



Waltzes and Diamonds

by Kimberly Burke
and J. Falcon

a Daniel & Aubin story

Waltzes and Diamonds

Screwdriver

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Chapter 1

Aube was woken by Daniel prodding him with the antenna of the cordless phone. By the expression on his lover's face, he knew instantly that it was Helen on hold. He'd only been home one night and between bouts of lovemaking, Aubin had promised Daniel he'd be home for at least a couple of weeks.

There was still so much to be done for the wedding and Daniel had suggested more than once that maybe they should think about putting it off.

"Aubin? Aubin? Dan?" he could just hear Helen's voice through the tinny speaker of the phone.

Daniel waited until Aube had the phone in his hand before giving him a kiss and getting out of bed.

Aube smiled at his lover and watched him head to the bathroom. Daniel turned back and mouthed to him "Tell her no," making him snicker as he put the receiver to his ear. "Salut, Hélène. It must be important you call me si early, you."

"Yes, darling. I have fabulous news, as always. I've gotten you a spot in that New Orleans Contemporary Art Center display show you've been aching for. You interested?"

He sat up at that, leaning against the pillows still, but fully awake. "Et oui? They are intéressé in me? C'est fantastique!! Oui, I am intéressé in doing ce show, me."

"I got you a featured artist spot based on the portfolio we gave them. You'll need to pick out pieces and of course do the usual cocktails and schmooze since you're local."

"Oh! C'est parfaite, Hélène. Merci. Thank you. Et they will also want I should come down et organize the space, I expecte." He was starting to bounce in place; he could hear Daniel's shower running and was trying very hard not to run into the bathroom to tell his lover the news right away.

"Yeah, they have a packet that I'm going to FedEx to you with all the details and the contract. You need to read it over, sign and send it back to me by the end of the week. *This* week, Aubin."

He rolled his eyes. Once or twice where he just didn't get around to mailing her the contract, and when he did it had coffee ring stains on it, and she labeled him a flake for life. "Oui, oui. I know, me. I will sign et send them avec Daniel, he pass by le post on his way to work, as soon as I get them."

"I'll send him an email so he can remind you then." Helen sounded really pleased. "Okay, I'm going to ring off unless there were other things?"

"Non, I think not, me. Daniel, he will be please, him. He want make some plan for notre wedding et maintenant we can." He grinned at her, even though she couldn't see it; she often teased him that he should have hired a wedding planner.

"I'm telling you, I know this absolutely *fabulous* girl--"

"Au revoir, Hélène," he said to her before hanging up. Every time he even heard about the wedding planner he just felt like the testosterone was somehow being sucked from his body and he was becoming Helen's best girlfriend. And if that didn't stop, the wedding he planned with Daniel might just involve a lot of flannel and plaid to counteract it.

The water shut off in the bathroom and he could hear Daniel moving around in there, drying off. Daniel's voice could be heard clearly. "So? When do you go again?"

He was just about to tell Daniel the good news, flat out, when a case of the naughties caught up with him and he answered, "Oh Daniel, you will not like this, you," instead. His voice didn't even tremor that much with his suppressed glee.

"Chicago again?"

"Non... non, it not Chicago for sure. Mais I think I peut-être have to look at the space for exhibition this afternoon, me."

"This afternoon?" Daniel appeared in the doorway to the bedroom, towel around his waist. "I need to get you to the airport. Go get dressed!"

He ran his eyes appreciatively up and down his lover's body, trying to will the towel to fall off. "Non, it okay, Daniel. You should finish getting ready for your work." He made no move to leave the comfort of their bed.

Daniel shifted his weight, but the stubborn towel didn't even move a tiny bit. "Clearly, I missed a memo. What's going on?"

Aube tried brokering a deal with God that if He made Daniel's towel drop even a little, he'd not think any more impure thoughts. Then he hoped God wouldn't notice the lie. But He must have, Daniel was walking to the bed, looking perplexed and still in the towel. "Rien de tout. I just not need for you to take me to l'aérogarde, me."

"Helen arranged for a taxi?" Daniel stood over him, hands on hips.

He gave up on hoping for a miracle and just pulled the towel free. He ran his hands over Daniel's thighs. "Non. Mon prochain show is here, en New Orléans."

"Oh really?" Daniel leaned forward, edging toward Aube and a kiss. "Decided to fuck with me a bit, eh?"

He snickered and nodded before tilting his head to invite that kiss. "Oui. I could not help make you squirm un peu."

Daniel's lips closed over his, a gentle kiss shared. "You're an evil man sometimes, lover."

"I like keep thing interesting pour toi." He grinned and leaned up to kiss Daniel again. "You are positif you have to go to your office today?"

"It was to catch up on paperwork. You give me a good enough reason...."

Aube stroked Daniel's firming erection gently and settled further into the pillows. "I was thinking, me, we find way to occupy ourself et après we go to see the space for the exhibition together."

Daniel moved back onto the bed, straddling Aube's body. "Sure."

Aube kept up the light touch and gentle stroke, watching as his lover's skin started to flush. "Et this also mean, I will be home for few week, me."

"W-wedding planning." Daniel propped his hands up on the headboard, bracketing Aube between his arms.

"Oui. It should be notre goal to have at least hall book et maybe un caterer." Daniel was only half-able to listen anymore, Aube knew this. He firmed his grip on Daniel's cock and concentrated on the sensitive head before slipping his other hand in behind his lover's balls to rub the soft skin.

Daniel closed his eyes, tilted his head back and sighed. "Feels so good."

Aube loved watching Daniel like this: skin pink, slight sheen to it, how he sounded as he panted and tried not to moan too loudly. Afterwards, Aube would taste him. Later, Daniel would mock grouse about needing another shower. Aube could sum up exactly how he felt about this man with, "Je t'adore Daniel. You are si beau."

"You make it so, lover." Daniel caressed Aube's face before bracing himself again.

He smiled up at his lover before increasing the pressure of his fingers, knowing it would melt the last bits of Daniel's brain. "Alors, mon amour, let go."

Daniel shuddered, his mouth falling open. Harsh panting filled the air as he shuddered and came, pulsing over Aube's fist.

Aube brought his hand to his mouth and licked off his lover's seed, humming happily to himself as much as Daniel. When his lover slumped down onto the bed, Aube cuddled against him, kissing him gently and petting his bare skin. "Et maintenant, good morning, mon amour."

"Morning," Daniel whispered and nuzzled against him.

He nuzzled back and hummed again, happily. There was no reason to rush to the gallery, after all, so they had time for staying in bed and being with each other. "Did I tell you que j'aime how you look en towel? You look très sexie"

"Do I really?" Daniel's smile was slow and lazy.

"Oui. I am si happy to be home for while. I miss you si terriblement when I have go away." He cuddled in close and held Daniel, just breathing in the scent of his lover.

"I still wish you'd let me come with you when you went on your trips. I don't like not being together either."

Aubin kissed Daniel's fingers. "Le prochain time I have leave, mon amour, I would be very happy if you come avec moi."

"I should learn something about all this gallery stuff. With it being your life's work and everything."

He grinned at his lover and rolled Daniel so he could rest on his lover's shoulder. "Et you want come et look menace at young men who want show their appreciation for the work of the artiste." He couldn't help the tease.

"That's me. Big scary boyfriend guy." Daniel bared his teeth and growled.

Aube snickered and poked big scary boyfriend guy softly in the tummy. "You keep cela up, et we not leave the bed all day, us."

Daniel's growl faded into a rumble and a smile. "That wouldn't be so bad either."

"Non... It would be very good, je pense." He smiled back and started to draw invisible pictures on Daniel's chest with his finger. "Daniel, tu te souviens when I te peintre for Mardi Gras?"

"Yes..." Daniel sounded pleased and sated. Definitely open to whatever Aube had in mind.

"I have some idées for des photographes I want try, mon amour. Notre maison is si beautiful et, you have un body parfaite for photographe."

"Sure. All I ask is if it's in view of the street I get to cover up. Getting arrested for public indecency when I work for the police would suck."

"Nothing will be en vue from street, mon cher. Mais premièrement, I would like paint you encore. Make you comme un mythe." He kissed Daniel's chest, a few ideas already forming in his head. Daniel was such a central theme to his art that he was often being teased about it.

"Sure. Anything for you, you know that."

"Oui." Aube grinned and kissed Daniel, nipping his lower lip. "You are un ange."

"Just don't put me in fluffy white wings." Daniel gave Aube a long, sweet kiss.

He sighed into the kiss and climbed further on top of his lover, burying them under still warm blankets.

"Non... I was think something more èsothéorique. More sexuelle."

"You're the artist, I am just the subject." Daniel shrugged.

"I show to Hélène 'Ange en repose' et she want it for St Louis, mon amour. You can be ange là. Ici? New Orleans, it have more love for esprit." He was skin to skin again with his lover and it felt good, like he never wanted to leave the bed again.

"I have all the love in the world for your spirit, Aubin Marchand."

"I know, cela, me. Et j'adore ton esprit. Which probablement why I make art of you all times." Aube giggled and kissed Daniel deeply, giving his lover a full body hug.

Daniel squeezed him tightly. "I'm adorable. That's why."

"Et si modeste." He deadpanned, but grinned and nuzzled Daniel's cheek. "Et alors. We should get motivate et I need te peindre."

"Sure." Daniel squeezed him one more time, then edged out from under Aube and got out of bed.

He was sorry for a moment about the loss of contact, but if painting Daniel this time was anywhere close to what it was like last time, soon enough it would be very worth it. He got out of bed and followed his fiancé into the hall. "I need find mes peintures for body, me. Peut-être you could faire du café? Are you hungry, you?"

Daniel snagged a pair of sweatpants off the dresser and put them on. "Hungry, yeah. I'll go find something."

"Bon, bon. Seeing as it will take while à te peindre." He smiled and gave Daniel another kiss before heading, still nude, to the spare room, where he kept most of his art supplies.

"You want cream in your coffee?" Daniel's voice drifted up the stairs from their kitchen.

"Oui, merci, mon amour." He called back down, pretty sure Daniel heard him. He rummaged through various types of paints and dyes and plaster mixes, which he knew he'd have to clean up if company was coming, until he found the case of professional body paints Miriam had bought him for his birthday.

Aube tied a sarong around his waist before heading downstairs, looking at his treasured body paints.

Daniel was sitting on the back steps, reading his newspaper, cup of coffee steaming at his side. He looked up at the sound of Aube's footsteps. "Hello again."

Aube sat next to him and gave him a quick kiss. "Hello. Le café is mine or your, mon cher?" He pointed at the cup between them.

"Yours." Daniel reached down between his legs. "This one is mine."

"Be careful, Daniel. You do not want burn there. For sure on that." He picked up his coffee and took a sip, reading the safety instructions on the paints.

"You're so sweet," Daniel whispered into Aube's ear. "I'll be careful."

Aube hummed happily and leaned against Daniel, resting against his shoulder. "I must keep mon fiancé safe, me."

"Yes, protect my heart." Daniel hugged him with one arm. "You found paints?"

"Oui, Miriam have bought me un set très bon..."

Daniel shrugged and Aube could see him trying not to grin. "So are we doing the gallery today at all or are we going to be finger-painting the whole day?"

"We go later, mon cher. Et you know, b'en sur, you, it not finger paint." He raised one of his eyebrows at Daniel, knowing Daniel was trying to bait him. Tease.

"But you always end up using your fingers," Daniel said innocently.

He smiled slowly. "That is because avec mon muse, I like un art qui est very tactile, it. I find mon muse has best reaction."

They kissed, then; coffee and sunshine flavored kisses.

"So should I sit here and let you paint me, eh?"

He grinned devilishly and nipped Daniel's earlobe. "Non. You should come inside et get all nu encore." Aube got up, picked up his mug and started to wander back into the house. "You will see, Daniel, you will look beautiful, you."

"I thought you said I was beautiful already?" Daniel raised his voice enough to be heard. There was a rustle of the paper being folded and set aside, then Daniel's footsteps across the floorboards, following behind him.

He turned and hugged Daniel close to him, allowing his lover to walk him backward to their living room. "Mon Daniel, you are most beautiful thing in whole world. Mais, I make you into l'art vivant."

Daniel nuzzled into Aube's neck, purring at him. "You should get the camera, too, or you'll forget."

He squirmed and hugged his lover tight for a moment before backing away from Daniel. "Oui, et put it on setting for blanc et noir. S'il-te plaît, if you could get le old stain sheet et put it on floor, then I not get les peintures all over when I make ton costume."

Daniel nodded and went digging in the tiny hall closet for the sheet.

Aube whistled to himself as he went to get their camera. He flipped through some of the photos still on it and smiled; mostly him, Daniel and their friends being goofy and various parties around the Quarter. He left them on and switched the camera to black and white mode.

When he got into the living room again, his lover was lying face up, nude, on the sheet. He had a sudden impulse to forget the photography session, but tamped down his own arousal and tried to look at Daniel simply as a beautiful piece of art.

He knelt next to Daniel on the floor and set the camera aside, bringing over his paint kit. "Mon beautiful muse, he look very relax."

"If I had a pillow I'd go back to sleep. Knowing you're here with me...." Daniel smiled and closed his eyes. "Try not to get distracted."

He smiled and grabbed a sofa cushion for under Daniel's head and gave him a kiss. "Alors, have un nap, mon amour. I will be here when you wake encore."

Aube opened the tubes of pigment and mixed them with the cream. Colors he wanted. Not that they'd show up in the photos, but he'd remember them. Autumn colors. With his fingers he did the larger blocks of color, painting Daniel's body, texturing the paint with a small, fine brush, making areas resembling fur, areas of leaves, a bronzed face with stylized rams horns, slowly transforming the familiar into other-worldly.

His lover became a pagan god or the golden fleece. He wasn't sure yet. Perhaps it didn't matter. Daniel would be whatever the viewer wanted to see.

Daniel yawned and stretched, twisting on the pillow and curling up closer to Aube, one arm draped across Aube's lap.

He smiled and stopped himself from admonishing his lover for smudging the paint. He sometimes got single minded when he was creating, but not enough to be even teasing when it was clear that more than anything, Daniel was just enjoying having him around.

Home. Being himself. Vaguely kooky and pushy. He worked more detail onto Daniel's arm, hinted at armor. He kissed his lover's fingertips when it was done and grinned. "Only un peu longer."

"Sure." Daniel blinked up at him. "Should I roll over or anything?"

"After it dry, un peu. Would you like see what I have finish so far?"

"If you're happy with it, absolutely."

He practically popped up he was so excited to show Daniel what he'd done. He brought the long mirror from the back of the front door and angled it at Daniel so the effect could be seen. The painted patches made it look as if Daniel'd been splashed to reveal the wilder parts under his skin.

"Wow, that's really cool. Very different from last time."

"Oui. This time it plus wild et sexie, oui?" Aube couldn't help but get a trill of excitement out of seeing Daniel like this. Between fantasy and reality.

"It is. Is there more to do or are you done?"

"Un peu on ta back, mon cher, then I am done et we make photographes."

"Okay. Am I allowed to get up or will it crack?"

"You can get up, Daniel. These very good peinture, them. They make with crème base. They ones use in filme, them." He bounced some more on the balls of his feet before putting down the mirror and tightening his sarong.

"It's great work, Aube. Pity no one is going to see it but us." Daniel carefully got to his feet and stretched, making his back crack.

"Alors, I will make un photographe ou two en couleur so we can send to les personnes who want see en couleur. Les blanc et noirs, they go in show, them." Aube gave Daniel a quick kiss before kneeling behind him.

Daniel twisted carefully to look at Aube. "Warn me when you get close to the knees. Way too ticklish."

He leaned in and kissed his lover's right buttock before continuing with the painting. "I do not think, me, I will be paint les knee anyway, mon amour."

"Excellent." Daniel turned back around and went silent, his body relaxing into an 'at ease' pose that Aube had seen him hold for many minutes.

Aube smiled and went back to painting, finishing off patterns where they would have splashed back and rounding out the pattern. Finally painting a set of moth wings on Daniel's back, he then set down his palette and took up a felt pen and scripted "Ange" onto his lover's lower back above Daniel's behind. The theme of this next show was becoming obvious to him now. He sat back and looked up at his Daniel. Ange.

Daniel looked over his shoulder at Aube and smiled, just one corner of his mouth lifted and a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "Love you."

Aube smiled back, still feeling dizzy and enraptured from looking at Daniel like this. "Je t'adore aussi." He reached over and got the camera, setting up and taking the photo of Daniel backlit, the hint of the paints.

"What should I do?"

"Euhm. Peut-être it best if we go upstairs before continue. I will need better lumiere, me. Et you not want be arrest for exposure." He laughed and got up from the floor. "Et après, I want you be yourself. Relaxe et we make beautiful art." He was used to photographing Daniel nude now; the first time they'd descended into giggles and played around, but now Daniel was a natural in front of the lens. If Aube had some way of getting Daniel outside of himself.

"We're inside the house. They can't say a thing, but I won't argue with you about the light."

They went upstairs to their bedroom, which got the most light in the house, really, and had enough interesting furniture in it to make something work. Aube sat down on one of their antique chairs and waited for his lover to fall into character.

Daniel paused in the doorway, looking at him hesitantly. "Is this my new home?" he asked, his voice carrying a different quality than usual.

Aube picked up the camera and zoomed in on Daniel's face, which was innocent and frightened. Daniel's eyes stood out so beautifully against the paint. "Oui, this is ta maison now. I made it pour toi et moi." He kept his voice even and soothing, like Daniel could take flight any moment.

The woodland creature took a single step into the room and paused again, cocking its head to look around.

