Nicholas has to admit that's the truth. But he can't go off alone with Aidan. It wouldn't be... right. "Thank you, but I'm content where I am." He opens his book and searches for the passage he thinks should be in there. Now, where is it, foreword or epilogue?

Sunk in thought, he sits back down on the couch, on the edge this time, one hand bracing the book on his knee and the other beneath his chin. Aidan plops companionably down next to him. "Mind if I put the radio on? I'd like to see how the last race is going."

"As you like."

Nicholas steals a glance at Aidan while he reaches overhead to flick the small transistor's switch on. He scans hastily through NPR, classical country, and opera before landing on an all-sports-news network. The races are just being announced, and Aidan's homely-beautiful face lights up with childishly unholy glee.

"That's it!" he exclaims, bouncing up and down slightly. His coffee is in imminent danger. "Come on, Bottle o' Rum! Keep that edge!"

"You've a bet on this?"

"Ah, well." He looks a little embarrassed. "A small one. Marcus keeps me in line about that sort of thing these days."

Nicholas can well imagine that he does. An image, momentary but vivid, flashes through his mind: Marcus, teaching Aidan one of many lessons. Aidan's long, slender arms flat against the brickwork wall below, a smooth, naked pair of buttocks waiting for the gentle slap of broad palm to flesh. A quivering erection dribbling clear liquid down the masonry...

*No! No. Pull yourself together.* Nicholas examines himself with a new inner horror. It is one thing to admit his attraction to Marcus; that has existed since long before the boss became 'involved' with his partners. But to let loose and examine the corner of his mind that is fascinated by Aidan - no, it won't do. It cannot be borne. Not for either of them. Nicholas cannot, will not, put himself through it.

"Yes!" Aidan howls, jumping from his seat. "Did you hear that?"

Nicholas hazards a guess: "Your horse won?"

"And how! By a good clean head. Got to go tell the others this."

*He is such a brave man, Nicholas thinks. In such constant pain, yet he laughs loudly as a child and savors life like a fine chocolate.*

"They thought I was mad for betting on the underdog," Aidan enthuses. "But I know when someone's got what it takes."

Aidan sits. One big, raw-boned hand lands casually on Nicholas's knee, and the squeeze it gives is startlingly gentle. Hazel eyes flicker up to meet his before he's given a half-smile and another, softer press to his leg.

At once Nicholas feels both a surge of envy and of pure wanting, a need to taste this man, salty and sweet. To take up the large hand yet on his leg and kiss it, one finger at a time, suckling the tips. To relish the flavor of whatever it is that makes him so strong, young and desirable. To know what those fingers might feel like on him in return.

Aidan is looking at Nicholas with a new, softer expression. Almost as if he wants to – but no, surely he's imagining that. Aidan can't want to kiss him. Not with three impressive specimens of manhood waiting downstairs. He's inordinately lucky, not greedy.

Nicholas manages a smile, patting Aidan's hand in encouragement of making it a friendly move, a little exuberance between friends. "Good show," he approves. "Scat, now, tell the others. Are you rich enough to treat them to a dinner?"

"God, no!" Aidan laughs. "A new shirt, maybe, for myself. A decent one, for when Marcus takes us out to celebrate on his own tab. He'll be wanting to do that to celebrate the win, and a good month of sales besides."

Nicholas is certain that he will. Marcus knows how to treat his partners right, lavishing affection on them. The stolen kisses Nicholas has seen without their meaning for him to – the gentle brushes of arm against arm – the entangling of fingers -

But Aidan's hand remains yet, touching his thigh.

"Your coffee," Nicholas babbles up, desperate to make him move, to remove the temptation. "Careful, there, you're about to spill!"

Without thinking, Aidan steadies his cup in both hands, and Nicholas inches just out of reach.

Realization flashes over Aidan's face. He gives Nicholas an unreadable look. "Thanks for that." His voice is flattened. "Best be off, then."

"Best if you are." Nicholas is much cooler than he wants to be. "Go and tell the others. I'm sure they'll be delighted."

"Right." Aidan snaps off the radio. Ah, blessed silence.

"Goodnight, then."

Nicholas nods and smiles as the other man backs away to the stairs, walking slowly down while he himself burns with guilt. He's no idea what happened just now. Certainly not what Aidan had intended, to be sure. It's all his greedy imagination. Aidan's a friendly fellow, given to casual lounging and touching. Nicholas mustn't read anything into anything.

Determined, he finally finds the passage that he wanted. Finger in place to mark his words, he begins to trace it, then stops before he's properly started.

They're noisy downstairs again. Really, he can see why Madison argues to have the soundproofing locked down at all times. There's all manner of soft clinks and clanks of empty glasses, the heavy shuffle of pizza boxes being gathered for the trash, the sewer grate opened to lower a heavy bag of rubbish.

It's a pleasant picture to think on. Just for a moment, one small moment, he lets himself imagine that he's down there, one of them, clumsily and cheerfully bumping hips with Marcus in the kitchen as they gather up detritus from the evening's celebrations. Listening to Baz, propped against the maple table and going on smugly about playing the odds. Laughing good-naturedly at him with the rest at the tale of Aidan's surprising win at the races. Twining his arm with Marcus's and resting his head on Ryan's shoulder while Baz grabs Aidan up for a victory kiss.

He shakes his head. He must stop thinking like this, he must. As they are the four men are a unit, plain for all to see. Perfect corners, conjoined at their angles, fitting together without seam or overlap. There's no place for someone like him in the middle of that bliss.

The kitchen noises gradually cease, and a door leading outside to the dumpsters slams shut. Nicholas relaxes a little, returning to his book — and looks up again, sharply, as the basement door is flung open yet again. Baz pelts upstairs this time, his open shirt flying out behind him. "Sorry, Nick!" he tosses out. "Seen Ryan's shoes anywhere?"

Nicholas points. "The 'worst ones'?"

"Bet your ass that's what he meant. He's tearing up the place, not able to find them." Baz opens the elevator shaft and halloos down it. "Hey, Ryan! Found them!"

"Good!" Ryan's voice echoes from below. "Get them for me! They'll still be good for work tomorrow."

"Work? That's a joke. I'm keeping him up all night," he explains to Nicholas with a lascivious wink. "He'll be calling it a sick day before dawn."

Nicholas has to ask. "Sick?"

"Fucked within an inch of his life, anyhow." Baz raises one sneaker above the empty elevator shaft. "Ryan, love! Bombs away!"

The sneaker falls.

"Hey – ow!"

"Not very nice," Nicholas rebukes.

"Oh, bah. It's all in fun. Besides, he knows very well it's him for me and me for him."

"Give a guy some warning next time!" Ryan shouts up.

"Right. Fore!" Baz lets the other sneaker fly.

Nicholas can't help it; he bursts into laughter. Baz turns on him, smirk lighting up his face. For a moment, he is the very picture of Pan of old, all beauty and mischief, dancing to a set of devil's pipes. "Liked that, did you?"

He pounces like a flash, leaping on Nicholas and dragging him up. His book goes flying as Baz whirls them both about in a mad, impromptu spin. Nicholas is laughing helplessly now, unable to stop. The bliss of the lithe arms around him, holding him up light as candy floss, are pure bliss. There's no fear that he'll fall to the ground. The devil may care, after all, and heaven fears what he holds dear.

Chuckling a little himself, Baz lets go before they grow too dizzy. He steadies Nicholas with both hands, stroking him down and brushing him off. "That's a good look on you," he says apropos of nothing.

Nicholas blinks. "What is?"

"Smiling. You ought to try it more often." Baz tucks a flyaway wisp of red-gold hair, overdue for cutting, back behind Nicholas's ear, then draws closer. "Makes you look a handsome," he murmurs near the curve of that ear. "Don't underestimate yourself, get me?"

Mercurial, he drops the contact and bounds off, taking the stairs down two at a time. "On my way, my beauties, hold the applause!"

Various shouts and cheers greet him, loudest of which are Aidan's fussing over his tossing stink-bombs down the elevator shaft and Ryan's aggravation with a bump he swears is rising on his forehead. He hears Baz's admonition not to be such a baby, then a hearty, smacking kiss to make it better.

Nicholas finally admits there's no point in pretending to read. He can no more pay attention to what's inside the covers of that book than he might to, say, Bulgarian radio, dull beyond bearing.

But bereft of even the comfort of research, the loneliness looms large. He shivers, wrapping his arms around himself. It's time to go. Best he just find his coat, and -

Down below, the shouts have merged into a different sort of ruckus, hysterical laughter and the sound of pounding feet. How he wants to be among them, running and chasing and catching; tossing his lover up against the closest surface to burrow in sweet and deep, capturing that one's unique flavor on lips and tongue...

And just as he's saying it, it seems to be coming true. There's only a few loud thumpings now. Baz must have carelessly left the door open, because he can hear the sound of deep, affectionate kissing and the rustle of clothes coming loose. How easy to imagine, now, the slide of hands over newly bared flesh.

He shivers. His cock rebels against him, rising and filling at the soft, erotic noises. It has been a long time, perhaps too long, since he's allowed himself even that simple if lonely consolation. He cannot blame his body, but he does his mind. *Voyeur!*

Ryan laughs softly, and he hears Baz's heavy boots stumble back a pace or two. "Nuh-uh," Ryan's saying. "Bedtime stories first. Where did we leave the good book?"

*Good Book?* Nicholas's mind boggles.

"Marcus took it upstairs for a nooner," Baz says casually. "It's in his office, I think. Sure you want it? I can spin you a fine yarn if you've a mind to listen..."

*Kiss. Kiss.*

Shove; stumble. "Nice try. I'm going after it. I want you waiting for me like a good boy when I come back, get it?"

"Going and coming," Baz murmurs. "I like the sound of that, I do."

"When don't you?" *Kiss.* "Be good."

"Am I ever?"

"Nope. That's why I love you."

"You'd better."

"Always."

The soft kissing resumes. Nicholas's cock pulses within the confines of his trousers, filling with a fresh surge of heat. The smallest damp drop appears where he's begun to leak. The sound of those mouths moving against one another...

"Be back soon?"

"Promise." *Kiss*. "Now, stay!"

"Well, well!" Baz's voice is heavy with amused sarcasm. "Yes, Master."

"Oh, now that I could get used to." Ryan's already on his way up, an easy lope on long, strong legs. "Promise to behave?"

"Much as you like for me to."

"Good enough." Ryan's head pops into view. "Nicholas, hey! You're still here?"

Nicholas shakes his head to clear it. *Shit!* His erection, bulging and leaking, is clearly outlined through his thin trousers. He must look blatant as a stripper with his tackle on display. He can't be seen like this!

A quick sidestep and he's behind his own desk, sitting down with the keyboard hiding his lap. The blank computer screen reflects his own face back at him - a bit panicked, but mostly calm. "I am," he says without looking up. "If you didn't live in the basement, I'd ask the same question of you."

"Ah, but I do, so you can't, nyah nyah." Ryan is utterly young and exuberant. He's mostly past his punk phase but keeps the purple-tipped long hair currently tousled about his face. He loves life, every part of it, with such joie de vivre that Nicholas's heart gives a twinge of lonely envy. *Give, and ye shall receive* -- isn't that how it goes? Ryan gives all he has, and he gets back in triple measure.

Nicholas would rather die than hurt him.

*How do I get myself into these messes?* He couldn't have been an ordinary home wrecker and fallen for one of the four, oh no. Four spots had to soften within his heart, letting or allowing in the force of each man's male beauty and verve.

Ryan knows none of this. Flashing Nicholas a grin, he heads past into Marcus's office. A bit of rummaging later and he's out again, waving a rosy-covered book that is instantly recognizable. "The Habits and Controversies of Famous Seductresses?" Nicholas asks in surprise.

"Have you *read* this? I mean, really read this?" Ryan whistles. "The engravings alone are enough to keep Baz interested. But when you throw in the special voices Aidan does, it's fun for the whole poly-amorous family."

His face is so warm with a mix of innocence and naughtiness that Nicholas can't help but sit back and bask. "You are a rascal, Ryan," he says softly. "Utterly incorrigible."

Ryan waggles his eyebrows. "At the last unanimous vote, yep. Also a cock-tease of the first order. With Baz in the mix, that's a pretty high honor."

Nicholas struggles to keep his voice even. "You enjoy each other immensely, don't you?"

Ryan strokes the cover of the book. "We have fun together, yeah." He looks up with softened eyes. "That's why they love me."

Ahhh. Yes. Another small piece of Nicholas's heart fragments. "They do love you. It was you who brought them together, after all."

Ryan ducks his head in an 'aww-shucks' gesture, but smiles. "What matters more to me is that I love them. You know?"

"You are a very, very lucky man. Do you realize that?" Nicholas blurts, not thinking, just speaking.

Ryan looks back at him for a long moment, eyes full of something that Nicholas cannot understand. His perverse mind, his treacherous body are caught a fourth time by desire – the need to be held and comforted, to rest his cheek against Ryan's chest and find peace.

"I do," Ryan says quietly. "We all do."

He walks to Nicholas, and reaches out toward him. Alerted to the coming touch, instantly wary of it, Nicholas throws up his arm and their hands brush, one against the other.

Nicholas is caught, frozen by the feel of those hands. Has he felt Ryan thus before? Sensed the hard, callused warmth of that palm beneath his own? His fingers ache to curl about Ryan's.

He can't move. Ryan's hands... they're good hands. He's seen them moving countless times. Holding and stroking Aidan through a headache, mussing Marcus' ponytailed hair into disarray and then clasping around the man's back while they kiss, caressing Baz's arms and chest with desperate hunger – yes, stroking all of them with equal love and need.

Ryan's gentle gray eyes are gazing at him now, full of something that mystifies Nicholas. But somehow he feels that if he takes that hand, loosely resting on his, into a firmer grip, and lays the kisses his lips burn for along the back, the palm, he would not be turned away. Ryan's other hand might land softly on his head... card through his hair... move down his throat to the tops of the buttons on his shirt.



Nicholas swallows hard. If he doesn't let go now, he is in danger of never doing so.

But he doesn't want to let go. Not of Ryan, nor had he wanted to let go of Baz, of Aidan, nor of Marcus. He aches for their touch and shrinks only from the fires they feed within.

He can do this. Move back and away. Be safe.

And he can. He will. But in just another minute...

### Chapter Three

The hum of warm air rushing from the ancient radiators roars loudly in Nicholas's ears. Or is that the blood surging in his veins? He can hear a soft pumping in his ears, much like the ocean. *Dizzy*, he realizes.

Ryan's hand, still atop Nicholas' own, strokes one of his fingers - toys with it, running a light touch from finger base to nail and back again. "Really beautiful," he murmured. "I used to have no idea what made a good hand."

*Throb-throb*. "And now you do?" Nicholas cannot pull away from that slight, teasing touch. Feather-light, it shoots pulses of fire into his groin. The zipper on his light tan slacks is biting into his flesh now, painful and wonderful.

"Yeah. A good hand..." Ryan picks Nicholas' palm up to caress it, turning it this way and that. "It could look like almost anything. Rough, soft, short, long, doesn't matter. It's what you can do with it. Long fingers..." he teases at the base of one nail, "strong grip..." he locks his own forefinger around Nicholas's and tugs, "and just something special that belongs to it alone."

Nicholas has to clear his throat. "You're saying, then," and oh, but his voice sounds pitifully small, "you think I've good hands?"

"Some of the best." Ryan clasps another few digits between his own in a light hold. "Marcus' hands are long and slender, Baz's are short and strong, Aidan's are a little crooked and he bites his nails. Mine are tough from working landscaping when I was younger. Each one's good. Yours are soft... like touching silk. But I feel a little callus here —" he taps at it — "and here, from the pen. You take care of yourself, and us, with these hands."

Nicholas fights the urge to draw away from this touch, these words; they're too much. But hidden under the desk, ever so stealthily, his free hand slips up to his aching cock, hidden beneath the keyboard tray, and gives it one long, slow stroke. He has to bite his lip to stop a gasp escaping at the blazing goodness of it.

Ryan's eyes are warm. He raises Nicholas' hand to his mouth and kisses it once, lightly. "Like I said. Beautiful."

But they're not. He knows it. "They're dusty," Nicholas murmurs, his voice still small. He burns to touch himself again, and knows not what fire Ryan is playing with. A little part of him is angry to be so toyed with. He's not a plaything, to be batted around in cruel kittenish teasing. Ryan has three men at his beck and call. He can't want Nicholas. This is a joke, or the overflow of hormones.

Hormones, ah, yes. He knows the cure for that. "Go back down to Baz," he says, finally gaining the strength to gently pull away. "It's well past everyone's bedtime, even yours. I'll clean up a bit and head home. We'll see you in the morning."

Ryan leans back, idly rubbing down the spine of his 'good book'. "Bedtime," he muses. "Means a lot of things. When you're a kid, it's teddy bears and night-lights..."

*Or utter darkness and the monsters in your closet that you're absolutely sure are real...* Nicholas thinks.

"When you're older, it's reading comic books, or maybe textbooks –" with an amused glance at him – "under the covers with a flashlight. Maybe sleepovers with your buddies. Movies and popcorn until you pass out in front of *Die Hard*."

"I wouldn't know, Ryan." And he wouldn't. He'd gone to private school since he was a boy. All he knew of teenaged bedtime was a line of dormitory cots and strict lights-out at nine p.m. Adulthood found him in an equally sterile bed in a lonely dormitory room, until the day he moved to California as a student and found himself sickly fascinated by the solitude and squalor that was all he could afford.

He can't sleep without the hum of quiet voices, the sounds of breathing and soft whiffling snores. So he stays awake and reads, forgetting to eat, grows thinner, and goes on.

Ryan just looks at him. "I've seen your apartment, Nicholas. Single bed, one sheet, Army-Navy blanket, a pillow thinner than Kleenex. Soldiers sleep better on the battlefield. I'm just saying it doesn't have to be like that."

"We're not all as lucky as you and that monstrous luxury you rest in," Nicholas responds tartly. "And as you remind me that it's so late, I doubt it'll be safe for me to travel back to my Spartan home tonight. If you'd be kind enough, perhaps there's an extra sheet and pillow that I might borrow."

"Why would you do that?"

"So I can sleep on the couch up here," Nicholas says very patiently.

"Oh." Ryan's fingers hook and scratch lightly at his knees. "I could get those for you. If that's what you really want."

*And my alternative is?* Nicholas would like to scream at him. *What, you're inviting me down to sleep at the foot of that Louis XIV behemoth while the four of you partake in what I can't have, right under my nose?*

Ryan looks so disappointed. *Don't*, Nicholas thinks miserably. *Just... don't. Cease your taunting and leave me in peace.*

"Okay," the younger man finally says. "Follow me."

That startles him. "Where?"

"Where do you think? The linen closet's downstairs. I'll let you pick something." Ryan tucks the book under his arm and turns to go.

Still acutely aware of his aroused state, Nicholas waves a hand at him. "I'll be along in a moment. Let me shut this down." And untuck his shirt to hang outside his pants, to hide the bulge and darkened spot. Or better yet...

If Ryan would only go and stay gone for a while. Nicholas' cheeks burn a little at what he's contemplating, but the need is so real and he's very nearly past the point of return. The memory and heat of Ryan's touches linger still, and his cock is pounding painfully with the need for release. Only a few moments is all he needs, a good hard stripping with his right hand and a handful of tissues to catch his seed in... no evidence, no proof.

"I'll start looking through the blankets." Nearly at the stairs, Ryan pauses and turns back. "Do you have anything to change into?"

"I don't keep any clothes here, Ryan. I'll do fine as I am."

"Nuh-uh." Ryan scans him thoughtfully. "I'll get you something for the night. Probably raid Aidan's closet for a T and mine for some sweats. If you're going to stay up here alone, you can at least be comfy."

When Nicholas hesitates, the warm eyes touch – briefly caress – his face again. "Come on. Do it for Ryan?"

Ridiculous boy. Beautiful man. Nicholas looks at Ryan's smile and feels his resistance crumbling. Besides, a loose pair of sweatpants... providing he doesn't make a mess in his sleep, the comfort those would provide for the erection that never ends in this place...

He's waiting for Nicholas. No hasty wank behind the filing cabinets, then. Clumsily stripping his neatly buttoned shirt from his trousers, Nicholas emerges from behind the desk. He resists the urge to check his state of concealment, to draw attention to it. "Fine; I'll help you choose, and carry it back up here."

"You could do that. Or you could take a shower."

Nicholas blinks.

"Well, it's been a long, hard-working day. We're all grimy."

"Very well," he nods. "I'll use the employee washroom."

Ryan sighs. "Look, nimrod, I'm extending an invitation to use the Bathroom of Delight. I remember how you oohed and ahed when we had the shower room installed, but you've never used it."

"It hasn't been appropriate – it wouldn't be –" Nicholas stammers.

"It's fine now. We won't bother you, and you can actually have enough hot water for once." Ryan holds out his hand, a little impatient, but ruefully smiling. "So would you stop being, what, an utter git, and get on with it?"

"Determined, aren't you?" But Nicholas can't help smiling.

"Damned straight. Or not, at all. C'mon."

And so Nicholas finds himself following Ryan down the stairs. Good, solid marble steps; they've seen enough use over the years that a groove is worn down the middle, but it conforms comfortably to the feet. It feels good – right – familiar. Of course he's traveled them before, but he never fails to appreciate their charm.

At the bottom Ryan gestures him right, toward the bathroom. "Go on ahead. Towels and everything are in there, even robes. I'll pick something for you to sleep in."

He's so easy now, and comfortable, the Ryan that Nicholas is used to, that his tension eases a little. "I think I will," he nods. "Knock if I'm taking too long with the hot water."

Ryan laughs. "Trust me, that shower doesn't run out of hot water. We, uh... tinkered with the tanks a little."

Well. That's nice to know, if a little alarming. But then again, they shower in there daily, and there haven't been any explosions yet. Nicholas nods again, truly grateful. Now that he thinks of it, he feels absolutely filthy. "Thank you."

"Bah humbug." Ryan grins at him and gives him a playful shove. "Move it, mister."

Nicholas laughs as he heads for the spacious shower that awaits. It's as luxurious as he remembers, probably the size of his own bedroom, with four polished brass jets and a fantastically complicated set of levers and dials beneath each. Apparently you can set this from "rainwater" to "pleasantly warm" to "scalding".

First things first. He backs away to the stand of towels, and a handy clothes hamper. Impatient fingers pull at the buttons on his shirt. His loafers are upstairs, so socks next, freeing his bare toes to wriggle on the cool tiled floor.

Then his trousers... and he hesitates. He can see himself outlined through the fabric, thick and pulsing with blood. The slightest touch...

After a slight hesitation, he slips back to the door and locks it, hoping Ryan won't take it as an insult. After all, a man does need his privacy.

Finally, finally, his hands go to his belt and he undoes it. An immeasurable sense of relief floods him as careful fingers pull his zipper down. His cock, so impatient, tents out in his boxers, begging for relief.

He steps out of the underwear and makes his way carefully to the furthest spigot. He wants the water hot, steaming hot, and at full throttle, to mask any gasps or deep breaths that he might take. He needs this, has needed this for what seems like hours, and if there's the privacy to do it in...

A button's touch and the shower begins to flow, gushing down in streams around him. He inhales sharply at the heat of the water before relaxing into it... wonderful feeling!

But even better, his hand drifts immediately to his cock, begging for the attention. His hand's lubricated with nothing but water, but that's good enough. He rubs at the top of his length, short strokes down the swollen stiffness of it. Thrills of sensation flood him, making his legs tingle. He closes his eyes, and breathes in. Rich scents surround him, a different one for each of the men who regularly use this place. Oh, good... so good...

He dares to pinch the tip, slippery with his own pre-ejaculate. Grasps it good and hard between two fingers and tugs with a low groan of pleasure. His other hand grasps the base and begins to work hard, stroking up and down, squeezing almost too tight for comfort.

His breath begins to come short and hard. Yes... yes... he's so very close; a little more...

Faces flash through his mind. Aidan, cheering the race – Marcus, with his awkward but real attempts to connect – Baz's utter impishness – Ryan's warm smile – he sees, behind his eyelids, four naked bodies clustered under one outpouring of hot water, suckling and biting at one another, a writhing cluster of nude flesh and jutting erections – their heads thrown back in ecstasy –

He pulls, hard, at the base of his scrotum and lets out a cry that even the shower can't cover as he comes at last, hard and fierce, every muscle spasming as jet after jet of clear fluid shoots from the tip of his cock to wash down the drain.

It's earthmoving. So good that the tremors won't fade. He leans against the wall, still cool to the touch, shaking in every muscle.

"Felt good, did it?"

His muscles jerk again, this time in shock. Baz! How did he – when – dear lord, had he seen? Heard? He must have. Sensed him, unlocked the door, and snuck up behind. The tone in his voice – Nicholas quails away from it, from a hundred memories of

headmasters and classmates catching him doing 'naughty' things. Fresh shame washes over him as he sees again brief flashes of what he thought on during his orgasm. How could he? Baz must know, must be able to see somehow. Punished, he will surely be punished!

But no...

Gentle fingers reach up a little to stroke through his hair. "That wrung you out like a rag doll, I see," Baz's voice, all smoke and sex, purrs. "Let me take care of this for you while you get yourself back together."

Nicholas has progressed beyond shock, into the realm of the unbelievable. Even as he hears the soft squish-squish of a wall dispenser, smells the sharp citrus tang of shampoo, and feels the warm hands return to his hair, he simply can't believe that this is happening.

Clever fingers massage his scalp, rubbing the soap in deep. He trembles under the touch. "I'm so sorry."

"Whatever for? And cover your eyes, now, don't want to get this in there. Smells great but you wouldn't believe the sting."

He obeys without question. "Baz...?"

"Hush now," Baz says, just loud enough to be heard. "Enjoy this."

The last of the soap sluices away from his hair. Wet hands dab at his forehead, then trail in reverse to smooth their way down his back. "Open back up now if you like."

He cracks his eyes hesitantly. Takes a tentative peek back over his shoulder. Baz's face is utterly calm, though touched with a gentleness he's not used to seeing written there. "I don't – I don't understand."

"You will." The hands turn him around. Baz glances down the length of Nicholas's body, at the now-flaccid piece of flesh hung in the middle of red-gold curls, and smiles. Not a leer, but a genuine smile. "You drained yourself dry, I'll bet. That was a long time coming. You needed it."

"You knew – you know?"

"I do." Baz strokes across his shoulders, trailing fingers down his collarbone. "I heard you calling out names as you came. Special," he breathes into Nicholas's ear, "special, certain names. I just had to come in and see how you were coming."

Nicholas has turned crimson with shame. "I didn't mean to."

"Maybe not. But I'm not blaming you." Baz strikes a pose, hand on one hip, and for the first time Nicholas realizes that Baz, too, is naked, water beading down his skin. "After all, I always said I could make anyone dream about me."

The tension breaks; Nicholas finds himself laughing, if a little hysterically. Baz gives him a broad grin of approval. "There, I knew you had it in you."

Now that he's been given tacit permission to look, Nicholas cannot tear his eyes away from the marble perfection that is Baz. Lean muscles perfectly molded and carved into shape. Tanned skin glowing with health and life. His own thatch of dark brown hair and thick cock, half-erect. It's thicker than his own, the head deep pink. The breath catches in his throat. He wants to stare. To touch.

A soft knock sounds on the door. Ryan sticks his head in, grin firmly in place. "Baz, what did I tell you?"

"That you had first dibs, I know." Baz smirks, trailing his fingers over Nicholas's chest. "But he's so lovely I couldn't help myself."

"You never can." Ryan looks uncertainly at Nicholas. "Can I... would it be okay if I came in, too? Please?"

Nicholas finds himself nodding dumbly. He's a dead man already, fired as soon as the jealous Marcus finds out. Maybe this is all a vivid post-orgasmic dream? Either way, there seems no sense in denying it. He feels Ryan's touches from upstairs anew and blushes. The memory stirs him, making his dormant cock twitch again.

Ryan's grin changes to a smile, slow and filled with promise. "Good," is all he says, but he slips in and closes the door behind him. He's only got a robe on, a thick beauty made of midnight-colored terry, his well-shaped bare legs and feet showing. Nicholas catches a glimpse of thigh as he turns to the clothes rack, and the breath sticks in his throat. He won't... will he?

But he does. Casual and comfortable, he throws his shoulders back and the robe slides off slick as water from a seal to puddle around his toes. He is indeed naked underneath, and beautifully formed in his own way as Baz.

When they meet, they turn to one another and wrap eager arms about their waists, lips meeting in a fierce clash of tongues and teeth, so deeply sensual that Nicholas's erection stirs fully to life again. His hands ache to reach out and feel of them.

"Go on," Ryan murmurs between sips of Baz's kisses. "It's okay."

He can't stop himself. His hands have a life of their own, and without his mind's permission they are moving, running in wonder over the hardness of arms and chests and backs, devouring the feel of them with his fingertips. As their legs tangle, he sees that



both men are fully erect, cocks bobbing heavily against one another. Ryan thrusts up and Baz hisses, a sound of pure pleasure. Nicholas groans despite himself, his own flesh hot and aching with pressure. Twice in so short a time... it hurts, but at the same time it's bliss.

"Touch it," Ryan breathes out. Nicholas doesn't understand until Baz turns his lover slightly in his arms, facing him. "Go on, touch it. Please. Please do it."

Ryan's erection, offered so to him, weighs heavy before his hand, dark purple and beading up with pre-ejaculate. Nicholas suddenly doesn't care if it's for Baz or for him. He has to know what that feels like, has to measure the weight and length in his hand, has to squeeze it just right to make Ryan cry out.