He took another picture of the light and shadow highlighting Daniel's well-muscled torso. "Do not be afraid, mon amour. Nothing will hurt you, ici."

Another step into the room, the creature touching the fluttering drapes around the bed. He was wrapped in them momentarily as the breeze picked up.

Aube got up and took many pictures of his creation now, some full body with the white gauzy fabric billowing behind him, some tight close-ups of only single body parts. "Te es si joli. Si beautiful."

Daniel sat on the bed, leaning back on his hands and spreading his legs. "Like what you see?"

Aube nodded mutely, his mouth had gone dry. It was his Daniel and it wasn't. Aube took a picture of Daniel from the waist up, the intent look staring at him on the small screen.

Daniel sat up, drawing up one leg and wrapping his arms around it. He rested his cheek against his upraised knee and looked out the window.

The light was just right, Aube took photos of Daniel from all angles, getting the detail of the wings on his back. "What are you thinking on, mon ange?"

"Trying to remember what it is like to fly." The fingers of one hand reached out towards the camera, fluttering slightly.

He took the picture and sighed, his heart going out to the angel. "It make you very sad you no longer can fly. Oui?"

"Yes." Daniel looked back to the window then down at the comforter he was sitting on. "But I forget more each day, soon it will not be more than a dream."

"That is very sad, mon ange. Mais why you cannot fly maintenant?" He took a few more photos, these ones in color, and the full effect of the earth-bound Angel came back.

Daniel smiled at him, and it was Daniel this time. "Because I chose to be with you instead."

"Je t'adore." Aube put down the camera and cupped Daniel's jaw, kissing him deeply.

"Love you, too."

Chapter 2

Daniel threaded his fingers into Aube's hair, holding him close, their foreheads pressed together. "You got what you needed today?"

"Oui. You want see it? Ou peut-être later?" Aube kissed Daniel again, nibbling at his lips.

"Later. I thought maybe I would put on some shorts and we could go to the gallery with me like this."

Aube grinned and nuzzled his lover. "Oui. You are un grand spectacle, maintenant. I think people would love cela."

"I want to show off how talented you are to everyone." Daniel nuzzled him back, carefully. "Maybe wear one of my work shirts unbuttoned, too."

Aubin felt his eyes widen in panic. "Non! non! Alors, if you do cela, they not see tes beautiful wing."

Daniel twisted around, trying to catch sight of them. "Right. Sorry."

He moved away, then waved Daniel over to the full length mirror on their armoire. "Go, take un regard. They suit you."

"Just like you do." Daniel finally got a glimpse of them. "I think I'm going to need to see the pictures to get the full effect."

Aube couldn't help himself and picked up the camera to take one more shot, of Daniel twisting in front of the mirror to get a look at his own wings.

This one would definitely be in the show. "Oui. I have many, me. They are all si belles."

Daniel grinned at him and winked at the camera. "And you are unstoppable. You should bring the camera with you."

"I should leave it here, me, or we never get there." He looked down at himself, paint smudged and in his sarong. "Et I should get clean, me, et put on clothe."

"Go get cleaned up and I'll stand around and pose for no one in particular." Daniel went digging through his laundry. "I have some cut-offs that aren't too disreputable."

Aube scampered off to the bathroom to take his shower, making sure to get rid of all the smudges on his skin. When he came back to the bedroom, Daniel was in an old pair of cut-offs that made Aube want to just forget the gallery and drag his lover to bed.

Fortunately Daniel knew that and had laid out clothes for Aube to wear, and was edging out the bedroom door. "Don't you want to show me off?"

"Eh oui, b'en sur. But when we get home, us. We fait l'amour encore for hour et hour." He ran his eyes appreciatively over Daniel's form again before going over to the bed to put his own clothing on. Daniel had set out his low rise jeans, which he'd had to tell Daniel were boy's jeans, and his Happy Bunny tee-shirt that read "Less About You... More About Me".

"It seemed appropriate," Daniel spoke from the doorway after Aube turned around. "And I love how that stuff fits you."

"Even si deep inside you, you think que ces jean are girl jean?" He winked and struck a dramatic pose.

Daniel's eyes had that wicked twinkle in them again. "I'm an angel fallen to earth -- you can wear girly jeans if you want."

Aubin feigned annoyance with him and started to chase him out of the room and down the stairs. "Think you are funny, oui?"

"I? Am hysterical." Daniel grabbed up his keys and wallet as he bounced down the stairs. "And I look damn good dressed in your art, far better than Michel. That makes up for a lot."

Aube laughed, caught up with his lover and tried to put him in a headlock. "Oui. You look very good, you, mais it always make you get cheek."

"Which is why we don't do it often. Want to keep me humble." Daniel kissed him and escaped. "Let's go, goober."

"Oui, want make sure you do not leave me for younger boy." Aubin grabbed hold of his lover's hand and followed him out of the house and into the driveway. The gallery was in the Central Business District, and while it would be fun to walk Daniel around the Quarter and show him off, it was too far to go on foot out there. "I ask un de mes colleague what un goober is, me. Et he say un peanut."

"Chocolate covered peanut, but I mean it as an affectionate nickname like goofball."

"Oui, je sais." He grinned and gave Daniel a quick kiss before going to his side of the car. "It like 'mon petit croûte'."

Daniel nodded and then paused as he went to get in the car. "This isn't going to smear on my seats is it?"

"Euhmmm... oui. Un moment." Aubin went into the shed they used as a garage and came back with a drop cloth. "Alors, this should work, oui?"

"Yeah, I guess. I just don't want to mess up your work." Daniel gave Aube a long look. "Maybe you should drive."

His heart nearly skipped a beat and he had to suppress his dance of joy. He hardly ever drove anymore. Daniel always said that his driving was an advertisement for passenger-side Valium dispensers, but then, Daniel had driven in Montreal for several years and knew Aube came by it honestly. "Eh oui? For real? B'en sur I will drive, me."

"Yeah, you drive." Daniel tossed the keys over the hood. "I'll just close my eyes and pray."

Aube caught the keys and did a victory dance. He put the drop cloth nicely over the passenger's seat before going to the driver's side and getting in, adjusting the seat and all the mirrors to suit him. "Alors... which one is brake, encore?"

"Aubin!"

He giggled as he turned the key in the ignition and the engine of the mustang roared to life. Much better than the little cars he'd been driving his whole career. He smiled over at Daniel before he put it in reverse. "Tu sais. In case de emergency."

Daniel reached over and grabbed Aube's cell phone and cigarettes, tucking them in the glove box. "Just in case of emergency."

Aube shook his head and sighed. Daniel was obviously deluded as to how bad a driver he really was. In fact, he always considered himself quite good and his friends in Montreal never complained. He backed the car out of the driveway roughly at the velocity of a fired cannonball, then put it into drive and took off for the gallery.

Daniel started muttering under his breath and kept his eyes closed. Even when someone yelled all he did was hold on.

Aube sighed and shook his head. "Daniel. You over-react, you. I have not kill you yet, oui?" He grinned, shot around a corner, and merged quickly into downtown-bound traffic, cutting toward the center lane.

The Contemporary Arts Center was a large glass and steel structure in the center of the business district and he could never remember when he had to turn left until he saw it.

"Slow down. Slow down. Slowdownslow.... Damnit."

He slowed the car down some and looked at Daniel. "I am not going very fast, me. I keep to traffic." Then he saw the art center and pulled quickly into the left hand turn lane where they had to stop and yield to traffic.

Daniel snorted. "You mean the jet traffic overhead?"

He giggled and leaned over to give his lover a kiss on the cheek, keeping an eye out for an opening to turn. Sometimes Daniel exaggerated so much. "Je t'adore. We are there."

"Yay," Daniel muttered and opened his eyes. "I think we set a time record in getting here."

"See? You should let me drive more, you. I am good driver." He beamed at Daniel before accelerating them through a small break in the flow.

Daniel was now repeating something that definitely sounded like a prayer.

He pulled into the parking lot of the Contemporary Arts Center and into a space near the entrance. He got out and surveyed the scene. The place was big and modern and would be a perfect place to showcase his newest series.

Daniel cautiously got out the other side. For a moment it looked like he was going to kiss the ground.

Aube walked around the car and took hold of his lover's hand, then leaned in and gave Daniel a soft kiss. "Daniel. You are most nerveux passenger, you."

"My nerves aren't what they were when I was young, no." Daniel smiled and squeezed Aube's fingers.

He patted Daniel's behind affectionately. "It okay. I always will get you place safe. Et alors, we go in now et you can meet Franco. Mais no making tease to him. He very much un queen flamboyant."

"More than you?" Daniel grinned and gave Aube a kiss. "I promise. I'll be on my most...angelic behavior."

"You can make all the comment you wish on way home, mon amour. Et choose un reward for good behavior." Still holding Daniel's hand, and only half noticing the looks they were getting from people, Aube headed to the entrance. He could hear whispers. Something about a live model exhibit this month.

"I'm not going to be a live model, right?" Daniel said softly, nodding at people who were staring at him.

"Non. Daniel, do not worry. I would not ask you à faire cela." Aube smiled gently at his lover and squeezed Daniel's hand.

"Okay, good, because this is my limit of public display."

"Oui, I know this, me. Et it would take me many blow job to even get you to place to ask." He snickered and held the door open for his lover, watching as the air conditioning made Daniel's nipples peak.

"You're enjoying this a lot, aren't you?" Daniel added a swagger to his usual stride.

Aube tried to feign innocence. Then gave up, there was no denying it, he'd been simmering slowly since the photo session and just biding his time.

"Oui. Very much. You are si sexie."

"And all yours." Daniel laced their fingers together.

Aube grinned and felt his heart swell. He always liked hearing it. He knew it, but it was just good to hear it as many times as possible. He was about to say something else when a singsongy voice cut through the relative quiet of the gallery like a gunshot. "Aubin! Aubin Marchand, there you are, you naughty little minx."

Coming toward them was a tall and very skinny man, crane-ish looking. He was wearing what could only be described as a set costume from Interview With The Vampire, and he was wagging one long, bony finger at Aubin.

Daniel just stopped and posed, one hand on his hip, the other still held by Aube.

Aube tried to suppress a giggle and he nodded to the other man. "Franco. Allow me introduce mon fiancé, Daniel Nichol."

"Oh, so this is Daniel. I don't blame you for turning down the Washington Show to spend some time with him, he's ..." Franco made a fluttering gesture over his heart. "Tell me... do you share?"

Daniel smiled slowly, but shook his head. "Sorry, I just don't have the stamina to keep up with more than one man."

Franco winked at him and goosed him on the way by. "Then we'll just have to make sure Aubin is out of town much more so you will need to find other outlets. Come now... Aubin, I want you to see the exhibit space they have you in."

They set off after Franco, going at a trot to keep up with his quick steps. Daniel raised an eyebrow but kept silent, as he promised.

"Have you come up with a theme yet, Aubie?"

Aubin cringed at that. Franco had taken to calling him Aubie and he hated it, but not even threatening bodily harm could stop the man. "Eh... oui. I think on peut-être calling cette exhibition 'Mon ange'."

"Franco?" Daniel said sweetly. "His name is Aubin or Aube. Respect that for me, would you?"

Franco stopped and looked at them as if the thought had never even occurred to him, then he squeezed Aubin's face to the point where he was sure he was making a 'guppy' face. "But look at that face. It's so young and innocent. He looks like an Aubie, don't you think?"

"Nope, he looks like my lover and fiancé, actually. And I can personally attest that he's not nearly as innocent as he looks. Could suck the chrome off a bumper."

Franco let go of Aube's face, and left him to rub his stinging cheeks. Aube sorely wanted to kick the skinny bastard sometimes, but he was one of the best connected people in the art world at the moment, so Helen had cautioned him against it.

"Oh well, then. I've heard that you are pretty talented yourself in that area, handsome."

"Someday, if you're really lucky, maybe you'll find out." Daniel smiled at Franco, all politeness.

Franco gave Daniel another long, appraising look and while he was preoccupied, Aube poked out his tongue at his lover. When Franco turned his back Daniel winked at Aube and shrugged. He really was trying to behave, for Aube.

Franco dramatically threw open the doors to a large, empty area. "And here is your area, Aubie- in."

Daniel was clearly swallowing back a snicker. He coughed and then gave Franco an approving nod for using the right name. "Wow, this is huge."

"There will be four areas, this main floor is Aubin's, seeing as he is the artist being promoted. Then a few other local artisans will be featured on the upper floors." Franco waved dismissively at the tiered floors going up.

Aubin walked into the room and looked around, panic beginning to get him. "Franco. There must be un erreur. All mon art could not fill cette région!"

Daniel made a clucking sound. "Yes, it will, especially if we bring out the stuff in the private collection."

Franco turned and gave them both a look. "Private collection? You mean there are things not in his portfolio?"

This time his lover's smile was predatory. "Oh yes. A number of rather exquisite things that would fit right in with his theme. And there are all the pictures from today as well." Daniel gestured gracefully at the paint adorning his body.

Aube grinned at Daniel. The man really was a wonder, especially when being secretly scathing to a completely ignorant audience.

Franco looked pleased so Aube interjected. "Oui! Et other night I made painting, me, of un ange en repose."

"The trick really will be not overloading the space. Setting up just the right pieces to show them off. We are getting fixtures for hanging and pedestals for the sculpture, right?" Daniel stood next to Franco and regarded the empty space.

Franco now eyed Daniel in the same way he eyed Helen. Aubin had to snicker. The man always seemed to think business managers were out to get him somehow. "Yesssss. Of course there will be hanging fixtures and pedestals for the smaller pieces."

"Excellent." Daniel gave Franco an air kiss and then wandered toward the door. "I should let the two of you negotiate without me." He let the sway come into his step now, showing off the fit of those very disreputable cut-offs.

Aube had to quite physically shake himself to not react to it. When they got home, he was going to pull off those shorts and fuck Daniel through the mattress. He reluctantly turned his attention back to Franco. "Et alors, Franco, we must discute price on les objets I am selling, me."

It was Sunday, Daniel's one day a week he usually allowed himself to sleep in, to take it easy. But this morning he'd been woken by Aubin in a half panic about the show while he got ready to go to Mass. Franco was trying to talk Aubin into putting more pieces up for sale over the cell phone, that much he could tell. Probably calling Aube, "Aubie" as well.

Finally, Aubin had headed out to Mass, but it was too late to go back to sleep; Daniel was awake.

He yawned hard then got up, pulling on jeans and a t-shirt. Maybe he could collect some of the pieces from around the house, or maybe just go read the paper in the back yard. Collecting the pieces together would keep Aube from buzzing around like an angry hornet when he got in, but being in the yard with his coffee and the huge Sunday Times-Picayune would allow Daniel to maybe catch a short nap before the buzzing started.

He decided on the coffee and paper. His lover would be in a state regardless.

Quiet. He grinned. That would all depend on the neighbors. He brewed the coffee, found a pastry that wasn't too stale and got the paper situated just the way he liked, then headed out to the backyard swing, stretching out full length.

There was a buzz of hedge clippers that droned in competition with the cicadas. The sun was just at the right level to get a good amount of shade and he could hear Drew still in his house, humming to himself as he cooked something that smelled decadent. Daniel would take Aube out for brunch after Mass today. Maybe Commander's Palace. They put on a good spread. A couple glasses of iced tea and two desserts, and Aube might even remember he liked food.

He frowned some at that as he opened the paper and settled into the swing. If this few days was what his lover's usual routine was like before a show, no wonder Aube was starting to get bony looking. Maybe he'd have a grill out tomorrow, invite the neighbors. Aube would snack all evening 'to be social' and eat a meal. Or he could lay himself out as a banquet table...

Now, that was a good idea, he mused, half smiling to himself. The one distinct advantage to having Aube home again for a while was that he could plan these things and not just frustrate himself. He picked up his coffee, took a sip and pretended to read the paper, while he thought about what he could add to the buffet.

Sliced carrots around each nipple. Cream cheese laid out in rows on crackers across his stomach, maybe only 3 or 4 of those. Aube was sure to get distracted. Pepperoni. He grinned. Yep. That would be fun.

He kept thinking about it as he flipped through the paper, glancing at headlines, skimming articles of interest. His eyes got heavy and he started to doze, paper lying gently on his face. He felt like he'd only just closed his eyes, but time must have passed, as he heard the back door close and Aubin's voice pierce the gentleness of the morning.

"Daniel! There you are! I think, me, you still au lit."

"No, I had this crazy Frenchman in my bed this morning yelling at his gallery coordinator," he said fuzzily.

The swing tipped as Aubin crawled on it with him. "He sound very inconsideré, him. You should make him sleep on couch tonight."

"But then I'd be lonely." Daniel pulled Aube in close, nuzzling him. "How was church?"

"Très bien, merci." His lover kissed him, moving the newspaper off the swing. "André say he come over later today et help carry thing to the exhibition."

"Good. We should pick out what you want in the show. Some of the best stuff really is here at the house."

"All thing dans la maison are present for you, alors. They can go to galloire, mais not for sale." Aubin blushed pink, compliments on his work still made him squirm.

"I'm not offering to sell any of it." Daniel made sure he was firm on that. "Those are mine."

"D'accord. André et toi, you can pick out pièce you like for showing."

Aube's smile was returning, he put his head down on Daniel's shoulder and squeezed him. "I should get change, me. Before I make mess of my suit."

"A minute more." He sighed happily and hugged Aube tight. "I was thinking we'd go out to dinner tonight. Commander's Palace."

His lover relaxed against him, warming where he lay. "That sound très bon, Daniel. I love leur seafood, me."

"Make you work for your dinner today." Daniel closed his eyes, tempted to drift back to sleep.