It's not the first time he's held another man's prick. He's had his share of relationships gone awry and even one-nighters, plenty of shameful mornings dressing hastily and leaving anonymous rooms, always so deeply bitter and still so lonely. He hasn't done so for a long time, though. Not for more than a year. And this, so succulent, so tempting...

He reaches out one trembling hand, praying that he's not made a mistake, and strokes once. Ryan's cock jumps under his hand, a live thing, quaking at his touch. "Again, god, again!" Ryan groans.

Baz lavishes kisses over Ryan's shoulders and back. "Go on," he whispers. "Be good. He's asking so nicely."

A little bolder, Nicholas grips Ryan's cock firmly. The skin is so smooth, but underneath it lays steel and a thrumming pulse-beat. He pulls forward, once, twice, again, exulting in the little jumps that the youth makes, the moans pouring out of his throat.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Ryan's chanting.

Nicholas pulls his fingers tight together and strips down once, hard as he can without hurting, tight as he knows the velvet grip of a man's hole can be. Ryan makes a low, strangled sound and his eyes, first closed, now open. They've gone dark as a stormy sky, flaring with bursts of lightning. "My turn."

"Fine, but me next," Baz murmurs, dropping with Ryan as he goes to his knees, still behind him. His hand has moved lower on Ryan's back, and from the shuddering and shaking, Nicholas knows that he's toying with his lover's small, puckered hole.

Is it practice or willpower? Ryan leans forward and braces his hands against Nicholas's legs. He laps at the fat head of the blood-darkened cock, drinking away the drooling strands of pre-come. Nicholas begins to shake again.

Then Ryan slips his lips around it, just the tip, and sucks fiercely.

"Ahh!" Nicholas can't help the shout he gives. Never has he... he's given, he knows what that feels like, but never received...

Baz reaches up to catch him, bracing him hand to hand. "I've got you," he soothes, kneading his fingers against Nicholas's. "Hang on. We'll take care of you. And you'll take care of us..."

They could stay like that forever for all Nicholas cares. He's lost, utterly lost to himself. The shame, the shock remain in a corner of his mind, shouting and shaking fingers, but he's lost to the pleasure and can't hear the condemning voices anymore.

At least, not until there's a slam, a loud slam, of the basement door shutting hard on itself, and everything comes flooding back. Nicholas cries out and pulls away, Ryan's mouth sliding off him with a wet pop. Aidan – and Marcus! Reality floods back in sharp and cold. Dear god, they'll hear this and think – they'll come in expecting to find Baz and Ryan alone – and they'll see him – and –

"What's the matter?" Baz comes after him, all concerned blue eyes and worried face. "Something wrong?"

Ryan, still on his knees, looks bereft as a child. "Did I do something to hurt you?"

Heaven have mercy! Nicholas buries his face in his hands. He can't look at the two men. They went with something they knew was wrong in the heat of one moment. But once they come to their senses...

Fingers try to pry his hands from his face. "You're worrying me now," Baz says firmly. "Come on, then, what's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Nicholas chokes. "What's wrong? You can ask me that? Aidan and Marcus are outside. Can't you hear them?"

Baz tilts his head to listen. "Yeah, both of them. And?"

"And? They'll kill me for this – they'll hate – no, they could never hate you, but they'll despise me for being so weak –"

Ryan and Baz exchange a long look that Nicholas cannot understand. Then Baz says simply, "Marcus has a pair of ears, you realize, and he knows how to use them."

Nicholas blinks. "Marcus already knows...?"

"He does know. Knows, and he hasn't come barging in here to stop us. What's that tell you?" Baz manages to pull Nicholas's arms down. Ryan surrounds him with a grip around the waist, bringing them together, wet hip to wet hip. "Aidan knows, too. They both do."

"Then why –"

Ryan puts a hand on Nicholas's cheek and turns his face, gently forcing him to look at them. "Because," he whispers, "they're waiting for an invitation. And I'm starting to think we have to write one out, because you still don't get it, do you? What we want – all of us want – is you."

The blow hits him in the heart with the power of an axe strike. Nicholas chokes on it. "You can't mean that."

"Why? Because no one's ever been bright enough to see you for what you are?" Baz scoffs.

"Someone special? Very special. Worthy. Wantable." Ryan laps down Nicholas' jaw. "Lickable." He presses his lips to the corner of Nicholas' mouth. "Kissable." His deft hand closes around Nicholas' deflating cock and works it deftly. "Fuckable."

"Keepable," a different, deeper voice chips in. Nicholas' head jerks up to see Marcus, leaned against the door to the bathroom. He's shed his own clothes without any flicker of embarrassment to be seen. Still dry, though, save for the slight moisture as he licks his lips. "Why's that so hard for you to believe?"

"Could be because you were so convincing earlier." Aidan slips in to stand at Marcus' side, lithe as a whip, long muscles bunched. He wraps himself around Marcus and tugs the fair man forward by the waist. "Marcus can't act worth two cents, and he made a total mess of asking you earlier. We all tried, but you didn't listen. So now, so you know for sure it's true – what we're wanting is you. All of us."

Nicholas is trembling. Almost afraid to believe.

Marcus slides forward, close enough to touch, and reaches out to Nicholas. Baz and Ryan keep a hand each on his skin. He feels a fourth hand – Aidan's? – touch his stomach as Marcus splays his own fingers out on Nicholas' shoulder. Water sprays gently over the elegant, Nordic face, and his blue eyes are without guile as he lowers slightly to place a kiss on Nicholas's lips. "We chose you," he murmurs. "All of us. It's just up to you if you'll have us."

"Call it a dream if you've got to," Aidan advises. "The best sort of dream, the kind you've never got to wake up from. One without any pain at all." He too leans forward for a kiss, nudging Marcus gently aside to taste Nicholas's lips. His tongue flickers out, parting the seam and darting briefly within.

"Tasty," he teases. "Can I have some more?"

"I'll have my share too," Marcus warns, and then is back on Nicholas, mouth to mouth, kissing him with the same ferocity as Nicholas has seen him and Baz kiss Ryan. This is a

lover's kiss, violent and filled with such passion that it tears the will from a man's soul. Nicholas' knees buckle but there are hands everywhere, keeping him upright. Water and kisses and touches; he's drowning, but so sweetly as he had never dreamed possible.

Hardness presses into him from every angle, and he knows that the throbbing, jutting cock that belongs to him is buried between hands, hips, and the curve of thighs as they move about him in a swirling dance. He realizes dazedly that the four men mean to consume him and birth him anew as a precious thing.

If he will only let them.

He cannot bear the thought of their stopping.

"Yes," he breathes, loosening himself into the sliding, soap-slippery hands. "Yes."

Marcus kisses him once more, long, sweet and lingering. Aidan presses his lips to the base of his neck. Baz's teeth nibble at the shell of his ear. And Ryan – warm, sweet Ryan – is there to support him, mouth heated along the curve of his jaw. "Come with us," he orders softly.

And Nicholas comes.

\* \* \*

They lead him from the bathroom, every man still soaking wet, and stumble somehow into the room with the bed he has lusted after since its purchase. Loving hands lift and push gently at him and he is suddenly on his back in the very center, feeling the weight of crawling bodies rise and fall around him like ocean waves.

He is floating away on a sea of bliss. Warmth tantalizes him from every angle, surrounding his mouth, his cock, his hips, and teasing with slickened fingers at his pucker. He rolls desperately, wanting everyone to have the best angle that they might.

At the last, it's Ryan's arms – dimly recognized, already, finally desperately loved – that hold him tight as he spoons up against him, erection pressing between the cheeks of his ass. The others writhe next to him, attending his every sense. "Are you ready?" Ryan whispers.

He is. Oh, how he is.

Ryan thrusts forward, his way eased by a sweet-smelling lubricant and fingers that stretched and burned so beautifully. Thrusts in a soft, sharp glide that pierces his very soul.

Nicholas is home. Home at last.

For as he'd always wondered, and now he knows... this bed is big enough for five.

## Chapter Four

Madison pauses, mini-fridge door open and carton of milk in her hand, giving Enrico her best "You, mister, are insane" look. Ranks right up there next to the "why do I waste my time with you, again?" glare and the "get out of the way and let me do this" stare.

He's thinking a weaker man might crumble under the heat just pouring off her. She's the queen-B bitch among all their testosterone, after all, and that's no lie – though he does doubt Ryan's claim that she has the word tattooed on her ass. But nah, none of those things she does are gonna bother him. He's tougher than that. He can take her.

Or he can pretend real, real good and hope she falls for it.

"What exactly do you mean, Marcus is sick?" she asks, drumming high-shine talons on top of the fridge door. "Enrico, hello. Marcus doesn't *get* sick. It's all those disgusting me-healthy-Swede genes. He's like, immune or something."

"I didn't say sick," Enrico points out. "You gonna drink that or let it rot?"

She glances at the expiration date. "Probably a moot point. And you did too say he was sick, I heard you."

"I didn't say sick," Enrico repeats wearily. "I said he was tore up from the floor up. You go interpreting that how you like."

"Tore up?" The nails pause. "As in, someone beat him up?"

"Think he got into a fender-bender. His harem dragged him in here right about sunrise, smelling like something a cat spit up and lookin' just about as pretty."

"What happened? A rear-ending, a collision?"

"Still don't know. You think they let me get near him? Nuh-uh, Lady M. It was like ER, watching them rush him down to that basement."

"Not surprised." Madison's lips purse. She sniffs the milk hesitantly and twists her features into a horrible grimace. "Yep. Definitely moot."

Enrico can smell the sour stink now. "Why the hell nobody thrown that out yet?"

"Because we hardly ever take milk in our coffee, dummy. It was buried all the way back behind the Nutella and the whipped cream, and what the hell are their sex foods doing up here anyway?" She slams the fridge and backs off. "I touched those!"

"Not like you gonna get gay cooties, girl."

"So not the point." She shudders. "No more milk in there, no powdered creamer left either. The one Saturday I decide to hell with calories, and I want some sweet, milky coffee..." She makes a small, disgusted noise and puts the nasty carton down.

"Don't just leave it to sit!" Enrico warns, because she'll do it, too. "Throw the thing out."

"You want rotten milk in the trashcan?"

"Shit almighty, Madison!" Enrico snatches the carton from her hand. Holding his breath, he cracks it open and pours it down a drain. Then he crumbles the carton with one hand and tosses it into the trash. Swish; nothing but net. He gives her one of his "you are just too stupid, female and white to live" looks. "Didn't your momma ever teach you nothing?"

A look of real sadness rolls over her face. She glances down. Enrico feels about two centimeters taller than the shag piling on the rug she's staring at. "No," she says, voice small and quiet. "My mother was a lesbian, too. Dad kicked her out when I was just a kid and raised me himself."

"Madison, I'm sorry -"

"No." She waves a hand at him. "No, it's OK." And there's her smile again, bright if it is fake. "Black coffee's good for the figure. Have to watch that! And now I know, if I ever need to throw pre-yogurt away again." Her forehead wrinkles. "Which reminds me, I should clean out my fridge when I get home. Oh! Maybe I could make some soup or something for Marcus?"

She frowns and taps one elegantly sandaled foot. "You're sure you didn't get a look at him? Didn't see how bad he was hurt?"

"Looked bad to me," Enrico admits. "But we ain't heard the boys make like the Wailing Wall yet, so I guess that means he'll live another day."

"Still..." she muses, sandaled foot swinging, "Don't you wish you could do something?"

Him? Not particularly, no. Marcus is a decent kinda guy, but he gets four times more lovin' each day than Enrico does every year. He'd rather save his sympathy for them that need it. "Nope," he answers bluntly. "Don't think they'd appreciate you going all Nurse Ratchet on them, either."

"But there's got to be something -"

Enrico's had enough. "You want something to do? That's fine, then. Come on." He grabs his keys, jingle-jingle, and stuffs them in his pocket. "You gonna stand there all day or get moving?"

She's wary; he can't blame her, pretty smart move. "Where are we going?"

"You wanna help someone? We're gonna go help. My side of town. So get moving, unless you ain't got the nerve."

Oh, yeah. She might be Queen B but he knows which buttons to push. She bristles so hard he can almost see quills springing out. "I'll show you nerve, mister. Lead the way."

"You're on, girl." Enrico follows, grinning from ear to ear. Now this ought to be fun, or it ought to do some good; either way, he's in for a fine day. On their way past the steps – damn soundproof flap's up, like always – he stops to yell down: "Hey, Marcus – Baz! Ryan! Me and Madison's gonna –"

"Get the hell out of here!" Baz bellows. "Each and every one of you!"

Enrico and Madison exchange wide-eyed glances. "Was he talking to us?"

She shakes her head a little. "I don't think so."

"Trouble in Paradise?"

"Could be." She shivers and grabs her purse. "Yeah, out of here is sounding better and better right now."

"On our way, Lady M."

The door shuts on her scolding him: "And stop calling me that!"

\* \* \*

"Baz, for fuck's sake!" Aidan hisses.

"You're the one yelling at us for making too much noise?" Ryan's deeply offended with his lover, and not afraid to show it. "What's up with the glass-breaking screams, then?"

"Really, Baz, that was a bit –"

"Shut. Up," Baz enunciates, more quietly but no less vehemently. "He's not gonna crumble or nothin', but what he needs right now is bandaging up his scrapes, a good meal, and quiet, get that? Let his body heal up. We've already got the med bit done –"

"We certainly have," Nicholas says quietly. Naked, Marcus is smeared in antiseptic ointment and wrapped in gauze like a mummy. "I still think we should have taken you to the hospital."



"No hospitals," Marcus snaps. "I just need to rest for a little, and then we have work to do."

Nicholas' face falls. Baz shakes him lightly. "Don't look so miserable, you. Marcus is just being a stubborn asshole, but he got off light for the aftermath of a car wreck. No permanent harm done, and it'll all heal."

"Wish we could have helped more, though," Aidan admits.

Ryan hugs Aidan about the shoulders while Baz shakes his head, frowning. "Help? Who was it bandaged Marcus up? Found the gauze in the first place? Hunted down some heating pads and blankets when these lunkheads wanted to dog-pile on to warm him up?" He jerks Aidan's chin up for a brief, rough kiss. "Don't you ever go thinking you're worthless around here. Get it?"

He turns a fierce glare back on the lot of them. "So he's beat all to shit, but he's resting. Comfortably. And quietly. It's what he needs, for all of what's left of today, and maybe tonight. A body heals faster that way."

"How do you know?"

Baz's face goes blank with surprise. "What, then?"

"How do you know?" Nicholas repeats, voice still soft, but determined. "That Marcus likes to be alone when he's in pain?"

"Excuse me, but who among us has known him longest?" Baz puts his hands on his hips, annoyed. "You think I want to leave him to lie? Not likely. But I know Marcus, and I know he'll want to be left in peace, knowing that we're getting on with work. That's all."

"It's just that –"

"You know Marcus, but you just don't know him the way I do." His words are cruel, but his hand gentle as it curls around Nicholas's arm. "It's hard, I know. But this is just the way it has to be. Wish him well, leave him lay, and we'll be out of here to let him heal."

Nicholas lets a long, low breath escape him. He doesn't look any too convinced, but at last he nods. "There's research I could be doing."

"I have to work on the website, plus those author sites I contracted for," Ryan says reluctantly. "It's voluntary overtime, but it brings in some extra cash..."

"Right, that's you two sorted. Aidan, you're with me." Baz slings an arm around his waist. "We'll shake down a few distributors over the phone, and get some money flowing around here."

"Yeah." Ryan rubs Aidan's shoulder gently. "It's a plan. I mean, it works and all."

"You're just not happy with it," Baz finishes. "Well, a lot of life's not happy, boys. We have more down here than most folks ever dream of. Gonna be some things we don't like that we just have to deal with. We'll take them as they come, OK?"

Nicholas shakes his head. "Can we give him a kiss goodbye?"

Baz shakes his head reluctantly. "I think he's sleeping, Nicky. Best not to disturb him. Just tiptoe on out, and last one through puts down the soundproofing flap, all right?"

Their voices trail out of range as, one by one, they trudge up the steps.

Nicholas pauses, hand on the soundproofing flap, and glances back through to their bed. There's no expression on his face, not wistfulness nor regret. Just blankness.

He lets the flap drop, and follows his three other lovers away from their fifth.

\* \* \*

Marcus just about vaguely hears them go. He's warm, naked on his back in the middle of their bed with one heated blanket spread beneath him and another draped atop him. He hates being pampered, but it's working. He can feel the bone-deep bruises and the ache of battered muscles already starting to recede.

He still doesn't want to admit it on general principle, but Baz was right. Much as he would have loved being surrounded by all four of them, piled together and cuddled close as they could get, it would have hurt. He does need the rest, the stillness, the quiet. He looks like a mess, but from what he can gather, it's mostly just looks. Scrapes and scratches, no broken bones, nothing hurt inside.

If he can fall asleep, he'll be fine.

If he can't, he's going to go bat-shit insane in less than, say, an hour.

This is fairly disturbing, but even more so is the realization that it's because they've *changed* him, the four of his lovers. He used to adore being alone for hours. Thinking. Running the place on his own. But just let Ryan kiss his nose to make him grin, Baz muss his hair just to get a rise out of him, and Aidan lean his head against Marcus's arm. Nicholas would be the one to come up from behind and enfold him in a warm hug, holding him tight to drive away the last of the need to be by himself and hurt.

It's not as if they have special favorites amongst their group. Some they find themselves paired off with more than others, but that's okay. There are reasons. Baz and Ryan, Ryan and Aidan, Aidan and himself, himself and Nicholas, and Nicholas and Baz, and himself and Baz, and Aidan and Baz, because Baz is just greedy. Not that any of them mind.

He's already missing them, lying here. Nicholas's habit of mumbling in his sleep. Aidan's whiffling snores. Ryan begging for just five more minutes. The way Baz yawns and undulates like a lazy cat, rippling out of his rest. Aidan's tired laughter as someone tackles and tickles him.

Nicholas's fingers, creeping up his arm. Still-shy eyes seeking out his own for that first good-morning kiss, all soft mouths and gentle loving.

If he could have his choice of one – just one – down here with him now, he thinks he might want Nicholas. Ryan and Baz would mean well, but they'd be clumsy and loud and then feel badly. Aidan would be better – he's their caretaker of the group. But Nicholas... he's the mind that understands them all. He'd be quiet and gentle and tender, deft with his hands, and not miss a thing. He'd coddle and baby Marcus until he was limper than a wet noodle, then perhaps curl ever so carefully up to his side and warm him better than the blankets do.

Yeah. If he could have just one... He yawns. Looks like sleep's coming, maybe. That'd be good. If he could move enough to jerk off, he knows he'd pass out for hours. Float away on the delicious laziness he's only rediscovered since the guys came into his life.

Maybe if he's good, and lies still enough, he can imagine it well enough to get off. If nothing else, he'll fall asleep with a smile on his face. So although he knows he'll get cold soon, he nudges the blanket aside, off one leg and side and away from his groin, exposing cock and balls to the air. He hisses in. Already, it feels so good. The thick flesh nestled in thick blond curls begins to stir a little.

*Good... good... now...*

He shuts his eyes, and the first face to come to his mind is Nicholas'. His glorious, sunrise-colored hair is mussed up, his face unshaven, as it had been this morning after he'd been up all night worrying. He's not shy or worried, now. There's heat in his face, wanting and needing, and plans on how to accomplish it.

He'd ease himself onto the bed light as a thought, sliding over Marcus's legs and balancing with one knee to either side of his calves. Lean forward to rest on his forearms, face level with Marcus's pelvis. He'd breathe out, ever so gently, warm air tickling and curling around his cock.

God, that's so real he can almost feel it...

He's had his eyes shut, and he's been lost in a dream, so he hasn't noticed the near-silent footsteps approaching. Has no clue someone's in there with him until the solid black mask comes down over his eyes. *What the fuck?*

"Not funny!" he barks. "You can't leave a sick man in peace? Who's there?"

"Sssh," a soothing voice murmurs. "It's all right."

Marcus feels the heated wetness of a tongue snake out, lick up and down the length of his hardening cock, and has to say it sure feels all right, but – "Why the mask?"

"I'll tell you later," Nicholas murmurs. "Just lie back, be still, and enjoy this for the moment, Marcus. Love. My love." The mouth takes him in fully, sucking in a gentle rhythm. A warm hand cups and tugs at his balls while the other strokes the top of his thigh. Every so often, as the mouth swirls up and off to lap at his tip, he'll hear that quiet, "Sssh" in that soft voice, and he loses himself just a little bit more.

He still can't see Nicholas. He feels his cock being moved and manipulated, fascinated as it grows wet and slick. Feels the pre-come being lapped daintily away from the spongy head, and hears the sound of soft swallowing.

He wants to move. To writhe. To shout out Nicholas's name. But every time he tries, that mouth jerks away, and it won't come back until he's still and obedient. His muscles are shaking with the strain when he gives a sharp snap of his hips – he can't help it – and comes.

That same warmth laps him clean and lays his spent cock gently on his thigh, then kisses him just above the thick thatch of hair. The heated blanket's drawn carefully up around him, tucked in beneath his arms, surrounding him.

He feels a touch, light as butterfly wings, on his cheek. "Beautiful Marcus," Nicholas's voice murmurs. "Don't be afraid. Sleep, now. Do you think you can sleep? Sleep for me, Marcus..."

Marcus's floating away on the soft, hypnotic sound. He drifts into a deep, restful state before his thoughts unknot enough to ask *how? Why? Nicholas?*, and he knows nothing more....

\* \* \*

When he wakes, it's because of a great clatter and to-do upstairs. A slight weight by his side, that he hadn't realized was there, twitches. The blankets move as if someone's sitting up beneath them. He's still got that mask on, but he feels the touch of a hand on his stomach.

"I'll be right back," Nicholas whispers. "Rest."

Every muscle still hurts, so Marcus doesn't really have a choice. That doesn't stop him from boggling at what's happened as the warm figure retreats, and he can sense – not see – it's sudden disappearance at the edge of the bed.

Then he hears, right above him, where the desk and books live, Nicholas, talking as calmly as if he's been there the whole time. Can't quite make out what he's saying. But he can hear the tone, a little surprised, then amused, and mellow. He hears Enrico rumbling, then his laugh, boyish despite all he's seen and done. Madison, higher-pitched, excited. He thinks they're asking Nicholas for something, and after a pause, a little more noise from them makes him think a deal's been struck.

Feet come down the stairs with extra-special care, two adult sets and one much lighter. Marcus tugs the blanket over his hips and dares to slide the mask up for a look.

The soundproof flap opens, and Madison peeks in, her eyes sparkling. That alone is enough to intrigue – she never, but never comes down here if she can help it. She says their beautiful bed gives her the willies, to which Baz always snickers and says *yeah, me too, isn't it great?* Then she smacks him.

Marcus finds himself grinning at her. "How are you?" he asks, voice creaky.

"I should be asking you that, mister. Good to see you're, um, doing well." She jerks her head a little, down at something he can't see yet, while Enrico pokes his head in and grins at him.

Ah. This would be why: Madison slips a little further into the room, and Marcus can see that her arms are full of a soft pink blanket. Enrico, in the doorway, is holding tight to the hand of a toddler, her eyes wide as buttons and her skin the color of a new-minted penny. "This is Jacinta," Madison jiggles the bundle, "and that's Lupe. I get to take care of them for a few days!"

"Their mom's not feelin' so hot," Enrico volunteers in a whisper. "Their father had a little problem with her girlfriend moving in with her and the kids, so she's gone to visit the doc's for a few days. Lady M. here's taking the babies in. Wanted to get your permission to be out of the office."

From the way Lupe's looking at Madison, Marcus gets the feeling that she's taking the "Lady" part seriously. But that's not so much what gets him as the warmth, absolute warmth that radiates from every single bit of Madison, heart and soul. "Can I?" she pleads. "I'll even mark them down as sick days."

Marcus shakes his head. "Vacation," he manages to say. "All yours."

Her eyes light up. "If you weren't, um, resting, I'd give you such a hug!"

For small miracles...

Then she bites her lip. "They don't have too much, uh, with them, Marcus. Could I -?"

"Petty cash," Marcus murmurs. "Take what you need."

Her eyes are soft and sweet as flowers. "Love you," she whispers, startling the merry hell out of him. "Thanks."

Enrico pats Lupe's back. "Come on, now, we goin' back up. Wave goodbye to the nice man, OK?"

Tiny fingers clench and unclench in a clumsy effort. Marcus makes the same gesture back to her, eliciting a small gasp.

Enrico winks at him. "It's okay, she's just shy. Come on, Lupe. Back on upstairs."

Marcus listens to them go, talk briefly upstairs, and then hears the door shutting gently behind them on their way out. Listens until the last footfall has faded.

He lies in bed, smiling softly to himself. God. Given the way it started out, this is turning into a good day.

"Put the mask back on," a voice whispers.

Damn.

He really and truly wants to look his fill at Nicholas, but he obeys with a sigh.

"You had to give her free access to the petty cash," Nicholas chides, but not seriously; Marcus can hear the note of laughter. "She's taken it all. Something about milk for the office, but I suspect most of it will go the way of Bloomingdale's. Those two young ones won't know what whirlwind's hit them when she's done dressing them like royalty."

"She'll have fun," Marcus croaks. "Nicholas? Where are you?"

"Right here, love." The bed sinks a little at his feet, and he feels the light pressure of a hand running up his calf. "Are you any better?"

"Some. But where – why can't I see you?"

A finger touches his lips. He kisses at it, and feels it stroke back in turn. "Baz and the others insisted you be left in the dark and quiet. Don't be angry. I couldn't leave you here alone, unwatched."

He reaches out and touches – feels – flesh, solid and heated. "You're naked!"

"And you're surprised?" The hand caresses his leg.

Marcus begins to struggle up.

Nicholas pushes him gently back down. "Hush now, hush." The love and amusement in that voice wind softly around Marcus. "I'm cheating a bit, but you'll forgive me, won't you?"

"Nicholas..."

"I worry about you, Marcus. A great deal." Fingers curl around the edge of his blanket, pulling it down a little, all the better to fan out and stroke his shoulder, his chest. "It's for my own good to see you happy."

"Anything for your own good," Marcus murmurs. "Just wish I could see you so that I'd know where to touch you at," he says. "All I can do is follow your moves."

"Wrong, Marcus." Lips brush his lightly. "I follow you."

"In everything?"

"Yes." The lips move to the corner of his mouth. "Everything."

"Then lie down beside me here," he says, patting the blanket. "Stretch out, so I know where you are."

The edge of the blanket lifts, and suddenly the whole of his side is warmed by human flesh, arms draping over his abdomen and a leg curling around his own. He closes his eyes and sighs in bliss. Perfect... this is perfect.

Running his hand down Nicholas's arm, he locates that hand and brings it to his mouth. He glories in the feel of Nicholas rippling next to him, then at the feel of a head lying ever so carefully on his shoulder. He manages to slip his arm – far less sore now – under the other man, and hold him closer still.

They lie in silence for a long while, Marcus idly listening to Nicholas breathe. "I hope you don't mind that I permitted Madison to come down," Nicholas murmurs apropos of nothing. "It's a sight I found too endearing to keep to myself."

"I don't mind." He kisses the top of Nicholas's hair. "I was shocked, yes. But I didn't mind. She was glowing. Hard to imagine until I saw it."

"Indeed. Who'd have thought her the earth-mother type? Yet look how she took to it. Do you know, the baby was on the verge of wailing, but she managed to soothe it? All by herself. I think Enrico was about to pop his buttons with pride."

"Hey, I'm not stupid. I saw it. Maybe I'm not as quick as you, but –"

Nicholas stiffens. Withdraws a little. "I'm sorry, Marcus. I had no wish to offend."

"Hey, hey, hey, who said you could leave?" Marcus pulls him back with arms gaining in strength by the minute. "Stay." He runs one finger down Nicholas's back, down the spine until the man hisses and presses against him. "I'm not mad, Nicholas. I know my strengths. I know yours, too. Doesn't make either of us the lesser man."

Nicholas sighs, deep and heavy. Marcus feels him nuzzling into his chest. "A good man," he murmurs. "All of you."

"And you. Forget the self-effacement, or I'll have Baz teach you a lesson."

Nicholas laughs. "Heaven forfend. I doubt I'm recovered from the last one."

"Mmmm." Marcus breathes the man's scent in deeply. "What if I decided to teach you a thing or two?"

"That would depend entirely on the lesson," comes the reply, decidedly dry, but Marcus's no fool and he feels the cock resting against his leg give a twitch. He knows that body so well, now that he's touching it, and can run his hand down between them to grasp the flesh without needing to look. He squeezes gently. "Feel like learning something?"

There's a nod against his shoulder as Nicholas struggles for words.

"School's in." He lets his other hand trail further down and finds what he thought he would, that Nicholas is already slicked up, the faintly scented lube warm and slippery to his touch. A questing finger tells Marcus that he's even stretched himself.

"Did you get off on that?" he whispers. "Your own hand, working away? Did you imagine it was mine?"

Shaky nod. "Yours. All yours. But it was foolish – you're still injured."

"Injured, not dead." Marcus draws his hands back, and uses them to gently push and lift Nicholas atop him. "And I'm well enough for this. Want to ride me, Nicholas?"

"God," Nicholas breathes. "God, yes."

"I still can't see you." Marcus is hard again, weeping. He takes Nicholas's hand in his, fingers curling around the solid palm. "Guide me. Come on, sink yourself down. You want to. I want you to. If you learn well, teacher might give you an A."

He has to bite his lip hard as the clutching, slippery heat surrounds him. "Fuck – Nicholas!"

Hands reach out to grasp his own. Nicholas raises himself a little, then lowers. "As you say," he replies, voice heavy and shaking. "School's in."



"They'll kill us."

"Baz will."

"Ryan will pout."

"Aidan would understand."

"They all would. Like they wouldn't do this if they could. You're just the one smart enough to figure it out –" and Marcus has to stop talking, because that squeezing, rising and falling, feels so goodgoodgood that he doesn't have the mind left to form questions or the voice for words. All he's got left is enough for deep groans, guttural cries, and babbled obscenities as Nicholas rides him slow and deep, taking him in all the way and sliding out on the slowest of torturing strokes.

He feels his hand guided to a leaking cock and grasps it eagerly, working it with all the skill he's learned in the last few months, doing what he knows Nicholas likes best. "Come for me," he manages to choke out, knowing that he can't wait much longer. He rubs harder, faster. "Come for me, Nicholas. Come."

He hears a choked off yell, a moan, and feels wetness coat his fingers. It's more than enough for him, and he too feels the contractions, the deep stomach-grinding ecstasy, as all that he is rockets through his body, out his cock, clenched deep inside Nicholas's body.

The weight of the man collapses over him, weight heavy on forearms so as not to crush. He feels the damp heat of Nicholas's panting on his collarbone. "Good," he breathes. "God, Marcus, so very good."

"And for me." And because he wants to, he nudges Nicholas's elbows until he's lying flat on his chest, wrapped around him like a limpet.

He can hear Nicholas's breathing begin to change, to slow and deepen. As does his own. "We shouldn't fall asleep like this," he says, struggling to keep from yawning.

"Too good to move..." Nicholas mumbles. "Just a little longer."

He can't tell him no, not when he's so warm and alive, when he can imagine the look on his face. Blissful. Satisfied. Loving. "Just a little longer, then," he agrees, tucking his head into the crook of Nicholas's neck.

\* \* \*

It's Baz who discovers the two when they come home, when he traipses down to check on Marcus. He's feeling a bit of wholehearted disgust, but mostly just admiration for Nicholas's balls.

Aidan thinks they should all pile in together. He's been rooting for it all day. Baz and Ryan ponder that, and after a moment decide they'll give it a try.

In a while.

"Lucky bastard," Baz remarks with fond disgust as he rubs circles on Nicholas' back.  
"He's too clever by half.

Yes, Nicholas agrees from deep within his sleep. *Clever. And so very lucky indeed.*

## Chapter Five

Baz always wakes up horny as hell.

There's that slow rise up out of sleep, accompanied by the heat in his groin, if his cock wasn't already high and mighty from what he's dreamed of. He'll wriggle about, stretch, and toss off the covers so he can just luxuriate in the softness and warmth of their fucking marvelous bed.

First thing he does is run a hand down his body, tug hard at his thatch once for a nice shock of pain to get him wide awake, then slide his hand up and down his shaft, proud and pleased. Always ready to go, his cock.

Then he'll turn about for a glance at his Ryan. He's got himself trained to start waking up whenever his beautiful boy starts to stir, so they'll get up (and hopefully get off) right around the same time. His sea-gray eyes might be blinking sleepily at Baz, the beginnings of a smile sweet on his face, or they might be wide and full of the devil, his lips grinning wickedly.

He does like his wake-up call. And if Ryan's too tired, too sore, in a mood for watching or has a taste to be the filling in a breakfast sandwich, why then there's Aidan in the middle, Marcus one over, and Nicholas at the other end. He's got four fine fellows to choose from, and Baz is a hungry man. Not that he's easy, mind you – it's just that he enjoys a snack and it's fantastic to have a buffet waiting for him.

Yeah, he always wakes up wanting some action. It's happened again this morning, as he slithers his way out of sleep with a hard-on that could break rocks. *Never fails*, he smirks as he gives himself that first teasing rub.

No, he can't help it. It's just the way he's made. Besides, he always was a bit of a dreamer, and lately he's had more than a few mouthwatering little fantasies trotting through his brain. Does art imitate life, or life imitate art? It's one or the other, but Baz doesn't much care as long as he gets off.

He gets *them* off, too, hearing him describe his dreams. Some of their best times yet have come after a little re-enactment here and there. Like last night, when Baz might as well have had a spotlight on him for all the attention lavished on his fair self.

They'd done their usual wild pretzel twisting-about, not that that ever got boring, mind you, but everyone was up for round two, and when he made a little suggestion... well, it was step right up, folks, line forms here for a taste of the Baz.

They'd taken turns, too, driving him mad. Aidan, kissing him till he was breathless and Baz wanting a bit of air himself, those clever fingers all the time working away at his

prick and scrotum, teasing, promising. Being passed the lube by some lucky bloke and sliding inside him, stretching wide, 'til he could – and damned if he didn't – take that whole narrow fist, rotating and squeezing on his sweet spot till he just about came.

Not yet, though. Marcus got his turn next, turning Baz roughly on his stomach and slamming in, hard and fast, just what he wanted. Made him scream – made them both scream, nice counterpoint to the other men waiting, breath coming fast and heavy in want.

Ryan next, flipping Baz's limp body over to envelop his cock in that warm mouth and using all the clever little tricks he'd taught that tongue. Getting him just – almost – there – then stopping, drawing away. He'd had a fine case of blue balls developing by that point, but it was too good to fret over. Delicious pain.

Finally Nicholas, wicked for once, hair awry – he and Marcus had been enjoying a good bit of a tongue bath and a duel of mouths while Aidan sucked his cock for all he was worth, rubbing himself hard and fast. No one had come yet, but didn't matter, did it? Best was yet to be.

'Cause it was Nicholas, his smile Lucifer's very own, who raised himself up all slick and ready and slid down Baz's cock like a flagpole, spearing himself deep. God, he hadn't lasted long afterwards. Got ridden like a pony, hollering out his lungs, only half hearing the others going at it in a frantic circle-suck, till Nicholas burst and spilled over his chest, muscles squeezing so hard that he popped too.

He vaguely remembers flopping down and grabbing hold of Ryan, reeking of the others, to hold tight to them as he could before they dropped dead into exhausted sleep.

Yeah, that'll go down as one of the better nights. Not that they're not all glorious.

He's ready for a bit more, so he turns his head and looks –

But there's no Ryan there. He blinks. No Ryan, no Aidan, no Marcus, no Nicholas. They've gone and left him all alone. He feels of the sheets, patting them down. Cool. They've been gone for some time, then.

How'd that happen? He's hurt and pissed all at once. His lovers must have sneaked out deliberately, so as not to wake him up! What's he done to deserve this?

Well, he's gonna find out, that's for damned sure. Shoving the heavy covers fully off him, Baz stands and vaults off the edge of the bed, landing with a good heavy "watch out" thud.

He does remember to get dressed.

His anger rises as he hits the foot of the stairwell up. The bloody soundproof flap's down!

Buttoned into place, even. He can't remember that ever being done.

OK, now he's pissed.

Yanking the flap back with a rattle-rattle-rattle-snap of clips, he stomps his way up the stairs – into a perfectly normal day. Aidan at the computer, Nicholas at his books, Marcus deep in conversation with Ryan over a cup of coffee. Not a one of them looks up at him with more than a passing "oh, there you are" glance.

Now that hurts. Baz has his mouth open, all ready for a tirade, when he sees:

Oh, shit. Looked like the standard desk crap at first go, but at a second glanced around he realizes what it is – bottles of fine liquor wrapped round with red ribbons, boxes of open chocolates, tubes of lube in every scent and flavor, and even – holy hell, is that a soft red-and-black leather flogger draped 'round Ryan's neck?

Baz does a quick bit of mental math, then drops his head in his hands and groans. Oh, hell! They'd not done the Christmas thing, not being much for celebrating that particular season, planning on saving it up for a Valentine's blow-out.

He can see it now: all of them sneaking out of bed, up for a peek at the parcels wrapped beneath the little rose bush in its pot on a small table in the office. Seeing what they'd got, and who'd bought what for who. Laughing amongst themselves as they traded round about, making suggestions about who'd have first turn with which.

Discovering that Baz hadn't left a bloody thing under the tree. He'd been big with his promises, but he'd gone and lost track of the days. If they'd not had that lovely orgy last night, he might've been able to sneak out and buy something, but no, he had to pass straight out, didn't he? Fuck!

They're pissed, he can tell. There's a stiffness in backs and shoulders, a studied determination not to look his way. And under the tree, three fat boxes and a clumsily wrapped something that's shaped like a bottle of his favorite, finest whiskey. They look lonely and forgotten down there.

It's nearly noon, now. He can see them in his mind, glancing at the boxes, waiting... waiting... finally giving up. Then he had to come roaring up the steps, nothing in his hands, pissed off and acting like they had something to explain...

Oh, fuck.

Good luck he woke in the mood for some. He's just royally screwed himself.

\* \* \*

Baz sits and stares at the phone book, counts his cash again, and can feel himself falling

just that bit deeper into the hole he's dug for himself.

There's nothing he wants more than to amble out, hit every store he can within walking distance – candy store, liquor store, sex toy heaven – and come back with his arms overflowing. Wants to load them down with prezzies that'll bring a smile back to those four faces and, God willing, get him at least a kiss to boot.

But he thinks – nah, he knows – doing that's not gonna get him anything. They see such a load, and they'll know these are "oops" gifts. Nobody's going to want that. A hasty make-it-up-to-you present, no thought involved, has more of a bitter taste than none at all.

But he's got to do something, anyway, even if it's a little thing. Got to get them back on his good side, and get their arms around him. Maybe more.

His poor, aching dick, not satisfied anymore with a lonely wank – even if he were in the mood – keeps insisting on a taste of dipping into some lovely heat, and his lips are cold, un-kissed. He's become a spoiled pet, made rotten by four sets of arms that like having him in them, and he isn't giving that up. Not over something daft as Valentine's Day.

Only it's not daft, is it, because they've put so much stock into it. He's in for a world of hurt if he doesn't come up with something *meaningful*, and fast.

Hence, the phone book, which you could kill a man with, it's so thick. And every place he's called just laughs at him for wanting such-and-such *on* Valentine's Day, no pre-ordering, and hangs up when he tries to coax them into "special" delivery. He's not giving up, though, no way.

Finally he finds a tiny little Asian flower shop that's still taking orders, though the heavily-accented owner laughs as well when he hopefully – stupidly – starts talking about red roses. She's all out, sir, none left at all. Thoroughly pissed off, he hangs up on her and sits to stew.

There's an idea rising in the back of his mind. He's trying his best to stuff it back down. Don't want to do this – lord, it couldn't be a happier-homo notion if he thought for ages – and it brings back some unhappy, unhappy memories of a the poor student he used to be, a sad bastard who thought flowers were the most neato-keen thing ever. Who kept books pressed full of the damned things, their meanings written beneath in the prim handwriting he still can't shake to replace with a decent scrawl.

But time keeps on tickin' past, and there's not much left to do. He shivers. Marcus is going to recognize this trick, and mock him. Aidan, Ryan – they'll definitely look at him funny, not getting it. Nicholas might understand – but who knows how he'll react if Baz gets this the least bit wrong?

Oh, hell. No hope for it, no help for it. He takes in a deep breath, forces it back out, and drops to his knees. Under the bed, then.

He's thin enough and the bed just high enough that he can snake-crawl his way across the floor to the box he keeps hidden under here. It's filled with things he doesn't want the others to think him sentimental enough to keep. A sketch Marcus once drew of him, with him naked on his back and thrashing about. "It's how I like seeing you," he'd rumbled, handing it over. An empty pack of smokes, the first ones Ryan had bought for him. Little airplane bottle of booze from Aidan. A lock of Nicholas' gorgeous hair.

A book. A thin, limp leather-covered book, once blank, filled with that same rottenly perfect handwriting. He pauses to rub his hand lightly over the cover, and wiggles his way back out.

It's gotten dusty, he notices, as he makes his way back into the soft lamplight of the bedroom. The pages look sadder than ever, handled so much that they flop loose in his hands, limp as a spent dick. He snorts. Ought to be. He'd damn near wanked himself stupid over that thing once upon a time.

He opens it and flips through the pages. Remembers most of them by heart and then some. Knows what he wants. For each of them. If he's got the nerve... and if the Asian woman's got the goods.

It takes a good long stare at the book, and a deeply contemplative look at their great big bed before he can get up the nerve to pick up the phone and dial. Listening to it ring, he reckons on one thing for sure – if this doesn't work, he's doomed.

\* \* \*

It's near dusk when his four partners come trudging down the stairs, toting armfuls of their new toys. They left his presents upstairs, and he can't say as he blames them. No gifts and an unexplained day off work puts him in everyone's bad books, and no mistake. They give him flat, unreadable looks and not a word of hello. Well, he can't let that stop him, either.

Half-hidden behind a pillar, he nods at them. "Boys."

"Baz," Marcus acknowledges gruffly. He's the only one to speak. Ryan flashes him a look of hurt. Aidan and Nicholas, nothing.

Baz chews on his lip, and waits. They'll see the bed soon enough.

When they do, Ryan near about drops his flogger. It's made, fresh sheets and all, pillows plumped up nice and fat. He knows they'll have expected him to leave it in a mess. That gets him a puzzled look from Nicholas, which gives him hope. He nods back, his face serious. Hoping they'll take a closer look.

Aidan's the first to notice. "There's flowers on the bed," he says, clearly puzzled. He puts

down his bottles and a pair of fleece-lined handcuffs to reach over to his pillow for a better look.

Only four, one on each of their pillows. All he could afford, all the Asian lady had left that was even close enough to what he'd wanted. "Under the pillow, too," he says quietly.

Aidan slips his hand under the cool pillowslip, fumbles about, and comes out with a neck chain. He turns it over, puzzled. "This is yours, innit?"

"Was." Baz shifts. "Yours, now."

Ah, they're curious now, they are, and he feels his heart lift just a bit in hope. One by one, they take up their flowers – puzzled, he can tell – and bits of things that have belonged to him. Marcus gets his battered cigarette lighter, on account of the old poof likes a smoke very rarely after particularly good sex, Ryan his favorite silver ring, and Nicholas – well, Nicholas gets that limp little book.

"Baz," Nicholas says slowly, "What's all this about?"

"Me being a total ass," Baz admits frankly. "This is me trying to make it up to you." He shoves his hands in his pockets and jerks his head to the book. "I know you're confused. Go on, then, read it. What's in there ought to explain a good bit."

Nicholas runs his finger down the spine of his book, and touches the bright, rude petals of his zinnia. "I don't understand."

Oh, for – "It's the flowers!" Baz snaps. "They've got meanings and all."

"So it's not all that you could find left at the store?" Oh, yeah, Ryan's hurt. Baz's heart twists a bit.

"No, love." He tries to gentle his voice. "Nicholas, just look up Zinnia, yeah? It's all in the book."

Nicholas still looks baffled, but he lays the flower down on his pillow again and flips through the pages of tiny writing. He looks at the page for a long, long moment, then smiles. "I see."

He lifts his zinnia again, and drinks deep of the no-smell. "Zinnia," he murmurs around it, "means 'I mourn your absence'. He's missed us."

"Missed you," Baz says quietly. "Didn't mean to hurt you."

"Well, you did," Ryan fires back. But he's holding his peach blossom a bit tighter, and he's fidgeting with the ring like he wants to slip it on his finger. "Nicholas?"



Nicholas skims pages for the meaning. Again, he smiles that tiny smile and passes the book over for Ryan to see. Baz watches Ryan's lips move as he reads: "Peach blossom – 'my heart is thine'."

There are words on his lips, but Marcus interrupts, holding up his Star of Bethlehem. "What's this mean?"

Now Ryan's smiling, too, and he's clutching his ring tight. Looks like Nicholas flipped ahead. "Reconciliation," he says quietly.

Marcus nods. "Baz?"

Baz scuffs his foot. "Yeah, lover?"

"You really are sorry, aren't you?"

"For being an idiot? Yeah." He doesn't want to look back up. "And for all the years you and I spent hating one another. Wasted time."

Aidan's got his snip of dahlia in his hands. Apparently, he doesn't need the book. "Forever thine," he says quietly.

Nicholas is the first to put the pieces together. "*I miss you. I love you. Forgive me. I belong to you.* That, and bits of yourself to tie them all together. Is that it?"

"Almost." He had to beg, borrow, and he's out of money for smokes for the next week, but he managed to coax four red roses out of the florist's personal bouquet. Carefully stripping the thorns with a silver knife, he's hidden them behind the pillar.

"Here," he says, thrusting them roughly out. "I'm no good at this sentimental shit, and never have been, okay? But it's all I can say, and it's the only way I can say it. Stay pissed off at me if you like, I deserve it. But there's my apology anyway. Take it as you want to."

They're all still for a long moment. Suddenly, he feels the light pressure of a hand on his own, and the brush of lips on his cheek. Ryan's there, taking one of the roses with a hand that bears a silver ring. "OK," he whispers, brokenly. "You're off the hook."

Marcus takes a rose. Still rough, a little angry, but he takes it. "Until the next time you screw up." Baz finds himself grinning, and sees a matching set on Aidan's face as he takes his rose, too.

Nicholas's hesitating. *Come on, come on*, Baz begs silently, holding it out to him.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Nicholas takes it. Baz gets it. Nicholas's trust is still such a shaky thing. He finds himself wondering what's in that lovely wrapped box upstairs with his

name on it, how much thought went into it, and a bolt of misery shoots through him. "Sorry, Nicky," he mumbles. "I'm sorrier than I can say."

Nicholas nods. "Very well," he says quietly. "I forgive you, Baz."

Then Nicholas makes it all right by holding open his arms. "Come here."

And oh, God, he does, just about flies into them and holds Nicholas tight. He feels the tight pressure of the others joining him, their kisses on his hands and hair and caresses on his arms.

They press in a little closer, and he feels something better still, hard and firm, pressed up against his groin, his thighs, his arse. His poor neglected cock perks up in interest.

Yeah, could've been the worst Valentine's Day ever. Was, for a good while, but it looks like they're about to see a turn and turn about.

Lucky that he not only wakes up in the morning ready for a little, but goes to bed at night the same way. Lucky's what he is all around.

And lucky, thank God, is what he's gonna get.

Looks like he could get to appreciating romantic holidays yet.

## Chapter Six

"I don't have you to myself very often," Aidan says sleepily, scooting deeper back into Marcus' arms. "Makes me appreciate you all the more when I do. You could go a bit tighter, there, if you liked."

"Not pushy, are you?" Despite the words, Marcus pulls Aidan closer, molding them shape-to-shape, stomach to back. "I'm afraid I'll choke you."

"Nah." Aidan's head relaxes, rubbing his cheek against Marcus' bicep. "This is just about perfect, I'd say."

Marcus chuckles, squeezing a little. "Can you breathe? You couldn't get a credit card between us."

"You saying money could come between us?" Aidan nudges his lover. "Besides, you're a fine one to be calling me pushy, Mr. Tops-a-lot."

"Hey!" A cool nose burrows in beside Aidan's warm ear. "Prick."

"I thought that was part of my many charms."

"One of them," Marcus allows, letting his hand drift lower on the belly it's been resting against. Not groping, not caressing, merely touching lightly and enjoying the feel. "Where are the others?"

Aidan cranes to see one of the clocks scattered about at eye-level for various waking heads. "Around nine AM? Baz's gone, suppose he's still out at that all-night poker game."

Marcus growls.

"Ah, give him his freedom, will you? Ryan, now, it's Sunday but he'll be upstairs at work doing overtime. Nicholas is at the library, I heard him say something about it when we got that lovely little kiss goodbye."

"Mmm." Marcus shifts slightly.

"What's wrong?"

"Just... I don't know." Marcus's muscles twitch a little, uneasy. "It doesn't feel right, somehow, not having them here."

"Marcus, we're not joined at the hip, now."

"Yes, we are." A small rock forward proves his point.

Aidan laughs wearily. "You've got to be joking. You never heard of rest for the weary?"

"It's no rest for the wicked." Marcus nips at Aidan's earlobe. "And I'd have to say..."

"That you'd better watch what you say," Madison's voice crackles through the intercom she's finally insisted they install by the bed. "You left this thing on all night. If I hadn't gone home, I'd be totally traumatized by now. I am so not your wake-up call buddy, but if you're up would you mind unpeeling for a minute and coming to the office?"

Both men groan. Aidan wiggles one arm free and presses a button. "Yeah, we're up and you surely do pick your moments, Lady M."

"TMI, Aidan! Besides which? You're disgusting. Just for that you get to be the one to come help me."

The intercom clicks off. Aidan groans, digging his face against the pale skin of Marcus's inner arm. "She's gonna have me lifting boxes," he says, voice muffled. "Carting around files or shaking down contacts."

"Could be worse."

"How d'you figure?"

"Could be me." Marcus swats at the slight turn of Aidan's hip. "Go on. The sooner you're done, the sooner you can come back down here and we can enjoy some quality time."

"If Ryan doesn't finish up early, or Baz doesn't come home plastered and needing a shower, or Nicholas doesn't burst in waving a new text that he's discovered..." Aidan grouches, reluctantly wiggling out from an arm that, despite its owner's words, isn't doing much to allow him to go.

"They'll be hours." Aidan feels a kiss to his lips as he turns, and a light brush of fingers down his cheek. "I'll wait for you."

"You'd better." Aidan scoots to the edge of the bed and slides off. "Am I presentable?" He's wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt – it was chilly the night before. Marcus nods. "All right, then." One hand combs through his unruly hair, and he's ready for the day. "Hold the fort."

"Planning on it." Marcus's already spread-eagled and wiggling into the warm spot Aidan's left.

"Bastard."

"Love you."

Aidan hesitates on the edge of the steps. He knows those words don't come lightly, no matter what the tone. "Yeah," he mutters, blushing just a little. "Love you, yourself. I'll try not to let this go on too long."

"Good idea."

There, that's a definite blush now, and Aidan's on his way up the stairs. Chuckling, Marcus relaxes back into the warmth that soaks into his bones. Mornings like this are sweet to him, lying snug and surrounded by four scents not his own, each one individual as the man it belongs to. Sharp pine cologne for Ryan, paper and ink for Nicholas, cigarettes for Baz and faint whiskey for Aidan.

It's strong today, for the night before had been unusually cold, enough so that they'd bothered to climb back into warm things before they collapsed into their usual tangle. Then they'd gotten too hot, and released the scents that marked them as unique along with the slight tang of sweat. It's a perfume a man this lucky should never get tired of.

Above all, pinned to the wall above their heads, he can still catch a whiff of the faded fragrance of Baz's flowers. The smell of Baz's work shirt from yesterday, flung into one corner. Nicholas's hand cream, light cedar, a bit spilled where they'd – well. Lube runs low sometimes, and you do what you have to. Then there's Ryan's extra pair of shoes, flung beneath the bed. You can't see them, but he can tell they're there. God, he's either going to have to burn those things or bury them. They're worse than Aidan's lucky T-shirt.

But bad or good, it's a cornucopia of blissful aromas that surround him. Stretching again, as hard and long as he can until every muscle is taut, he swims his arms and legs in the bed and soaks up every nuance that he can. Learning, at this late date, that he doesn't need to be afraid to enjoy – to take pleasure in the small things – it's still so new to him that he doesn't know how, often, but this is easy.

Also, peaceful. His eyelids droop. Even though it's daylight, it's Saturday after all, and his internal clock is telling him he should rest. Maybe... maybe just a little nap... just until Aidan comes back...

His eyelashes have fluttered to rest on his cheeks when he hears footsteps approaching down the stairs. Madison's murmuring something, but he can't be bothered to listen closely enough. He's comfortable and warm and there is nothing but nothing going to get him out of this bed before Aidan comes back to it.

He perks up just a little, turning his head toward the sound as the soundproofing flap comes scrolling up and he hears Aidan's familiar footfall on the stairs. Familiar – but a bit off, too. Marcus frowns, eyes still closed. One step down, normal weight, fine – then a pause, and two tiny thumps in counter-rhythm. More, his lover's murmuring soft encouragements out loud.

Someone's with him. A small someone. And he was just talking to Madison. Madison's who's been obsessed, lately, with playing Mother Teresa to the kids of gay and lesbian parents.

Marcus freezes.

Oh, god, no. Please, no.

Aidan peeks tentatively around the corner. "Marcus, are you awake?" he whispers.

It would be great to pretend sleep. Trouble is, Aidan would be able to tell, and he's not going to lie to the man, no matter what it costs him. But if he's got in tow what Marcus thinks he has, this had better count for some major brownie points... "I'm awake," he says reluctantly. He still doesn't open his eyes or raise his head.

"You see, then?" he hears Aidan whisper. "Just an ordinary man, like myself or Enrico. Madison was right; nothing to be scared of, eh?"

Small whimper.

Now his eyelids do snap open, out of pure curiosity. Standing near the foot of the bed, Aidan's bent nearly in half to keep hold of the hand of a tiny girl with vast eyes of honey brown and short, glossy silk hair. Her face is a little dirty, but she's dressed in pristine pink overalls and a white sweater. She's also wearing a look of sheer terror. Aimed straight at Marcus.

She whimpers again, shaking her head. "Aidan?" Marcus asks carefully.

"Hush now, sweetling, it's all right," Aidan soothes. "This is one of M's little favorites, and she's named Mariposa. She's just a bit afraid of men, that's all. Show her that you're all right, now. Don't move around much, nor quickly, either, yeah? Oh, and keep your voice down, and, eh..." He winces. "Ix-nay on the own-fray, would you? Her f-a-t-h-e-r..."

Oh. Marcus shuts his eyes. Pauses. Considers what he's seen. Re-opens them. "Aidan, are you holding...?"

Aidan jiggles the tiny blue something strapped to his torso. "This is Ramon. Only three months old and already big enough that he's giving me a backache, can you believe it?"

"You... two..."

"Yeah, well, Madison's gone shopping. The little ones might have to stay the night with her, and she's out of diapers and such."

Marcus' mind works busily. "What about Enrico?"

"Off dealing with, eh... some problematic people. Hence Madison's nanny act for the night. They both want these two safe and sound." He jostles the wiggling blue grub attached to him. "I forget, is the microwave still working or do I need to use the stove to heat this one's bottle?"

Bottle? Stove? Oh... milk. Marcus's foggy brain isn't working at top speed. It's hard to function when two button eyes are staring holes clear through you, all the way to your spinal chord. He carefully lifts one hand and rubs his eyes.

"I think Ryan and Baz had too much fun with popcorn last time they used the microwave. They started trying to see what would happen if you nuked unpricked potatoes, hot dogs, boiled eggs..."

"Stove it is, then. Come on, you." Aidan nuzzles the wiggling bundle and pulls gently at Mariposa's hand. "Want to give me some help fixing your brother's lunch, yeah?"

Thank God, the solemn eyes switch to Aidan. After long and deliberate consideration, he gets a small nod of yes. The little head turns to give Marcus one long, last stare before she toddles off, Aidan patiently matching her tiny steps so that they proceed at a snail's pace.

Marcus raises himself on his elbows and watches them go. Not exactly what he was expecting out of a lazy weekend morning. But underneath the small (or not so small) whine in his head about being denied serious quality time with Aidan, he knows that this is the right thing to do.

After all, Madison's really gotten serious with her rescue missions lately. She's even converted a section of her apartment into a kids' overnight shelter, complete with crib and "big kid" bed, rocking chair and changing table. He knows, because he and Baz and Enrico had to spend an entire night hauling the stuff from the thrift shops where she bought them, while Ryan repainted and refinished, and Nicholas helped Madison research safety issues.

Madison takes this seriously. She's starting to get a name for herself; they all call her Lady M now, as do Enrico and Aidan, for being the one they can leave their children with in safety overnight. Sometimes more than overnight. They come home to their mothers or fathers clean, dressed in fresh clothes, with their stomachs full and their eyes bright from peaceful sleep. She spends more of her salary on juice boxes and diapers these days than she does on shoes, and for Madison, that's a major lifestyle change. Refusing to help her would be... cruel.

Damn it.

See, Marcus just doesn't understand children. He hasn't been around them much in years.

Children are uncanny in the way they look at you and weigh everything in the balance, which isn't a comfortable position.

It's the coward's way out, he knows, but maybe if he lies really, really still, they'll forget that he's there.

"Marcus?"

Or not. Aidan appears around the corner, holding a saucepan in one hand and a bottle in the other. Mariposa's clinging to his pants leg for dear life. Staring. "I could use a hand here, if you don't mind."

Marcus swallows down a tiny sound of panic. *No. Sorry. Can't. Don't think I'd be able to.* "Sure."

"Great." Aidan looks so relieved that Marcus can't regret it – until Aidan says: "Both the little one and Mariposa are hungry at the same time, it seems. This one's not started crying yet, but he soon will. I can cook something, but do you know how to hold and feed a baby this little? Or if you'd rather, you could watch her."

"I'll hold the baby," Marcus says quickly, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. Mariposa squeaks and hides behind Aidan, earning him a deep frown. "Sorry," he mumbles, feeling two inches tall.

"Just be careful, there. Mariposa, it's all right, see?" Aidan gently tugs the wee girl out from behind his knees. "Marcus is a good guy. He'll just hold Ramon and give him his bottle while we find something for your breakfast."

Marcus watches as he unclips the baby satchel from himself. He's gotten pretty used to Aidan's dexterity, but this is a new application of it. Click, click, snap, and the blue grub's loose and wiggling in his arms. He eyes Marcus up and down, then shakes his head. "Right, I'll put him on the bed. It's not like he'll fall off this thing. Just toss the quilt up a bit and make him a little nest, will you?"

Nest? That he can do. How big? Not too big. Hastily, he mounds up a small hillock and hollow of soft blankets and softer quilt. The beam of appreciation that earns him lifts his mood more than a little.

"Just perfect," Aidan approves, lowering the bundle down into it. "You do know how to handle a bottle, yeah?"