Aubin started snickering, probably thinking of ways to turn that into something obscene, but settled for gently petting his tummy and nuzzling against his shirt.

"You're spoiling me," he murmured before sitting up, bringing Aube with him. "You should go get changed and I'll put on more coffee."

"Je sais. But I still want you should pick out a few de tes favorites."

His lover half-grinned at him and then headed into the house to change out of his church suit. Which Daniel would swear was new. Better not to go there, Nichols. Don't ask, just make sure there is enough to cover the bills.

He wondered for a moment if it was at all proper to ask exactly how much Aube sold a piece of his artwork for. But that would cause yet another discussion on the value of his lover's art, and once a lifetime was more than enough for that. When Aube came back downstairs, he was in a pair of baggy jeans, tee shirt and a black knit cap.

Daniel gave the cap a second look. "Is this the new thing?"

Aubin shrugged and adjusted it. "I did not have time to wash en shower, me. Alors... Pourquoi? It look very bad?"

"Nope, it's rakish. I like it."

His lover laughed and struck a pose for him, wiggling his ass. "Some day, I like to remind a personnes that I am boy also, me."

"Like Helen."

"Oui. Like H  l  ne. Et alors, I cannot be over the top for always, either, me."

"Here is the coffee and let's get started."

Aube nodded and took the coffee from him. "Merci, Daniel. I will make roll of photo-poster et painting. We take it to a frame-maker, us, et he mount them."

Daniel nodded. "And which of the pieces that we have here at the house do you want to include? Definitely the three in the living room."

"I do not know, me. Choisis those you like best, mon cher. Then I make inclus to them." His lover smiled at him and sat down on the couch, starting to roll up the large poster prints of the various photographs and paintings.

"You're not including the explicit ones are you?" Daniel craned his neck, trying to see which ones Aube had picked.

"Non. They did not want any more of grand controversie than they can help. Et alors, nu, is okay. Nu et erecte? Non."

"Since I'm going to be there, yeah, I'd rather not have that kind of open speculation. I do still have to work in this town." He snuck a kiss to the side of Aube's neck before heading upstairs to get the sculpture out of the bedroom.

Chapter 3

Daniel could hear Aubin still in the living room, and heavy paper shuffling, then the piercing sound of whatever horrible disco tune Aube had chosen as his ring tone, and finally him talking to someone from the gallery, either Helen or Franco most likely. He sounded cross and impatient.

Daniel came down with the piece as well as the painting from the top of the stairs. "Hey, artiste?"

Aube looked at him and covered the receiver on his cell. "Oui, mon amour?" Aube said, smiling at him.

"Both of these, too. Okay?" He held them up for appraisal.

"Oui. They are very beautiful, them. Alors, make sure André does not carry ce statue. He is clumsy, him." His lover nodded and winked at him, still covering the phone. "Et je t'adore aussi."

"I'll package them up myself in the crates before he gets here." He settled the pieces in the growing pile and wandered into the kitchen for a refill on the coffee.

He could hear his lover go back to the phone conversation, telling the person at the other end that those were not the terms he'd agreed to and he reserved the right to keep from sale any pieces he wanted. Finally, the conversation died and Aube wandered into the kitchen and got a glass of water.

"Should I put the stuff back? I mean, I don't want to cause problems with you and Helen."

His lover smiled at him and came over to nuzzle his cheek. "Non. We have cette argument each time, us. It just get very old, it. Sometime I think it b'en easier to let her sell whole thing."

"Then I'm definitely hiding the lovers piece."

Aubin's chuckle against his neck was warm, the kiss, warmer. "Ou... you have to inspire a new one, you."

"Any time, any place, lover."

"Ah oui? Et alors, this very good to know, it." Aube's hands skimmed up under his shirt to touch his abdomen.

Daniel smiled and gave Aube a kiss before stepping away. "André will be here any minute and we have stuff to finish."

"Et oui." Aube smiled, but Daniel could tell he was still disappointed. "I will take some thing out to car, me, alors."

"Excellent. I'm going to sit in the kitchen and relax." Daniel winked.

"B'en, alors. Remember, you, to let André in when he get here." His lover smiled at him and wandered out to the living room. He heard papers rattling and the gentle clink of statues knocking together.

What he actually did was start the marinade for the grilling he had planned for tomorrow, setting it in the fridge to...marinate.

He jumped when a voice behind him said, "Smells good, Daniel. But I'm still not convinced your and Aube's cooking's not lethal."

"Then bring your own, Mr. Skeptic." He peered over the door of the fridge at André.

"Now, now, that would be insulting." André grinned at him. He was leaning against the counter, wearing his Elfquest Anniversary T-shirt and some ratty old jeans. "So, how you holding up with the big show and all?"

"It's the usual. Aube has decided it's one of his 'I'm a boy' days."

"Ah. Well that would explain the outfit. He should have those more. He's very low key."

"It's like he's a different guy." Daniel shrugged. "Wanna go help or shoot the breeze some more?"

"I would imagine there will be hell to pay if we don't help. But, don't worry, we can chat while we carry." André followed him out of the kitchen to the living room, where Aube was looking around at boxes as if he were in a trance.

This happened sometimes; his lover lost in the potentials of all the pieces and how they would fit into the gallery space. He gently touched Aube's arm. "Earth to Aubin."

At first his lover jumped, but then he relaxed and smiled. He looped an arm around Daniel's waist and cuddled. "Salut. D'accord. I think, me, all these thing go. They all fit in the space. Et après, it Franco worry on get lighting to work."

"If not I'm sure I could borrow some of the red and blue spinners from the patrol cars...."

André started to snicker and Aube gave him a look somewhere between bemused and annoyed. "Daniel. I begin think, me, you not take all this très sérieux, you."

"It's that or panic that my friends will be seeing my naked penis blown up and hanging on the wall."

Aubin shrugged and smiled at him. "You have nothing a worry about, you. It not like it un penis très petit."

Daniel rolled his eyes. "Well, yes, or I wouldn't have let you photograph it in the first place."

There was a sudden wicked twinkle to Aubin's eye. "Et b'en. I would not still be around, me, to offer to make photo of it. I am size-queen, me."

André cleared his throat, a first warning that they were wandering into territory he didn't want to hear about.

Daniel nodded. "Given what you've got in your jockey shorts, lover, I don't blame you."

Aubin grinned at André and pinched Daniel's behind, making him jump. "Et alors. We compare later, us. In meantime, si you et André take out les box avec les statues, I will package final pièces for transport, et we can go to galloire."

"Yes, sir." He snuck a kiss and then grabbed up a box.

His lover snickered and André just rolled his eyes at both of them. "Now, I know why I get invited out for these things. If I wasn't here to chaperone, you two would never make it out the door."

"Hey, I was a good boy. I put him off once already this morning."

André grabbed up a box and followed him out the door, leaving Aube to fret over packing his precious commodities. "Ah yes, and there was no fallout from that?"

"He'll make me pay dearly tonight, in ways you don't want to think about."

André made a face and shuddered. "Yeah. I mean really the less I think about Aubin in any way lacking clothes, the better. Ick."

Daniel laughed. "See? You really shouldn't ask questions like that."

"Or I should revamp the whole celibacy sermon." His friend snickered and winked at him, waiting for him to pop open the trunk of the car.

"That I would come listen to, just to use it against Aube."

"It would keep me from wondering if I should suggest a rating system for confession." André put his box into the trunk. "You should come more, it makes Aubin behave in Mass when you do."

"Yes, Father Michel," he said dutifully. "I'll come next week."

"But only if you want. I know it isn't your thing and probably the only couple hours of peace guaranteed in your week." They headed back to the front of the house and Aube was already outside, two more boxes on the porch, and he was locking the door.

"C'est tout, for now. We have much to set up at other end, us."

Daniel grabbed up the next box and went back down the stairs. "Anything you say, princess."

There was an indignant huff from the top of the stairs and André was snickering.

"Daniel." Aube said as he thumped down the stairs. "Je ne suis pas princess."

"Would you prefer Dauphin?" He took off around the corner, trying to stay out of range.

"Daniel!" The screech that could stop a clock followed him around the corner before his lover made it that far. So much for it being a boy day.

He dodged to the other side of the car, staying out of reach. "Don't let your crown slip."

André got into the back seat and shut the door and Aubin got into the passenger side. The grump could have been mock or could have been real, but it was still funny. "You asking to sleep on couch, you," Aube muttered.

"What if I bring you presents to make up for it?"

"Quels sorts of cadeaux?" His lover was fighting to keep the pout, but presents always managed to win him over.

"A trip to that outrageous clothing store you love to get us both outfits for the opening." It needed to be done anyway.

He could see Aube start to visibly squirm in the seat. It was the one store that carried Priape clothing and his lover had been looking for any reason to get him in a pair of their jeans. "Et alors, what I have to do in order to get present, me?"

"Stop being mad at me about calling you princess."

"I am not angry against you, Daniel. Mais, maybe I am not princess anymore." Aubin shrugged and looked out the window as they backed out.

He had to smile; Aube was pouting, just a little. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"Non. It okay when you say it, Daniel." His lover smiled at him and moved closer to snuggle. "I just do not like when other people think I am princess."

André inhaled, sounding like he was going to say something and had thought the better of it. Daniel looked at André in the rear view mirror and winked. André winked back at him and was obviously trying to suppress a snicker. Aubin trauma seemed to mostly amuse the priest.

"You're my princess," Daniel murmured before giving Aube a quick kiss.

His lover seemed momentarily mollified as he nuzzled into Daniel's shoulder. "Mais, that mean one day I will be old queen."

"You'll be a stunning and stylish old queen."

"Je pense I will need du surgery pour cela, mon amour."

André still looked like if he didn't laugh soon he might be in serious danger of rupturing a blood vessel.

"To reshape your head so the tiara stays on," he teased gently, half-hoping to get André in trouble.

"Daniel! Have you seen what old queen look like? I do not think I still look good en leather pant in twenty year from now." Aube sounded serious and there was a definitely desperate sound that escaped from André in the back seat. Something like a balloon deflating.

Daniel hugged Aubin with one arm around his shoulders. "I was more worried about the ball gowns and the falling cleavage."

"Mais, Daniel. I not have cleavage me..." His lover sounded puzzled.

André finally broke and started to laugh. "Aube. Please. You're killing me."

Daniel hugged Aube again tightly. "I totally love you, goofball."

Aubin made a cross sound and gave André the finger before going back to nuzzling Daniel. "Je t'adore aussi. Mais I still do not think I will look good en leather pant in twenty year."

They pulled into the parking lot of the Contemporary Art Center where several banners hung, announcing the upcoming exhibit. Daniel just had to smile at the three foot high letters with Aubin Marchand spelled out on them. "Wow. We have to get a picture of that to send to your maman."

Aubin smiled and bounced in his seat. "Oh oui! Et there is un black-tie open night. They have order champagne et des food thing I not like much, me. Mais, we get wear des tuxedo, us!"

André was still snickering, but sounded sincere as he said, "Congrats, Aube. It's great and you guys will have a blast."

"You're invited, André. We'll need a friendly face in that crowd."

"It sounds like fun. When are you guys getting your tuxes? And then the next night is the less formal opening, right?" André was usually about as keen on black tie as Daniel was himself.

"Three or four days before the opening I think, that way if it isn't right Aube has time to complain and get it fixed."

"Daniel. I just say to you that I did not like way mes pant fit once." Aubin gave Daniel a kiss on the cheek before getting out of the car and André gave Daniel a knowing glance.

"I am assuming he meant for one occasion."

"Yes. He's never happy with the way his pants fit." Daniel rolled his eyes. It was an ongoing battle.

André patted him on the shoulder before opening the door. "Maybe you'll get lucky and Priape makes tuxedoes."

"And it'll be out of fashion in six months."

"But then we won't all get treated to the baggy pants conversation again." André got out of the car and went back to where Aube was waiting for Daniel to pop the trunk.

Daniel slipped out of his side of the car and keyed the trunk open. "Should we get a cart or make a bunch of trips? That way Aube can stay with the pieces and start getting them arranged."

"Premièrement, I must take the photo to departement where they will be mount, them. Et après, I can make set up to arrangement. Franco et Hélène are inside, if you want take les sculpture to them."

"Yes, sir." He saluted rather than get into the whole princess argument again. Aube was getting all forceful. It was an interesting change to see. So this was what his lover was like when he went away on business. What would be even more interesting to see was if this carried over into other parts of their life later on today.

"Et Daniel. Make sure, s'il-te plaît, that Hélène is not try to gather all les sculpture to centre? She have habit of doing that." Aubin grabbed up the tubes with the enlarged photos in them and headed toward the gallery.

André looked shell-shocked at the competence Aube had displayed since their arrival at the gallery. "Who was that and what did he do with Aubin?"

"That, my friend, is Mr. Marchand, up and coming artist, lately of New Orleans. Something else, innit?"

"He's pretty together. He's pushy and he kinda scares me, actually."

"Absolutely. He's tough when it comes to negotiations and, apparently, price."

André grinned at him and picked up one of the boxes. "Very different from what you told me of his first encounter at sales. So, what do you think he makes at one of these events?"

"He usually does three or four sales which Helen insists is unusual for a new artist. He grumps that it's not ever half of what he has for sale. I argue he couldn't keep up with that rate of work anyway." He grinned and shrugged. "I know he's not costing the galleries money so that's enough for them."

"And enough to keep him in new clothes and shoes and you don't have to worry about him spending the bill money to do it, also." André chuckled. "But just like him to expect to be the toast of the town overnight."

"The sale of his first big piece was enough to cover the studio rent for a month. I'm not sure what he has planned for the money, but it's got to be a good chunk of change by now."

"Maybe he's planning on surprising you with a secret honeymoon in Europe," André teased as they headed up the steps to the front doors, then he followed Daniel to the main exhibit area.

"Wouldn't that be a kicker?" Daniel said as they carefully set the boxes down.

"It would. Or he's just accumulating and not really thinking about the money at all. Or he's blown it all on shoes, clothing and trips to a masseur."

"It's his money." Daniel shrugged. "First I think he's really had, let him enjoy it."

André set down his box, too, just in time for Aubin to come wandering in chatting with a young, bland man in a suit. Aubin quickly brought him over and beamed. "Daniel, André, this sexie mec is Alex. He make co-ordination to these event."

Daniel extended his hand. "Nice to meet you, Alex. I'm Daniel and this is André."

Alex smiled broadly and took Daniel's hand in a firm shake, then shook André's. "I've heard a lot about both of you. But I have to admit, that the way Aube says your name, I thought for the first week or so you were a girl."

Daniel gave Aubin the raised eyebrow look but his voice was neutral. "Not an uncommon problem."

Aubin blushed and looked at his toes, even his ears turning pink. But Alex continued, "Well until he showed me a picture. And then there was no mistake." Alex gave a nervous laugh.

"So, you organize these things?" André cut in.

"Yeah. I got my MBA in '96 and was doing stuff for investment houses, then I decided to change goals. You must be real proud of your fiancé, Daniel. He's got a lot of talent and the market is really looking good for him to come into his own soon."

"He's going to take the world by storm," Daniel said softly, his voice clear.

"Yeah. He's gonna be big." Alex's grin, if possible, got wider before he looked around. "Oh, there's Missy. Aube, meet up with us when you get a chance." And with that, Alex was gone.

André started to snicker. "Someone needs to cut down on his caffeine."

"MBAs are like that," Daniel kept his voice soft. "You like him, Aube?"

"Alex? He is okay, him. He work very hard." Aube shrugged and looked at Daniel.

"In other words cute but straight and knows his stuff."

Aube smiled. "Et b'en. Yes, he is straight, him. Mais, he not my type."

"Little too...boring for you?"

Aubin shook his head. "Trop short, him. Et he un peu skinny." Then he grinned.

Daniel snickered. "Too much like you, eh?"

Aube pounced on him and gave him a squeeze. "Pas enough like you. Mon ange."

"Yours." He squeezed Aube tightly. "Okay, Father Speculation and I will go get the next couple of pieces from the car while you get started on the unpacking and setup."

"Bon, bon. Et I should go et meet Missy. She from Times-Picayune et alors, I should make pretty face for her." Aube batted his eyelashes at Daniel and sprang off to meet up with Alex and Missy.

André walked out to the car with him. "Father Speculation, huh?"

"Okay it was lame. It was all I could think of."

André laughed and patted him on the back. "You were preoccupied with Aubin right then, so they can't all be winners."

"He just amazes me and then my brains leak out of my ears."

"He's absolutely crazy about you, too. Or wait... was that Alex he was talking about over coffee the other day?" André snickered and teased him.

Daniel mock-growled at him and snatched another box out of the trunk. "Funny, funny man."

André grabbed the last box and grinned. "I try."

"Heh. Let's go watch Princess rearrange the dust motes for a few hours, eh?"

"Well okay, but behave yourself, or I'll tell him you called him that." André followed him back into the gallery where Aubin was talking at length to Missy about his art.

"You do and I'll tell him about the time you wore Hawaiian shorts under the cassock."

André tried to look innocent. "You wouldn't want to break his head, would you?"

"I don't want to sleep on the couch either."

"The way you complain about his snoring I thought it would be a welcome break," André said mildly, watching as Aubin showed off a painting to the reporter.

"You don't need to be telling him that either."

"You are no fun at all." André winked at him then nudged him as Aube touched the young lady's wrist as he emphasized a point. "Look, Aube is trying to flirt with a girl."

"You mean get her attention away from Alex."

"I really don't think he's interested in Alex, do you?"

Daniel gave André a patient look. "No, I think the reporter is, and Aube, quite rightly, is making sure they are paying attention to him."