It can't be that hard. "Sure," Marcus improvises. "I can do that."

Aidan gives him a slightly raised eyebrow. "I'll bet you can. But if you get it wrong, you'll be the one who has to listen to the screaming, too."



Marcus tenses. "The baby's going to scream?"

"No, I will – at you – then Mari will join in, and Ramon'll be so pis - peeved that he'll join in, and we'll all have a fine time of it." Aidan winks. "So get it right, eh? Meanwhile, Mari and I will go and see if that greedy man Nicholas left any eggs this morning, or if he boiled them all."

Bedamned if Mariposa doesn't smile at that. "Oh, you like eggs, do you?"

She nods solemnly.

Marcus gets an idea. "Hey, what about Ryan's Pop-"

He doesn't get to finish the sentence before Aidan glares at him. "We won't feed any of those over-processed frosted squares to any child in this house, friend. Not if you value her life and health. Lord knows how Ryan survives it every morning."

"Okay, okay." Marcus raises his hands, forgetting that he's got a bottle in one of them. A squawk, like that of an angry chicken, sounds from the blankets.

"Uh-oh. I'd hurry with that, if I were you," Aidan says with a nod before making his escape, the dirty bastard.

Marcus takes a deep breath. The bottle is warm in his hand. He hopes Aidan checked the temperature - he remembers from somewhere that you should do that. The wiggling bundle's starting to pick up the pace of its kicking and thrashing. He'd better do this, hadn't he?

Carefully, he lowers the bottle, not wanting to spill, and nudges the teat against plump baby lips. They purse up, as if objecting to the smell and taste of the thing. Small hands work loose and flail. Doesn't take much to figure out what's wrong.

"You're used to the breast, aren't you?" he surprises himself by whispering. "Sorry, kiddo. Can you make do with this?"

Reluctantly, the baby lets the nipple slip through his lips. The first taste of milk – and that's familiar to him, at least – sends the little mouth open wide, smacking hungrily. Marcus grins. This isn't so hard. He loves it! What if he gives the bottle just a little squeeze, and let him get a decent swallow in?

*Hack! Cough cough cough! Choke!*

"Aidan!" Marcus roars. The wheezing baby, drooling milk from both corners of its mouth, gags pitifully and lets out a tremulous, loud wail between coughs. From the kitchen he hears the clatter of a fork dropping and a great shoving, battering sound.

Aidan appears, hands on fists, thoroughly pissed off. "Marcus, what in the – oh, for pity's sake! Would you pick him up already?"

"I didn't mean to – he –"

"I'm sure that you didn't." Aidan's already there, expertly sitting the tiny baby up and patting his back with clever hands. "Hush there, hush there, now, just got a bit too much at once, didn't you? Wonder how that happened, eh?"

Marcus blushes.

"Right," Aidan says, resignedly. "I'll finish here. Mariposa was just about to dig into some scrambled eggs. You go fetch her out and see if you can get her to eat."

"Me? Fetch her out? Out from where?"

"No, not you, the tooth fairy. Yeah, you. You're the one who scared her enough to hide under the kitchen table."

"So I'm supposed to un-scare her enough to get her back out?"

"And do it before her eggs go cold." Aidan gives him a severe look. Still, faced with Marcus's wounded, confused expression, he gives in and leans over to kiss his lover. "Just go easy with her," he encourages. "Get down to her level and talk soft and quiet to her. Maybe take her a little treat to coax her out. Bribing's not so good for kids her age, but she's in a strange place with strangers, so we'll make an exception if we have to."

A treat? He can do that. Ryan's got some Ring-Dings – no, wait, Aidan said no over processed sweets. Besides, there's the eggs that he's got to feed her somehow. Food... chocolate, ice cream, hot toddies... that's how he usually comforts those he loves. What else can you bribe a toddler with? Marcus stares about wildly, looking for something, anything.

A thought occurs to him. Scooting quickly and carefully as he can off the bed, he reaches underneath and drags out a cardboard box, the same sort of thing as the wooden one Baz keeps buried far deeper underneath the mattresses. Reaching in, he pulls out a small trinket, glances at it once, then makes for the kitchen, deliberately slow.

"Good," Aidan encourages. "Now remember – stay on her level."

Marcus feels like a prime idiot, but as he nears the kitchen Marcus drops to his hands and knees and crawls, one slow shuffle at a time, toward the table. He can see those eyes and that little jumper nearly hidden in a tangle of chair legs. "Mari?" he whispers. "I'm sorry I was loud."

She blinks at him and gets a tighter grip on the central table support.

"My name's Marcus," he whispers.

Blink. He's not sure what that means.

"Don't be scared. OK?" *Please don't, because then I'll feel even more guilty and Aidan will be angry and come to think of it, I want you sad less than I want Aidan mad at me. You're just a little kid and you can't help it, can you?*

"Want to come out and eat your breakfast? Eggs," he coaxes.

Pause. Finally, a blink. She has to be hungry. He can see that her little arms are thin, and her cheeks aren't plump with baby fat like they ought to be. "Come on out and eat."

That gets him a slow, slow shake of the head.

Time to bring out the big guns, then. Ever so carefully, Marcus extends his hand and shows her what's inside his broad palm. A tiny, perfect rag doll with brown yarn hair and tiny black eyes. It's old, perhaps from the later 1890's, but perfectly preserved. It smells sweet, of lavender and verbenas.

"Hello," he whispers in a little toy's voice. Mariposa grows perfectly still in awe. He wonders if she has any other dolls. "My name's Alice. I used to belong to Marcus' grandmother. Want to come out and play?"

Five minutes later he has her buckled into the car seat atop his table, tiny doll clutched in both her hands, making airplane noises as he feeds her small bites of still mostly-warm eggs. She's solemn as a baby bird, opening her mouth for each morsel, but when Aidan peeks in, Ramon in arms, he grins at Marcus and that makes it all worthwhile.

The kiss he gets as a reward is far better than the bites of egg he's been sneaking along the way.

\* \* \*

"...so you're sure they weren't any trouble?" Madison asks, passing Mariposa from Aidan to Enrico. Of all things, the little girl finds being handed around like a dish at the dinner table exquisitely funny, and actually giggles as she goes from one set of arms to the next. On Enrico's hip, she burrows her head into his ribs and peeks out from underneath his protective arm.

"No trouble at all. Took us both a bit of getting a knack for two, but that's just to be expected."

"What, you don't get enough practice with Baz and Ryan?"

Madison shoots Enrico the look that says she'd like to smack him, but she doesn't do that in front of children anymore. "I knew Mari would be good." She tickles the tiny ribs. "What about Ramon? He's so little, and he does cry a lot."

Aidan grins the most impish of grins and puts a finger to his lips. "This you have to see."

Beckoning with a finger, he leads them around the corner. Madison stops dead, hands flying to her mouth. She does elbow Enrico to stop him from guffawing out loud at the sight of Marcus, fast asleep in Baz's favored recliner (much too small for him), with Ramon snuggled up and snoozing on his chest.

"Cute, eh?" Aidan whispers.

Madison can't really form coherent words, just murmurs and soft whimpers. Aidan thinks he can pick out the word "camera" every now and then. "I already took some pictures," he says softly. "You'll get copies. That and him feeding Mariposa her breakfast. He never knew, he was so wrapped up in it."

"But here," he says, gently unwrapping Marcus's arms from around the baby and passing him over to Madison. "Best take this one along now. Get him back to your apartment."

Madison takes him, chuckling softly and making faces. "He needs his diaper changed, Aidan."

"Yeah, well, why do you think I'm passing him off?" Aidan grins. "Sssh, now, don't wake him. Off you go, then." He runs his hand through Marcus's hair. "We're going to take a nap of our own."

Madison cuddles the baby close. A thoughtful look, one Aidan's learned to be afraid of, crosses over her face. "You know, the five of you should really think about ad –"

"No!" Aidan pales and backs away. "Baby-sitting's fine, but don't you even go there."

"Ease up." She nudges him. "From the way Marcus was holding Ramon, I bet he wouldn't mind."

With that parting salvo, and a knowing grin from Enrico, they head back up the stairs. Aidan's left combing his fingers through Marcus's hair, a troubled look on his face. Everything's been perfect so far. Just the five of them. Good lord, isn't five plenty?

Then he thinks about the families he knew when he was a kid. Loud, noisy, full of laughter – fighting, too, but vast and all-welcoming, uncles and aunts spilling out everywhere.

He looks down at Marcus's empty arms, and sees that his lover's shifting uneasily in his sleep.

Silently, he slips down to sit on Marcus's lap, wrapping his arms around him, and thinks quietly for a very long time, until Ryan, Baz and Nicholas return home.

## Chapter Seven

Usually, the downstairs apartment isn't that messy. They are five guys, so come on, despite Marcus and Nicholas, the neat freaks in the mix, their home is often more cluttered than not. Ryan's shirts and sneakers, Baz's latest game craze, Nicholas's books, Marcus' portable files, and Aidan's assorted paraphernalia litter the place. They're casual about it. Shove aside what's in the way, and have a seat.

They usually wouldn't bother with making up the bed, unless it's been a really good night and the sheets need to be changed. Otherwise, they'll just toss the car-cozy sized comforter over the top. The lush comforters are all the better when rumpled up into inviting folds, just asking you to climb in and get cozy or get naked or both – with someone else, for preference, which usually leads to not so much enjoyment of embroidered goose down duvet and more fun in making human pretzels.

It's all good.

They've got a wonderful life together. For starters, no one's killed anyone yet, which you might find surprising when you look at who's in this relationship.

Or so Ryan thinks as he sits slumped into one of the kitchen chairs, watching Baz fiddle about with two tiny plastic scraps that he's trying to piece together. "That's not a bomb, is it?" he asked warily.

"Could be, if it'd just work properly."

"Any guarantees it won't go off down here?"

Baz gives him a wicked look. "It's one of those new dryer thingies. Wouldn't do much to this place except make it smell all April fresh – which, God knows, we could use." He snatches up a paper and waves it at Ryan's sock feet, propped on another chair. "Go give those a wash before I cut them off, will you? You stink like a skunk on a bender."

"Bite me."

"Promises, promises," Baz says, reabsorbing himself in his Downy bomb.

Ryan leans further back. "I do not stink," he mumbles after a minute.

"If I didn't love you, I'd have already hosed you down."

"Well, you try working ten hours against a deadline, and see if you're fresh as a daisy."

"See, I get around that by only working when I feel like it. Give up while you can."

"Probably smart." Ryan flips aimlessly through a stack of junk mail on the table. A small boxy thing – looks like a sample of something – catches his eye. When he opens it, he cracks up.

Baz sighs and lays down his fiddly bits. "And the funny is?"

Ryan holds up the sample. Baz puts his hand over his mouth, but he can't hide the smirk. "God almighty, are we on the wrong mailing lists."

"Get-Em-Up Pills." Ryan turns the packet this way and that, marveling. "Hey, Baz?"

"Nothing good can come of this. What's going on inside your mind?"

"What happens if you give an already horny man virility drugs?"

Baz blinks. "Can't say I know, love. Never tried it before." He waggles his hips. "Never needed to, if you get me."

That earns him a playful shove. "Witness. But wouldn't it be fun to see..."

"Oh, absolutely." Baz pops one of the little pills free of its foil container and holds it up to the light. "You think these will dissolve in coffee?"

"What, you can't swallow pills?" Ryan scoffs. "Your throat's pretty good for letting things in, pal."

"Nitwit. It's not for me, is it?" His smile is that of the devil in blue jeans as he makes for the mug tree. Pulling out a red one marked "MARCUS", he fills it with sweet brew, adds powdered creamer, then crumbles the tablet between his fingers and sprinkles pill fragments down inside. A few good stirs, and it's like nothing ever happened.

Ryan's too busy laughing to scold him. This should be interesting.

"And to make it fair..." Baz grins again, a grin that should be illegal in fifteen states, and extends his tongue. He places another pill on it, curls it back into his mouth, and swallows. "We'll see what's to be seen, eh? Might want to go ahead and slick yourself up."

"I do not fucking believe what I just saw." They turn together to see Aidan, standing in the kitchen doorway, looking equally delighted and appalled. "You took a pecker pill?"

"And laced Marcus's coffee with one."

"Hot damn!" Aidan kicks off his own sneakers. "There any more in there?"

Ryan does his best impression of Baz's leer. "You, my friend, don't need any. Trust me.

This is an experiment. We're going to find out what these do to Big Toppers like Baz and Marcus."

"Yeah." Aidan drums the heels of his hands on the table. "So someone was talking about getting slicked up in advance, yeah?"

"Jesus, Aidan, eager much?"

"When you've had the kind of day I have, anything involving sex sounds really good."

"It usually doesn't?"

Aidan swats Ryan with a flyer for lounge chairs. "Smart-ass."

"Seriously." Baz takes Aidan's hand and massages it gently between his own. "What's wrong?"

"Ahhh..." Aidan shrugs. Still, he holds his other hand out for Ryan to take. "It's hard going, you know?"

They both nod. Of late, Aidan - third-generation immigrant - has been taking on some books and advertising that have him dealing with the immigrant gay and lesbian community. Half hate him out of envy for making it in the world, while the other half hate him for "turning his nose up at his heritage".

"I swear, it's like I'm not good enough for them, you know?" he complains miserably. "I'm a fake or I'm a show-off. All I – we – want to do is help, not get slammed with this, yeah?"

"It's prejudice all the world round, Aidan," Baz murmurs, stroking the back of Aidan's hand with his thumb.

Ryan frowns. "You could always quit, you know," he points out quietly.

Aidan jerks upright. "The hell with that!"

Ryan smiles at him. Baz lifts Aidan's hand to his cheek and nudges it like a cat. "Getting a door slammed in the face happens to us all, you know."

"Disturbing, but true. Like I don't get it from the straight book distributors I work with. First off, they know I'm not only part of a gay publishing enterprise, but that I myself am gay, thank you Happy Piercers —" he shakes his head so the loop in each earlobe jingles — "The shit I get, you wouldn't believe."

"I might," and "You'd be surprised," Baz and Aidan say at the same time. The rubbing switches, both men caressing Ryan's hands and one of Baz's naughty fingers starts



rubbing in the crevices slipping in and out.

"I had a bad day myself," Baz volunteers.

"Yeah?"

"I got turned into a newt," he says, frowning sourly. He's the instant recipient of two don't-go-there glares, but does anyway: "I got better."

Ryan and Aidan both throw things at him.

When the barrage has settled, they snag hands again, with kisses to palms and fingers. "It's not all bad," Ryan admits. "I mean, hey, I got asked to play the construction worker in the Village People talent show number this big magazine does every year."

"God help us all!" Baz rears back.

That's never good. "What? What?" Ryan looks around him for a sudden infestation of monsters, cockroaches, or something tall and drippy. Nothing. "What's your malfunction, Baz?"

"Talent show? You? You can't carry a tune in a bucket, Ryan!"

Aidan swats Baz for Ryan. Baz pretends to sulk for a moment, before their hands creep back into one another's grips. "So... where are our better two-fifths?" Aidan wonders.

"And how long before that pecker pill takes effect?" Baz asks.

Ryan peers at the packaging. "About an hour, it says here. Nicholas is at the library and Marcus is saving the world from poor fashion sense, waiting in line at the dry-cleaners. He's been gone for hours."

"Still, they ought to be home soon," Baz says hopefully. "If this stuff works, I can't wait to see what it does to Mr. Stiff Upper Lip CEO."

"Or what it gets him to do to us."

All three men are quiet for a moment, utterly reverent. Then Aidan wrinkles his nose. "Hey, what stinks? It smells of moldy cheese and broccoli in here."

"Ryan's fucking feet! He's been sweating a deadline all day and –"

"That's it!" Ryan tackles Baz, knocking him out of his chair onto the floor. A whoop goes up as they wrestle, ending up with Baz on top, of course. He thrusts down with his hips.

"What, already?" Ryan teases.

"Like you said, love—" *kiss* – "I don't need any of it, really, not when you're around."

"Hey, lonely over here," Aidan frowns.

"Don't need to be." Baz rolls off. "Come and pull up a patch of floor that needs mopping, eh?"

"I've got a better idea." Aidan casually retrieves a canister of Lysol from the table and sprays Ryan down with it. "Stinking, oversexed, and waiting for the Willy Wonka tabs to kick in – what would you say to a group shower?"

Baz is up quick as a wink. "Now," he growls, "you're talking. First one in there naked gets to undress the last one!"

Aidan and Ryan exchange looks as Baz makes for the shower room like hell's on his heels. A whoop echoes off the tiled walls in there. "Why didn't you tell me the edible finger-paint soaps had arrived?"

They exchange another look. Then they're up and running, faster even than Baz.

That's where Marcus finds them maybe twenty minutes later, naked and soaking, striped like circus Celts. They've got all of the shower heads on full blast, aimed toward the middle of the room, so it's like being in a rainstorm. The three men are singing an altered version of "Let's Get It On", not suitable for younger listeners, gyrating soap-slick cocks together. Not serious yet, just teasing.

Marcus peeks his head in. The look on his face changes from annoyed, to impressed, to lascivious. "Hey, the soaps came."

"Not yet," Baz leers. "Give us a few."

"I'll give you one." Marcus grins at them and starts undoing his belt buckle. Surprised but pleased, the three men lean against each other and watch, Aidan kicking in a decent vocal version of "The Stripper". Instead of frowning, Marcus laughs.

"Hey," Baz asks, far too casually. "You had your coffee yet?"

"A few minutes ago. Thanks for leaving me a cup... but have you been trying spices in the grounds again? It had a kind of funny taste."

Ryan hides his laughing fit behind Aidan. While he's there, there's all that naked back to admire, lick, and kiss, shimmying around to the tune he's belting out. Mmm... raspberry flavored, he thinks, sliding his tongue around the small of Aidan's spine, where Baz's hands have been most recently. Not bad.

But there's a show to watch. Marcus's getting into it, now, slinking out of his slacks and whipping them aside instead of folding them neatly.

"You think it's already worked on him?" Baz whispers in Ryan's ear.

"Naah," Ryan whispers back. "I think he's just horny as hell. Waiting in line forever, you start thinking about things."

"Waking up in the morning, I start thinking about things."

"True."

And horny, oh, yes, Marcus is that indeed. His erection's full and thick and flat to his belly as he slides his shirt away from his shoulders to let it puddle on the floor.

All three admirers give a whistle as he stalks toward them, naked and proud. The water runs down him like rain off a statue of Priapus, and there's a brief scuffle to see who gets first dibs.

Marcus grabs Aidan around the middle and pulls him in for a deep kiss, the kind that you don't recover from for days. He lifts his mouth away to growl. "Blueberry?"

Aidan holds up a finger-full of yellow soft soap. "Banana for you?"

"Tempting me?"

Baz grins excitedly, jabbing Ryan. "We're in for it now!"

Ryan nods eagerly. "My turn? My turn?"

"If you insist..."

With Aidan still dangling, dazed, from one arm, Marcus reels Ryan in for the same kind of kiss, maybe a little deeper and darker than before. Baz is feeling ignored, but makes up for it by sashaying up to Aidan and picking up where the other man left off.

"Now that," a fifth voice says, with hushed and oh-so-relieved wonder, "is the most beautiful sight I've seen all day."

"Nicholas!" Ryan tears away from Marcus's hungry mouth and twists about in his arms so that his arse is flush with the man's crotch. Not one to waste an opportunity, Marcus begins rocking him a little. He gasps, but manages to hold his hands out to Nicholas. "Get naked and get in here!"

"Orgy, is it?"

"Call it what you want to," Baz mumbles around hickey-raising kisses on Aidan's chest. It looks like he's trying to raise a series of welts in the shape of his name. "We missed you. Come and play, Nicky."

"Mmm, yes, I can see how much you missed me." Still, Nicholas is stripping off his clothes. Deep lines of weariness mar his face as he stumbles toward them, leaving a trail of shirt and tie and slacks and socks. He joins them, still wearing his boxer briefs, as if he's so tired he's forgotten. There's a promising bulge in there, though.

They share and share alike, then, each drinking their fill of the thin bookish man – Marcus with two fingers under his chin, nibbling at his lower lip; Ryan, full and deep; Baz, plunging in with tongue and teeth until Aidan yanks him off and takes his own turn, sucking hard at the corner of Nicholas's mouth.

Sometime in there, questing fingers have managed to slide underneath the band of those briefs and pulled them down, while another set of hands have yanked them down to Nicholas's ankles, all the while licking up the length of his calves and behind his knees. They're not telling who's doing what, and it's heady enough to be passed around between four men that Nicholas doesn't bother asking.

Ryan feels himself pulled flush and hard against a truly impressive erection. He turns his head and sees Baz's face, eyes a little wild as he presses forward hard, slipping between soapy cheeks with ease. "Guess what, love?"

"The pecker pill kicked in?" Ryan asks hopefully.

Baz grabs his hips, feels quickly to be sure Ryan is relaxed and slippery, then sinks in balls-deep. "Got it in one."

"Hey, hey, where's the foreplay?" Aidan demands, even as he's sinking down to suck Ryan's jutting cock.

"Fuck – foreplay –" Ryan just manages to gasp, caught between Baz's rough thrusts in and Aidan's deep sucking out. He catches a glimpse of Nicholas, looking just a little wistful, then deeply surprised as two strong arms wrap round him like bands.

"Pecker pills, huh?" Marcus growls. Nicholas keens, a long, high sound, and arches forward. Aidan reaches out with one hand and grasps his cock, jerking it roughly. "I should have known."

"What – don't you – like?" Ryan chokes, eyes rolling back in his head. "Fuck, Baz – fuck, fuck, fuck-"

"I am!" Baz gnaws at the join of neck and shoulder. "How many of those pills were there in that pack?"

"About a dozen."

"Fucking yes!"

Marcus growls, and does something they can't see that starts Nicholas screaming again. Aidan works harder, liking the sound of that, and keeps his mouth busily working on Ryan's cock. It's like a race, and they're all gonna win so big. Aidan even comes first, not even needing a hand on his pulsating cock, jerking so hard and swallowing so convulsively that it sets off a chain reaction of full-body spasms, howls, wails, and screams that make the shower room sound like an S & M chamber on a really *good* night.

They end up in a tangle on the shower floor, legs too shaky to hold themselves up. No real telling where any one of them ends and another begins. "Cock lifting pills," Marcus groans. "God, Baz. I'd kill you if -"

"I weren't so much fun?" Baz prods at a bit of water-warmed, naked flesh with his reawakening cock.

"Yeah."

"He hates it when you're right," Ryan observes.

"He must hate me a lot, then," Baz smirks. "Fuck, this stuff is brilliant! It feels like I'm on fire."

"Good – definition," Marcus pants, already seizing Nicholas and rolling him over. "Need to taste you, now."

That sounds like a good idea, such a good idea, in fact, that they all end up circling round each other, eating their lovers out like a four-course meal and tracing circles, stripes, and zigzags over every other bit of flesh while they wait their turn. Then, it's orgasms all around a second time.

Ryan collapses, panting, on his back, in a puddle of hot water and come. "Damn, Baz. Did you slip me one of those as well?"

"Nah." Baz grabs him. "You were the one wondering about medications and me." He runs his tongue along Ryan's chest. "Ready for round three, lads?"

"We're gonna be here all night, aren't we?"

"Nah. Eventually, we'll prune up and move it into the bed."

"Sounds like a – oh, dear God! – plan to me."

"Did anyone remember to put the soundproofing flap down?"

"Fucking hell, Aidan, you'll be the death of me – nah, I forgot – Jesus!"

"Me neither."

"I didn't even, oh God, God – think about it."

"Oops," Ryan says with his mouth full.

"Madison's filing late, isn't she?"

"If she's still there."

"We'll owe her."

"Talk about Lady M in the morning!" Baz rears his head up from the tangle of five fucking, sucking, rubbing, and rutting bodies. "Enjoy the pecker pills *now*."

"No complaints here."

None all around, come to that. And come they do. Again. And again. In the shower, and yes, eventually in the bed.

The moral of the story is this: shitty days happen to everyone. Still, junk mail can occasionally provide you with endless entertainment, and if you've got a bed big enough for five?

There's no reason not to enjoy it as much as you can.

Chapter Eight:  
Interludes From A Life Together

Aidan's been out shopping. Not here in the big city, though you can get anything you want and then some, as the chest of "special" toys beside the great big bed bear witness. No, he's been down to San Francisco, Chinatown, to the one tiny shop that he knows carries exactly what he wanted.

Candles. Not just any candles. Special ones, blessed by a very powerful Wiccan. Expensive as hell, but worth it for what he's got in mind.

See, it's their one-year anniversary tonight. Twelve months to the day since they invited Nicholas in and became five-sides-complete. He wants to celebrate that, the best he can. He just hopes the other men will get what he's got in mind.

He thinks they will.

So, with hope blooming bright, as soon as he gets home he unpacks the box of scented delights, the candles purchased with his own hard-earned money.

The clove one comes out first, spicy and fiery, meant for Baz. He always adds a delicious edge to their coupling, tripling, what-have-you. He's got a bite to him, and a searing warmth that burns you to a crisp but leaves you wanting more.

Oatmeal with cream comes next, for Marcus. He strokes that one, feeling the weight of it in his palm. Heavy, solid, and very – he snickers – very *filling*.

The next one out is sandalwood, for Nicholas. It smells of foreign lands and distant places, and makes him think of storytellers surrounded by a hush in the middle of an otherwise chaotic marketplace. A small circle of scented silence in the hullabaloo. Sweet peace, gentle pleasure.

Then there's cedar, for Ryan. A good, thick pillar, with carvings down the side. Solid but a little exotic.

Aidan runs his finger along one of the Chinese characters on the last candle and nods. He'd had a bit of a time choosing, but this one is right.

The one he picked for himself.

It's plain, with no scent. White and straight. An ordinary taper, with nothing to recommend it except the carved characters.

He knows what the men will say when they see it compared to theirs – the protests, the insisting that he's more than that, the kisses to convince him (and, well, if he's looking

forward to that part of it, who can blame him?). But he's planned this out, too.

See, this candle, like the others, is the sort that melts. He'll put it in the middle of the others, the center to their circle all around him, and let them burn brightly together, puddle and pool around him, making him more than just himself, and adding himself to them as well.

The thought makes him grin, a wicked elfish smile his lovers say they like so well, as he rubs the length of his own candle. Into its place it goes, then, with a final pat to wish it well.

Then he's up the stairs to the offices to fetch his lovers and bring them down to start their celebrating a bit early. The sun's just going down on the city, but he's got a light to keep their own night alive.

\* \* \*

Now, it's been a long, hard day, and what Aidan's craving more than anything right now is a pint. Doesn't matter if it's that cold, watery, making-love-in-a-canoe American beer or a proper, lukewarm draft thick enough to chew. He's been thinking about it for hours now, the idea of it poking its tasty nose through the correspondence and editing he'd been struggling to do and now the random tidying he's doing around their flat to keep himself busy.

If it were all of them there, he'd suggest it without a second thought. Probably be taken right up on the notion, at least by Baz and Ryan, and they'd manage to convince their other two partners to come along for the ride. It'd take a bit of work - smoky bars aren't exactly Marcus' cup of tea, so to speak, and though he loves Nicholas dearly, Aidan can't quite see him taking a shine to the places he himself likes to go. No, he can't imagine Nicholas throwing darts or shooting a game of pool. Their fifth belongs where he sits, cozy in his favorite chair by the good lamp, poring over a book – this one for fun, for a change.

Yeah, if it were all of them, he might get his wish. But Baz and Marcus are out, and Ryan's putting in overtime like he always does, so his idea's a no-hoper, isn't it? There's just Nicholas and himself in the apartment tonight, and doesn't he yearn for...

But there, he's being stupid. It's foolhardy to want something more when he's got so much already. Hasn't he got a wealth of riches? Marcus, Ryan, Baz and Nicholas too.

Aidan slows and then stops in his cleaning, gazing thoughtfully at the red-haired man immersed in his reading. When Ryan brought up the idea, he'd been near ashamed to admit himself so greedy that he'd welcome the fifth into their relationship. A man's only meant to have so much before the gods start tapping their foot and thinking he needs a smack-down.



But they'd done it, hadn't they? Brought Nicholas into the great big bed, with plenty of room for him there, and made him part of their whole. Ah, many's the night Aidan's spent wrapped up in those long, elegantly thin arms, thrusting hard and fast against Nicholas's belly or driving deep within him. A few times, he's even surprised Aidan by flipping him over and using those slender fingers to prepare him for taking that lovely cock. Which, by the bye and dear God, does Nicholas know how to use.

He's listened to Nicholas going at it with the others. Moaning under Marcus, quiet and shy but passionate in Baz's arms, and laughing, always laughing, in between groans of pleasure with Ryan. Aidan's even seen him sandwiched between two of them, or on the giving or receiving end of the line.

Well, Nicholas knows how to let go his bookish ways in bed, that's certain. He's free and easy and loving as the rest of them beneath the covers, or atop them, or in the den, and *fuck*, but Aidan really wants a beer. A lovely beer sliding liquid and refreshing down his throat. He either gets that or he's gonna jump Nicholas right then and there. Likely startle the life out of him, deep into that book as he seems.

Trouble is, he can't - no, he doesn't want - to go alone. It doesn't feel right.

He's forgotten that he's staring, so it startles him when Nicholas slowly slides a finger down the page of what he's reading and glances up. "Do you see something you like?" he asks, amused.

Aidan grins and sits down on a stack of Marcus's newspapers, high as an ottoman. "I think I do, at that."

"Would you be interested in..." Nicholas's eyes flick toward the bed. Aidan has to swallow hard. But for once, he wants company more than he wants sex.

"All the time," he says hoarsely. "But not right now."

Nicholas tilts his head to a side. "Right now, what would you rather?"

Aidan bursts. "It's been a hell of a day and if I don't have a draft I'll fucking explode and I know you likely don't wanna but would you come with me please and I'll do you any way you like later or you can do me if you'd just say yes, okay?"

The faintest of grins glimmers on Nicholas's lips. "Well," he says, shutting his book. He looks at Aidan for a long minute. "You've done it again."

Damn it. "Sorry," Aidan says, looking down at his feet. He shuffles them uneasily. He's gone and offended Nicholas now, hasn't he?

"Oh, yes." Nicholas stands and stretches, *upupup*, until Aidan's fascinated eyes can't help but follow the move. "I was just thinking how much I'd like a pint myself. Maybe even a

game of darts."

"You like darts?" Aidan blurts, startled.

"I'm dreadful at pool, but I'll beat you all hollow at darts." The book's put carefully aside. Nicholas flicks his gaze up with a wicked – positively wicked! – smile. "And as for your promises regarding later, I'll take you up on those as well."

Bedamned! Aidan can't hold back his own grin. He holds out his hand, and Nicholas takes it, warm and comforting. They come together for a quick kiss, having to bend down and lift up on tiptoe to reach, but it's worth it.

Nicholas pulls back, a slightly dazed look in his eyes. "Shall we?" he murmurs.

"Hell yes, we shall." Aidan slings an arm up around Nicholas's shoulders. "It so happens I know this fine little place down on 42<sup>nd</sup> street..."

And it doesn't get better than this, does it now? A draft for now and a date for later in the great big bed. Might be he could even get Nicholas to top. A pleasant shudder runs down his spine as he thinks about that pretty picture. Nicholas atop, maybe Ryan atop him - or Marcus, or Baz. Either way, he's in the mood, and it looks like he's gettin' lucky pretty soon. All that and beer to boot.

The night's going to turn out fine after all.

\* \* \*

It's the middle of the night, but that makes no never-mind to Baz. He's a night owl by nature, even if he does try to keep normal hours for the rest of the lads.

Sometimes it feels odd, against his nature, but he's glad enough to do it for Ryan's sake. Aidan's. Nicholas's. And yeah, even for Marcus.

His Ryan, especially. Make no mistake, he adores the others in the bed. But Ryan... he'll always have a soft spot for him. Was him got this thing started after all.

Now, usually, Baz sleeps next to the wall – he enjoys having that four-fold phalanx of men, warm and solid, between him and the outside world. But more often than not, he and Ryan wrap around each other like clinging octopi before falling into the arms of sleep.

Tonight, though, it seems as if in his sleep Ryan's turned over and wound his arms about Aidan, in the middle of the bed. The man's head is pillowed on Ryan's chest; Ryan's arm is tossed over him teddy-bear style. Loving on him.

Does it hurt, to see such a thing? Baz considers it carefully.

He sighs. Right, so maybe it does sting just the tiniest bit. Can't help it. The five of them may be in this together, but it's his nature to be jealous. And Ryan was his, his very own, first.

Of course, he can't – wouldn't - open his mouth about it. He's fond of Aidan himself, he is, and it was his idea in the first place to let that one into what he and Ryan had.

*Only 'cos you saw how much Ryan cared for him,* a mean little voice whispers in the back of his head.

Now he really can't sleep.

Impatient, he bats at the stray thought. No call to be jealous when he's had a full portion of the goods. Aidan's proved himself time and again to be warm and limber, and surprisingly passionate. The feel of his slick channel as Baz slides in, so tight... Baz shivers, feeling himself harden just a bit.

No. He can't regret inviting Aidan in, and can't blame him for staying. He'd wanted him to stay.

It's just... he wants what's good for his Ryan, more. Wanted him to be happy. And when he saw the tenderness between the two, he just acted.

He's not sorry. Fuck, no. Not sorry a bit.

But bedamned if he's gonna mope for one more second. Baz narrows his eyes at the two men, snuggled loosely together, and makes up his mind. He wanted Ryan first, he wanted Aidan second, and he wants them both now. Not for fucking, mind you - just for comfort, if you will.

He tugs and pulls at Ryan, just enough that he mumbles in his sleep, letting go of Aidan. A wedge opens up between them, barely wide enough for a slender person. That's all he needs.

Slithering over one lover's warm body, Baz insinuates himself slick-as-you-please between the two.

Their faces twitch at the unexpected intrusion. Then, dozing yet, they smile faintly. Two pairs of warm arms drift over to hold him tight.

Baz snuggles down in the middle, well-satisfied. Ryan may have Aidan, and Aidan may have Ryan, but he's got the both of them.

Good enough and then some.

## Chapter Nine

"Oh. My. God. You guys, I have had just the most perfect idea!" Madison gushes as she clatters down the steps to the basement, her smile wide and excited. She's gotten a lot less picky about coming down there. As she says, she's seen it all by now, and if she's not blind for life it's not going to hurt her to see a little more if they're careless.

This has had the effect of making most of them nervous in the mornings. Baz doesn't give a damn, but the rest of them have started insisting on having a pair of boxers or pajama bottoms within easy reach of the bed. Just in case Lady M decides to surprise them. Which she does. Frequently.

So instead of being naked or maybe just wearing robes against the slight chill in the air, they're dressed for a lazy day: Ryan in sweats, Marcus and Aidan in jeans, Nicholas in loose slacks and a button-up shirt, and Baz in a pair of boxers that truly do defy decency laws. Not that he cares. He's just pissed off at the intrusion.

Because Madison is, unfortunately, a morning person. Or maybe she's not – it could just be she's usually been up long enough, dressing her hair and working that beauty regime, that by the time she reaches PrideWorks she's perky as a chipmunk. This is great on a regular workday, when they need her sharp and ready.

On the weekends, it "bites large and chunky things", as Ryan says, "is really most inconvenient", in Nicholas's words and "isn't a good time for this" in Marcus's attempt to pacify everyone and succeeding not at all. Baz and Aidan say nothing, but glare up at her out of red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes, which is more disconcerting than a whole volley of invective.

She'd have to pick this day. It's not often that they wake up all at once, or close enough together, and get a chance for breakfast as a group. Ever since Marcus let it slip that he could cook, then proved it with a gourmet brunch, he's been promised everything from deep-throat blow jobs to a four-man sexual onslaught to get him to make omelets again.

They've just sat down to a full table. Cereal, muffins, bananas, coffee. Ready to enjoy the companionable silence of five men who aren't much on mornings but love each other enough to share one. Then *she* comes along, with her brilliant ideas, and mostly what they can think of is: those kill-worthy eggs are getting cold.

Madison glances at the cooling plates, but it doesn't phase her a bit. "No, seriously, this is perfect," she enthuses. I finally figured out what you guys needed, and what to do with you on the weekends! Here, look."

Digging into her shoulder bag, neat and chic as the rest of her impeccable self, she pulls out two soft cloth bags. One's marked "Ye Olde Candy Company", and the other "Scrabble". Triumphant, she dangles them in front of the men.

Marcus puts his head on one hand. "Madison, does this have a point?"

"D'uh, Marcus, don't you listen?" She rolls her eyes. "Look, this is what it's all about. All five of you are in love, yeah, great, birdies singing and little cupids dancing around, fantastic. But I couldn't wedge a Neiman-Marcus card between you most of the time. You need to spend more time one-on-one."

"Is this in the latest issue of Cosmo?" Ryan groans.

She swats at him. "No, it's just common sense, which I'm not surprised you don't recognize."

Aidan glances wistfully at his breakfast. "Madison, come on, then, give it up and let us eat."

Baz's already nose-deep into his plate because, to be honest, he doesn't give a damn. But at last it does sink in that they might have a reason to rush, so Madison gives a long-suffering sigh and shakes the bags at them again. "OK, OK, I'll give you the simple version. All of you, draw a slip from the candy bag. That means you too, Baz."

He growls at her, not surrendering his fork. "Piss off. I'm busy."

"Oooh, Mr. Touchy. I said, take a slip out of the bag." She's got that folded-arm, tapping foot thing going on, which means she's not budging until Baz obeys. Snarling again, he reaches out and plucks the first scrap of paper he touches.

"Well?" She's almost bouncing. "Read it!"

He gives her a long, flat look. "Date."

"Good! Now, the rest of you."

Reluctantly, or not, the other four men pluck slips of paper out of the bag. Aidan's the only other one who gets "date" as well; the other three are blank. "Perfect!" Madison enthuses. "Now, Baz, you and Aidan pick papers out of the second bag."

Ryan's already eating. "Thank God," he mumbles. "Oh, man, Marcus, you outdid yourself with these."

"Thank you for the reminder," Nicholas says dejectedly, staring at his wilting omelet. He's far too polite to start eating while Madison's still hovering over them. Aidan, on the other hand, glances at Ryan and Baz before digging in as well. After a little hesitation, Marcus picks up his fork, too.

"Uh-uh." Madison shakes her head, hair swaying. "Draw, or I'm not going away."

"Bloody, mother-fucking, son-of-a bitch..."

"Baz!" Nicholas scolds. "Such language in front of a lady."

"Madison's no lady, she's a muff-diver bent on interrupting our private time."

"Now it's my turn to say, watch your mouth. And draw!" Madison orders.

With the sigh of the seriously put-upon, Baz reaches in and snatches out a name. Aidan takes one with his free hand, then glances at it in curiosity. "That's me."

"Pick again, then!" She's getting impatient, now. Hastily, Aidan snatches a second slip.

"That's better." Madison puts the bags down and claps her hands together. "Okay. Aidan, you and Baz are taking the men whose names you drew out tonight for a date. Who'd you get?"

"A date?" Baz chokes around a mouthful of muffin. "What the hell?"

"A date?" Aidan looks at his paper again. A slow smile begins to spread across his face. "Is this your idea of how to get us one on one, M?"

"See? Someone with brains." Madison wrinkles her nose. "And no, I can't believe I just said that. So who are you taking out?"

Aidan grins at his paper, then turns to Marcus. "Looks like it's you and me, blossom."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you." Aidan squeezes Marcus's large fist in his own. "My treat, then."

Marcus is still startled, but it looks like he's warming to the idea. "Just you and me?"

"According to this."

"And... alone?" A smile spreads from his lips to his eyes. "No dance clubs, though. No bars."

"I'll think of something," Aidan promises, bringing Marcus's hand up for a kiss.

Madison looks so pleased with herself that she might pop. "Baz? Who'd you pick?"

Baz swigs down the last of his juice, picks up the paper, and reads – obviously for the first time – "Nicholas." He blinks as it hits him. "I'm taking Nicholas out on a date tonight?"

"Read 'em and be happy." Madison stuffs the bags back in her purse. "Ryan, you lucky winner, you get to spend tonight with me and Enrico, going over the files."

"Hey!"

"Hey, yourself," she retorts. "You lost out. Besides, next week you get to draw first."

"Next week?"

"Until everyone's had a turn. That way we'll get all of you knowing each other better."

"Don't know how much better you can know a man you've fucked six ways to Sunday," Baz mutters.

"- and I'll get the extra help I need with the files." Madison beams at them. "Perfect, right? So I'll see you tonight at six, Ryan. Wear something comfortable, though... maybe a little less comfortable than that?" Her perfect little nose wrinkles. "Kay, then. Enjoy your breakfast!"

Turning on her heel, she clickety-clacks back up the stairs, leaving five very gob-smacked men behind her. Baz is slumped back in his chair, staring down his piece of paper with an odd look on his face. Nicholas, after one glance, is refusing to look at him. Aidan and Marcus have bypassed sweet muffins in favor of sweeter kisses, and Ryan looks lower than gum stuck to a shoe.

She would have to pick Saturday morning breakfast, wouldn't she?

The rest of the meal is finished in silence – mostly uncomfortable, instead of the good lazy time they'd been expecting. Once they've finished, Marcus rises distractedly and starts gathering dishes, their clank-clank-clink loud in the silence.

No one really knows what to say, nor do. They've been steamrollered, and they know it. Marcus doesn't so much mind, nor Aidan, but they can feel the waves of misery rolling from Ryan, the strangeness from Baz, and the stiff pride from Nicholas, who excuses himself politely and goes upstairs to research with nary a good-morning kiss to any of them.

While Aidan and Marcus attack the dirties, Ryan wanders off into the den and flops down on their oversized couch, fishing between the cushions for the remote. One click and Saturday morning cartoons are on. Ahhh, sweet cartoons. They ease the pain.

Or they would, if Baz weren't following after him like a dejected puppy, and slumping down beside him. After a moment, Ryan feels the soft weight of a head snuggling into his shoulder. "Not feeling too happy, huh?" he asks quietly, circling Baz's back with an arm.

Silent shake of the head.

"It's just a date, Baz. A night out. Dinner, a movie. And it's Nicholas. What's so bad about that?"

Baz mumbles something.

"What?"

"I said," and he glares, "I've never been on a proper date before. Quick hook-ups, dance-floor nookie, one-night stands, sure. But this? I don't know how to do this, Ryan."

"What?" Ryan drops the remote and stares at him. "We had –"

"No, what we had was regular meetings for sex and the occasional cup of coffee before going back to my place for sex. Then we came up here, and..." Baz shrugs. "Fact is, I've got no clue, Ryan. Even if it is just Nicholas."

"Mmmm." Ryan ponders that. "Maybe it's because it is Nicholas? You don't –"

"Bite your tongue! Why wouldn't I want to spend time with the man?"

"That's not what I was asking." Ryan nudges him. "But something's bothering you. Spill, or I tickle it out of you."

"It's just... I don't know him like I do you, or Marcus, right? There's loads of history with the both of us. Aidan would be easy to take out – one good bar and he'd be satisfied. It's fucking stupid, after all the times I've had my cock in his arse and t'other way around, but I don't... I dunno. I don't know Nicholas that well. Got no idea what he'd want."

Ryan sighs softly, resting his chin on Baz's head. "Not to be rejected is what Nicholas wants most," he murmurs. "And that's how he's feeling right now."

Baz stares at him. "Why the hell would he –"

"Probably because you looked like someone had beaned you with a two-by-four when you found out you 'had' to take him out tonight." Ryan jostles Baz gently. "I've got to work on teaching you what 'subtlety' means."

"Think I hurt his feelings?"

"I'm pretty sure of it."

"Well, hell." Baz sags. "Ryan, it isn't that I don't love the man. I do. Same as I do the rest of you. In bed, out of it. I'm just..."



"Scared?"

Small nod.

"Okay, then." Ryan clicks off the TV. "Guess what you're going to do tonight, Pinky?"

"Good God."

"You're gonna take over the world."

"I couldn't just fuck him blind?" Baz pleads.

"That's dessert. First you need the appetizer, the salad, the entree..."

"Right." Baz sits up and runs his hands through his hair. "Okay, if we're going to do this, I'm gonna depend on you, love. Get me through the fire?"

Ryan smiles at him, the gentle smile of a man who knows he's loved and has nothing to lose. "I'll help you. Promise." Then, with a wry grin, he adds: "Thinking about you two tonight'll give me something to distract myself when I'm working on the files."

"Files." Baz snorts. "You ever think of just saying no to her?"

"To Madison? You really have lost it. But c'mon, I've got an idea. We'll start with figuring what to wear..."

"Pod-person."

"Scaredy-cat." Ryan tugs Baz up off the couch. "C'mon, sweetheart. Let's go."

\* \* \*

The day drags on, slower than your average weekend, but Nicholas remains upstairs plodding slowly book through book. He doubts he's taken in half of what he's read, but he won't go back downstairs yet. He just can't.

The look on Baz's face when he found he was stuck taking him out on a date...

It hurt. He's seen that face contorted over him as the man came. Felt lean hands gripping him tight, or that mouth encasing his cock, or plowing deep into his channel. Yet after all that, his bedmate was horrified at the thought of dinner and a movie.

Was he so little, then, that all he meant to Baz was... sex?

Wonderful sex, and he couldn't deny it. Wouldn't deny it. But if that was all there was to it...

*Oh, do stop it, Nicholas, he scolds himself. What's done is done. Stay up here. It's not likely he'll come after you after all. Enjoy the night, then creep back down to bed. Take what you can get and be glad of it. It's certainly more than you've ever had. But surely Marcus... Ryan... and Aidan... they wouldn't have reacted that way, would they? He doesn't think so. How can he be sure, though?*

If this were a real date, he thinks he'd be giddy as a schoolgirl. Perhaps downstairs in the corner of the closet he calls his own, gleefully picking through outfits. Discarding one and then the other. Laughing with Marcus and Aidan as they got nosy and came in to help. Finally borrowing this from one and that from another, until suddenly the miracle happened and he looked either polished as a prince, or dangerously sexy as a biker.

Baz would have liked the biker look. He'd think. But if Baz wasn't interested at all, then...

Nicholas sighs and puts his face in his hands. He knows he's being foolish, but he can't help it. He's put his faith, his honor and his trust in their peculiar fivesome. To find out that one of them is in it – with him – for less than love – well, it's not shy of heartbreaking, for he's put the whole of his heart into it with every one of them.

He remembers the first time, in the shower, with Baz's mouth sucking wetly 'round his cock, the hard fast tongue action that had him gasping for breath and reeling to touch the wall to steady himself.

Other times.

Slowly being split apart by that prick as he slid down onto it, or hooked his legs over slim shoulders, or balanced himself on hands and knees and allowed himself to be ridden...

He shudders with the ripple of need that runs through him. Oh, he aches for Baz's touch – no, burns for it, with the force of memory behind it. They all have their ways, but Baz is brashest in what he wants and his sly teasing could make a man do anything.

Except go on a simple date.

And now Nicholas feels like a whore.

Because he's not wanted, is he? Perhaps the others are having him out of pity, because he knows he was so very pitiable, but it's taken Baz's rejection for him to come out of his happy fog and realize...

His head hits the table. He won't let himself weep, as afternoon passes into dusk, but the temptation is so very strong.

He's been a fool. Hasn't he?

\* \* \*

Marcus can be oblivious sometimes, and he hasn't noticed Nicholas's absence all day long except for a few puzzled, wondering looks around the apartment. Aidan, on the other hand, sensitive as he is, has surely guessed what all the whispering between Baz and Ryan is about. He doesn't poke his nose in, just throws them sympathetic looks in between asking to borrow one of Baz's silk shirts and a pair of Ryan's good black trousers.

"Where are you going?" Ryan asks as he passes them over.

"Ah, the usual." But Aidan's grinning. "I managed to snag tickets to CATS tonight. He'll love it."

Ryan and Baz burst into laughter. "Aidan, that's not just gay, that's flaming."

"Yeah. And? I plan to be making all over him during the songs. Might as well go where everyone expects that sort of thing."

Baz's giggling – giggling! "You reckon they'll pull him up on stage for a dance with Rum-Tum-Tugger?"

"God, one can only hope." Aidan tucks the tickets into his shirt pocket. "Then dinner at L'Chateaux d'Orange."

"He hates oranges."

Both Aidan and Ryan thwap Baz with what's handiest.

"Have a good time," Ryan says warmly, giving Aidan a kiss for luck. Baz, never one to turn down a chance, leans forward and offers one as well, only a great deal messier, eventually involving the severe wrinkling of Aidan's silk shirt. Ryan's watching with great interest when they hear a soft throat clearing at the end of the closet.

Aidan pulls back, blinks up, and stares. And stares. Ryan whistles. Marcus cleans up nice, he knows, but this is... well. The man looks dangerously sexy in peel-me-off leather pants and a tight-fitted shirt that outlines every muscle.

"Fuck me," Aidan whispers.

"Only if you're good," Marcus replies gravely. Then, while Ryan and Baz are smothering their snickers, he offers his arm. "Ready?"

"Damn right I'm ready." Aidan grabs the arm. "Kids? Do not, and I'll repeat this, do not wait up."

"Yeah, right. We'll be waiting for every detail if I have to pinch this bastard to keep his eyes open."

"Baz..."

"What, like you wouldn't?"

Baz watches them go with a wicked grin, but as soon as they've vanished so does his cocky look. He turns to Ryan in despair. "I can't do this. I'll trade you. I'll go and file with Madison. If you'd just –"

"Uh-uh."

"Ryan!" Baz pleads. "I've got no idea what to do."

"Yes, you do. We've been over it and over it." Ryan kisses Baz softly, tasting his lips. "Go upstairs. Apologize. Show Nicholas the town. Then come back here and fuck like weasels. Easy enough."

"Yeah, the last part, anyway," Baz mutters, adjusting his shirt. "I'm not used to this kind of gear."

"Baz, if you don't go right now, I'm kicking your ass all the way up those stairs."

"Ryan..."

"Go!"

Mumbling to himself, Baz slinks out of the closet and heads for the steps. His heartbeat is pounding in his throat for sheer nervousness. What he's known for a long time, what Ryan knows now, too... he's wanted to spend time with Nicholas, just Nicholas, for a long time now. It's just as he explained earlier. Nicholas is still a mystery to him in so many ways, but one that needs to be unlocked.

Only he's messed it all up before it even began. To make it worse, of all the things he's about to do that he doesn't have a handle on... apologizing is the biggest of all.

But all right, he can do this. One deep breath, and Baz pulls back the soundproofing flap. *One step at a time, there you go...*

\* \* \*

Baz can walk silently as a cat, so the first warning that Nicholas has of his approach is when Baz is close enough to cast a shadow over the book he's still trying to read. Flinching violently, he slams the thing shut and raises it to strike a blow –

And stares up at Baz. A different man, or close enough. He's combed and pressed, discarding his trademark casual "come and get me" rough edges. More, he's got on an honest-to-God suit, and while lord knows where he found it, it's quiet, understated, and utterly adorable.

"Baz," Nicholas says slowly.

"Close enough." Baz shoves his hands in his pockets. "Sorry about the book. I made you lose your place. Didn't mean to startle you."

"It's quite all right." And it is – Nicholas hadn't been paying a particle of attention to it. He certainly wouldn't want to find that place again now, not when he can stare at the altered man in wonder.

"You like it?" Baz runs a hand through his hair. Nicholas would swear he was nervous.

The faintest of smiles tugs at Nicholas's lips. "You look rather like an old roommate I had in college," he says softly. "Very much like."

Baz grins back, just a little. "Was he a lover of yours?"

"No. Though I'd always wished..." Despite himself, Nicholas finds he's pushing his chair back and standing up. "May I?"

"If you want." Baz stands still and lets Nicholas run a hand down the neat lines of his suit. He manages a grin. "I'll dress up like this for you again sometime, if you want."

"You would?" Nicholas's startled. "Why ever for?"

"Well, 'cause you like it. Don't you?" Baz's face takes on a troubled look. "Or are you just putting me on?"

"No!" Nicholas hastens to reassure him. "I just... it's only that..."

"Right." Baz takes another deep breath in. "Nicholas, I'm an ass."

That gets him another faint grin. "So I've seen."

"I didn't mean to make you feel unwanted, when Madison sprung that whole plan of hers on us. I was just – surprised, that's all." He shuffles from foot to foot. "The fact is, I've never been on a real date. Can't say I really know what to do."

"I believe that dinner and a movie is customary."

"Balls to customary. That's not what I want to do with you." Baz reaches out, a little shyly, and cups Nicholas's cheek in his hand. "I want to do something special. Something

you deserve."

The beginnings of dizziness are stealing over Nicholas. Familiar disbelief, and the slightest daring-to-hope. "Deserve?"

"Yeah. I've been wanting this for a while, actually. Just didn't... wasn't sure how. I like you lots, Nicholas." Baz's thumb brushes over Nicholas's cheek. "Ah, nuts to like. You know I love you. I just want to know who you are better than I do now."

Nicholas shuts his eyes for a long moment. "Baz?" he asks after a moment.

"Yeah?"

He smiles. "Kiss me?"

Baz laughs. "Now that I can do." Lean arms wrap around him, and blessedly familiar lips brush over his own. Nicholas deepens the kiss deliberately, twining his tongue around, tracing the contours of Baz's mouth, and drawing away when he must, for air, by slowly sucking on Baz's lower lip. He looks dazed, and Nicholas is sure he isn't the only one.

"What," he says slowly, "what the hell was that for?"

"Consider it a promise." *And my thanks.* Nicholas picks his jacket up from the back of his chair, only hesitating at the very last moment. "You truly want this? To spend time, alone, with me?"

Baz's eyes warm his skin as they sweep over him. "I want it more than anything, Nicky. Will you, then?"

Nicholas leans over and kisses him again. "Agreed."

"I've got plans," Baz offers shyly. "For us. For tonight. You like the beach? All the personal ads say as much, so I figured it'd be fun to roll our trouser legs up, amble along, try to find conch shells and so forth. Maybe have dinner at a good waterfront place."

"It sounds like heaven." It truly, truly does. All the self-doubts and dismay Nicholas has been feeling have lifted away. Baz wants him. Truly wants him. And if he does, then the others must as well, and hasn't he been a fool himself?

He smiles as Baz offers his arm. When he takes it, Baz pulls him close enough for a quick, chaste kiss. "All right, then. We're off."

And so they are. Off to a wonderful time, rollicking in the wet sand. Talking. Cracking open shrimp by the bucketful and dipping them into savory butter, laughing out loud over the antics they and their other three have gotten up to. Ambling back to the car as if they've not a care in the world, but on the way finding a secluded sand dune and

discovering that despite grittiness, sex on the beach really is all it's cracked up to be.

When they've finished, they hold each other and grin the grins of the fully contented. "Madison's a crazy dyke," Baz says softly, brushing Nicholas's hair out of his eyes, "But she has a good idea from time to time."

"I must thank her."

"Nah." Baz kisses him, soft and sweet. "I suspect she already knows how grateful we'll be. I'm glad she had her brainstorm. She probably knew we needed this, didn't she?"

Nicholas says nothing, glad to just hold Baz's hand and nuzzle into his neck. Perhaps they will have to thank Madison... but someday. Not yet, not tonight, and if he's lucky, not tomorrow.

For love, certain love, adds a spice to sex that he hadn't known was missing before. And if he doesn't miss his guess, it'll be one of the wilder nights their glorious big bed for five has ever seen yet.

Chapter Ten:  
Interludes From A Life Together - Two

Aidan loves sharing ice-cream sundaes with Ryan. Eating them facing each other, passing bites of chocolate to and fro. Better, though, is when they say to hell with sweets and go straight for sugar-flavored kisses, nestled between each other's thighs with lips fixed together. On one such occasion, Ryan's being a busy lad, his tongue in Aidan's mouth, sweeping and swirling to and fro.

Finally, too soon, he draws back with a neatly tied stem on his tongue from the cherry Aidan had popped into his own mouth. "See?" he says, with a sly grin. "Told you I could do it."

\*\*\*

A chilly autumn evening, and they're sitting outside watching the moon rise while Ryan eats an apple. Marcus likes to spend the twilight alone, but Ryan's come along with him tonight for some reason. It feels like he's waiting for something.

Marcus isn't sure what Ryan has in mind, but he's got a few ideas.

As the apple vanishes, Marcus eyes his lover with the glimmerings of a smile. He takes Ryan's hand and lifts it to his mouth. "You're all sticky," he murmurs. "Finally." He applies his clever tongue to Ryan's fingers, dipping between each crevice for every last sweet taste.

Ryan gasps, thoughts clearly flashing across his face. As Marcus suspected, Ryan probably had other reasons for joining him.

He's not complaining, though.

\*\*\*

Sometimes Nicholas likes to take Ryan out to the best restaurants in the city. He's kind, patient with Ryan's shyness and feeling out of place amongst all the Armani and leather. To ease him, beneath the tablecloth feet slip out of shoes and twine around each other, stroking up and down calves. Hands meet over pristine tablecloths. Lingering, caressing.

When the coffee is served, Nicholas always leans over the sweet foamy cups and takes Ryan's face in his hands to kiss him and lick away the taste of coffee and cream. Showing him he's good as anyone else. Better, because he's loved.

\*\*\*

Baz's always been one for chowing down, he has, and he's got a particular fondness for



sharing a snack with Ryan whenever the mood hits them. Junk food in particular. Things with sharp or spicy tastes. The stuff no one else can abide, they adore.

Their favorite Saturday afternoons are spent lounging on the couch, watching ball games with a bag of nacho corn chips between them and Ryan's head on Baz's lap, cheek nudging his cock. He rolls his head, knowing if he teases Baz enough, then hands will start to wander and hungry mouths meet.

Promises for later.

\*\*\*

These are promises that are kept by all in the great big bed, when they attack Ryan as one, hungry for the full meal. Aidan devours his chest with sharp, biting kisses while Marcus seizes his mouth with ravenous lips and tongue that won't be denied. Nicholas rests against his back, mouthing a searing line from spine to shoulders, and Baz... Baz lies between his sprawled legs, suckling on his cock like a hungry infant. Caught between the four, Ryan can only thrash and groan and think... it's good to be hungry.

It's better to be the main course.

\* \* \*

Sometimes you just get a fucking great idea, and it's too good to keep to yourself. So you share it with one of the special folks in your life – and they get all cocky, thinking they can make it even better. So you challenge them, just to see who'll finish on top.

As it happens, it's turned out so good Aidan thinks he's going to forget how to breathe.

It was him who found the hammock, and strung it up between two trees with good strong knots his nimble fingers know well how to tie. But it was Nicholas who unstrung him by taking off both sets of their clothing, one slow inch at a time. Out in the great Natural, knowing full well they were where anyone who had a fancy to could see.

Then the real fun:

Together, they lay down carefully, gently swinging till they were balanced between earth and sky. Nicholas, behind him, slipped first slickened fingers and then his swollen cock deep inside Aidan. Lean hands tightened over his belly, but other than that, Nicholas didn't move. Hasn't moved for nearly an hour now.