"Ah, well yes. That makes more sense. I mean I knew the guys Aube dated... well a while back. He does have a certain taste." André smiled.

Aube looked over at them and waved, then motioned them over as the first of the mounted photos were brought out.

Daniel would have loved to have known what André meant, but didn't dare ask. Instead he tried very hard not to blush and to view the photographs as dispassionately as possible.

When he got over there, he was actually pleasantly surprised. In combination with the body paints and the odd angles, his face was obscured in all the photographs. And the ones Aube chose hinted at nudity, but didn't show much. Aube beamed at them. "They turn out very good, oui?"

"Fantastic." He reached out, not quite touching the glass and traced the curve of his own perpetually frozen hand, fingers delicately arched.

"And they're gonna be a steal at two thousand each." Alex chimed in, seeing dollar signs, obviously, and not the subtle play of shadow over the "angel's" back.

Daniel did his very best to not choke or faint over the price his lover's art commanded.

Aube shrugged and dusted off the glass. "Et b'en. They sell, they do. They are very beautiful, them." He smiled at Daniel and went over to hold his hand. "I do not do this for money, me."

"Shh, I'm liking that part," he teased gently, but he hoped the hug and the look in his eyes explained.

Aube giggled and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "It is Daniel fond wish that I earn beaucoup de money, so he can continue to take on many volunteer thing, him." His lover winked at him, but when he saw the reporter writing something down he added hastily. "I am kidding me, I make joke."

Daniel raised his eyebrow at the reporter, but said nothing. He jerked his head in the direction of the door, hinting to André that it was time to beat a hasty retreat.

André followed Daniel back over to where the boxes were. "He's off in his own world with this, isn't he?"

"Yeah, it's fascinating in that 'visit an alien planet' way."

"You know what's really alien? Out of all of them, Aube is the most grounded and least superficial." André chuckled.

"Frightening, isn't it?"

"It really is. But then... I think two years ago, he would have still outdone them all. It would have been all champagne and caviar for him."

"Good timing then."

"I guess away from Felix and Gilles and everyone, I didn't realize how much he'd grown up." The priest shrugged and opened one of the boxes.

"He was ready." Daniel shrugged. "And I think he wanted to."

André smiled at him and took out the sculpture inside the box. "I think there was a lot more than that."

"Me getting hurt last year proved to him he could handle it."

"He did change quite a bit after that, huh?" André might have said something else, but it was cut off by an elated shriek and Aubin was hugging someone.

Daniel craned his neck to look, then had to catch himself from falling as he tripped over a box.

André helped him steady out and they got a second box unpacked. "Should you go and get Aube and ask him where he wants these?"

"No. We should get the last two pieces out of the car and then go get a latte."

"Okay, but you're buying." André laughed and headed out toward the car.

"Of course. You came out and helped today. Least I can do is buy you a cup of coffee."

"I'm glad to help -- I get a chance to see you two. I bet you're happy this show is in town for once."

"It's a nice change, and I get to see how it really works."

"It is really interesting. Like seeing the set of a film. Have you guys done any more planning on the wedding?"

"Please." Daniel sighed. "I think I'm going to insist on postponing it."

"Aubin's gonna freak if you say that, you know." André's tone was neutral, but serious.

"Which is why I haven't said it before now."

"Have you thought about how you're gonna do it?" André was going into counselor mode now; Daniel recognized the tone.

"I was going to wait until he panicked about sending the invitations and then gently suggest that we add a few months to the schedule."

"And you know what he'll say 'I stay up day and night, me, I get them finish' or worse, he'll hear you have changed your mind because he didn't get it finished."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Do something romantic. Take him out some place and tell him again and again, even if it seems redundant, that you love him and mushy things. Then bring up postponing the wedding." André shrugged and hefted up one of the last boxes. "I mean, your way could work, too, and he's not my fiancé."

"Just seems really...girly."

His friend chuckled. "Well he is your Princess."

"I knew I was going to regret that. I just knew it."

Chapter 4

Whoever had chosen to open a new exhibition in the Contemporary Art Center in mid-heatwave should be shot in Aubin's opinion. Not that the gallery he was in wasn't air conditioned, in a very loose sense of the term, but with so many people there, it didn't seem to have any effect. He pulled at the collar of his button top, wishing he'd not let Daniel talk him out of the T-shirt he'd originally chosen. But perhaps "boytoy" was not the statement he wanted to make either. There were many statements he would have liked to have made when Pierre showed up as the second feature artist at this opening and started in with his sycophant limelight hogging. Aubin retreated into the shadows where Miriam was keeping him company.

"Damn, he's a jerk." If someone could find a way to sip cheap wine angrily, it would be Miriam, who invented it. "I should go grind my spiked heel into his foot."

Aube laughed at that and leaned over to give her a kiss on the cheek. "I am more piss off, me, at personne who make mistake of double book him. Like mon Daniel would say 'mistake my ass.'"

He watched as Pierre went slickly from one small group to another, schmoozing his way around the room. The urge to go home and shower was rising, but so was the anger and upset -- this was supposed to be his night.

Miriam's phone rang. "Bother." She dug around in her little purse and finally pulled out the black and red flame-painted phone. "What the D--oh. Right. Now? Okay, okay. I'm coming." She snapped the phone shut and gave him a pleading look. "Can you stand it alone for maybe 45 minutes? An hour tops, I swear. Emergency."

He smiled at her and nodded, but felt his heart sink. It had been bad enough that Daniel had to back out at the last moment due to a conflict in his schedule for his class, but now for Miriam to have to leave as well?

But an emergency was an emergency. "Oui, that is d'accord. I will see you en un heure."

"Go for a walk around the block, you." She grinned and gave him an air kiss. "And stay out of the wine."

He laughed, then wagged his finger at her. "I am plenty old enough now to make my own décisions." As she left, he turned and looked back out at the room. Perhaps, if he was quick, he could make it to the buffet and back without being noticed. Get a glass of champagne and something to nibble on.

He'd made it to the buffet and was actually talking to Helen who had come down for the premiere when Pierre glided up. "Aubin, so glad you could come."

His smile switched from the genuine one he had while talking to Helen to a pasted on one for Pierre. "Pierre, of course I would be here, me. In case you have not notice, le marquis out front has both our name on it."

"Yes. I was feeling generous when they mentioned you asked for a show."

He resisted the urge to whack Pierre one; the man was lying and they both knew it. "I was book here before you were, Pierre. You know this. I know this. Mais, if you do not mind, you, I was having une conversation with ma amie." He deliberately turned his back on Pierre in order to return his attention to Helen.

She was giving Pierre the oddest look, but smiled at Aube. "Waiter, bring that man his reality check."

He smiled back at Helen and was just taking her arm to leave the tense situation and find somewhere they could talk, when he felt Pierre put a hand on his shoulder. "So, where is the posse tonight? Daniel finally have the sense to leave you?"

"If you must know, non, Daniel et moi are just fine."

"That's not what I hear."

Helen choked on her wine and when he turned to look she pointed to the doorway. "Oh. My. Goodness."

He followed where her finger was pointing and dropped the plate he was holding. He was sure his jaw hit his chest. He wasn't sure if he should laugh or hide, because there, in the doorway was Daniel.

Or at least he thought it was Daniel.

Only it was Daniel in a very chic black gown, heels, and with a wrap. What gave it away for sure was the insane gleam in his eyes -- along with the wicked smile on Miriam's face as she stood behind him. Daniel glided across the room and held a hand out to Aubin.

"Hello, lover," he purred softly. "Don't you recognize me? It's Danielle."

Aube wasn't quite sure what he'd done recently that made God decide he should be the butt of some cosmic joke, but he figured he might as well play along. He bent low over Danielle's hand and kissed the back of it.

"B'en sur, I recognise you, ma chère. You remember Hélène et Pierre, oui?"

"Indeed." Danielle gave Pierre a long look. "Shouldn't you be off sniffing the butt of someone who will actually pay you?"

Danielle's words fell on deaf ears, because Pierre, like everyone else in the room, had stopped everything and was staring at her. Aubin swallowed against a dry throat as the attention of the room was now very much focused on them.

Finally, one of the investors that Aubin had been talking to over the past several weeks ventured forward and tipped his hat to her. "I have been hearing so much about you from your fiancé, though I must admit, you are not at all how I pictured you."

"Well, these aren't my regular clothes." Danielle smiled and took a wineglass off a tray as a waiter sailed past. "I'm usually more down to earth, but I wanted to look my best for Aubin and his big show tonight. Preparation for the museum show in a few months, you know."

He couldn't speak. He couldn't move. He couldn't take his eyes off his lover. The eyeliner and lipstick would have been a shock, but the wig, the gown and the peek at long and hairless legs... His mind had just been well and truly blown.

The investor persisted. "I didn't know he had a museum opening in just a few months."

"Oh yes. Miss Helen," Danielle gestured with one gloved hand toward their benefactress, "she spotted Aubin's talent a while ago and has arranged for a showing in St. Louis. He's going to be big soon, I can feel it."

Danielle turned and looped his hand through Aube's arm and gave him a light kiss on the cheek. "I hope you don't mind me singing your praises, dear."

Aube shut his mouth with an audible snap and tried to make his face assume what he was hoping was a smile. "Non, pas de tout, mon amour."

Miriam was snickering like a maniac in the background as more of the people at the small gallery opening started to come over to find out what Danielle was talking about. Pierre was slowly getting pushed back toward the rear of the crowd.

"He's sold quite a few in the last few months, so much so it's a wonder he can keep up with demand." Danielle fluttered just slightly. "Helen's got first call on anything he does between now and the October opening in St. Louis. Was there something you wanted to see? I'd be happy to tell you about it."

He followed along as Danielle took people over to where his sculptures were. He was finally calming down enough from seeing his Daniel all decked out in drag that he was finally starting to notice things. Like the ease with which his lover walked in the stiletto heels and the way he swayed his hips gently. This was not the first time Daniel had done this.

"Ma Danielle... She exaggerate, her. But I am making comfortable amount of sale, me."

Danielle smiled at him and tilted her head. "Are you calling me a liar...honey?"

"Non. Non, I would never call you une liar, ma petite." He looked at Danielle and smiled, trying not to stare at the large falsies Daniel had strapped to his chest, nor think too hard how the dress could be so tight across the hips and not leave a telltale bulge.

"That's good. Why don't we circulate for a while and then you take me home, hmm?"

"That sound like une bonne idée to me, ma amante." He reached over and patted the gloved hand that was holding on to the crook of his elbow and escorted Danielle over to where there were some local curators of galleries and museums now taking an interest in his sculptures.

Danielle leaned over and whispered, "This is what you get for people misunderstanding my name and asking for the lady of the house one too many times." 'She' beamed at him and then began chatting up the men around them.

He raised one of his eyebrows at her and decided to wait on his reply to that. Not his fault the Anglos couldn't ever get it straight that that was how he pronounced Daniel.

Then he leaned in and whispered back when there was a break in the conversation as the men conferred with each other. "Peut-être you would prefer I call you Dannie, then?"

Daniel winced and shook his head. "No. Besides, I figured if nothing else they will remember you far more than Pierre after this."

Aube smiled warmly at his lover and leaned up to give him a kiss. "Merci, mon amour. For everything. I am happy to see you ce soir. We have been so busy lately, us."

"We have." Daniel purred at him. "What say we blow this pop stand and go home before things start to migrate?"

"That sound formidable, mon cher. The night, she is still young, her. Et it is my opinion, we need to capitalize on it." He bid the gentlemen farewell and exchanged cards with them, before escorting Danielle into the street.

"You look very beautiful ce soir, by the way."

Daniel snorted in the darkness. "I scare small children and spear rats with these heels, Aube." That sounded just like his Daniel.

He snickered and gave his lover a kiss on the hand. "But you are always beautiful in my eye, Daniel."

"Hail us a taxi and I'll show you all sorts of beauty when we get home."

Aubin nodded, then wrapped his arm around Daniel's waist, noting the way it curved slightly under his fingers. He could feel a flush creep into his skin as he became unexpectedly aroused. He hailed a taxi and held the door open for his lover, watching avidly as the slit in the dress exposed more than just the glimpse of smooth legs.

Daniel just watched in return, a half-smile on his face that gave away very little as they rode in the light spattered darkness.

He sat next to Daniel letting his eyes trace over where his hands still didn't dare. He gave their address to the cabbie in a somewhat cracked voice and slowly peeled off Daniel's elbow-length gloves finger by finger, before taking his lover's now perfectly manicured hand in his own. He kissed Daniel's knuckles and the inside of his wrist.

In return Daniel let the slit in his dress ride up above his knees.

"Mon Daniel..." He leaned in and lightly kissed his lover's lips; the sticky sensation of the lipstick not completely foreign to him, but surprising in this context.

"Absolutely one hundred percent yours." He could feel Daniel's smile. "I was hoping you wouldn't be angry about this."

"Daniel, I cannot be angry against you. I was just surprise, me. What made you decide, you, to dress like this?" He ran his hand up Daniel's side.

"Many things, but mostly just to get to Pierre."

"I think maybe he will never forget it, him. Not in million year." He laughed gently eyeing the slit in the dress, wondering what Daniel's legs felt like so smooth.

"Go ahead," Daniel murmured. "I figured that part would get your attention."

He reached in, and tentatively stroked the stocking-clad thigh. The feeling was entirely unlike anything he had ever felt. "It... very ...my hand feel like it glide."

Daniel leaned over and whispered. "There's only two places left on my body with hair."

His mouth went dry at that and he met his lover's eyes as he stroked further up Daniel's thigh. "Daniel... it feel very sexie."

"The things I do for you." But it was said fondly.

"You are very good to me, mon amour." He smiled and was about to lean in for another kiss when the cab jerked as it pulled into their driveway.

Daniel dug into his purse and pulled out a twenty, paying for the ride with a healthy tip.

Aube got out quickly, went around the back of the car, and opened the door for his lover, following up their front porch, watching Daniel move.

Daniel took his sweet time, swaying his hips and digging out his keys before opening the door. "You should pull the drapes."

It took Aube a few moments to get his brain to engage enough to get over to the front windows and close the shutters, then pull the drapes across. He turned back to watch Daniel move around the room.

He'd kicked the shoes off and tossed aside the purse and scarf that had covered his head. Then he turned and looked straight at Aube. "You're way more interested than I would have guessed."

"It is very different it. Should I not be?" Aube loosened his tie and took it off, unbuttoning his shirt. "It is still you."

Daniel took a moment to wipe off most of the lipstick and set aside the gloves. "It is."

Aube licked his lips as he watched his Daniel slowly emerge again from the wrappings of his not quite self. Oddly, he was finding this unbearably erotic, like Daniel was getting more than naked. With a deft twist of his arm, the top of the dress came unzipped and slithered down Daniel's shoulders.

"Mon Daniel..." Aube stepped forward and rubbed his lover's now hairless chest through the camisole, leaning down and sucking one of Daniel's nipples through the silky material.

"Oh." Daniel wobbled for a moment, trapped in all the unfamiliar clothing.

He moved them so he could set Daniel down on the couch before he fell over. Aube leaned down and kissed him, at first gently and slow, then deeply.

"You really liked this," his lover murmured. "I'm flattered."

"You are very belle, you. You seem very aware of votre body et sexe comme cela." Aube finished removing his shirt and dropped it on the floor

Daniel pulled up the camisole enough to expose the garters on his stockings, and the girdle that helped with his 'figure'. "I'd like to get part of this rig off before it gets painful, lover."

Aube smiled and went to his knees before Daniel. He started to unclip the girdle from the bottom, freeing his lover's erection "Would not want pain."

"No, no pain tonight beyond the bent toes from the shoes." Daniel lifted his hips.

"They make your leg look nice, though." Aube took the hint and further freed his lover from his confining outfit, finally pulling the girdle free and dropping it on the floor.

"You don't think I'd go to all this trouble to look ugly do you?"

"Non, I am not think very much at all maintenant." He smiled up at his lover. It was true. He was having a hard time making sentences or even thoughts while he was looking at his Daniel, shaved and in garters and a camisole. Oddly the feminine clothing only seemed to highlight just how male his lover was.

Daniel chuckled softly and bent down, kissing him. "Come up here where we can kiss properly."

Aube climbed up onto the couch and straddled Daniel's lap, nuzzling into his throat and just under his ear before taking his mouth in a kiss.

Daniel was silky and smooth over the broad, muscular frame. The thin straps of the camisole got hung up on the ropey muscles of Daniel's biceps and shoulders.

He felt his breath hitch as he ran his hands over the familiar and yet alien planes of his lover's body, enjoying the feeling of the smooth skin. "Daniel, so very sexie."

"Now you know what it would be like if I waxed all the time like you do." Daniel shifted his legs and Aube could feel the solid heat of his lover's erection pressing up against him through the linen of his pants.

He gasped and reached down to undo his own pants, freeing his cock. He thrust forward against his lover. "I like this for change, me, but I would also miss your hair."

"That's good because this is so not a regular thing I'm willing to do." Daniel pulled on Aube's erection, fisting it.

"It feel good, though." He gripped Daniel's shoulders and thrust harder, biting his lower lip, trying to stifle a moan.

"That is the general idea." Daniel's voice rippled with laughter. "I was taught that hair poking through pantyhose -- so tacky."

He laughed in spite of himself. "I never think, me, this was something I hear come from you, mon amour."

"The ladies in San Francisco taught me that, along with how to walk in heels."

"You have led un b'en interessant life. So many thing you do." He smiled fondly at his lover and leaned in, taking another soft kiss.

Daniel got his hands inside Aube's pants, rubbing against his hipbones with warm thumbs. "Do them all with you if I could."

"I am happy hearing tes story, me." He started to writhe unconsciously to the rhythm of Daniel's rubbing.