Linked together thus, they struggle against the heat and tightness, the urge to pump and thrust. The sun's hot on their backs and bellies and legs, baking them golden and drawing sweat out in great beads of frustrated need. Still they're holding back, drawing the

sensation out all the sharper and sweeter.

Aidan thanks God when sharp teeth finally nibble at his earlobe. "Do you concede?" Nicholas murmurs softly.

Aidan nods fervently. "You win," he gasps. "And I've never been happier to lose."

"Good." Nicholas' hand slips down to leisurely strip Aidan's cock. "I'm glad to see you've learned to trust me about certain things." His voice is light, his words easy, but his breathing, harsh and heavy, gives him all away. "Next time - *god!* we'll try this in the bed."

Fuck, Aidan thinks, thrashing happily. After this, he'll try tantric or any thing else Nicholas wants any way he can get it.

He may even suggest hammocks again.

\* \* \*

"Baz, hush! They'll hear us."

"Balls. They will not, unless you keep that up." Baz has Nicholas by one eager hand, tugging him upstairs and toward the main offices. His hair is wet, clinging to his forehead and cheeks in tendrils, and his body sparkles with moisture. A soft blanket's draped over one arm, and his free hand balances two goblets and a magnum of champagne. Aside from that, he's got nary a stitch on him.

Neither does Nicholas.

"Besides, the shower didn't wake them, and you were none too quiet in there."

Nicholas stumbles behind his eager lover, struggling to keep his laughter down. "You're mad, do you know that?"

"So I've been told, often and oft. Come on, this way."

"You're – we're not going through the main offices?"

"Do you know a better way to the roof, Nicky?"

"The roof!" Nicholas pulls to a standstill. "Baz, surely not the roof."

"It wouldn't be my first time up there. Besides," Baz purrs, turning around to slide his free arm around Nicholas's ribs, "it'll be like that one night on the beach. Remember that? Just you and me and the stars?"

Nicholas swallows hard, but his hand reaches out to toy with the fringe of Baz's wet hair.

Baz sidles closer, nudging their naked cocks together. Nicholas's prick, half-hard against his thigh, stiffens at the contact. "It'll feel good, you and me up there. Lovely breeze, soft blanket, a good bottle of bubbly... and me. What more you gonna ask for?"

"A first folio of Shakespeare for my collection?"

"Why, did he write good gay porn?"

"You'd be surprised."

"Would I?" Baz leans up on his toes and threads his free hand through Nicholas's hair, dragging him down for a long, sweet kiss. They melt into each other, Nicholas going under with barely a complaint but many a soft whimper as Baz's tongue works magic against his own.

When Baz pulls back, his face is that of a naughty child, and his body, cock fully erect, that of a full grown and even naughtier man. "Roof?" he asks, soft and low.

"Roof," Nicholas replies huskily through swollen lips. Willingly, he lets Baz twine their fingers together again, and lead them where he will.

He vaguely notices Madison fast asleep on the couch, but it barely registers and he's only obliviously glad she isn't watching this. Not that Baz would care.

Not that he would either, just now. His cock throbs, needing more of Baz's touch; aching for the smooth grip of his ass or the rasp of his teeth. Baz's own erection looks just as impatient, wet and flat against his belly as he moves.

The roof is quiet for a busy city's night. Nicholas can tell that truly Baz has been here for this purpose before, for he leads them straight to an unexposed nook where no one can see. Yet when they look around, and up, they can see it all. Close by Ryan's garden, enough to smell the heady sage and mint growing so lushly there.

The champagne and glasses are set down with care, the blanket less so, and then two cool hands are snatching at Nicholas, tumbling him down into one great big tangle of arms and legs and hushed laughter that turns into gasps when Baz thrusts his hips down and makes the first come-slick stroke over Nicholas's stomach.

"So that's how you want to play," Nicholas murmurs, slipping his hands around Baz's back to grip his smooth arse cheeks tight.

Baz burrows into Nicholas's neck, sucking hard enough to raise purple spots. "First time around." He lifts his face, eyes all a-glitter, and warns: "Just the first time, mind you. All right?"

Nicholas thrusts up. "More than all right," he gasps at the friction. He pushes himself hard, driving against the tight muscles of Baz's stomach. Moving together, their cocks scrape fat and heavy against one another. Faster and faster, more and more, both breathing quickly now, clawing at one another's skin, and then – the explosion.

White lights, unable to see – peaks of pleasure that rise and fall, undulating with the writhing of their bodies, the one against the other until slowly, slowly they're floating back down to earth. They're sticky and sated, hair still wet but bodies damp for a wholly new reason.

On his back and gasping, Nicholas is utterly boneless, but his hand manages to clasp itself around the glass of champagne Baz shakily pours for him.

They raise their glasses together and laugh at the rattling clink. Baz collapses on the blanket. "You're far too good a fuck, Nicky," he drawls, deep affection in his voice. "I love what you do to me. Love you."

Nicholas slowly sips his champagne. The bubbles tingle on his tongue, much like the sensation of Baz's hungry kisses. "And I you," he says lazily, caressing this one of his lovers with a soft and gentle hand.

They drink to themselves, to their other lovers, and to the night that has only just begun.

## Chapter Eleven

Aidan's taken to sharing a cup of coffee with Madison in the mornings these days. It's a habit they've fallen into, the pair of them, and one that he's grown fond of. Since he's been off the booze himself thanks to his lovers' orders, he's often the first awake and out of the big warm bed. Second only to her, who often comes around early to take care of what needs doing before heading out, unpaid, to the slums.

She's developed her own sort of outreach, helping the children of gay and lesbian parents who need a hand, whether they want her there or not. Not only that, she's done it all her way. She chucks her charm at executives, coaxing money for her causes out of them with her own thousand-dollar smile. Lord, is it ever amusing to watch them crumble like sweet pastry crust whenever she crooks her pretty little finger.

Quite a lady, their Madison.

Oh, yeah, she's done a bang-up job bringing in the cash for her mission. Every penny's gone towards the free clinic she helped set up, the women's resource center she'd had her heart set on, and a half-dozen new shelters, sprung up like mushrooms after the rain, where little ones can sleep warm and, most importantly, safe at night.

It's her care for the children that's brought them closer together, Aidan thinks. Often and oft, when he's sipping on a cup of something hot and bitter-sweet, he thinks of his days as a teacher - something he used to do forever and ever ago, before his orientation got him fired - and wonders if just maybe he oughtn't to start seeing what he can do with her mission.

He can't be spared too much, he knows. He's needed at PrideWorks as editor of his own line. The headaches keep him from doing as much as he'd like. Besides which, he can't be parted for long from Marcus nor from Baz, nor Ryan, nor Nicholas. But maybe he could carve out an hour or two once in a while, and have a crack at showing a handful of kids that "A" means "A". Aidan used to love the looks on their faces when they made that connection. He'd like to see it again.

Madison gets that. She knows what it's like to be torn between want and duty, even when it's no burden to be working so closely with the menfolk that he loves dearly as family. So whenever he mentions it – casually, not wanting to get her hopes up, nor his – she smiles at him, big and bright, praises the notion, and moves on.

When she's gone after one such morning meeting, Aidan moves almost absently to the small staff sink to wash out their coffee cups and rinse off the sticky saucers they've eaten apple-cinnamon pastries from. He's in a melancholy sort of mood. The day's bright, and crisp as it rarely is in the city. A fine morning to be outside on the streets, perhaps sitting on a stoop and breathing in the air.

He lets himself picture, for a minute, that he's on one of those steps, a large pasteboard book upon his knee and a couple of kids at either side. Pointing out pictures and letters, explaining and watching for that little light to come on in their eyes.

"A is for apple," he murmurs, splashing water over the sticky cups. "B is for banana. C is for carrot, and D -"

"- is for daydreamer," a voice rumbles behind him, as strong arms circle around him and a chin dips down to nuzzle into the dip of his shoulder.

Aidan flicks a finger-full of water back at his rogue cuddler. Marcus! He gets the oddest notions to be roguish from time to time. But to show he doesn't mean any harm, he turns his head roundabout for a kiss, tasting toothpaste and breathing in deep the scent of faintly expensive cologne. "Morning, you."

"Morning." Marcus brushes his lips along Aidan's. "Am I interrupting?"

"You are, and you know it," Aidan scolds, turning virtuously back to his task. "You're distracting me."

"Hmm." Marcus rocks Aidan a little. "Good. Maybe you're distracted enough to come back downstairs to bed?"

"Sweet talk will get you nowhere but washing a doughnut plate."

"Aw, come on now." Marcus's hand travels down the length of Aidan's side, down to his hip and his thigh. "M is for a certain man named Marcus, who, A, adores you."

Aidan can't help it; he bursts into laughter. "You're crazy, you know that?"

"So I've been told. A lot." The chin burrows a little deeper. "B is for boxer shorts, which you're not wearing right now."

"And you can tell because – oh." Aidan sucks in a breath. "Hands, Marcus, cold hands!"

"Hands you like exactly where they are. C is for condoms, which we really should buy stock in..." Teeth nip at his earlobe. "D is for delicious."

Aidan shivers, letting the saucer slip from his hands. "Damned rascal."

"Damned straight."

"Or not." He leans back against Marcus, feeling the hardness of the man's erection pressing stiffly into the curve of his arse. "Better not be."

"Thanks, I think I like things the way they are." Marcus rocks them back and forth a little,

seeming to enjoy Aidan's little gasps. "I like this game."

"Getting kind of," Aidan inhales sharply, "to where I'm enjoying it, myself."

"Then what next?" Marcus muses. His hands begin to roam over Aidan's chest, stroking in small circles, pinching the nipples. "E is for eager. Aren't you? Feel these," he purrs, plucking at the small nubs. "They want a mouth on them as well as fingers."

"Really, you think? Can we just say that F is for fuck, and get on with it?" Aidan struggles to turn around, but Marcus holds him fast.

"G is for gently, Aidan. There's plenty of time."

"Maybe for you." Aidan rubs himself back against Marcus's cock. "Or maybe not?"

He's rewarded with a particularly hard pinch to the nipples. "And H is for hold on there. When you get what you want, won't it be all the sweeter for waiting?"

"I is for I damn well don't care to wait that much longer, now." Aidan writhes against Marcus in the special way he knows the big, tough guy can't hold out against. "Come on, then, you and me. Right here. No one's comin' round for at least an hour yet. Picture it, then, my hands on this sink here, those hands of yours around my cock..."

Marcus's strangled groan is a thing of joy to hear. But oh, he's stubborn, that one. "Just you wait," he murmurs his threat, "and that's for J. As for I, you think I don't want you as you stand? Warm from the heat of that water, your hair curling up into pretty little tendrils, that ass nestling up against me." He takes in a deep breath. "What you do to me, Aidan, God. K. Kiss me."

"If you'll only let me turn around -"

Hands grip and flex on his hips. "It's tempting to keep you right here where you are."

"More tempting than another kiss, a proper one?"

"A question with no good answer. But let's see." Marcus turns Aidan slow and gentle, hands gliding over his skin, until he's balanced on the edge of the sink and both pairs of arms are secure around waists. Lips lower to lips, touching gently at first, then with an eagerness that increases as cock scuds against cock, friction building deliciously.

"To hell with the alphabet," Aidan gasps when he has to pull back and breathe. "L is for lust, some serious lust here, you know?"

"M is for me." Marcus captures his mouth again. "Are you lusting after me?"

"N is for no. Marcus, what do you think?" Aidan lets his hands skim down to grab double

handfuls of Marcus's arse, squeezing it. He laughs. "Have you stopped to think just how perverse this is?"

Marcus's eyes glitter in that way that always makes Aidan just a little nervous, and more than a bit excited: "O, oh, yes."

"Prick."

"Queer."

Aidan laughs in surprise. "So you are, rogering innocent young men like myself, and so S, shameless, too. You ought to hang your head."

"Yeah, but where?" Now he's got better access to Aidan's face, Marcus' littering it with hungry little kisses. "S should stand for super-fine. Baz is going to be really, really pissed he missed out on this."

Aidan groans. He darts up and seizes Marcus' mouth in a kiss, thrusting his tongue deep into the moist cavern of Marcus' mouth, lapping at the arched ceiling and soft cheeks. "T," he whispers against the swollen lips. "T is for tongue. And tasty."

"U is for undulation," Marcus whispers, doing just that, his hips beginning a slow and steady rhythm. "I'm not going to stop unless you tell me to."

"As if I would," Aidan gasps, letting Marcus's hands support his weight while the top of his head threatens to come off. They're both wet, now, dampening each other, and his breath's not the only one coming in quick and short gasps. "Want you."

"Not Nicholas? Not Ryan?"

"I want them too, always, but it's you I'm wanting right now."

"Yes," Marcus whispers. He moves faster, grinding their cocks together. "I'm close, Aidan. Really, really close. You?"

"Almost there, Marcus, God!"

"Can I...?"

"Fuck, yes."

Marcus dips and presses his face to Aidan's neck. He kisses him hard, hitting Aidan's favorite hot spot. The damp pressure, the frantic rubbing of dick against dick - it's altogether all too much and it sets Aidan to thrashing in Marcus' grasp, coming hard enough that his vision fades to white. He's only just aware of Marcus' hands tightening hard enough to leave bruises while he, too, spasms, and it just adds to the pleasure that



goes on and on and on.

When at last he's able to see again, he's clinging to Marcus like a child to its father, using that broad body to hold himself upright. "No -" he gulps, "No 'Z'?"

Marcus chuckles wearily, sinking against Aidan's slighter form. "You have the strength to think of one?"

"Not a drop left in me," Aidan admits. "I'll never think of the alphabet the same way again."

"Mmm."

They stand for a moment, curling into one another. Marcus's thumb caresses down the length of Aidan's spine. "You really do want to try teaching again, don't you?" he asks quietly.

Aidan breathes in and lets it out again, long and shuddering. He nods, wordless.

"Then we'll have to see what we can do," Marcus says simply.

"Ah, Marcus, no one's gonna hire —"

"They might. We can try, at least." Marcus pulls back to place the tenderest of kisses on Aidan's lips. "Promise."

Aidan sighs happily. "Did I tell you I love you today?"

"Not yet, but it's never too late."

"Never is." He nuzzles Marcus. "We're missing V and X, but that was Very X-Rated, so we're good. And I've thought of a Z, you know. Care for a nap, curled up on the sofa there? Just you and me, until the rest of that lazy lot wake up?"

"Sounds perfect." Another kiss. "And then for some web surfing to see about getting your teaching license again. The publication house has been good for you, but you need more. You need to be out there doing what you love. After all, just one session with you and I have a new appreciation for education."

Laughing, they bear each other to the couch and curl into one another. A post-orgasmic daze and the early hour, each other's touch and the security of their hold all work together to send them drifting swiftly away into the sweetness of sleep, with this lingering on Aidan's lips:

"A," he murmurs, fading into dreams. "A is for amazing, and B is for beloved..."

## Chapter Twelve

"Some days," Ryan says conversationally to Marcus, "are a real bitch. You go out to a routine lunch, and someone decides your car looks like a good one to jack. While you're teaching them that's a bad idea, a gang decides you look like pushovers. Then, while you're showing *them* the error of their ways, your car is being jacked anyway. And finally, you get pounded until you bribe them with the car."

He appears at the bottom of the basement steps, half-walking and half-carrying Marcus, decidedly the worse for wear. His voice is lightly scolding, a faux-cheerfulness that fools neither of them. He's scared, and they can both tell.

"Fortunately, while everyone's squabbling over who gets what or whether winner takes all, you make a getaway with *most* of your hide intact. Of course, you could have yelled for a man like, say, *me*, chatting and eating cookies with the nice little old lady in the nearby brownstone. The man who has a stun gun, pepper spray, and a cell phone on him. But do you? Oh, no. Gotta be Mister Tough Guy. How tough are you now, huh? If you weren't hurt, I'd shake some sense into you. Or try, anyway, if I wasn't pretty sure I'd lose some teeth."

Marcus mumbles something that Ryan doesn't catch, but he gets the idea. "Oh, no. No way am I letting you into our bed smeared with all that ook and bleeding from your very own perforated hide. Shower room, now."

Marcus mumbles again. Ryan shakes his head. "Uh-uh, no argument." He briefly rubs his hand against Marcus's shoulder. "Not that you're in any shape to. Just follow me, OK?"

Ryan struggles a little under the weight of the bigger, bulkier Marcus, but finally manages to get him into the vast shower room and onto a bench. He slumps there, face grayer than ash. Blood seeps from a dozen rents in his clothing and other wounds, unseen, to run in thin rivulets down the drain.

"God, you're a mess," Ryan mutters in worry, touching the one undamaged side of Marcus's face. "Why do you hate hospitals so much? It'll be all right, though. I'll fix you up."

Turning, he begins to rummage through metal cupboards and cabinets – finding towels, a vast first-aid kit, and a bottle of whiskey. Marcus rolls his head wearily to see what's going on, and winces. "Ryan... don't. I'll heal."

"Sure. In a week or so, maybe. Right now? You look like hell." Ryan turns on one of the shower jets and comes back, his arms full of things, with a gleaming pair of scissors on top. "The others are out, but do you really want them to come back and see the CEO bashed like this?"

"No, but..."

"Okay, then," Ryan interrupts. "Just let me do my thing." He picks up the scissors and begins to snip at the tattered remnants of Marcus's clothing. "This way, hey! There'll be naked Marcus. Never a bad thing."

Marcus half-laughs, half-groans. "Ribs?" Ryan asked sympathetically. "I figured. We'll tape those. No problem."

"They'll still know I'm hurt."

"Yes, but..." Ryan softly raps his knuckles on the side of Marcus's head – "they'll know you had the sense to get it taken care of. It'll save you a lot of yelling-at, trust me."

"I'm hurt, and I'd get yelled at?"

"Think about it."

"Oh." Marcus subsides, listening as the scissors go *snick-snick-snick* through the fabric of his trousers. "I guess that might have been a little bit of a close call."

"Yeah. Damned close." Ryan puts the scissors aside, and tugs gently at the cut cloth. "If you stand up – can you stand? – I think all that's just gonna fall away."

Marcus winces.

"Oh, come on. You can lean on me again. One – two – three – up! – ooof!" Together, they hoist Marcus to his shaky feet. The remnants of his clothes flutter harmlessly off, leaving him bare of anything else.

"Shower?" Marcus asks. "To wash off the blood?"

"Yeah. And I'm warning you, it's gonna sting like a bitch. Sound like fun?" Ryan lets Marcus lean more of his weight on him. "Come on, big guy. Let's go."

They hobble their way over, step by slow step. Halfway there, Marcus laughs. "The man nearly broken in half finds something funny," Ryan says, half-amused, half-irked. "Gonna share?"

Marcus chuckles. "Just thinking. I'm the one in charge around here, but you're carrying me around like a baby."

"In case you haven't noticed, things have changed a little," Ryan says dryly. "We happen to fuck each other on a regular basis, for one. Willingly. We enjoy it. It tends to make a guy a little more eager to lend a helping hand when it's needed."

"That's the whole point." Marcus groans when Ryan gently levers him against the wall, under the gentle spray.

"Stings, I know. I told you." Ryan picks up a clean sponge soaked with antibacterial wash in one hand, and kisses Marcus's shoulder lightly. "This is gonna feel even better."

"Wonderful." Marcus manages to grit his teeth through the worst of it. But as Ryan works his way down his body, over the bleeding scrapes and bruises, he watches the wet, dark head with something akin to wonder, and he has to ask: "Ryan?"

"Hmm?"

He reaches down and places his hand on Ryan's wet head. "When did you start to love me?"

Ryan, working tenderly over a gash on Marcus's calf, stops. Still squatting, he is quiet for a long time, then looks up with a sigh. "I'm not sure. Maybe when I first met you."

Marcus blinks. "But it was just you and Baz, back then."

"Yeah."

"And I didn't want to be involved."

"So you said, although I caught you looking even when you were bitching me out for messing up line edits." Ryan winks. "You know what they say about the fine line? They're pretty much right."

Marcus shakes his head. "Seriously. When?"

"Does it matter?"

Marcus massages his fingers gently on Ryan's scalp. "To me, it does."

"Umm..." Ryan breaks into a grin. "Hey, seeing as I'm down here, how about I just blow you and we save the awkward questions for when I'm ready to answer them?"

Marcus has to laugh. "Like never?"

"That was the general idea." Ryan moves in a little closer, breathing warm and heavy over Marcus's cock. "Tempted?"

Marcus's body is; his cock begins to twitch and fill at the warmth, but for once he groans unhappily. "God! You'll be the death of me."

"Good. No more awkward questions."

He softens his touch. "Ryan. Please?"

Ryan looks down with a sigh, squeezing the rouged sponge into a bow tie. "I don't know," he says with a faint shrug. "Maybe always? One day it wasn't there, and the next day I... it just was. Not like Baz. He basically attacked me like a tiger with eighteen arms and legs until I gave in. I mean, not that it was so much a fight as a 'woo-hoo! Surrender!', but –"

"Ryan..." Marcus strokes him. "You're babbling. Don't. Okay?"

Ryan grins up at him, all little-boy and grown-man at once. "Kay," he says softly.

"Now, you were saying something earlier about a blow job...?"

It's Ryan's turn to laugh. "Best cure-all known to man." Then he hesitates. "One thing, first? Fair trade, question for question? When did you start to –"

One of Marcus's fingers strokes across his lips. "I don't know," he says quietly. "Maybe a little when you first came here. Maybe not. But one day it wasn't there, and the next day it was."

Ryan nuzzles his head against Marcus's leg. "It's as good an answer as either of us is going to get, isn't it?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"With all the others, there was a moment, you know? This shared *click*. Even you and Baz had a few episodes in college. But with us..."

"Does it matter?" Marcus caresses his lover as gently as he can. "Ryan?"

"Yeah?"

"Show me how much you love me?"

To his relief, Ryan cracks up, shattering the sober mood. "Is that a nice way of saying I should get on with it?"

"It could be." Marcus puts a hand on his cock, fully erect now, and drags the drooling tip across Ryan's mouth. "I love you," he whispers.

Ryan shuts his eyes and licks his lips. "Love you too," he says quietly.

Then he opens his mouth wide and sweet, taking Marcus in. And together, beneath the warm spray, they show each other just how much what they've said is true.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Interludes from a Life Together - Three

Madison once said their vast shower room reminded her of one in a school gymnasium. They were all indignant about that, but none more so than Nicholas. The lovely white tiled room has special memories for him. After all, wasn't it there he first found himself accepted into his group of lovers?

There's nothing at all there like the griminess of a gym shower. The lighting can range from bright, to wake them, or ambient, to slow them down. The four jets can blast until they merge in a glorious water fight, or be adjusted one by one to soothe and caress a sleepy or a sore-muscle body.

He *loves* their shower, and he'll defend it to the death.

Just now, he's dimmed the lights down halfway, just enough to see by, and clicked the buttons behind a chrome panel to set music playing. Mozart, soft and low. His lovers are all out, with him left behind to mind the shop. They always leave one... in case. Just in case.

But that 'in case' hadn't been needed. He's gotten a phone call from Ryan just a bit ago, jubilantly declaring that they'd defeated the Lilith Fair concert ticket line for Madison's birthday gift. They're on their way home from the other side of the city, and Nicholas intends to be clean and waiting for them in the bed when they arrive.

The water's just the right kind of hot, sluicing down on him and turning his skin faintly pink. He hesitates over the soap dispensers, finally choosing chamomile. A soothing, welcoming scent. Handfuls of it on a clean sponge, rubbed up into foaming lather.

Slowly, he drags the sponge across his skin. No need to hurry, no rush. Mozart plays dreamily on and he's plenty of time before –

A pair of arms slips around his bare waist. Hands slide up his slippery torso, and a head nestles into his shoulder. "Marcus," he sighs, leaning back.

"Nicholas," he murmurs. "Turn up the water. Let me get warm."

Nicholas realizes Marcus, too, is naked. Not hard, but gentle in his caress. "Missed you," he says as Nicholas increases the spray to send it cascading over the both of them. "They're way behind me. I took my car. They took Enrico's truck."

"Selfish of you not to offer anyone a ride," Nicholas chides, though not seriously.

"Very," Marcus agrees solemnly. "But I figured I knew what you'd do, and this is worth it. Mmmm... that water feels like heaven." His fingers slip, slide, caress. "You feel like a

seraphim."

"A fallen one," Nicholas murmurs, swaying back.

"Gladly fallen?"

"Ever so gladly."

"Can I turn the music up?"

"As you wish."

Marcus's hands slide lower. "Can I turn the music down?"

Nicholas rubs his damp hair against Marcus's shoulder. Nearly purring. "As you wish."

"Can I kiss you?"

"As you wish."

"Can I..." and he whispers in Nicholas's ear.

Nicholas half-laughs, then squirms around until he's facing Marcus, his soap-slick chest pressed to the broader one. "I think that's a definite possibility."

And Marcus, grinning the grin of one who knows he's won this particular gambit, dives in for a deep and hungry kiss, the prelude to something... more.

## Chapter Fourteen

Special as it might be to find the right someone, the earth doesn't shake when two people become a couple. A threesome might raise a few eyebrows. A foursome is a locker room fantasy.

But a fivesome? That can make news.

And so it came to pass that a quirky reporter from a small, independent - but monied - gay newspaper contacted the fivesome at PrideWorks. Baz scoffed, and Ryan laughed. Nicholas blushed; Marcus grumbled into his coffee... but Aidan looked thoughtful.

They still don't know how he talked them into it.

Well, all right, they do know - it involved a lot of sucking and some hot, deep, wet penetration - but here they are, all set to be interviewed as a "phenomenon". And the reporter doesn't just want the fivesome - she wants to interview the whole company.

And so, over a catered breakfast brought into the office, the reporter launches a sneak attack one morning and begins...

### **Madison**

Madison sips the imported morning coffee that the interviewer has gone to great expense to procure, and stares. "You have to be kidding. I do all this community work for gay and lesbian parents, and you want to talk about that?"

"Okay, then. Yes, the bed really is that big. Yes, all five of them share it. Damn right, it's not just polyamorism; it's greedy. And if they forget to put that soundproofing flap down one more night, I'm going to duct-tape their weenies to their thighs.

"Well, it's not like I haven't seen them before. You can walk in on some of the most amaz – I mean, disgusting things, right there in the office! In daylight!

"Sure, I'll take another cup. God. I didn't get any sleep last night.

"Oh, we had to stay late. There's some street kids in trouble. Kicked out for being gay. We - but I guess you're not interested in that, are you? You just want to hear about the bouncy-bouncy.

"Okay, okay, don't get snippy. Yes, I work with the cast and crew of 'As the Bed Turns'.

"What are they like? I don't really know how to answer that. Put them all together, and they're this big, obnoxious, oversexed unit. Separately... well, Nicholas's really shy. And clumsy. And booky. Most of these thick old volumes are his. He knows everything there



is to know about - well, pretty much anything.

"Marcus is a doofus. I'm sorry, but he's moved past that 'man on a mission' thing into a guy who gets laid at least twice a night and that'll turn anyone's frown upside down. At least he still takes the job seriously.

"Aidan. I like Aidan. He was the first one of those five guys to call me "Lady M". Yeah, really. He still teases me about it.

"Yes, he sleeps in the middle of the bed. Two on each side. You really don't want to know how I know that.

"Baz and Ryan? Baz is... Ryan is... I don't know. You really can't separate those two. You never see them apart. It's like they're two halves of one person. Which is really kind of creepy, you know?

"They belong together. Them, more than the others. I think the guys all know it. Well, I mean, know that they have something special even though it is all of them together in their 'relationship'. Maybe someday everyone else might part ways, but not Ryan and Baz. Those two – you can just tell they're in it for the long haul.

"Ooh, are those croissants? And blueberries? Can I – oh, you're such a good interviewer. Thanks! Anything else you want to know? Oh! Here's one thing. Marcus makes a sound like a moose call when he comes, and..."

## **Enrico**

Enrico's the next person awake to swing by the office. He'd rather have a cold Coke in a can than coffee, and he looks at the croissants as if they're bread-shaped slugs.

"Oh, Madison let you in. Figures. You wanna talk about those boys? I don't know, man. I kinda like to live and let live where that whole mess is concerned.

"Damn, you got sausage over there? That's not fair. Okay, two of the links and I'll talk. Not like people don't know, anyway.

"Yeah, all five of them, one big lump-o-lovin'. Kinda makes a man's head spin when he thinks about how it all works, which is why I don't think about it much. You get me? And the shit they get up to -

"Not chocolate muffins, too. You don't play fair. Hand 'em over.

"Okay, so one time I was in the corner over there – just right there, see? And I hear this *thump-thump* noise. Don't see no heads, so I get up real quiet like and go see what's happening. I peek over those damn filing cabinets and there's Baz and Ryan, hands jammed into each other's pants, and oh, God, I ain't that hungry any more.

"Look. I don't got no issues with being gay. I work here, don't I? I believe that it's all about your body, your choice, and no one has the right to tell you different. I did have a few problems with the whole office romance thing, though.

"Shut the fuck up.

"What I'm tryin' to say is, so far as getting down and dirty with another dude, that's just their personal business. Doesn't mean I really wanna see it. I can get scrambled porn if I feel like watching someone else get it on. That's all I'm going to say about that.

"Yeah, I trust them all. They don't let you down, not ever. Nicholas, he's got the brains, Marcus has the business savvy, Baz has an eye for what's going to sell, Ryan works like hell at any job you set him doing, and Aidan does his best. Hey, you know of anything stronger than aspirin for a migraine?

"It's just that he gets these headaches, that's all. I worry about him a little.

"Nah, don't worry about it. Maybe I'll go check with that old juju woman down in the ghetto. Boys wouldn't like that, but she don't do no black magic. She might have something to help.

"We done here? 'Cause I've finished my breakfast, and if those boys aren't awake I'm heading off to check my e-mail where someone might actually need me for something.

"One last question, okay. Baz and Ryan? Why you want to know about – huh. Okay, yeah, they are together all the time. Glued at the hip. You see one; you see the other. It was those two who started off this whole gig, you know? Then they pull in Aidan, then Marcus, then Nicholas, and it's a big ol' love-in all of a sudden.

"I don't know, man. They make me think of my Auntie Regina and her husband George, and they been together thirty-five years. They look at each other and you can tell, they love each other something special. I mean, special kind of special. Never even seen 'em fight – really fight, not just wrestle over the remote or bitch about who gets to drive. They're tight, man. Real tight. I figure they're gonna stay that way.

"We cool? Cool."

### **Nicholas**

"I beg your pardon! Well, you startled me. No – here – let me pick those up. I'm terribly sorry. Were those your – yes, I see, those are the notes. What the hell -?

"Oh, Madison let you in. That does make sense. Coffee? Is it – oh, good lord, Jamaica Blue Mountain. That smells heavenly. And croissants... well, I suppose I might talk to you. Briefly, mind. I've still quite a lot of research to do. That's why I'm up.

"Yes, it is easy to get out bed because I sleep on the end. That's an awfully personal question to –

"You're what, now? Now see here, I hardly comprehend how that's absolutely any of your business.

"Rubbish. Inspiration can be found anywhere. Take Shakespeare, for example. A single one of his sonnets can yield – no, I do not read Shakespeare with that in mind. What an absurd notion. His sonnets are about pure love, as opposed to sensual, and –

"No, Marcus does not make a sound like a moose! It's - well - I suppose rather more of a bullock -

"Oh, good lord, there aren't any secrets left, are there? Very well. I'll talk to you. But if you let the others know, there will be hell to pay. Mark my words.

"We all get along quite well, thank you.

"No, we do not play naked Twister. Often.

"I refuse to answer a question that has the word 'dildo' contained anywhere within it.

"I suppose I'm not much fun, then! I prefer to keep my opinions about my relationship with my lovers private, as such things should be. If you consider that makes me a fuddy-duddy, well, so be it.

"I'll give you my honest opinion, and then I really must insist that you leave. Things fall together in patterns. The world works on a system of cause and effect. Marcus came here to the city alone to start the publishing company, to do what he could to help people. Enrico believed in his cause, so he joined with him. Madison needed a job. Aidan - you don't know of an efficacious headache remedy, do you – oh, well. I suppose it didn't hurt to ask.

"Yes, I suppose I fell a little in love with both Marcus and Aidan from the first. They were so very... vulnerable. But I could see how they felt for each other, even if neither would admit it. Little things. Touches to the hand, the shoulder. Marcus stopping by every hour to check on him.

"I kept my feelings to myself.

"Pardon me. No, I've just got a speck of pepper in my eye and it smarts.

"Yes, well. A little time passed, then Baz and Ryan arrived in the city. I gather that due to a spot of animosity in their pasts, Baz wasn't exactly welcome here. Marcus actually had the idea that he was holding Ryan hostage for a bit.

"Yes, I was somewhat jealous. That's neither here nor there.

"At any rate, it was due to Ryan's presence that Marcus calmed down enough to listen. Apparently, Baz and Ryan had fallen in love – a thing hardly tolerated by their families. I must say, they had narrow points of view. The two were nearly run out of town on a rail. It hurt Ryan, badly. I could see that holding onto Baz was all that kept him together.

"Marcus ended up letting them stay. When they were first introduced to Aidan, he had a sudden migraine and nearly hurt himself – would have, if Ryan hadn't been quick on the catch. After that, they fell in love as well. Rather surprisingly for a man of his nature, Baz proved willing to share. Marcus joined in soon after, and in a little while I –

"Why is it surprising? Well, I suppose it's because that regardless of what the group of us share, Baz and Ryan have a special bond. Perhaps it was forged by being hounded out of town with only each other for comfort. Perhaps their love is simply true and deep. I'm rather ignorant when it comes to such things. I'm only glad their hearts extend far enough to take me into their company as well.

"I told you, it's the damned pepper. Now, are we done here? I really must get on with – oh, Marcus! Good morning. Yes, yes, doing quite well. This lady is – er – um – I'll just go and work on the research some more, shall I?

"And do try the coffee. It's far better than Madison's. Good-bye..."

### **Marcus**

"Um – ma'am – don't take this the wrong way, but I don't really care who you are. You can't just –

"No.

"No.

"No.

"No!

"My God, who told you that – oh. Madison.

"No, I do **not** sound like a moose when I – I can't believe we're discussing this. What did they –

"Oh, God.

"No, no coffee. I'm just going to, um – go back downstairs, and –"

"Look. I'm not an expert about these things. And I don't know how to say them. But if Baz and Ryan hadn't come along, my life would be completely different. And it would be a lot worse. Okay?"

"They love each other. We all love each other, but they're... I'd say soulmates..."

"I really need to be going now. I have to find Madison. Saks? Shoe sale?"

"You gave her **how much** to go shopping - ?"

"I'm going back downstairs, then. Sure, I'll send one of them up. The more the merrier, huh?"

"You don't have a paper cup I can take some of that coffee with me in, do you?"

**Aidan**

"Listen, lady, you couldn't tempt me with – oh, God, is that sausage I smell? Oh, fuck, excuse me –"

"Sorry. It's the migraine; it makes me a bit sick."

"Yeah, I'm tired. Doesn't help."

"Street kids, and we were out past three a.m. We get done here, and I'm goin' back to bed. Hey, you. You don't know of anything good for a head the size of a melon, do you?"

"Oh, God, I don't know where you got the idea to serve Scotch for breakfast, but unless you want me heavin' up the rest of last night's dinner on that lovely table, you'll put that away."

"Nicholas, love, you don't have to. You're busy. Now come on – Marcus, it's embarrassing enough to chuck up like some pregnant – WHAT? – Saint Peter on a cracker, get that panicked look out of your eyes! Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I haven't got the patience for this. You want to do something useful, get me back downstairs. In bed."

"Yeah, you can bring me some cracked ice."

"I wouldn't say no to a temple massage."

"Lady, you mind not writing all this down? Look, Baz is on his way up. Pester him, will you? For once he and Ryan aren't tied together like Siamese twins."

**Baz**

"It's about time you showed up. I gave you a call, what, a couple months ago? What've you been doin', sitting about on your ass waiting for the mood to strike?"

"I'm not so much on coffee. Save it for Ryan. I'll have the last of those sausages, though."

"Not got much time, here. Ryan was stirring, and I want to go down and surprise him in the shower. Yeah, I see you smirking. That kind of surprise. Ought to open his eyes, you think?"

"Damn, these are good hunks of twisty bread. Guess I'll forgive you for taking your time, after all. Great eats."

"Oh, that's a nice trick with the waggling eyebrows, there. I'd like to do that myself. Mind teaching me sometime?"

"Yeah, I figured it out a while back. Just had a sixth sense about it. You don't get five guys like us in the sack together without it raising some kind of literary eyebrow. So I figured we'd just get to the point, invite you in, meet you face to face, and chat a bit."

"Right, I don't mind that. But you'll have to bear with my kind of description. Nicholas is like a blanket, one of those nice patterned throws, the sort my grandmum used to like. A bit worn around the edges, but fuzzy and comfortable and awfully nice to roll around in, you get me?"

"Marcus - I'd rather not go there - it's the whole past-between-us thing. If he didn't want to talk about it, I'd just as soon stay out of there, myself. We give each other what we need. And love him? Fuck, I knew you'd ask that. All right, yeah, I do love him, but it's no puppies and kittens kind of love. It's different. Wilder. Fierce."

"Aidan needs lookin' after."

"Ryan... well, Ryan fell for Aidan first, and I wasn't goin' to lose him. Aidan's a charmer. He knows how to play, and he doesn't mind paying out if he loses. He gets under your skin. Loves with all his heart, and isn't shy about showing it. 'Course I love him. How could I not?"

"You want to hurry this up?"

"Oh, hell, Ryan... Right, Ryan. Look, what I'm telling you is between you and me only, get me? Only he knows. None of the others do. I mean to keep it that way."

"I've wanted him since the first time I laid eyes on him. Thing is, I thought it was only for sex, right? So I went after him. I'm not goin' to lie, it took a good bit of convincing. But after I told him about my past, and no, that is not a story you're getting out of me, he

saw me in a different kind of light.

"Then, of course, the families found out about us. Hoot! Hell, did they find out about us. Caught us with our jeans 'round our ankles up against a wall. Made it pretty damn hot in that town. We didn't see any choice but to run for the city and Marcus, even if I was pretty sure he'd toss us back out again.

"I took Ryan along. I'll always take Ryan along. He's the other part of me. This boy, this warm, sweet-smelling, sun-burnished boy fits his way neat as you please into a hole I hadn't known I had in my heart, and...

"Okay, that's it. I'm off. No, it's the damned pepper. Got a fleck in my eye. And I hear the water starting in the shower. I'm off to surprise Ryan. Get comfy and have some of that coffee yourself. If I have my way, it'll be a bit before he's up to get interviewed.

## **Ryan**

"Hey! Who let in the catering squad from Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous? I wondered why Baz hid the pop-tarts. Oh, God, are those chocolate muffins? How'd you get in – oh. Madison. That'd be why there's one lonely blueberry rolling around in that basket. That's her idea of saving some for the others.

"Yeah, load me up. The office is gonna be busy today. This is a big improvement over frosted pastries.

"Whoa!

"How did you – Baz. Yes, he does have a big mouth. I think he likes trying to shock people. Okay, yeah, I'm just teasing. He did tell me that you were up here, and what for, and everything else. I think Marcus's probably going to kill him, or at least try. Or pretend to try. Then Baz'll sweet-talk his way back in. That's the way it usually happens.

"I have to hurry, though. So I'm going to be really, really simple about this between mouthfuls. I love them. They're part of me. Marcus when he's moody, Aidan when his head hurts, Nicholas when he's being shy and quiet. Marcus when he shouts, Aidan when he's fighting the need for a drink, and Nicholas when he's brave enough to come over for a snuggle.

"But it's Baz that I started off with, and it's Baz that I'm staying with forever, no matter what else happens. I don't know anymore where I stop and he starts. Sure, we fight and bitch and act like a couple of kids, but that's just our way, right? He's the one I keep warm at night. I'm the one he washes down in the shower after a hard day's work. After all these years, he's still the one. He'll always be the one.

"When I was younger, and I wasn't sure what I was, I didn't expect the love of my life to be a man. But that's just the way it turned out.

"God, those were good croissants. Thanks! Stop by again, and we'll do lunch in the rooftop garden. When we're away from listening ears, I'll tell you a story of two that's been left out.

"Aw, come on. Don't act all surprised. Baz told me about the other things you write down, too. Gotta say, you don't do a bad job, though there's a lot you leave out. Like the way he wraps around me and holds me like I'm his teddy bear. Or how he drools on my shoulder.

"Yes, you do, too, Baz!

"Anyway, thanks for the food. Coffee to go? Fantastic! I'm going to run an errand, get some more paper and file folders, and I've gotta give my honeys a kiss goodbye – yeah, Nicholas, come here, that means you too."

"Leave the mess here. I made the guys pay for a housekeeping service. Hey, nice eyebrow trick! Yeah, we have better things to do than clean. And if you'll excuse me, I have things to do so I can head back down to that great bed of ours to get other stuff taken care of."

"You take it easy, huh? And seriously, thanks for stopping by."

"Okay, Baz, I'm coming. No, not like that - well, you will be in a minute."

\*\*\*

It's not what the interviewer expected. But, pouring herself the last of the coffee, she smiles and puts her pen down. She's satisfied. She suspects her readers will be, too.



## Chapter Fifteen

Enrico pulls hard on the metal bars, wrestling hard as he can. Damn, but they must be welded together. That's okay. Never give up, never say die. He yanks again with all the strength in his arms, wincing at the screech of metal against metal.

Behind him, Madison stands with her arms crossed, tapping one dainty foot. "That's not going to work, you know."

"Oh, yeah?" Enrico attacks again. "You got a better idea?"

"Actually, I do." Madison strides up to the racks of shopping carts and eyes them up and down. One swift kick to a wheel and one of the things pops loose, rolling back into her hands.

Enrico drops the handlebars of the cart he's been wrestling with to stare at her. "You just gotta show me up, don't you?"

"There are some things that Big Bad Man just can't do as well as a woman." She nudges another cart with her toe and pulls it free, easy as breathing. "You take that one."

Enrico glares it, gives the one he was wrestling with a good kick, and gets a hell's-a-screamin' stubbed toe for his efforts. The cart stays right where it is. "How'd you do that?"

"Trade secret." Madison expertly grips her own cart's handles and maneuvers it around. "So, you ready for this?"

Enrico reluctantly accepts his cart. The wheels squeak. "Am I ready for this? Like hell, I'm ready. How'd we get into this mess again?"

"Watch the language, mister! And you," Madison says, pushing her buggy forward, "lost the bet that our overly amorous friends couldn't last for twenty-four hours without - well, you know. I was stupid enough to put my money on you. Ergo, we have to do the week's shopping for the boys."

"They didn't play fair. Each one of them picked a city at random and drove so they wouldn't even be together!"

"Actually, I have to admit that was clever." Madison taps her chin with a pale pink nail. "Original. Ingenious. Sneaky."

"Yeah, you would get a kick out of it. Look, how do we know they're telling us the truth? Who says they didn't meet up in San Francisco or something and get all crazy in a hotel room?"

Madison shrugs. "Look, just suck it up and deal, okay? Those lucky boys can skip town if they feel like it, but some of us have responsibilities, don't we?"

She nudges the cart forward with her knee, bending to pick up the tiny girl hiding behind her calves. "It's okay, Adriana, the scary man's finished making noise. Come on, Addy, up you go —"

Enrico gives her a hand lifting the tiny Latino girl into the child's seat on the basket. "And babysitting, too?"

"Like you mind that. Her mom's at the free Lamaze class and I said I'd watch her. No reason I can't multi-task."

"Multi-task, my a -" He coughs. "My foot."

She gives him a pointed look. "Thank you."

"Seriously, Madison." Enrico leans forward. "Ordinary shopping, like bread and milk and eggs, that's one thing. But I saw that list. You gonna buy those things with a kid around?"

"Nope." Madison scans down the list, then tears it neatly in half. "I'm buying the eggs and veggies. You're buying the rest of it."

"Oh, no, no, now wait a minute. That's not fair!"

"So who said life is fair?" Madison caresses Adriana's springy, soft curls. "Besides, you were the one saying just a minute ago —"

"I got it, I got it." Enrico surveys his list, face falling into the glum lines of a basset hound. "Any one sees me buying this sh — stuff, my rep as your token straight man is ruined, you know that?"

"Tough it out, Enrico. We're off to buy orange juice. Meet you at the registers!"

And damned if she doesn't wink back over her shoulder at him before she sails off, little Adriana staring at him with big mocha eyes.

\* \* \*

Enrico reads the list over again to make sure he understands Ryan's scribble, Aidan's scrawl, and the three other handwriting styles. He feels his cheeks growing hot. He'd swear they put half that stuff on there just to embarrass him — them — whatever.

"They're crazy. This is MegaMart, not Sex-o-Rama," he mumbles out loud.

An old lady shopper, easily slipping out the cart that he had so much trouble with, drops her mouth open and gives him a shocked face. Enrico flinches. "Um... sorry, ma'am. Sorry."

She looks offended and moves on, past the cheerful greeter around her age.

Enrico winces. Oh, God. But okay, he can do this. Never give up, yeah.

He looks back down at his list and closes his eyes. Right. He is so fucked.

\* \* \*

Three gallons of plain mineral oil.

Five quarts of massage oil - cinnamon, sandalwood, chamomile, tea tree, and citrus.

Three packs of brightly colored kiddie soaps in funny shapes, including crayon.

Plain white candles. Lots of them. In different thicknesses, from taper to pillars. Nothing peppermint or clove or citrus, and that's underlined.

Enrico shuts his eyes tight for a moment, and keeps on shopping. Votive candles. Floaty candles. Scented candles. Damn near enough of those to fill half the buggy.

Shot glasses. Balloon glasses. Goblets. Containers he knows nothing about and doesn't want to.

A double-pack of ping-pong paddles without the rough sandpaper on them.

Ten yards of suede cut into strips. Dear God, the way the fabric cutting lady looked at him!

Even more: three yards each of blue, gold, scarlet, emerald, and saffron velvet rope.

Plain braided rope.

Twine.

Duct tape.

Five boxes of saran wrap.

Five see-through men's robes.

Satin boxers.

Oh, dear God, something that looked like a corset, complete with garters and thigh-highs. They'd even drawn a sketch of it.

Makeup.

What the fuck?

Nicholas has written down the brands and shades they want, but hell if he can figure the difference between "charcoal" and "espresso". Enrico has about the worst ten minutes of his life when this gorgeous little lady decides he needs help picking what goes with his skin tone. She doesn't approve his final choices, and prances off with a mince to her step that just accentuates the perkier little ass that - aw, damn it!

Back to shopping. Next up, a dog collar with nasty-looking studs on it. Plus a leather leash.

Enrico hesitates at the leash. That collar looks just like Baz. Awful ideas about what they're planning on doing with that suede, the leash, and the collar float into his mind, and he tosses the items into his buggy with a little yelp.

All of this mess and he ain't even hit the - *swallow!* - sexual accessories aisle yet. They have to be pullin' his leg with some of this shit he's got in his cart already. At least he prays they are.

But what he's gotta get down this row, he thinks with an internal shudder as he pulls past towering stacks of shampoo, toothpaste, and tampons - this is where they mean business.

He can't find it at first. Has to ask someone. They stare down into his buggy, stare at him, then point dumbly down at the far end of the rows.

"Thanks for nothing, man," Enrico grumbles, pushing his heavy cart all the way down — and just when the fuck did MegaMart turn into a perv's paradise? Fuckstick, he'd been expecting a few bottles of K-Y and a tiny little display of condoms, not all this!

He looks at his list. The first word he sees is underlined in blue and red: LUBE. And beneath that, a list of... flavors. Flavors that he, glancing up, sees to be in stock. All of them.

That's not so much what scares him. What worries him is the quantities written beside each flavor. Wild cherry (3). Raspberry (4). Blueberry (1 — only Nicholas likes it).

He drops the list like it's hot, then has to bend over and pick it up. He feels a pair of eyes boring into his ass, and whips around — but no good, the peeping Tom's gone and skittered.

OK. With what feels like the eyes of everyone buying dental floss and Dr. Scholl's

looking at him, he loads the buggy up with every damn flavor of lube they stock, in quantity. The pile's concave now with a mountain of sex supplies. No way this is a week's supply. Good God, if it is, he's not just embarrassed, he's impressed as hell.

He realizes he's been fondling the last tube of lube and flips hastily it into the basket as if it's burning his fingers.

Out of sheer cussedness, even though they're not on the list, he grabs three of the biggest boxes of condoms he can find and adds them as well. Size Regular, which everyone damned well knows means Small.

Then, as an afterthought, he adds a box of extra-large. They might end up tossing those back at him. Never hurts to have a few on hand, you know?

Dear God, let that be all. He scans the list, scratching things off.

Okay, only one thing left.

Cheeks burning, he heads for the new display of shower-head attachments. *This* is just way, way, *way* more than he's ever wanted to know.

\* \* \*

"Paper or plastic?"

Enrico's steadfastly not looking at the cashier or the bag boy. "Paper!"

"You got it, man." He can hear the snicker in the kid's voice. "You want it all grouped by category, or what?"

"I don't give a damn if you mix the condoms with someone else's cucumbers."

The cashier can't quite smother her chuckle. He deals her a death glare. But thank God, it's finally over, it's done, he has a buggy full of nice, non-transparent paper bags, and there's Madison waving to him by the entrance. Damn it, she got plastic, and he can see right through.

He snarls at her as he pushes his cart up alongside. "They did that on purpose."

She raises one eyebrow. "You think?"

"Oh, come on. You got to buy the Eggos. I was stuck buying -" he eyes Adriana, still wide-eyed and fascinated, "*things* in flavors I didn't know existed."

"Yeah. Real lucky." Madison dives into one bag and pulls out a cucumber. A carrot. Zucchini. Another bag brings up chocolate syrup, honey, strawberry jam, and orange

marmalade — but no bread or ice cream. She eyes him. "And if you think that's bad? You should see their wine selection."

"I pass." Enrico groans and shifts his cart, pushing it toward the exit. Thankfully, the elderly guy standing there doesn't ask to look through their supplies. "At least that's over."

"Umm, not exactly."

Enrico freezes, one foot out the door in sunlight and blessed freedom. "Start talkin', Madison."

She's looking down at her feet. "Well, there were some things on my list that we have to buy at the liquor store. I can't take Adriana in there. You'll have to do that."

Enrico's tempted to relax. But he knows better. "And?" he asks suspiciously.

Her cheeks pink. "Did you, um, see the back of your list?"

"The what now?" Incredulous, Enrico flips it over. He just manages not to cuss in front of the baby.

"That place, you're definitely going in alone."

"Oh, my God, Madison, you're not gonna make me — and if we're going there, why the hell — why did they make me buy all that sh —garbage in MegaMart?" Enrico pleads, eyes wide.

"Nicholas said something about multi-packs, buying in quantity, and cost value." Madison's cheeks are bright red. "And careful with the language. Adriana, remember?" Madison kisses the little kid's forehead, giving him a sharp look. "You might want to get paper bags there too."

Enrico eyes the toddler. "She can't read, can she?"

"Not yet. And I'll tell her stories while you're inside."

Enrico shuts his eyes. "Just remind me to never, never make a bet with those s-e-x monkeys again, okay?"

"I am so there with you." Madison shudders.

"Do you even know where this place is?"

Her blush tells him she does. He groans. "Okay, you navigate."

He looks at the list. Nicholas's neat, precise handwriting tops the rows of writing: *To be purchased at "Our Dirty Little Secret's Emporium: Sexy Toys For Naughty Boys"*.

His life is over. His rep is trashed. And he is going to kill those boys, soon as he gets the chance.

And one more thing: he hopes to God that a cock-sucker is a lollipop.

Otherwise, they are going to have themselves some words when he gets back to the office!

## Chapter Sixteen

Marcus is mostly asleep. He's swimming in that sort of good, warm floatiness, surrounded by a warm, hard body on his left and to his right; arms and legs hooked over him wherever they happen to fall. If he turns his head just a little, he can smell the scent of chamomile shampoo still clinging to Nicholas's getting-shaggy locks. Move the other direction, and he can smell the spicy Irish soap on Aidan's bare shoulder. Surmounting all: the heavy, musky scent of sex.

Whose turn is it to change the sheets today? Ah, he doesn't know, and he doesn't much care. Outside, he can hear the rain pattering down in a gentle, soothing lullaby. It'll be overcast all the day long, he surmises, and maybe he'll be able to laze for a few hours with a hot cup of coffee and the warm body of one of the four, in their new window seat. Not even Ryan will have to go out on errands if it's wet. They'll all be together.

Even better, they just finished with deadline day, giving them a few hours to legally relax, and Aidan's had no headaches for almost a week. He's got a new lease on life, with his teaching paperwork going through like a charm. Marcus feels like he's on vacation, almost.

No worries. No work. Just him and his lovers, with ample time to enjoy each other.

He snuggles down amongst the tangle of limbs and gives a deep, contented sigh. This, this is the only way to go.

He'll just get a little more sleep, first, before...

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

Next to him, Aidan jerks awake. "Huzzt?" he mumbles.

"It's the phone," Marcus whispers against his shoulder. "Ignore it, and it'll go away."

"Phone." Aidan shakes his head dazedly. "Nah. Can't. Might be calling me in to work." He substitute teaches, now, when he can.

"Ah, Aidan —"

Too late; Aidan's already reached for the cordless phone mounted on the wall above his head. "It's Aidan," he says with the molasses lilt he has fresh out of sleep. "Yeah? Where? Morning, afternoon — ah, right, both. Hang on."



He turns to Marcus, sliding his hand down the man's bare chest. "Have I got any other plans today? Can't remember."

*Yes. Stay in bed. Let me fuck you. Cuddle with me.* Marcus chokes back the selfish words and shakes his head.

"Right." Aidan turns back to the phone. "What time you need me there? Six-thirty? Can do." He laughs. "Nice to be wanted, eh?"

*You have no idea.* Marcus draws one finger down Aidan's arm. Absently, Aidan brushes it away. "I'll be there. Thanks for thinking of me. Sure. Bye."

He replaces the phone in its cradle, and gives a long, luxurious stretch that lifts his bare chest free of the heavy covers. Next to him, the sleeping Ryan-Baz tangle wriggles and twitches in mild complaint. Nothing like the protest Marcus wants to voice. "You've got a job?" he asks awkwardly, knowing the answer.

"I do. Seventy-five dollars for the day; that's not bad." Aidan raises up on one elbow and kisses Marcus's nose. "Shift aside, will you? I've got to piss and shower."

Reluctantly, Marcus drops his hand. Aidan lifts up and begins crawling out of the bed, toward the foot. His bare ass, each cheek perfectly shaped to fit in Marcus's hand, would tempt a saint, and his morning hard-on sways temptingly between his legs. Marcus reaches for it, but misses. Damn it.

"You'll be gone all day long?"

"All day." Aidan slips down onto the floor. "Hush, now. You'll wake the others. I'll just get ready. If you want, since you're awake you could give me a lift."

Marcus feels slightly better. "I could? I mean, yeah, I could."

"Right." Aidan winks at him. "Toss on some clothes; I'll be ready in a few."

The temptation to follow him into the shower room is unbearable. But if he does, there's no way Aidan's going to make that six-thirty appointment. He'll end up sneaking up behind Aidan, grabbing that hard-on with soap slick fingers, pushing his own fingers up the tight little ass until the he's begging for more. Might even end up fucking hard and fast, or soft and slow, on the tiled floor.

At the thought, Marcus's own cock rises up full and heavy.

*Wanting.*

Glancing over, he sees Nicholas starting to stir. There's a tent in his sheets as he shifts his

weight from one side to the other. His hair falls forward towards his eyes, and he looks innocent and boyish with the glasses off.

"Morning," he murmurs, drawing the sheet down to expose his cock, dark with blood and pointing up at his flat stomach.

Nicholas stirs, his eyes fluttering open. "Marcus?"

"Ssh, ssh." Marcus drops a light kiss on Nicholas' breastbone, and another just below it. "Good morning," he murmurs between presses of his lips to flesh. "Just saying good morning."

Slowly, Nicholas's long fingers card themselves through Marcus's hair. "Good morning," he says back, a little breathlessly. "It's early."

"Never too early to show someone you care."

"That's a Hallmark commercial."

"Is it?" Marcus pretends to consider that. "Well, then, how about this?" He flicks the tip of his tongue over the head of Nicholas' cock. "Is that commercial enough for you?"

A strangled gasp is his only reply. Nicholas' hips jerk as if on their own, pushing his cock towards Marcus's mouth. "Do you like that?" Marcus draws his hands over the outline of Nicholas's hip bones. "Want some more?"

"You have to ask?" Nicholas jokes, voice strained.

"More of this?" Marcus raises up and slips his mouth down over the whole of Nicholas' cock, sliding slickly down until he feels it bump the back of his throat. He lashes the thick, throbbing vein - *so alive, so vibrant with life* - on the underside with his tongue, and sucks hard, his cheeks hollowing.

Nicholas lets out a long, soft moan. His fingers tighten in Marcus's hair. "Good... so good," he manages. "Don't stop."

Marcus has no plans to quit. He hears the water running, imagines Aidan stepping naked and shining-pale under the hot water, and tastes the salty bitterness of Nicholas' cock on his tongue. He couldn't stop if he wanted to.

Not that Aidan wouldn't let him join him, the time bedamned, or that this is Nicholas, struggling to lie still lest they wake Ryan-Baz. Stroking hard with his tongue, he increases his suction as he backs off, probing the slit at the tip before he slides off with a wet *pop*.

Nicholas makes a small noise of loss. Marcus soothes him with cool hands stroking over

his sleep-warm chest, and small hushing sounds. "I'm not done here yet. Not by a long shot."

Nicholas shudders, his fingers flexing in Marcus's hair. But it's a good kind of shudder, you know? As if he understands that Marcus's feeling playful—happy and ready to tease his orgasm out of him.

His thighs are already trembling with excitement as Marcus parts them, licking slowly down the length of that cock. It jumps under his touch, a live thing, eager for the feel of him. Slowly, he makes his way down to the base, and nuzzles his nose deep in the thatch of rough curls that surround him.

"Shave for me, some day," he whispers against the sensitive skin. "Shave everything for me."

"For you," Nicholas whisper-chokes.

"All of this, gone." He strops his cheek against the rough hair. "I love it — but I want to feel you, just you, when I do this."

"Ah, God, Marcus."

"When I do this," he whispers, snaking out his tongue to draw a line down the center of Nicholas's balls, heavy between his legs. The stifled yell that he hears makes him chuckle, as well as the groan as his lips tickle the sensitive skin.

"And when I do this." Gently, so careful not to hurt, he sucks one pendulous sac into his mouth and suckles, rolling the ball over his tongue. Nicholas's hands tighten unbearably, then let go. He can hear him gripping at the sheets. Imagine his knuckles going white. Slipping the ball from his mouth, he laves it with his tongue, then moves to the other one and gives it the same long, lavish treatment.