One hand slid up his chest and rested on the back of his neck, rubbing there, too. "I know. Shall I get you off?"

"I was think, me, peut-etre we go to notre lit. Make sexe." He leaned down and brushed his lips over Daniel's.

"I'm comfortable here." Daniel pushed one of his legs up onto the couch, letting the hose rub up against Aube's side and back.

He leaned back and closed his eyes. "J'adore, we stay here, alors. Need you." He got up from Daniel's lap and finished removing his pants and socks.

"Should I?" Daniel's voice died away and he was digging in the couch for the tube of lube they'd stashed there.

He nodded and watched as his lover found the small tube. He blushed at the memory that came back to him as to why it got stashed there in the first place. "Oui, I want you."

"Whatever you want," Daniel muttered. "Always."

He crawled back into Daniel's lap and gently kissed him again.

Daniel's hands rubbed softly across Aube's thighs and hips. "If I'd ever had a clue silk would do it for you I would have worn it a long time ago."

He laughed huskily at that, running his hands again over his lover's smooth thighs, shivering. "I do not know why. This is very érotique."

"For the uniqueness. As much as I adore you I'm not wearing this on a regular basis." Daniel pushed up and gave him a quick hard kiss. "Indulge yourself tonight as much as you like."

"I would not want this on basis regulier, me." He slid off his lover's lap and kneeled between Daniel's spread legs, pressing a kiss to his inner thigh through the stocking.

Daniel's eyes were hot as they watched him. "So sexy."

"Oui, it is." He kissed further up the smooth thigh and then bit gently as to not cause a run in the stocking.

His lover twitched, his fingers tightening on the couch cushions.

He chuckled and let the air brush over Daniel's leg before moving in closer and licking the base of his lover's erection. A soft groan escaped Daniel's throat. He felt the fire being stoked by the sound. He moved up and licked the head of Daniel's cock before taking it in his mouth and sucking it gently, savoring the musky flavor.

"I always forget how good you are at that."

He only groaned in response as he took more into his mouth, massaging the underside with his tongue, feeling the delicate skin.

There was a barely whispered 'oh' above him and he could feel the muscles of Daniel's legs tightening.

Aube backed off and gentled his lover's balls away from his body, not letting him come yet. He didn't want it to be over quite yet. "Mon amour."

"Yours," Daniel said hoarsely, squirming.

He kissed and licked gently at his lover's lower abs. "J'adore, do we have un condom, us?"

Daniel twisted and dug into the side table. "We better, or there will be mayhem."

He reached over to help, pulling the drawer right out of the table in his effort, but seeing what they were looking for fall onto the floor. He grabbed for it and then smiled triumphantly at Daniel. "This is maybe easier if you lie down on le couch."

With a nod his lover slid down, stretching out on the couch. The camisole rucked up, baring more of Daniel's stomach and showing off the garters.

He felt a strong shiver ran up his body as he felt his arousal spike at the sight. So very different from what he was used to. Consciously wanton. Overtly sexual. No modesty. He crawled onto the couch, straddling his lover's hips and, while taking Daniel's mouth in a hard kiss, opened the condom wrapper.

Daniel squirmed under him again, making Daniel's erection rub up against his thigh. The kiss gentled for a moment then grew fierce.

He moaned, trying to calm himself down, or it would be over before it started. He reached back between his legs and rolled the condom onto Daniel's erection.

"You're sure?" Daniel's voice sounded strained.

He nodded quickly and gave Daniel another kiss, before grabbing the lubricant. "Oui, I am very sur, me."

Again the hands on his hips reached up to brush against his chest and nipples. "So brave and sexy."

His breath caught in his throat and he shut his eyes tightly, the nipple with the ring in it contracting painfully. When he managed to take a breath again, he unscrewed the lid to the lube and coated Daniel's fingers with it.

"Fun, remember?" Daniel's voice sounded breathless as two fingers slid into Aube's ass, stretching him.

"Oui, I want this mon amour." He moved back against Daniel's hand, feeling little spikes of pleasure start to thrum in him.

A third finger was quickly added. "Want is the right word."

He let out a loud moan at the slight burn, which dissipated quickly. He thrust back a few more times before he reached back to pull Daniel's hand away. He steadied his lover's erection and slowly sank back on it, feeling it fill him slowly. "Daniel."

"Aubin." Daniel touched him gently on the hips before gripping the couch again.

He sat back until he was nestled in the hollow of Daniel's hips, then he started moving slowly. He was full, owned. He looked down at his lover. The sight of the camisole against Daniel's skin and the feel of the garters pressing into his thighs spurred him on.

"Good." Daniel bent his knees, pushing Aube forward.

He gasped loudly, the shift in position pressing Daniel's cock against his prostate, making his muscles contract automatically. He moved faster, the pleasure building in the base of his stomach.

Daniel freed up one hand to grasp Aube's erection. "Passion."

His moans and gasps were getting louder and more in rhythm with his thrusts. He could never help himself over that; Daniel always half teased him about being loud. He always made sure to let Daniel know he liked it. Aube closed his eyes, the sensations beginning to overwhelm him.

Daniel's hips slammed up into him and there was a matching groan. "Good God."

His eyes rolled back into his head and his muscles stiffened. A wave of pleasure swept over him and he was pulled under by it. He was dimly aware of letting out a cry as he spilled over Daniel's hand.

"Yes," Daniel pulled him down against his lover's chest. "Love you."

"Je t'adore," he gasped against Daniel's chest, trying to kiss it, but feeling completely boneless. "Oh Daniel."

Chapter 5

"I'd call the evening a success."

He chuckled but still didn't move, resting. "Oui, I would think so, me. You make me go out of my head."

"Perfect." Daniel kissed the bridge of Aube's forehead.

"J'adore, been so long, mon amour." He smiled against Daniel's chest, slowly feeling his strength come back.

"Not that long." He was given another kiss and a nuzzle.

"Non. I guess it feel like that when it more than day." He raised his head to look at his lover. "I am un addicte."

"You are and I don't mind at all."

He leaned up and kissed Daniel gently, feeling Daniel slip from his body. "In long run, you are good thing to be addicte to."

"I hope so." Daniel sighed a little and kissed him again.

"It is." He smiled and traced his tongue over his lover's shoulder. "We should get clean up, us, before going to fais do-do."

"Truer words were never spoken." Daniel bent his neck around and Aube pushed up enough that they could see each other. "I wouldn't want to get a run in my hose."

Aube laughed and got up from the couch, helping Daniel up. "Non, we could not have cela, us."

He unsnapped the garters and slid the hose from Daniel's legs, gently running his fingers down the smooth skin while he did. Daniel stretched under his touches and then pulled the camisole up over his head. Naked, he looked mostly like himself now.

Aube smiled , giving his lover one last lingering kiss before stepping back and looking at him. "Even though you in dress is very interesting, I like way you look normal best."

"Boring one hundred percent Daniel at your service." Daniel scooped up his clothes and got up off the couch. "Shower and bed?"

"Oui, that sound good. But you are anything except boring, you. My life she is never dull with you." He scooped up his own clothes and started up the stairs. "And if you are very good boy, I might let you wash my back."

"I'll be extra good then."

Aubin was just finishing mixing some plaster of Paris in his art room when he heard the phone ring. He swore under his breath as he banged his toe against the uneven doorway, trying to move quickly to reach it before the answering machine got it.

It was the land-line and the only people that used that number were the police station, where Daniel worked, and the galleries wanting to exhibit some of his art.

The sore toe made for an interesting hobble as he grabbed the phone and then dropped it when the slick plastic squirted out of his grip.

"Hello? Hello? Big brother, it's Merry. Hello?"

He finally managed to wrangle the receiver and held it up to his ear. "Allô? Aubin à l'appareille. I mean, this is Aubin."

He lifted his throbbing foot up onto the small chair next to the phone stand to inspect it. "If you are look for Daniel, he is encore at work, him. I can take un message?"

"Could you tell him his sister called?" There was a pause too short for him to start talking before she began again. "Actually, maybe I can start with you."

He forgot about the pain in his foot as his stomach did a back flip. This was Daniel's sister on the phone. Someone from his fiancé's family, and she wanted to talk to him. "Ah oui. It is un great plaisir to talk with you." He turned and sat in the chair, settling in for a chat. "Daniel has said much about you."

"Nothing bad of course." Her voice had the same rippling laughter that Daniel's did when he was in a good mood.

He couldn't help but chuckle and like this woman immediately. "Non, non. Nothing bad. Some story of when you were tous petits, euhm, when you grow up together, you." He was making a conscious effort to pick out only English words, hating how his language sounded so stilted and accented in comparison to hers.

"Aren't you charming?" He could just barely hear the clink of a coffee cup over the phone. "I can't wait to meet you in person."

"Me, too. I have always ask Daniel to make invitation to you to make visite with us. He tell me you are coming to our wedding. Thank you, I know it mean very much to him."

"I can't not see my big brother get married. Who would make sure his tie is straight?"
Another pause. "I know this is sudden and all, but Daniel offered to let my son come visit y'all for a while and I was going to take him up on it."

"Ah, oui? Je veux dire. I mean, of course. Our home is always open when famille want to make visite to us." He carefully pulled out a notepad and pen from the small desk drawer in the phone stand to take down the information. More than once he'd forgotten to give Daniel all of the particulars of a message. "When should we look for him to arrive?"

"In a week? I didn't want to just have the boy show up on your doorstep."

"A week? Oui, that is good for us. I can make ready notre guest room for him and make some shopping for thing he like to eat. I can tell Daniel to maybe take some vacation then." He wrote down the information while bouncing with excitement.

"Oh. Oh. Dan has a job?"

He paled at that, maybe he wasn't supposed to say anything about it. But Daniel never told him not to mention it either. "Oui. Yes. He is un liaison with the police. He help many people like that. But do not be concern, I am home most of time when he is not and so your son will have someone look out to him."

"Charlie is sixteen, Aubin. He doesn't need to have someone home with him. I just don't want to load my brother up with my problems."

"Ah yes, of course. He would not want someone to watch him like hawk. But I would not worry about letting Daniel help with your problèmes, Meredith. He would not have made the offere if he was not able to follow through. He have me to help also."

"You're sure?"

"I am positif, me. We will look for Charles to visit next week, alors. It will be fun, I think." He knew she could not see his smile, but hoped she heard the sincerity in his voice. He had been wanting to meet someone -- anyone -- from Daniel's family for so long now.

"And when you're sick of him I'll come out with Sarah and we'll have a visit before the wedding madness. Want to see you in your home."

"That would be terrifique! I would love to have chance to make visite with you before le wedding. I know Daniel feel the same. He not tell me, but I think he is all nerveux for it. This would help him think on something else." He chuckled again thinking about how he and Daniel had been running around trying to get some of the bigger things booked and paid for, and just hoping the details would fall into place.

"That's my Danny Do-Good. Trying to look calm and cool all the time."

He laughed louder at the comment. "Oui. But he not fool anyone. I know, me, when he is all nerves."

"Yeah. but it makes him happy. So, I'll call you back with flight information in an hour or so -- and get my boy started packing."

"That is all belle et bonne as we say en Québec. It is all good. I will go out and start to make shopping for his visit, alors, you will need mon number cellulaire." As he told Meredith his cell number, he was also mentally ticking off things he would need to buy for Charles' visit.

"All right then. I'll give Dan's cell a ring and let him know it's okay with you."

"Yes, that would be a good idea. I think he is not en classe now and his cellulaire should be switch open. I will take my scooter for shopping so I can be done fast and home when he get here."

"Hide the scooter before Charlie comes or you'll never see it while he's there."

He laughed again. "I do not think that he will want to when he see it. You will know what I mean when you come here." He was trying to picture any sixteen year old on his custom colored scooter. "In meantime, you should call Daniel and I should make shopping before I forget."

"Good enough then. Nice talking to you."

"It was un grand plaisir to talk to you. I look forward to your call in an hour to settle times."

A few more niceties, and then she hung up, leaving him with a throbbing toe and a mental to-do list a mile long.

No better time than the present to get started on it by getting dressed. He went to his and Daniel's room and pulled on a pair of jean cut-offs and his sandals, minding his still sore toe. He wandered into the guest room and took mental note of a few things he could buy that a young man might like for it.

He grabbed his scooter helmet, keys and cell phone before heading out into the bright early afternoon light. The haze was still high enough in the air as to not make him feel completely drenched when he reached his scooter.

His scooter. He took in a long moment of adoration for her. The sparkly paint job, the bell, the cute little basket in front. He put on his helmet, climbed on and started her up, setting off for the French Market on Rue Decatur. Sure it was a tourist trap, but there

were also little stores tucked away where locals knew to look. And he could park his scooter there easily and not get hassled.

He breezed into the shop he frequented for all the finer things in life, and started to look around. Junk food that he would most definitely not eat himself. Well, perhaps a little when he was having a beer and a smoke. Oh, and some magazines. Soda or pop or whatever they were calling it right now. Meat? Did teenage boys still do meat? Maybe sandwich stuff would be better.

He was wandering up the aisles slowly and pausing to ponder and then put things in his basket. Chocolate cupcakes. Everyone loved those. Some milk so he could tell Daniel's sister that her child was not subsisting entirely on junk.

He stopped at the newsstand and checked out the array of brightly colored magazines. He cautiously picked up a girly magazine and opened it. He was quite sure that any sixteen year old would be interested in porn.

"Not your usual fare, is it, Mister Marchand?" Aube looked up and smiled at the large woman behind the cash register. Her accent was thick from one of the Caribbean islands and her dark hair was done up in a colorful tignon.

"It is not for me, Lola. Mon Daniel, his neuve, euhm, nephew is coming to make visite to us."

"And you don't want him to get lonely and wander on down to places he shouldn't to fix his itch. Wise boy, you are."

He grinned at her and walked over to the counter and put his basket up on it. "It closer to, I am afraid Daniel would kick his ass if he find him in such a place."

"Fierce one, your Daniel. He ran some boys out of here last time he came in. And not hard on the eyes either." She winked at him broadly.

He felt his grin widen and his cheeks pink. He liked it when people told him how good looking his lover was. Sure, it was only skin deep and the inside counted and, well, it was shallow, but it still felt really good to hear that people thought Daniel was as good looking as he did.

"Mon Daniel is parfaite, him. Just un peu grumpy sometime. But he is very brave, him. Et very handsome. I think having his nephew around for few week would make him very happy."

"Or so crazy you want to clonk them both over the head and come hide out with me." She finished bagging his stuff and handed it over. "I could teach you a few things...."

His blush deepened and he lowered his eyes shyly. "I may take you up on cela yet, Lola. But no making with pinching my ass before noon, okay?" He then flashed her a wicked wink. "I will also need un bouteille of the scotch mon Daniel like et un carton de cigarettes longues, s'il-vous plaît."

The big ring of keys rattled as she unlocked the wire cabinet the alcohol was kept in and pulled out the MacAllan and the cigarette carton. "Your boy has expensive tastes in scotch. Good thing he doesn't drink it too fast."

He nodded and settled the bottle into the bag, making sure it wouldn't fall out. "Oui. Just un peu on night. It smell nice when he drink it." He took out his wallet and handed over the credit card.

"Definitely knows his scotch and you're a good man to take care of him." She zipped the card through. "You need anything else last minute like, just give me a call. I'll have my boy bag it up and bring it over. And I expect an invite to the next shindig you boys throw, you hear?"

He nodded his head while he signed the bottom of the sales bill. "Oui. You are most certain on our guest list for le grand party for Labor Day. If we have smaller party before, I will make a call to you." He picked up the bag of assorted goodies then took her chubby hand in his and gave the side of it a light kiss. This always assured him a giggle and mock slap for being a flirt.

He was whistling to himself and securing the bag to make sure nothing fell out when his cell phone began to loudly play 'Carmen'. He checked the number before flipping it open. "Allô, Meredith. I am just finish at le store. Did you talk with Daniel?"

"No, damn thing is turned off and told me if my name was Felix or Jill to hang the hell up and bother you."

He laughed so hard he cackled. "Oh! That is my fault, Meredith. I ask for you to m'excuse. Gilles et Félix are friend of mine." He then composed himself again and spoke more calmly, still snickering inside. "But that mean he is either en classe or he is driving. I will tell him call you when he get home."

"Thanks. I have the flight info if you have a pen, or I can just give it to Grumpy Butt when he calls me."

He got out a pen and notepad from his basket and cradled the cell between shoulder and cheek, leaning on the scooter seat for a writing surface. "I have un pen et du papier. You can repeat it to him when he call, but this way it is not necessaire you remember."

"Excellent." She relayed the details. "Is there anything I should send with him besides some clean clothes and his gameboy?"

He thought about it for a moment while he finished writing down the flight information and times. "B'en, non, I do not think so, me. Anything he need, we can buy when he is here. Is there anything we should know ahead of time? Allergies? Food he like a lot?"

"Allergic to peanuts. As for food, he's not picky but likes plain stuff over fancy."

He noted that down and scratched peanut butter off the list of things to buy. "D'accord. It is all good, alors. I look forward to meet him and will make sure Daniel give you a call tonight."

"Thanks again, Aubin. You're a dear."

"It is pas de problème at all, Meredith. Very soon, we all will be famille. Our home is always open." He and Meredith once again shared a few more pleasantries and teases about Daniel before he finally hung up and headed for home.

He called out for Daniel as he entered the foyer and was pleased when there was no answer. He was in a good mood and felt like having fun with his lover when Daniel got in. Tease him, not to the point of being put out, but enough that it might warrant some fun retaliation. Aube's groin twitched at the thought of that.