"Do you like that?" he murmurs, his lips buzzing on hypersensitive skin. A low moan is his only answer, and he smiles. Lifting the sac gently out of the way, he laps at, then gently nibbles the strip of skin behind them.

"God! Marcus!" Nicholas' back arches, nearly leaving the bed.

"Ssh, ssh." Marcus strokes his quavering thighs. "I love how you respond to me. It's so honest."

"Love you," Nicholas manages to gasp out. "Going to come — ah, God, going to come —"

"Ssh, not yet." Marcus reaches up to pinch the base of Nicholas' cock, hard enough to stave off his orgasm. "A little longer."

"You're killing me."

"Better this than chainsaws."

Nicholas laughs a little. "Your sense of humor is — oh, God! — strange and out of place, Marcus. Making jokes about murder when you're — ah, ah! — doing that to me—"

"That, and more." Marcus paints a wet stripe back up Nicholas' balls, feeling his muscles quake. He feels warm, warm as the skin he's lavishing his attention on. His vision has taken on a hazy glow. Are Baz and Ryan awake? Have they lit candles? Are they watching?

His own cock jumps in reaction. But he can wait until Nicholas is satisfied before he takes his own pleasure. And it won't be long. Nicholas' skin is alive, rippling with tension and shakes.

The water keeps running in the shower, and he envisions Aidan reaching down to lazily take his own cock in hand, jacking slowly. He carefully substitutes his fist for the two fingers holding back Nicholas' orgasm, and laps a path up beside his heavy cock onto his stomach.

He's wet for Marcus, dripping translucent pearls of creamy pre-come on his belly. Marcus sniffs at the small puddle, then laps delicately. "Delicious," he says quietly. "Nothing else tastes like you, Nicholas."

Nicholas thrashes and moans. His hands grip the bed sheets in tight fistfuls. "But the best," Marcus says, using his other hand to scoop up the slick puddle of pre-come, "is yet to come. If you liked that, try this."

He moves his hand down again, past the tight and quivering balls, down to the hidden place between Nicholas' cheeks. "Spread for me," he whispers. "Open wide, and let me in."

Nicholas moans and opens for him, wide as a wanton, drawing his legs back. "Please," he whispers, guessing what Marcus has in mind. "God, yes, please."

"Since you asked so very, very nicely..." Marcus' slippery fingers circle Nicholas' small, tight pucker, coating it with his own juices. He probes lightly, then lets one finger slip inside that burning warmth. Nicholas almost howls.

"More?" he challenges, nipping ever so lightly at the base of Nicholas' cock. "Do you want more?"

"God, yes, more." The tremors rack his slight frame. "More, Marcus. Please."

Smiling a cat-and-cream smile to himself, Marcus slips a second finger in and pushes, thrusting both digits deep inside Nicholas. Slick and slippery, they move with ease. He crooks his fingers, searching for the sweet spot he knows so well. Ah, there it is. With one finger, he rubs over it, then presses down and massages.

"Marcus — God — can't bear any more — need to come —"

"Say please," Marcus whispers, flexing his grip. He moves his mouth up to hover over the tip of Nicholas' cock, fingers still rubbing at his prostate. "Ask me sweetly."

Nicholas' tousled head tosses on the pillow. "Marcus, I love you. Please, let me —"

"Then come." Marcus slides his mouth over the head of Nicholas' cock, presses hard with his fingers, and lets go of the constriction.

No one, not even shy Nicholas, could hold back the howl that erupts from his throat as his hips snap and jerk, his back arches, and he pours a flood of salty-sour semen into Marcus's waiting mouth.

Marcus drinks eagerly, lapping sloppily with his tongue and swallowing every drop that he can catch. As Nicholas collapses, boneless yet still shaking, Marcus cleans him off. He laves up each sparkling dribble and pearl, from his thatch of hair to the tip of his emptied cock, before laying it to rest against his thigh with a kiss.

Sudden movement behind him distracts him, and he turns to see Aidan in the doorway between shower and bathroom, his eyes impossibly wide and huge. His erection stands out like a pole, and his skinny hands are stripping it hard.

Marcus shifts onto one hip, reaching out a hand. "Show me," he breathes. "Let me see you come, too."

"So hot," Aidan mutters, jerking at himself. "So fuckin' hot."

"That you are." Marcus keeps his eyes fixed on Aidan, raking him from head to toe with a glance that smolders and sears. "Show me what you're feeling."

"Wanted you," he chokes out. "No time."

"But there's time for this," Marcus pushes. "Come for me. Let me see your face."

Aidan arches his spine and with a yell, spills over his hand, hot seed spurting from his cock and dribbling down between his fingers.

Lightning-fast, Marcus twists and arcs his way out of the bed and onto his knees, lapping up the spunk as it falls. He tastes different from Nicholas — heavier, muskier, like a good liquor.

Aidan slumps against the doorway, letting Marcus suckle his fingers. His grin is weak, but still highly amused. "If I'd only known, I'd have let you share earlier."

Marcus pokes his tongue sharply between two fingers for a precious drop. "This," he says, swallowing hungrily, "is almost as good. You know?"

"Oh, fuck yeah. I know. Hell, what a memory to go to work on." With his clean hand, Aidan combs through Marcus' already thoroughly-mussed hair. "You're a god on your knees, man. And I'm gonna need another shower before I can think of going in."

Marcus glances back at Nicholas. The wickedness, so often hidden in that particular lover's eyes, is twinkling at him. "Care for some company?"

Aidan laughs and pretends to push him away. They're tussling good-naturedly when a silky voice interrupts. "What? Going to be all selfish this morning?"

Marcus looks up, startled. They *have* woken Baz and Ryan. Baz, who's stretched out like a lazy cat, with Ryan suckling the last drops of come from his prick. "We've all had our fun this morning except you. And Ryan —"

"Wants to play," Ryan murmurs, lifting his head in a sleek, animalistic move. "Lie back down, Marcus."

A look at both Aidan and Nicholas, and the interest flashing across their faces, sends Marcus back onto the bed. Ryan crawls off Baz, still stretching and arching in contentment, and straddles Marcus with a knee on either side of his leg. "Aidan," he says, stroking Marcus' bare chest, "Give me a bayberry candle?"

The lit pillar is pressed into his hands. Slowly, slowly, Ryan tilts it until drops of the hot wax splatter across Marcus' flesh, red as blood spatters. Marcus can't help jumping under the pain — ah, hell, it hurts so good — and he sees Ryan smiling.

That tough, well-built body ripples above him as their heavy cocks scud together, slick with pre-come. Hard hands tilt the candle again, spilling wax down his torso.

"I remember," Ryan says as he works, making rough circles and designs with the molten wax, "when we didn't get along, or pretended, anyway. I used to think how much I wanted to torture you."

Callused fingertips stroke his cheek. "Now, I know different." He tilts the candle and spills a few molten drops into Marcus' thatch of public hair. "Now I know I love it, and you love it too."

Baz's pale hand curls around one of Ryan's legs. "Do that to me sometime," he begs, voice husky with want.

Ryan glances at him, sweet and threatening. "When you least expect it."

Baz's face crooks in a wicked grin. "I'll be looking forward to that."

"But you," Ryan whispers, turning his attention back to Marcus, "you're what matters right now. You've sucked, and you've finger-fucked, but you haven't been taken care of yet, have you? You want that, Marcus? Want me to fuck you, or you want me to ride you?" He nudges his cock against Marcus's belly. "Want me to sink down on top on this and ride you like a fucking bronco?"

"Too many Westerns," Marcus growls, his hands finding purchase on Ryan's hips. "Ride me."

A hand — whose, he's not sure — presses a tube of cherry-scented lubricant into Ryan's hands. With a grin, he straightens up, and squeezes a vast dollop onto his fingers. "I was really hoping you'd say that," he rasps. "Want you inside me."

Marcus bucks up; he can't help it. Ryan plants a hand in his chest, pushing him back down. "In a hurry much? First, I get to do this." His hand, dripping with sweet cherry-smelling lube, disappears between his legs. From where he's lying, Marcus can just see two fingers vanish into Ryan's body, pumping and stretching, not taking it easy at all.

"Oh, yeah," Ryan breathes. "Rough. I want it rough from you. Rough and fast and hard. You want to fuck me like that?"

"Ryan," Marcus growls, working his fingers on the taut hips. He'll have bruises.

"Hurt me," Ryan coaxes, pushing in a third finger and working it hard. "Make it hurt so good."

"Don't make me wait much longer." Marcus pushes against him, butting his cock hard against those fingers. "Want to feel you from the inside."

Ryan grins down at him. "You want? You take. You have."

He sinks down over Marcus' cock, smooth and tight as a velvet glove made of fire. Baz darts in and fastens sharp teeth over one of Marcus' nipples, sucking hard, biting just enough to barely break the skin. Eager hands, roving over him. With that and Ryan all around him, surround him, Marcus can't help arcing back, his mouth open in a silent cry. The heat — the tightness — oh, God, he's not going to last —

Ryan rises and falls on Marcus' shaft like an expert. Slippery cherry fingers skim across his chest, nails scratching lightly. "I could ride you all day," he whispers. "You feel so good."

"Going to make me scream?" Marcus struggles for some control but it's fast slipping, slipping, slipping from his grasp.

"I could," Ryan teases. "But I think you're gonna scream anyway. Especially when I do this."

Ryan *squeezes*. Marcus' back clears the bed. His hands clutch impulsively, grabbing those teasing hips again, holding him still. Baz's sharp tongue laps hard against his sore and swollen nipple. "Too soon!"

Drops of sweat sheen Ryan's face as he rocks back and forth, still squeezing. "Not soon enough," he says thickly. "I've listened and watched. It's time, Marcus. I want to feel you dripping out of me. Want to hear you yell."

Marcus struggles for control. "Let it go," Ryan orders, managing to lean over far enough to scratch at the dried red wax. "Just let — it — go —"

He sinks his nails in, and that's it, that's all Marcus can take. He feels the orgasm explode at the base of his spine, blasting through his cock with a hard thrust and a spurt of come so forceful that Ryan grunts, tilts his head back, bites his lip — and comes as well, seed splashing across Marcus' decorated chest.

It burns so good that Marcus feels a second spasm rocketing through him, wet and sticky, flowing deep inside the young man's body.

Warm and cool hands surround them, patting and stroking. Heated and chilled lips and tongue lick, suckling up every spare drop of moisture. Picking at the wax dried to his skin. Falling, ever so slowly backwards against him, Ryan slipping free to lie atop him, until they're tumbled like puppies in a pile.

He reaches out and gathers in whoever, whatever he can, holding it close. Just in range of his blurred vision, he can see the clock tick over to six a.m. Outside, the rain is still falling, and he's swarmed in love and lovers.

Ah, God. This'll have to go down as one of the best weeks ever.

And best of all, it's only Monday. What's the rest of the week going to be like?



## Chapter Seventeen

It starts out very innocently the day that Nicholas accompanies Madison to lunch, his price to pay for losing out on one of her Saturday "date drawings". They're to be meeting an executive, someone she's angled for ages to get a word in edgewise with. Excited, she chatters all the way out to the car Marcus is loaning them – she still can't afford one, and won't hear of taking Nicholas' clunker.

"Geez, a ten-year-old compact? I don't think so. Look, if Marcus is actually letting go of the keys to his car, I'm sure he trusts you with it."

Nicholas jingles the keys uneasily. "The question is, do I trust myself with it?"

"Phooey." She waves that aside. "You're a good driver, Nicholas. You just don't have any faith in yourself." Then she frowns at him over her sunglasses. "Hello? You have four hunks – and I will kill you if you tell them I said that – in your bed every night. I've heard it. God help me, I've seen it! What do you have not to be confident about?"

Muttering to herself, she sits daintily as stilettos will allow in the passenger seat. Nicholas has no choice but to slide behind the wheel. The keys are warm from being in his tight grip.

Uncertainly, he pats the cell phone that Marcus has insisted he bring, and prays the traffic is merciful. If there's so much as a scratch laid on the car's finish, much less on himself or Madison, he knows Marcus will break down and cry. And who would he mourn first – his lover, or the car?

No, no, he shouldn't be silly. He knows Marcus would first embarrass him thoroughly with a check-over from top to toe, then do as much the same to Madison as she might allow. *Then* he'd spend hours mourning over his car.

The thought makes him laugh a little. They all have their little quirks and foibles. He shudders to think what would happen if someone broke one of Ryan's Doctor Who figurines, or scratched one of Baz's prized records. Aidan... Aidan might get upset if someone... well, it's hard to imagine. And himself? Well, they all know better than to go near his library when he's not at home.

The thought of Ryan and Baz hunting for pictures of satyrs and naked alien males among his collection while he's away gives him a shudder. He thrusts the keys into the ignition, floors the gas, and takes off with a startled squeal from Madison and a screech of protest from the engine.

"Make me change my mind, why don't you?"

"Oh, do get bent," he murmurs absently, hunting for a place to merge.

"No thanks. You guys are already twisted as pretzels. See what you made me do?" She turns a tragic face to him, and he has to smother a snort of laughter: apparently she'd been freshening her makeup in the mirror, and the abrupt take-off sent her lipstick skittering across her nose.

He can't quite keep a faint smile off his face as he fishes for a handkerchief and passes it to her. "I apologize, Madison."

"You'd better," she grumbles, dabbing at her face. "If this doesn't come off..."

"It will."

"And you know makeup because?" She pauses and shakes her head sharply. "No, nope, wait - don't want to know."

"You don't care to hear about the weekly Drag Night?"

"Nicholas!" she screeches, covering her ears. "TMI, Nicholas, way TMI!"

"It's a pity. Baz looks quite fetching in that blue sheath dress once he's shaved his legs, and Marcus —"

He gives in, laughing, at her piteous cry. Although it's true. Baz does look a delicious treat in that dress, even if he does complain incessantly when it's his turn to wear it. Marcus they've not been able to coax into anything yet, though he's got the most deft hand of any with applying kohl and powder.

Just a bit of harmless fun.

For five insane, extremely gay men, anyway.

They'll be having fun back at the flat, preparing for their dates, he thinks wistfully. Marcus has drawn Ryan and Baz has drawn Aidan. The latter will likely come home smelling of forty-one flavors of alcohol, a rare treat for Aidan, and call themselves well-satisfied, but he finds himself wondering what Marcus and Ryan will do. There is that canal ride park that's recently been built at great expense to the city... but he wouldn't take Ryan alone, would he? Not when he knows how Nicholas's been longing to go.

He bites his lip. Even if he is the odd man out tonight, he does hate to leave them alone for even just a lunch.

But drawing a blank this one time is fair. After all, he's been extremely lucky lately, having had a turn with Baz, Ryan and Marcus and only just now missing out on his chance with Aidan. Still, that day will come. Perhaps even next week.

Right now, he can cope with the forfeit of lunch with Madison and a potential source of revenue for her charity work. Delicate watercress sandwiches and Waldorf salad on fine plates. Fresh-ground and fresh-brewed coffee in china cups as thin as paper.

A real hardship, that, he dryly decides, thinking of Ryan's beloved Looney-Tunes glasses and Baz's beloved Mel Mac plates ("lasts forever, this stuff does!") that populate their cabinets in the basement.

They've a lovely set of china, but the saucers gather dust and the teacups gather coins, lighters, movie stubs, and all the other detritus of living. He's given up on drinking out of Dolton.

And again, it's fair. Without the clutter, he'd be without the men in his life, and he'd not make that trade for all the elegant willow-ware in the wide world.

The lunch itself goes well, very well, until the polite formalities are done with and it becomes evident that there's being a dreadful mistake made: this executive is a Hollywood type, and he thinks Nicholas is an actor, trying out for a new part on that peculiar "Queer Shock" show. He's not even mentioned his sexual orientation! But apparently he's neat and well-mannered and well-dressed, and the agent's enthusiasm for getting him onto the cast is remarkable.

Madison he dismisses with a "we don't do charity work, darling".

Madison says nothing, only holds her head up high and smiles that utterly dazzling smile that could sell toothpaste, in his opinion. Nicholas manages to fend off the agent's advances by muttering and stumbling about "a boyfriend" at home, but can't keep the odious little fellow from pressing a card on him. "You're an actor," he says confidently. "Trust me."

They say goodbye with smiles and polite handshakes. The agent's so taken that he even promises to call Madison "if any opportunities that would suit you come up, sweetheart".

Then they're back in the car, and Madison's smile has utterly crumbled into ashes. He drives in silence, uncomfortable, knowing she'll want to be dropped off at her apartment instead of the agency. That she'll spend the rest of the night in sweatpants, eating ice cream and staring into space. Poor girl; she tries so hard.

First, however, she has to work through the anger. "Planning on calling him, Nicholas?" she asks with false cheer. "Gonna be famous?"

"I've no plans on it, Madison," he says as gently as he can.

"Why not? I mean, all you do is sit there and it jumps into your lap. Not mine. I have to go chasing it all over this damned city in these *damned* shoes!" She kicks them off. "It isn't fair, Nicholas. He loved you and you weren't even trying. You know? That's your

problem. Baz-Marcus-Ryan-Aidan loved you and you weren't trying to get their attention, but you did. Why the hell do people love you, when they can't stand me?"

And that's not true, of course, that's so far from true as to be horrifying – people adore Madison and they have certainly not loved Nicholas throughout the most of his life – but her lip is trembling, now, and he's torn between putting a hand out to comfort her, and keeping his eyes on the road like a sane driver in city traffic.

In the end, he touches her once – briefly – on the shoulder, a soft squeeze of comfort, then leaves her be to pretend she's not crying during the rest of the drive. He's angry on her behalf, anyway, and not speaking means he, too, can brood over the flat failure of their luncheon.

When they pull up to her apartment building, Madison snuffles once, then looks at him. "You should call him," she says softly. "The agent. You'd be good on that show."

"I'd be dreadful."

"That'd be the fun part." Her smile is wavering. "Nicholas... I mean it. You have so much good stuff being handed to you right now. You should take it. Grab onto it with both hands and don't let go. Everything. Okay?"

"Of course. Madison –"

"And don't 'of course, Madison' me!" she snaps. "Take me seriously. If you get a chance at something, go for it. If you have something good, do everything you can to keep it. For me."

Now the tears are streaking down her cheeks. He longs to reach out and hug her, as if she were Ryan or Aidan or Baz, but – she's not, and he's still a little shy of her. "I promise," he says quietly. "For you."

She snuffles. "Really promise?"

"I do."

There's a long pause, in which she takes a shaky breath, then finally nods. "Okay." Picking up her shoes after one dejected, disbelieving glance, she opens the car door and gets out.

Pauses, and peers back in. "I meant everything, you know. Even the whole package deal you've got going in the basement."

And surprisingly, that makes him laugh. "Madison, are you playing the Yenta now? Or do you fancy planning our five-way honeymoon?"

"Dork." But it's said without malice. "Bye, Nicholas."

"Goodbye, Madison." He watches her go – the slump of her shoulders, the limping on feet sore from standing on needle-sharp spikes. Perhaps, he hopes, she won't be alone tonight. Perhaps she'll call Enrico, or the social worker from the East Side that she's gotten acquainted with in her efforts to help the children there. He should have suggested it.

But ah, she's a big girl, she can take care of herself. Even if she does come up with some insane ideas. Making things "forever" with their fivesome? That's absurd. They're in it for the long haul, no doubt, but they'd never... they wouldn't consider... would they?

Surely not.

Perhaps?

What if...?

No, no, it can't happen.

But the thought's in his mind, now, and it's tempting him beyond words. He has always had this sense – this need – to belong. And even though, every night in the great big bed, at least one of his partners finds a way to show him how he's wanted, he longs for something more permanent. A band upon his finger, a mark upon his skin. A tangible bit of evidence he can show off that says: "Look, see? I belong. I'm claimed. I'm wanted."

Could it happen?

He's not certain, and that keeps him silent through a long afternoon of wandering the stores of the main streets to occupy himself. He even pauses long enough to choose and purchase in one shop, caught by the trays of merchandise, and spends far more than he can afford on items he's almost certain he'll have to return.

After that, as he meanders, he's just killing time and he knows it. He doesn't... doesn't want to go home. For the first time since that fateful shower, he's not ready to face his partners. What he's thinking must be transparent on his face as ink on a page.

And he's afraid: of Baz's laughter, Ryan's disbelief, Marcus' awkward silence that means "no, but I'm too embarrassed to say it", of Aidan's strange looks at him for thinking of such a thing.

Why should they agree? After all, they seem perfectly happy to continue on as they have been. And please, understand him, every night and day is bliss.

He just wonders. And finds that he's starting to dream. And wish. And want.

\* \* \*

He doesn't mean to confess his thoughts for a long, long time, if ever. But his lovers come home early from their dates, professing to be tired and just wanting the night in, to spend the evening snuggled up on the vast couch together eating popcorn and flipping channels.

They tease him a little for cringing when "Queer Shock" comes on, but settle when he snatches the remote and turns the TV to football. That always settles them. And arouses them. Both all to the better, in his opinion.

It's relaxing, soothing away his doubts and fears. And so it is that that night, snuggled up in the bed big enough for the five of them, with his head on Marcus's chest and Ryan's fingers carding lazily through his hair, the thing slips from him easy as crystal water bubbling from a brook:

"Should we make our union official, then?"

He feels, rather than sees, the utter stillness that descends upon the lot of them. Hears a fourfold intake of breath that isn't let out, needed or not. The hands petting him slow to a stop. Inside, he cringes, sure that he has ruined it all.

"You mean..." Marcus begins slowly.

"Whoa," from Ryan. "Nicholas... whoa."

And from Baz: "You're not serious?"

Aidan, however, wraps his fingers around Nicholas's and squeezes.

Baz exhales, long and slow and deep. "Well, fuck me."

"Every night," Ryan jibes, though one can tell his heart isn't in it. "Nicholas, you're not kidding, are you?"

From somewhere deep inside – or perhaps from the warmth of Aidan's fingers – Nicholas finds the courage to say: "No, I'm quite serious."

The stiffness in Marcus's chest eases. Then it shakes, in a slight laugh that made Nicholas cringe. "Really serious?"

And though fearful, he cannot help but stroke the man's bare abdomen. "Very much so."

There comes the sound of Baz shifting onto his side. "But you can't be... not us," he says, sounding bewildered. "You can't want all of us. Not like that."

"But I do." Nicholas raises himself onto an elbow, still making small circles on Marcus's lower belly. Aidan's hand moves to the small of his back, warm and comforting. "All of you, exactly like that."

There's a rustle as Baz shakes his head on his pillow. "I don't get it. Why would you? I mean, I love what we've got here, I do. Don't get me wrong."

"I – we – love you," Ryan says softly, shifting himself so he can reach Nicholas to put a hand on his thigh. "I don't play naked Twister with just anyone, you know. Look, you might be thinking this sounds like something bad to me. It doesn't. I'm – I guess we're – surprised, that's all."

"Don't say anything else about it just now," Aidan surprises them by murmuring into the darkness. "Just take a bit. Just think about it."

His voice washes over them as they obey; a lilting lullaby that soothes them into rocking thought gentle as a cradle, to and fro, fro and to. "We're together always and ever anyway, yeah?" Aidan goes on after a bit. "Nobody here's thought, or thinking of leaving, not ever. Nicholas's just saying that he'd like to make that official."

"Maybe we don't need that, maybe we're satisfied to go on as we are. But it's just that then we'd have something to point to. Someone asks us a smarmy question, we hold up the hand with a ring on it and say, 'so there'."

Marcus stirs under Aidan's hand. "You'd like this too, wouldn't you?"

Aidan is quiet at first, but then they feel him nod. "I would."

Baz's voice is strange. "Nicholas?"

Nicholas feels a tremor run through him. Is this the slam he's been waiting for? "Yes?"

"You'd really like being tied forever to all of us rough-and-tumblers?" Nicholas feels the brush of fingers down his thigh. "Mated to us?"

He can't restrain the familiar – delicious – tremble at that touch. "Oh, yes," he whispers. "God, yes."

There's a subtle understanding, and the men of the bed shift apart so that Baz can have full, free access to Nicholas. The mattress dips slightly, the air shifts above him, and then two slender knees are sliding into place beside his hips. Baz's hands hover lightly on his shoulders. Not gripping, not kneading, as they're wont to do in this position. Just resting, light as butterflies.

"You're serious?" Baz's voice is hoarse, rough. "Not joking at all?"

Nicholas can feel Baz's erection stabbing at his own. God, how he wants to push up with his hips, feel that delicious friction – but more, no, more he wants an answer and he manages to shake his head.

"Not joking," he murmurs. "I do want you – all of you – forever."

Baz makes a noise that isn't really words, and drives down between the vee of Nicholas's thighs. Hard. "Serious?" he repeats, fiercely. "This, for always?"

"For always and ever," Nicholas gasps, struggling to raise his arms, to pull them around Baz's back and bring him deeper, closer. Baz's deceptively gentle hands hold him back.

"You promise that?" Baz rasps, not allowing Nicholas to grind up against him; from the trembling in his muscles, he's striving just as hard not to push down. "Never going to leave us?"

"Never!" Nicholas swears, and he's not just motivated by wanting to get off. He means every bit of it. He wants Baz, never-ending Baz – and Marcus, and Aidan, and Ryan, too, all of them. Perhaps they can sense that in him, because one by one - unable to resist – they're touching him now, tentatively and firmly. Small hands, strong ones, callused fingers, broad palms. Rubbing down his thighs, tickling at his hips, stroking him from ankle to foot.

"I want you forever," he says through lips so dry he thinks the words will crack them, just as his heart is hovering on the edge of breaking. Do they think to distract him with the sex that his body's begging for, or will his deepest-held wish once more come true? "Say yes. Say you'll belong to me, and I to you."

"I already do." Baz bends until his lips are brushing Nicholas'. "But you want to make this official?"

Their mouths touch, sliding just enough that Baz can delve into Nicholas', eager and open for him. Their tongues glide against each other briefly, and then Baz is sweeping his in broad, wet stripes across Nicholas' soft palate, the tender insides of his cheeks, counting his teeth.

He draws back just far enough to whisper: "All right, then. I'm in."

Again he thrusts down, his slick cock pushing roughly between Nicholas' cheeks. "You hear me?" he whispers, shoving again – not penetrating, just thrusting – "I'm for it. I'll marry you, as it were. And these bastards had better do the same, too, or they'll have me to deal with. Get it?"

Now those hands are pushing at his shoulders, one after another, catlike. "Let's hear you," Baz orders. "Truth, and I'll have it now. Do you agree? Yes or no, say it now."



A small mouth nips at the flesh of Nicholas's knee. "Yeah," Aidan whispers. "You knew it already. I'm there."

Ryan's hand covers his shoulder and slides down as far as it can on his arm, rubbing gently. "Me too. Crazy as it sounds, I'm in. I want this."

But Marcus is lying still, so still, that after a moment Nicholas even dares push Baz off and roll to his side. "Marcus?" he whispers, reaching up to touch that beloved face. "Do you...?"

His fingers come away ever so faintly damp. Beneath his fingers, Marcus nods. There's one second of relief, utter relief, before he's being seized and hauled over on top of the broad body, mimicking Baz's previous position, and kissed till he can barely breathe. All the while, Marcus's laughing, muttering endearments between a brutal clashing of mouth upon mouth.

"There'll be no getting sense out of him for hours, now," Baz grumbles, but good-naturedly, running his hand down Nicholas's back. "Get off him and back over here. Had something I wanted to finish there."

"In a moment." Nicholas snuggles down on Marcus's chest. "Right now... just *be*, Baz."

"Rather just be fucked." But again, there's no malice, only need and urgency. Ryan distracts him with one hand gliding down his chest to grip his cock, and with a gasp he bucks back into the man's embrace. "On the other hand, one good thing about tea for more than two..."

"Or three, or four." Ryan's hand slowly works Baz's dick, shining and slick in the moonlight with ribbons of pre-come. "And, hey, Nicholas? I want a ring."

It surprises them all when Nicholas bursts out laughing. Laughing hard, so deeply that Marcus raises up in surprise at the outburst. Still giggling, he slides sideways and dips his hand under his side of the bed.

They can barely see the black velvet bag as he pulls it out of hiding, but it bears the embossing of a local jeweler's they all recognize as it gleams at them.

"You didn't," Baz says slowly. "You sure as hell didn't. Did you?"

"I did." Chuckling yet, Nicholas tips the bag onto his palm. "One for each. Marcus first..." The squared-off band slides on with ease, and Marcus holds his hand to the moonlight, admiring it.

"Nicholas... you didn't have to..."

"I did. Isn't that customary?"

"Yeah, customary. Now gimme," Baz demands, then moans and shudders as Ryan obliges. "Quick, before this bastard has me promising you my never-to-be-first-born in exchange."

He passes them out, each one just alike - a simple silver band. All the men stare at their rings, and Nicholas drinks his fill of the sight. He can't believe... dare he? Yes, damn it, he dares. He's asked, and they've answered; he's wanted, and they've given. They are his now, and he is theirs, promised to forever.

Holding his hand up above the bed-full of men, he deliberately slides his own ring onto his finger. "Forever," he says steadily.

As if it's a toast, they respond: "Forever."

Baz whines, "Can either Ryan or you get on with it now?"

Laughing, Nicholas flies back to Baz's side, Ryan behind and he before, sandwiching him and pushing hard against his needy erection. He hears Baz gasp as he's penetrated, and groans, wishing for – but oh, there it is, slick fingers between his own cheeks and the slow, steady push of Aidan entering him.

"Love you," he hears whispered into his ear before the man begins to thrust. When he jumps, Nicholas knows that he in turn is being taken by Marcus, joining them all.

Together in the great big bed, they make love – not sex, but love. Rings shining on their fingers.

Promises to keep.

THE END