He put on his briefest cut-offs and headed to the back garden, vodka cooler in hand and girly magazine under his arm. It would at least provide some amusement until Daniel arrived home.

He'd gotten a dozen pages in when the distinctive rumble of the mustang filled the narrow canyon-style space that was their driveway. The door slammed and then the crunch of gravel sounded as Daniel walked the length of the house to their backyard. "Aube?"

He peeked up over the edge of the magazine and then arranged himself in the deck chair in one of his more inviting poses and called out. "Oui, Daniel. I am in le jardin."

The footsteps came closer and then stopped. Daniel went silent. Another step and. "Um..."

He tilted his cheek up to invite a kiss hello, but tried his best to keep his expression neutral; even though inside he was jumping around with excitement. "Bonne soirée, mon amour. I was just getting un peu de sun. You have a good day at work, you?"

"Um. Yes?" Daniel was trying to get a look at the magazine without looking like he was trying to look.

Aube insistently tilted his cheek up further and tipped the magazine back against his chest, obscuring the page it was open to and letting Daniel fully see the surgically enhanced young lady sitting exposed on the cover. "That is good. Your classe, it went well?" He kept up the conversational tone as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on.

Daniel blinked at him and kissed him mechanically. "Went fine, thanks. What are you reading and why?"

He raised the magazine innocently and looked up at Daniel, batting his eyelids. "Cela? I think it is called 'Classy' and I buy it today. It not live very well to its titre, mon cher." He was very proud of himself -- still no hint of the snicker that was dying to get out.

"But why? I mean." Daniel was floundering for words. "It's just."

"I want to see what you see in such thing, Daniel. Beside I thought maybe your young man you have invite to stay with us might have taste similar to yours." He arched his eyebrow and peered at his lover, enjoying the floundering immensely.

"You bought that for--" Daniel's mouth fell open.

"I had un phone call très interressant today, mon amour. It seem that a very nice lady was looking for you about sending her son here." He smiled, but just slightly.

"And..." Daniel stopped and closed his eyes. "Merry. Charlie. You think Charlie is straight. So, you buy a girly magazine for a sixteen year old so he has one for his nightstand."

"Oui."

"You shit." Daniel grinned.

He grinned back at his lover and snickered. "It is because of that, you love me. I give you good amusements."

He finally put the magazine down and winked saucily at Daniel. "I had a few chat with your sister."

"We'll get to that shortly. First I have to get even for the teasing." Daniel tossed aside everything in his hands and bent down so he was eye-level with Aube. "So do you want to run and I catch you or are you just going to lie there and take your punishment like a man?"

Aube pretended to think about it, giggling. They both knew what his choice would be and that the whole thing was just one grand game. He leaned forward and gave his lover a quick kiss before saying. "I think I make you m'attrappe. You have to catch me."

He darted past Daniel and headed for the house.

Daniel snorted and then chased after him, fingers tangling in Aube's belt loops once they had both cleared the steps.

He pretended to struggle against Daniel, then sighed dramatically, leaning back against his lover and smiling. "I will have to become much faster if I wish to avoid being punished, I think."

"That would also require the whole 'not wanting to be punished' part Mr. Tiny-little-cut-offs-that-show-off-my-ass."

"These old thing? I was thinking of maybe water le jardin or something is all." He rubbed back against Daniel, rumbling happily in his chest. "Well, now you caught me, Monsieur Nichol, what you plan to do?"

The first swat to his jean-clad ass always made him jump. More at the surprise than the actual sting, but as the heat from the impact spread, he was finding his cut-offs were getting uncomfortably tight as he started to harden.

"You already know what I plan to do. I think you had this whole thing planned from the minute you got the phone call."

He tried to look apologetic and chastised, even slouching his shoulders some. "Non, Daniel. When I get phone call first thing I think is that it very funny your sister call you Grumpy Butt."

That got him another stinging slap against his ass.

He yelped and waited for the hurt to subside and add to the increasing heat he was feeling. Daniel was caressing the small of his back with the hand that still held him by the belt loops.

"Do not worry, mon amour, she and I will get to know each other much better still when she come make visite in a few week, her."

"She's coming for a visit, eh? Maybe I should head off to the bayou and let you two conspire without me," Daniel rumbled in his ear.

He rubbed his slightly warmed ass up against Daniel's groin, smiling to himself when he felt his lover's arousal. "Then we may be force to plan what you will wear to the wedding without you. Then you wear what we decide."

He made a half-hearted "attempt" at escape.

This time he ended up pressed against the wall that led upstairs. "Now, now, Mr. Marchand, none of that."

He tried to press himself away from the wall, but his lover managed to pin his arms behind him and held him there. His cut-offs had gone past being uncomfortable and

directly into torturous and he spread his legs, both to alleviate the pressure and as an open invitation.

So long as Daniel was not just of a mind to torture him. Which could be fun, too. "If you loosen votre grip, Monsieur Nichol, I promise to behave, me."

Daniel nipped at Aube's earlobe. "Oh, really?"

He gasped and let his head fall back against his lover's shoulder. The writhing became unconscious and more pronounced. "Oui, I feel like I am under arrest, Monsieur Nichol."

"That would take a badge and a gun." Daniel's voice got softer. "I just want to fuck you through the wall."

Aube felt his stomach clench momentarily at hearing those words spoken softly against his ear. The raw need in them used to send him skittering for safety. His mind had played tricks on him and all he had heard at one point had been the drunk slur from the night he was attacked. In increments he'd managed to quell the panic. This was his Daniel speaking to him. He trusted Daniel more than anyone else in his life. He was growing to enjoy these moments more, to encourage them, knowing if he ever said 'stop', his lover would.

"Oui, Daniel. Fuck me."

One of Daniel's hands slid under the ragged hem of Aube's shorts, rubbing the curve of his ass before sliding towards the crack.

He moved his head to a cooler spot on the plaster surface of the wall, his breath puffing back at him in warm gasps.

Daniel's hand teased and tickled him, making him squirm in earnest. "You torture me."

His lover chuckled and rested his other hand on Aube's hip, freeing Aube's hands. "Because we both like this part the best."

"Because you are sadiste and I am un maso." He laughed as he braced his hands against the wall to push back, getting a better angle to invite a kiss.

"But we have such fun while we're doing it." Daniel gave him a gentle kiss, very much in contrast to the insistent movement of his fingers inside Aube's jeans.

Aube closed his eyes and sighed through his nose. The gentle kiss slowly deepened and his lover's hands stroked and caressed, expertly driving him out of his mind with need.

Daniel reached around the front of him and undid his cut-offs, freeing his erection. The relief was short lived as those maddening hands stroked his cock, causing lightning

shocks to dance up his spine. "Always ready for me, for this." Daniel kept stroking him, pushing him closer and closer to the edge.

"Oui!" he managed to gasp. He didn't trust himself to form coherent thoughts anymore. His lover had managed to turn his mind to jelly once again. Not that he would ever complain.

Until those horribly skilful hands left him for a moment and Daniel's solid weight was no longer pressed against his back. He growled and looked around for Daniel until he found himself pressed back up against the wall, more insistently this time. When Daniel's gel-cooled fingers penetrated him, he screamed and pushed back against them impatiently.

"Never rush this part," Daniel muttered. "Never ever."

"Daniel." Crazy, he thought his lover was torturing him. Daniel probably was, to a degree. He really seemed to enjoy watching Aube lost in pleasure, and Aube, for his part, loved to put on a show for Daniel.

Aube writhed, trapped between the wall and his lover, getting very close to the edge before Daniel would gentle him away again. Dimly, he thought he'd get revenge for it somehow.

Daniel slid into him and everything else faded away but that sensation; a heady, wonderful sensation of pain and pleasure that swallowed up the world and everything in it.

He couldn't breathe; his chest felt tight as he gasped for air, letting out long and ragged moans that rang loudly in his own ears. The first couple of strokes brought flashes behind his eyelids as Daniel's thrusts pounded into him, hitting exactly where he wanted them to. He cried out in earnest when he felt his lover bite at his neck.

Fingers gripped his hips, pulling him back in rhythm, tight enough to bruise. "Mine," whispered into his ear, the gentleness of Daniel's voice belying the movements that rocked the two of them together.

His fingers scrabbled against the plaster wall, trying to gain some purchase so he could push back harder against Daniel's sweat-slicked body. He growled in frustration as each of his attempts were thwarted by the increasing momentum of his lover, the relentless stab of Daniel inside him drawing increasingly louder moans from him.

This was the stage he never wanted to end; the wonderfully painful blade his lover set him on, allowing him to let go.

"Le mien..." was his last thought before his pleasure peaked and his body stiffened. He cried out his pleasure, an incoherent string of babbled curses and endearments spilling from him as well. He'd relaxed, floating in a wonderful muzzy state when he felt Daniel

press up hard against him, and hold there, trembling only slightly, the already tight fingers digging into him. He turned his head to whisper "Je t'adore, Daniel," into his lover's perspiration dampened neck.

"Mmm. Love you, too, Aube."

He nuzzled Daniel gently still using the wall to brace against, not trusting his legs at all. His lover was still holding on to him, most likely in the same state. He also enjoyed just the holding and being held. "Today I think on you all day, me. Maybe tonight I am inspire to make une sculpture."

"Been a while since that happened, the sculpture I mean," Daniel's voice was muffled against his neck. "What kept me in the forefront of your mind all day?"

"Remember, mon cher, your sister, Meredith, she make call à la téléphone to you today. She would like very much you make call to her about your nephew, Charles."

He sighed as Daniel gently pulled out, leaving behind a wonderfully warm ache. "So you should do that while we both remember, Danny." He snickered as he repeated the nickname Meredith had used for his sometimes brusque fiancé.

"Shouldn't make fun of a man with his dick hanging out in the breeze." Daniel mock-grumped at him. "And Danny is a perfectly good nickname."

"This time seem more apropos than when you try and make me part of wall tout permanent, Danny." He turned gingerly, his ass still tender from the few whacks. "We need faire cela more, us. Give grand surprise to anyone who come to door."

"Um. No."

Aube grinned and mock sighed at Daniel, pulling him closer again. "Maybe un repeat performance in notre chambre after you call ta sister? I made du shopping today and buy some things you peut-être find very intéressantes."

Without his lover even saying a word to him, just by the raising of one of his eyebrows he could tell Daniel was about to call him "insatiable" or just "goober". But he also knew, from the fire that still burned behind those silver-grey eyes, that Daniel would make the phone call as quick as he possibly could to take advantage of this.

Chapter 6

Aube chewed on his thumbnail, pulling the digit away from his mouth for a moment to inspect the ragged edge of his once perfect manicure. He tried to move his hand away from his mouth, but as soon as he wasn't paying attention, he'd be right back at it.

His stomach felt hollow and his head hurt. He scanned the crowd, looking for Andre, but was half-hoping his friend wouldn't show up. He didn't even know where to begin on this one.

How long should he stay before assuming that Andre hadn't received the message? Fifteen minutes? Half an hour? An hour? Andre would not be able to call him back, Aube had just had his cell number changed.

Andre slipped in the doorway and scanned the room, clearly checking to see if Aube was still there. He almost walked back out until Aube raised his hand tentatively. "Heyla, Aubin." Andre leaned over him, giving him a kiss on both cheeks before sitting across from him.

"Allo, Andre." Aube kissed him back and tried to smile, but felt it falter when his stomach clenched. Maybe on second thought, he couldn't do this. But he just needed to find out what to do. "I did not make order, yet. I wait see if you arrive." Four cups of coffee and many stubbed out cigarettes did not equal an order, but he really wasn't hungry either.

"I'll just do a crossiant and coffee then, to keep you company."

"B'en, b'en, alors..." He took a deep breath before lighting another cigarette, ignoring Andre's disapproving expression. "Thank you for coming at short notice."

Andre nodded. "I already finished the homily for this week. I had the time."

"B'en. I look forward to hear it on Wednesday." He smiled again, but Andre's face remained impartial. He'd done that since they were children.

Wait for Aube to just get tired of the dance and spill it already. But this was not about a broken window this time. "How is Daniel? I haven't seen him this week."

This was the easy part, even if his lover's name made his heart lurch in a way that made him want to throw up and not in its usual warm way at all. "He was very good when I see him this morning. His nephew is schedule to arrive to make visite to us this week end."

"Very nice. It will be good to see Daniel with family." Andre sipped at his coffee before adding the sugar and milk. "The coffee, it is crap here."

Aube nodded, and a sigh escaped before he could stop it. "Oui. I hope maybe I see it, too."

The cup paused on its way back to Andre's mouth. "Pardon? Why wouldn't you?"

"Andre? I did something very stupide, me." His voice cracked partway through the sentence and he couldn't look at his friend anymore. He felt his face getting hot. "Very, very stupide and now, I think maybe I do not know how to fix."

"Short of dead, anything is fixable. Tell me."

"Before I tell you whole thing, first there is something you must understand about my relationship with Daniel." Aube still didn't look up, he traced the outline of the spilled sugar with his eyes instead. "We are not all the time exclusive when it come to sex, us. He has his partner and I have mine and sometime he and I go to club and leave with other men."

"O-kay." Andre sat back in his chair and finally took that sip of coffee. "And that's worked for you so far."

He nodded and shrugged. "We do not have jealousy that way. Both very secure that we love only each other."

"Aubin, look at me." Andre tapped the table with his forefinger. "I know in my heart that Daniel will always love you. Now tell me what the problem is."

Reluctantly, he dragged his gaze up from the pile of sugar to look at Andre. The combination of worry and upset on his friend's face made his vision blur momentarily. He scrubbed his eyes with his sleeve. "A few month ago, I met Michel. He is painter and musician. He is very nice and we talk. We start sleep together almost immediate, but I tell him right from beginning, he can be my friend and we can sometime have sex, but I have a lover and nothing change that."

"And now you love him?"

"**Non!** Non... No more than I love a good friend. But, he has different idea."

Andre nodded sorrowfully. "So you need to let Michel down easy. That's a hard thing."

"I try, oui. I tell him and he say he understand. Then he ask maybe we keep go like before and that's when I do something stupide. I say, yes. I was so lone when I was away, it was nice to have someone talk to and... other thing. But then? He start call all the time. Want see me when we are here. I tell him no. He call more. I have cell change."

"Sucks. Doesn't know how to take a hint." Andre gave Aube's hand a squeeze.

"But. Maybe it very much could be interpret that he and I date. Helene thought I broke with Daniel. I do not know how to tell Daniel. I think he will be very hurt."

Andre didn't say anything, just sipped at his coffee and bit off the end of his pastry. His expression had gone smooth and cold.

Aube knew that look and his heart leapt into his mouth. He swallowed and picked up his own cup of coffee. "But, I never think we date. I would not do that... but maybe I was too lone. I do not know. I make grand fuck up of everything."

"First you apologize to Daniel."

Aube nodded, feeling the misery and shame creeping into the sick panic. Andre was pissed with him; he'd really screwed up.

"Next, you admit it got away from you. Then you come to dinner with me tonight and get drunk."

Aube nodded again. He knew what he had to do, but it would be difficult. If God was on his side, then he'd be the one to break the news to his lover and be able to start trying to make amends before it got worse. "Daniel, perhaps he will not want to come, him."

"I wouldn't blame him, but you'll need to be with someone and I'm great at ordering pizza."

"Maybe I will bring my toothbrush as well, just in case."

"If it'll make you feel better sure. If you think it's going to get you a kiss from me? Think again."

Aubin chuckled and shook his head. "I was thinking closer that if I get home and find the door bolted."

"Daniel isn't like that." His friend smiled.

He smiled back. No, Daniel wasn't. If anything, he'd say that the house was Aube's and go stay in a motel or with friends if he needed space to think. "I should go home, me, and tell Daniel now. Yes?"

"After you eat something, yes."

"I am half afraid that if I eat, I will dégoûter directly after." He still wasn't hungry, but there was never any sense of trying to derail Andre from this line of badgering. It was how he tried to take care of people when he'd run out of ways to help. Aube got the attention of one of the waiters and ordered dry toast and a water.

Andre just rolled his eyes. "Burn the toast, you'll need the carbon."

The 'ick' face escaped before he could stop it, but he nodded to the waiter, who wandered off. Aube just hoped he got the order even remotely correct. "I am a very lucky man to have Daniel."

Andre smiled as he drank his tepid coffee. "He's lucky to have you."

He puzzled over that for a moment. His dry, burnt toast arrived and he picked up a piece to nibble on to make Andre happy.

Finally he said. "Maybe the lucky part is just that we found someone who love us big."

"You are worthy of love, Aube. Remember that."

"Yes, I will try." Daniel would still love him, he knew that. But it would take some work to get their relationship back on track.

He swallowed a bit more of the toast before getting up and giving Andre a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you for listening. I will give you a call as I head over to your place."

"Good, good. See you then." Andre grabbed the check and stood. "See you tonight."

Aube took the check from him. He'd pay it on the way out. "For sure. Unless Daniel does me in." He winked at Andre and smiled at his own lame joke. Well, that part wasn't as bad as he thought. But he'd not let Andre think that telling Daniel would be easier than he hoped.

"You call me later." Andre gave him a long look. "At least say you're not coming over, neh?"

"I will for sure, Andre. Don't worry." He waved to his friend and left the cafe.

He fought the urge to dawdle too much on the way home, but it was tempting to just go shopping and hide. He stopped a few times in front of the elegant displays of the Burgundy antique dealers. He'd shake himself and start walking again. Every step brought him closer to doing exactly what he didn't want to. Daniel would be home from work today and waiting for him. They were supposed to be working in the garden today. The lanterns and weeding would just have to wait a bit longer. It was too bad that the pond was going to have to wait as well. It was so much fun designing it and listening to Daniel tell him to just 'scale it back. We don't need a moat'.

He reached their house. Daniel's car was in the driveway, but no music was spilling out of the open windows. The house windows were open though, and it was quiet. There were a couple pairs of jeans and some t-shirts out on the line drying, but other than that it

was still. He grasped the screen door handle firmly and opened it, calling out as he stepped into the semi-darkened hallway, "Allo? Daniel? You home?"

"Yeah, upstairs. Trying to clean out the dresser so Charlie has someplace to put his crap."

He toed off his grubby running shoes on the mat before heading upstairs, one at a time rather than his usual bounding. When he got to the landing, he could see Daniel in the guest room, emptying his art supplies out of drawers. Just the sight of it made his stomach drop and he wanted to run back down the stairs and out of the house.

Daniel glanced up at him and down at the stuff piled around him. "I got that art box thing you've wanted for months, but haven't figured out how to put it together." He waved a hand in the direction of the corner, behind the door.

"Oh. Merci, Daniel. Maybe together we can figure on it, later." He smiled and moved closer to the room. "Maybe we take down the curtain as well, put up something for boy instead of lace." Okay, so he was stalling. Just a second more. He'd ask Daniel to come to their room so they could talk. Or no, not there. The living room. Or the kitchen.

Daniel kept moving stuff into boxes and emptying drawers. "I doubt Charlie is going to notice the curtains, but if you think it's a good idea we can manage something."

"Sometime, it is the little thing that end up causing the big trouble." He said half to himself before clearing his throat and just screwing his courage to the sticking place. "Daniel? Could we maybe go to the living room? I need to talk with you over something."

"Sure." His lover stood and dusted off his hands. "What's up?"

"I think maybe when we get to the living room and you are sitting. Then I will talk." He reached over to take Daniel's hand and gave it a squeeze.

Daniel gave him a befuddled look, but kissed him on the cheek and followed Aube down the stairs.

When they were in the living room and Aube had Daniel settled on the comfy old-fashioned couch, he kissed his lover gently on the mouth before sitting next to him, telling him the whole story, the way he told Andre. From beginning to end. All the time keeping hold of both Daniel's hands in his own.

Daniel just looked sad when it was over. "You couldn't tell me you were lonely?"

He would rather the anger, really. He hated seeing Daniel like this. His expression still hoping maybe it was all a sick joke or a dream. "Daniel. I did not realize that was what it was until it get out of hand. Then? I turn down many out of town thing."

"Ignorance then."

"Who know what cause it, Daniel. Mais, I just think it was fun thing, like you and David have. Then, it get away from me."

Daniel had already known and was just waiting for him to come to him about it. That explained the lack of music and outdoors. He also made a mental note to rake Helen over the coals. He'd told her that there was no problem between him and Daniel. "When?"

"This morning. Michel called." Daniel sighed.

"And then I come home and confirm something you were hoping was not true."

"It could have been much worse." Daniel leaned forward and gave Aube a kiss. "I thought maybe you'd found someone else."

He could have passed out right there on the couch, relief seemed too small a word for what he was feeling. He pulled Daniel close and held him. "Non. Never. I never even considère look. I just keep hoping that Michel would get hint when I tell him that non, he is not my boyfriend and please stop calling."

"You need to tell him that in front of me. Sometimes, you aren't so clear in English."

Aube paused. The thought of Michel and Daniel ever crossing paths hadn't occurred to him. He looked into Daniel's eyes. It was important to his lover to actually hear him say this. Not over the phone or in a letter, but introduce them and tell Michel for once and for all that it's over. "Oui. Okay, I will tell him in front of you."

"Sometimes you aren't the only one who worries." Daniel's expression was odd. Half-hurt and half-sad.

The relief bubbled up and broke. Aube pulled Daniel in tighter. "Je t'adore. Just you."

"Love you," Daniel murmured, burying his face in Aube's neck.

"I never meant for Michel to take it wrong, Daniel." He rubbed Daniel's back, not sure what else to do.

"I know you didn't. I just." Daniel shrugged. "Anyway, it's going to be fine."

"Non, Daniel. You have to say thing or they lie between us and rot and make un poison." He steeled himself, readying for whatever his lover had to say.

"I thought you were leaving me for someone else. You know, an artist who understood you."

"Daniel. You don't need understand all of thing I do. You have faith with me and told me I have talent, keep me go when I want just stop. That is much better."

Daniel snorted and pulled away. "I'll keep that in mind for next time when I spend the day wondering after phone calls from your frantic lover, okay?"

"Daniel? There will not be 'next time'. I did not mean for you ever to make question of our relationship. I tell Helene we fine and I tell Michel he was not my boyfriend and it over."

"But you never told me about him. How am I supposed to believe you?"

"It was not important to me. It was important when I get home to you, I was away too much."

"Oh." Daniel blinked. "So you just totally missed that the guy was in love with you? And that makes it okay?"

"Non. I never said it was okay, me. I never expect he get feeling for me. I think he is not in love, he think he is. We meet up, we talk and we make sexe. C'est tout." Aube kept his voice even. Any remnants of relief were now gone and it felt like he'd drunk cold water too quickly.

"Don't leave out the part where you don't tell me about it." Daniel got to his feet. "Okay, I'm going for a walk."

"D'accord, I should have told you, Daniel." Aube let his head droop. "Did you want me here when you return to the house?"

"I'm not sure I'll have anything more to say about it, but yes I'd like you to be here. I just need to think."

"D'accord. I will make call to Michel and make meeting for us." He watched Daniel walk out the door. The stone in his stomach made him feel ill.

He didn't so much as glance backwards as he let the screen door slam shut behind him. What an idiot! What an idiot they both were. Him for being concerned, Aube for not even noticing. The whole thing just felt so stupid. He walked, not even looking where he was going, but letting his feet carry him as he tried to figure out what had really happened.

Or did it even really matter what had happened? No, right now, he decided, it didn't. What mattered was that Aube had said he didn't mean it, that it was over and that he still loved Daniel. The day spent wondering off and on what the hell was going on, the hours

with the disconnected phone, it meant nothing and he would get over it. He just needed to walk it out first.

Dusk was deepening by the time Daniel arrived back at the house. Soft lights in the windows indicated that Aube was still home. The porch light was on as well. He was careful to kick off his filthy sneakers before coming into the living room. Aube was asleep on the couch, his face was still pinched and he was clutching one of the cushions tightly to him. He did that sometimes when things got stressed. Fall asleep.

Daniel crouched next to the sofa and gently tapped Aubin on the shoulder. "Go upstairs to bed."

His lover opened his eyes and blinked a few times before rubbing. He shook his head. "I am not tire, me. I only close my eye for a minute."

"You've had a stressful day, go rest. I'll be up after I eat something."

Aube opened his mouth and looked like he was going to protest again, but then closed it and nodded, sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the couch and setting the cushion aside.

"Did you get a hold of the guy?" Daniel waited, steadying Aube as he stood.

His lover nodded. "I tell him we meet him at his hotel at tomorrow about twelve noontime."

"Cool. I'll meet you there on my lunch hour. Just let me know what hotel it is in the morning."

"D'accord. I will wait in foyer for you." Aube was looking at him, his eyes were clear, but shadowed. "Alors..." His voice trailed off.

"Yes?" He waited patiently.

His lover just shrugged. "I will go bed, maintenant. Tell you in morning which hotel, like you say. Bon appetite."

"Okay." It seemed that Aubin was not feeling up to talking. "Sleep well and I love you."

He got a gentle smile out of his lover. "Je t'adore aussi, Daniel. Maybe tomorrow I can think much better."

"Rest." Daniel gave him a kiss and a shove toward the stairs.

There were a few backward glances as he watched his lover wander out of the room in his almost haphazard fashion. Aube finally reached the stairs and waved to him before going up toward their bedroom. This was not going to be a restful night.

Chapter 7

Aube checked his cell for the time. Almost noon. He lit another cigarette off the embers of the one in his hand and inhaled deeply. Daniel would be here soon, he just hoped that Michel didn't come down to see if he was here yet before that happened.

Daniel slipped in the door and walked up to him, fortunately he was in plain clothes today and not his uniform. "Hey."

Aube grinned and stubbed out the smoke in the pedestal ashtray. He gave Daniel and quick kiss. "Allo. I was worry maybe something came up."

"Nah, I just had to finish off a counseling session and catch a cab over here."

"Bon, bon." Aube took a deep breath and let it out. It was going to be now, before his courage actually deserted him. "Alors. Michel is in room 206, up the stair from courtyard."

Daniel nodded. "Let's do this."

He took Daniel's hand and walked with him out into the steamy courtyard of the hotel. It was a nice, old French Quarter house with a large garden yard and a fountain that had been converted into a pool. It would be nice to come back here with Daniel to have a week end, perhaps. The stairs were old and iron, but sturdy. They clanged under his and Daniel's shoes.

"Is he cute?" Daniel asked, his voice light and teasing.

He chuckled in response and shrugged mock nonchalantly. No reason to lie about it, Daniel would see Michel in a moment. "Very. If you like that sorte de chose."

His lover snorted a chuckle as they reached the door. Daniel reached out and knocked.

"Who is it?" Michel's voice was half muffled by the door.

"C'est Aubin, Michel. I am here with Daniel." Aube tried not to roll his eyes too much. Of course it was him, was Michel expecting half of New Orleans here at noon?

There was the sound of a bolt being slid back and the door opened, the smell of marijuana wafting out. Michel peeked out at them. He was just as pretty as ever. Young, fine featured with curly blond hair. Aube's courage fled and he flinched to back away. It was one thing over the phone, but this? Daniel's hand was like iron on his.

Michel stepped back and motioned to them. "Come in."

Daniel shouldered his way in first, taking in the room before stepping to the right and letting Aube in.

He followed his lover in. The room looked like a whirlwind had gone through it, but Aube was used to that from Michel. A field of temporary chaos seemed to follow him.

"Michel..." Aube started tentatively. "This is Daniel, mon fiancé." Okay, that was a stupid way to start.

"Nice to meet you." Daniel held out his hand, which was ignored.

"Aubin...you have a fiancé?"

Regret was slowly being turned into a little pique. "Michel. Don't start playing that game with me. I tell you I am engaged when we meet, and I talk about Daniel to you. Don't make it sound like this big surprise."

"I thought you were just saying that to be difficult."

"Non. Michel. I was saying it so you would know I am not your boyfriend. I was friend and sometimes we make sexe. C'est tout."

"You said that on the phone, too." Michel was pouting now.

"He meant it," Daniel interrupted. "So stop calling."

Michel turned and looked at Daniel like it was the first time he registered someone besides himself and Aube was in the room. Aubin felt a shock hit his nervous system, the last thing he needed was for Michel to say something stupid and inflammatory to Daniel. That would get them nowhere. He took hold of both of Michel's shoulders and made Michel look at him. "Michel. I am very sorry if you got wrong idea. I thought I made it all very clear. Mais, if you thought maybe you win me away from Daniel eventually, which maybe I think is closer to truth, you were very wrong. I never said you had big future with me, I said I have future with someone else and I love him all my soul. I never tell you I love you."

"But...I love you."

"Michel..." He was going to rebuke Michel, but he just couldn't. He saw himself when he was younger wondering why Noah just wasn't in love with him as well. He smiled.

"Michel, you are bright young man, very attractive and have much talent. You deserve someone who love you very much. This person is not me. I am in love with Daniel. I am always going to be in love with Daniel. Et, I think somewhere there is someone who will return love as big as you give out to you. Please, don't keep hoping that maybe I will become them."

Michel backed up a step. "I get it. You came to tell me in person because this guy made you, yeah?"

"Non. Daniel cannot 'make me' do anything. I am stubborn like ass. It was my decision. I thought maybe if you see that he is real maybe you change your mind." Aube backed away and reached out for Daniel's hand. It was warm and solid in his grip.

"Maybe we should go," Daniel said as Michel turned away.

"Oui. Perhaps it is best. For what it is worth to you now, Michel. I mean everything I say and I do care for you as friend and hope for you maybe one day you find someone who make you happy for always."

The only sound in the room after that was the click of the doorknob opening. The tension hung heavy, so much so it seemed to be bowing Michel's shoulders. Aube knew that look instinctively. A broken heart was unmistakable. They were out of the hotel and walking down the sidewalk before he realized his cheeks were wet. Daniel just held onto his hand and kept silent. His chest and throat were aching. He couldn't swallow. He'd never meant to hurt anyone. Not Daniel, not Michel. Michel did deserve better than him.

He kept thinking about that bowed and defeated look.

By the time they were at their home, the tears were dripping from his chin. Daniel just pulled Aube into his arms and held on. Daniel. The look on his face. The artbox he'd bought after months of Aube waffling on the idea. All signs of 'please don't leave me'. No one had ever actually understood him more. He hugged Daniel close and let out just one sob. "Pour toujours, mon amour. Il n'y a aucune personne au monde qui m'adore comme toi."

"You are my world and my life," Daniel murmured into his hair. "Thank you."

"I do not deserve you."

"Then I will have to say the same." Daniel wiped the tears off of Aube's face with his thumbs. "I guess we're stuck with each other."

He grinned at that. "It would be only punishment that fit us."

Daniel pulled him in close again. "Yes."

He rested like that for a long moment, feeling Daniel's pulse where his cheek rested, the solid warmth of his lover's body. Finally, he kissed Daniel's neck and pulled away a bit. "I would very much like stay like that for all the day, me. But, your lunch must be almost complete and you have not eaten yet."

"True." Daniel nodded. "I'll grab a sandwich or something and call a taxi."

"I also have buy you some of those Joe Louis you call Moon Pie for snack."

"Uh. Okay. Thanks." Daniel pulled his pants up a bit and then headed for the door. "See you tonight?"

"Oui. Of course. Today, I think maybe I finish clean up guest room for your nephew." He smiled and watched Daniel's hands as they tucked away the T-shirt that had come loose.

"Cool. If you feel ambitious there is the art box. I'm hopeless at that stuff."

"You just like pretend you are." Aube smiled. "You know difference from ecrue, eggshell et ivoire."

Daniel batted his eyelashes. "I'm gay, honey, not dead."

Aube rolled his eyes in return. "And yet you still wear grubby jean."

"I wouldn't want to out-dress you." Daniel waved and walked out.

Aube sighed and looked around. Yes, first he'd tackle the guest room. He needed to keep himself busy.

He and Daniel would be all right. He just hoped Michel would be as well.

The sun was spilling cheery light through the open curtains on the French doors of their bedroom, but Daniel, for once, was not heeding her call. Aubin had kept them both up until the wee hours of the morning putting the final touches he considered "necessaire" to the guest room for Charlie's arrival.

Then equally "necessaire" was the sex play as soon as they managed to fall into bed. He smiled into his pillow and pulled the sleepy form of his lover closer. He never minded losing sleep to that.

Unfortunately his movements caused Aubin to stir slightly. "Daniel? What the time is?"

He lifted his arm enough to look at his watch. "It's past ten. Plenty of time."

There was a nod of auburn hair and Aubin relaxed again in his arms, but the lack of snores told him that his lover was still awake. "Mon amour, we have finish everything, oui?"

"That all depends on whether or not you still want to dust," he teased gently. Apparently Paulette really had taught Aube how to clean; he just never used the skills.

His lover snorted and rolled onto his back so he was looking at Daniel. His eyes carried a hint of humor. "Non.. mais peut-être there is still thing I need to polish, oui?"

Daniel grinned and scratched his stomach. "Well, if you're feeling generous...."

His lover leaned up and kissed his chest right above the nipple, tracing down toward it slightly, then gave him a wicked grin "Oui?"

"Oui," he mimicked. "Or I can do for you, if you rather."

"Non... last night, mon amour. You make me go out my head. Ce matin..." Aubin's head dipped down again and another warm, wet kiss was placed on his chest. He arched as Aubin tweaked his nipple sharply. "Ce matin it my turn."

He could only strangle out a moan as his lover's warm, moist tongue flicked over his other nipple, causing sparks of sensation to shoot through his system. "Um. Okay," he finally managed to say before falling flat on his back.

Aubin's whole mouth was quite talented and he never failed to enjoy every aspect of it that he could. As his lover snaked his tongue out again to lick, Daniel closed his eyes. When the warm, gentle kisses started moving down his torso, he balled his fists into the sheets to try and keep from pressing his lover's head down to where he wanted it. Aubin never rushed this. Part of him was glad for it, the rest of him was cursing Aube's name.

Finally, after what felt like forever, he could feel Aubin's mouth wrap around his cock. Daniel gasped, locking his knees and feeling the sheet rip under his hands as he tried not to thrust up. Not yet. It wasn't time yet. When Aube stopped and tapped on his leg with one hand, Daniel howled. He managed to lift his head and look.

There was that damned smile.

He growled and the smile got wider. He growled again.

Aubin flicked his tongue against the sensitive underside of his cock. "Is there something you would like, Monsieur Nichol?"

Before he could grind anything out past his desperation, Aubin steadied his shaft and swallowed it down in one fluid movement. His lover's cheeks were hollowed as Aube worked on his cock, the wicked tongue dancing along the underside. His lover's throat contracted rhythmically around him and a finger reached under him to tease along the crack of his ass.

He was lost to the sensations and yelped when he felt the slick digit thrust its way into him. As it curled and rubbed against his prostate, the last coherent thought Daniel had was that his lover was in dire need of either revenge or reward -- something with an 'r'.

He thrust up into the welcoming heat several times and impaled himself on the wicked finger before his balls drew up. His whole body stiffened. He cried out and then lay on the damp, torn sheets panting.

"It was good, oui?" Aubin looked up at him from Daniel's hip. Aube had the nerve to smile at him in that innocent way while still licking the remnants of Daniel's completion from his lips.

He tugged gently on Aube's hair, urging Aube to come up and lie next to him, meeting his lover with a soft kiss. "What are you thinking?"

"I think, me, if I faire cela very much; we need new sheet, us." His lover chuckled and held up the hem of the sheet with the holes torn in it.

"They were old anyway." He shrugged and gave Aube a gentle squeeze. "Thank you."

Daniel stared up at the ceiling and tried not to stress about Charlie's visit. He refused to call the boy 'Chuck'. Chuck was a man's name and the twerp hadn't earned it yet, not that he could tell. He was fully expecting trouble given all the problems Merry had had with the boy over the last couple of years. It had escalated to fights and petty theft. Oh, and bigotry. It was time for Uncle Dan to see what he could do, or at least give his little sister a break for a while.

He'd let his friends at work know and had told some of the neighbors about his nephew. Gossip should take care of the rest and if 'Chuck' got into any shit while he was here, then Daniel would know about it before Charlie cleared the front stoop.

He felt his lover tap him on the end of the nose to get his attention. "Daniel, you make ta frown face. You think on la visite? I think, me, it will be okay. I have take time also with no trip plan."

"Yeah. It'll be fine." He'd just keep telling himself that as they fell further and further behind on the wedding. He was just going to start planning it for late March in San Francisco like he'd wanted once Aube's show'd really taken off.

His lover smiled at him, then rested against his shoulder, idly playing with his chest hair. "There are many thing we make des plan à faire. There is Six Flag et du baseball. I buy des clothe he will not be all embarrass by, me. You can have talk with him. It will be tout b'en."

"Clothes he will not be embarrassed by? For you or for him? I don't want you to change one bit for the little shit." Now he was getting angry over Aube's need to please some part of Daniel's family he hadn't even met yet.

His lover averted his eyes and blushed. "They were for me, Daniel. I think peut-être it would help keep thing smooth. Do not be angry against me. I try and help."

"Charlie's biggest problem is that he never thinks outside the box. Outside what he wants." Daniel took a deep breath and tried to calm down. "That's the whole family's problem, actually. You shouldn't have to change for them."

"I just want them to like me. Think on what it will be like when we marry. I do not like idée I have whole famille who not like me. I have my own for cela." Aubin started to sit up. They'd clearly never see eye to eye on this need to be accepted issue.

Daniel debated letting Aube go. Maybe it would be better to just drop it. He sat up. "They'll like you for being brave enough to wear those pink pants, not because you tried to hide what makes you *you*."

His lover's posture relaxed and Aube leaned back against him, letting out a sigh. "I guess we will see si mon personlité can win them over, eh? It work on you, Grumpy Butt." Aubin started to snicker.

That's when he decided it was time for revenge. Merry would get hers when he saw her next, but now was perfect for Aubin. He struck hard and fast, tickling. "I'll show you grumpy butt."

He lover let out an eardrum piercing shriek as his body started to contort, trying to protect itself against the attack. "Daniel!" was all his lover managed to get out before a fit of laughter hit him and he flopped over again, trying to wriggle away. Between panting breaths, as he got more composed, his lover gasped. "Si. tu. start. this. we. be. en. retard."

"True." He got in one last wiggle across Aube's stomach before he crawled out of bed and stretched. "Shower and dressed to be at the airport by 12:30."

He was gifted with a few residual giggles as Aubin calmed down again. "Did you want me venire with you to l'aérogarde, or it be easier if I wait here for vous deux?"

"Either way is fine." He smiled. "I wouldn't mind the company, but you've got pieces to finish for the gallery, too. More swans, yes?"

"Oui. Et they want une autre pièce unique for un galloire." Aube beamed and puffed up his chest. "Mais, I bring home les thing I need, me. So then I can be free to keep you company." His lover got up and stretched. "You shower first, you. I go in after."

Showered, shaved, and dressed in jeans and a decent button down shirt, he was ready and waiting for Aube to finish. He'd snuck in a cup of coffee and scanned the headlines on the paper, too.

Finally his lover emerged from the bathroom, somewhat toned down from his usual flare in clothing, but not altogether. Aube still had on a mauve baby-tee with "princess" in glitter on it. Daniel, himself, had bought it for his lover.

"I am all ready, mon amour. I just need mes lunettes solaires. Sunglass... Les one bleues."

"You look dashing and debonair, my man." Daniel put on his Raybans. "I think you left them in the Mustang when we went out yesterday."

His lover smiled at him and pinched his ass gently on the way by. "Ah oui, I think you are correcte, me. When we went to home super-centre pour chercher less femme curtain for guest room, us."

Aubin climbed into the car first, putting on his blue "porn star" sunglasses and checking his reflection in the vanity mirror. Daniel sighed to himself. At least Aubin had stopped yanking on the rear view mirror for that.

"I really don't think Charlie was going to be offended by the lace curtains we bought for your mother, Aube." He slipped into the driver's seat and got buckled in before starting the car. "It's a guest room."

"Et now our guest room have two set of curtain, Dannie. It work out very good, callis. Beside, I bought des tie for le gauze around notre bed. So now you not have fight with it when you get in et out. So it b'en worth it, oui?" His lover shrugged and opened the glove compartment, looking for something. He found the pack of gum he'd put in there the day before and then settled back and buckled up.

"True." He snagged a piece of the gum and popped it into his mouth before backing the car out of the driveway. "Tropical fruit again?"

"Oui, j'aime tropical fruit." Aubin smiled at him and opened a piece of gum for himself. "If you have request, then next time I am at confectionnaire, I get it. I was going to get cinnamon, me, but if people in commercial are indication, then we need only sometime in private. Or else, we can be arrest, je pense."

His lover laughed at his own joke and waved at the squad car they pulled up next to at a traffic light.

He did his own wave to the patrolmen as they waited. "It would be rather hard to explain to the boys, wouldn't it?"

"Kevin would laugh for une whole week, I think, me. Then he would think on it et laugh more." Aubin grinned at him and thankfully did not motion to the cops next to them to roll down their window so he could have a chat with them.

But then they were new to the force and had not met Aubin yet. Last time they had pulled up next to one of the cops Aube did know, Daniel thought for a moment they would all have to get a coffee so they could finish their conversation. The guys teased him all the time about his social life-in. He just teased them right back about their lack of a social life -- and ate dirt at every baseball game. It all worked out. He pulled away and then they were on the highway to the airport. He popped in a new CD they'd gotten as a freebie outside one of the clubs. His lover started to bounce and 'dance' to the music as the bass pumped out from the speakers. "Oh j'aime cette song, Daniel!!" He reached over and turned up the volume to the point where the seats themselves were vibrating.

Aubin pointed to Metairie Cemetery, the turnoff before the airport, as they went by it, and then yelled over the music, "Dannie, you think, you, ton nephew would like un tour hanté?"

Daniel raised one eyebrow and dropped the volume on the stereo. "Yes, I'm sure he would if it was gory enough."

His lover just smiled at him and made 'spooky fingers'. It took Daniel some finagling and possibly cutting off a guy in a minivan to get a good spot on the pick up area of Louis Armstrong International. It was the summer and the airport was busy with locals still heading out of town and tourists streaming in to take advantage of the much cheaper prices.

He waited by the baggage claim for Charlie, having sent Aubin off to find the lemonade and iced tea stand. It would be easier to meet up with Charlie without Aube, and his lover seemed to get that, at least. He was happy enough as he wandered off watching people in the airport even if he would rather ram Charlie and Aube together at high speed and make them cope with each other immediately.

And there was Charlie, right on time, backpack over his shoulder and trying to look nonchalant as he stared around at the strange airport. Daniel forcibly reminded himself that it was his nephew's first big trip on his own and that the boy might not be a complete idiot. Yeah, right. He remembered what he'd been like at sixteen; thin and wiry and with more bumps on his face than a cheese pizza with extra sausage. Nothing like the hulking linebacker that was his sister's little boy. He was already taller and heavier than Daniel. He'd definitely grown since Daniel had seen him last, at the Memorial Day thing.

Daniel raised his hand slightly before stuffing it back in his pocket. "Heya."

Charlie spotted him and smiled, the smile getting broader when he saw Daniel was alone. "Uncle Dan!"

"Good to see you again." When Charlie got close enough they hugged briefly, then broke apart. "Good flight?"

"Yeah, the usual." Charlie shrugged. "Mom says hi and all that."

"We'll call her after we get your bag. Aubin's off grabbing some drinks. He should be here by the time we're ready to bail."

Charlie's face fell. "So, he's like, real and stuff? You didn't make him up to tease Grandpa."

Taking a strong hold of his temper Daniel nodded. "He's real. You know he is, he's talked to your mom a couple of times. And I'd never tease my father about something like that."

"Yeah, okay." Charlie turned away and tuned him out.

Or tried to. "None of that shit, Charles."

Charlie turned to look at him, shocked at the flat tone and use of his Christian name. "Uncle Dan?"

"Aubin is the most important person in my life right now and if you're going to be an ass, I'm going to whoop it on a regular basis until you get a clue. No bullshit in my house or you'll find yourself in a world of hurt. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir." Charles's eyes were as big as saucers.

"Good." Now to see how long it would last. He didn't think it was going to survive the meeting with Aubin, who was twisting through the crowd even now, three drinks balanced in a cardboard tray. "Behave, here he comes."

Aubin at least was playing oblivious, and his expression brightened when he saw them. Unlike his customary falling all over a new person and kissing them on both cheeks in greeting, his lover hung back and smiled at Charlie, offering him his hand to shake. "Salut, Charle. Ton oncle has tell me so much of you. But I was not positive, me, if you like limonade ou thé glacée. So you choose which you want and I will have other."

Daniel watched carefully as Aubin handed him his iced tea. He spotted the shiny new mardi gras beads wrapped around his lover's wrist and the fact he'd not tried to cover the bright bite on his inner arm. Okay, so this was Aube's attempt at compromise. Fair enough.

Charlie gave Daniel a significant glance and then reached for the iced tea. "Tea is fine, thanks Aube." He'd ignored the hand held out to shake. "Lemonade would be for my mom."

Aubin pulled his hand back and took the tea out and gave it to the boy, then took the lemonade for himself, shrugging, his smile not faltering a beat. "Ah oui? I will remember that, me, when we come to pick her up. I like it b'en, me, if it is not trop sugar."

Aubin looped his arm around Daniel's waist. "You not tell me he was so look like you, Daniel."

He chuckled. "That would all be the fault of my father."

His lover grinned at him and led them over to where Charlie's bags would be on the conveyor. "You not tell me ton father is si cute, then. I have found where bags will be, me. I talk to le mec who sell the bead and he tell me."

Charlie gave the beads a long glance. "Think maybe I can get some of those while I'm here?"

Aubin smiled and unwound a few strands, offering them up. "Can start on ta collection now, us. Ton oncle and me, we have lots, us. There are many place we can go and find them for you."

"Thanks." Charlie grabbed them and wrapped them around his wrist the way Aube had.

Daniel covered up a smile and just herded both of them toward the luggage carousel. "I think Aube has some sightseeing trips planned for your visit."

Aubin smiled openly and Daniel felt him give a squeeze. "Oui, I have many thing plan for b'en du fun. There is Six Flag... Des tour to look for vampire. There is des river boat..."

Daniel gave Charlie a significant glance. "See, these are all things that Aube wants to do anyway and I'm too much of a lump to go...."

Charlie looked like he didn't know quite what to say.

His lover laughed and gave him a peck on the cheek. "You are not lump, you. We just have un excuse now, not make busy with work et plan. We can suspend tous et faire these thing. We have b'en du fun us!"

"Yes." He gave Aube a long gentle kiss as they stopped in front of the baggage. Longer than he'd normally give in public, but there was a point to be made.

And the point had been received, if Charlie's expression was anything to go by. He moved away from them and watched the luggage conveyor intently, chewing the inside of his lip.

Daniel looked to Aubin, who winked saucily at him and he jumped from the quick pain of the goosing that followed. His lover turned to say something to Charlie, then shut his mouth again, just smiled instead.

He grinned and rocked back on his heels. Okay, score one for the home team.

When Daniel had come downstairs to get his breakfast and read the paper, Aubin and Charlie had still been trying to out-sleep each other. It had been mildly entertaining to watch them dance around each other last night, neither quite sure what to make of the other, and this morning it came down to a marathon lie-in. Even for Aubin. They'd have to find common ground. Daniel had only taken today off to get Charlie settled, then the two of them would be on their own tomorrow.

The paper was out on the porch. He grabbed it as the coffee was perking, flipping through the headlines. An hour later there had been vague rumblings from upstairs but that was it. It was time for the big guns. He got out the pitcher of ice water and headed upstairs.

He stood briefly on the landing, trying to decide which one he would rouse first. He thought perhaps Aubin, after all he was in his twenties and should be beyond the games of a teenager. But then if he doused the bed as well, he'd have to sleep on a semi damp mattress. Besides, there were other ways to get to Aubin.

He headed to the guest room, pitcher in hand, pulled back the covers on the day bed, and unceremoniously dumped the contents of the pitcher on Charlie. His nephew seemed to levitate from the bed under the force of the indignant scream "Uncle Dan!!"

He grinned. That yell should get Aubin up. "Morning, Charles," he drawled. "Or should I say afternoon? Get up, the day's awasting."

Charlie gave him a murderous look as he sat in the middle of his now-sodden bed. Daniel's grin widened when he heard the rushed footsteps from their bedroom come up behind him.

"Qu'est-ce qui est arrivé, Daniel? What happen? I hear un scream." Aubin was pulling on his never before used house coat over his boxers.

"I was just encouraging my nephew to shower, that's all." He crossed his arms over his chest and gave them both a look. "I thought we'd go out to lunch and then find an arcade."

Charlie got up from his bed and pulled the cover back to the end, shrugging. "Cool" seemed to be all he had to offer up to the conversation at the moment.

"That sound good, Daniel. Peut-être ton nephew would like to have un Po'Boy ou muffleтта? We can go to Café du Monde ou Chez Napoléon?"

"Or we can go for normal food with normal people." Charlie muttered under his breath.

Daniel raised one eyebrow at that. "That is normal for here, shithead."

Aubin looked at Daniel and smiled , then kissed him on the cheek. "I will be happy no matter where we eat, mon amour. Peut-être Charle would like McDonald ou Burger King. I will get shower, me, and dress. Check and see ou les arcades are. Je pense there is un dans Mall Riverwalk."

"Take your time in the shower, Aube. I want to join you." He didn't take his eyes off of Charlie as he said it.

His lover smiled wider and nodded, disappearing back down the landing to the bathroom. This left him and Charlie alone for a moment. The teen looked at him, just over his shoulder. "What? He said he didn't care where we eat."

"Your momma raised you better than that. I suggest between now and when we get in the car you remember that." He turned on his heel and left Charlie standing there. Damned if he was going to let his snot-nosed nephew insult his lover.

When he entered the bathroom, Aubin was just getting into the shower and adjusting the temperature. Aube winked and sprayed the water at him. "I better be careful, me, hmm? Or else tomorrow you maybe soak me."

He grinned and wiped the water out of his face. "Not likely. I don't want a wet bed to sleep in."

"It never une problème for you, Daniel." Aubin's tone was becoming teasing and he turned his back to Daniel. "You always try and make me sleep in le wet spot, you."

Daniel stepped into the shower, pressing up against Aube. "You're used to the cold and wet, being from Canada and all."

"I thought it was le sud de les States that was known for l'humidité, mon amour." His lover shifted back against him, sighing.

"We are. We like it wet and hot," he said softly into Aube's ear before groping for the washcloth and soap. "Good morning, lover."

Aubin shivered before turning in his arms, giving him a soft kiss. "Bon matin, mon amour." His lover pulled him close, but looked apprehensive. "Daniel, your nephew is only room away, him."

"I know. I also know he's going to imagine things far more lewd than we'll do." He dunked his head under the stream of water and reached for the shampoo. "Besides, the hot water heater isn't that big."

"We need un plus grand heater, then, us." Aube looked disappointed, grabbed his sponge and started to lather it, then he recovered and smiled as he moved Daniel out of the way to hog the spray.

Daniel smiled gently and pushed, less than gently, taking back some of the water flow. "Don't worry, I've arranged for Kevin to meet us for dinner somewhere and take the boy out with some of the other kids from around the station. Give him some people his own age to hang out with, and Kevin wants to meet some of my family, too."

"It will be tout b'en, alors. He will have place to make escape to when you are at work, you. Kevin is si cool." Aubin's smile was still bright and the way he jostled for domination of the shower spray again to rinse was still playful, but Daniel noted that a flatness had crept into the background of his tone.

"Talk to me." He stopped moving, stopped playing. "What's going on?"

"It nothing, Daniel. I just know I must work very hard, me. But it is okay." His lover shrugged and reached past him to turn off the water. "We need leave some hot water for Charle shower also, mon amour. Even si he might want sit en water cold when day heat up."

"No. Wait a minute." He blinked and ran the conversation back over in his head again. "Work very hard? Never. It's family, Aube. You be yourself for family."

"Je sais, Daniel. I know. They like me ou non. Does not mean I should not want they should." Aubin made a gesture like he was sweeping away cobwebs, like he always did when dismissing unpleasant thoughts. "Peut-être today I will wear la chemise de poète you buy me other week."

Daniel suppressed a wince. He knew what Aubin wanted, he wanted it for himself sometimes. Just to be accepted as they were. "Yeah, sure. Whatever." He rinsed off quickly and stepped out of the shower. "I think I have some clean shirts left."

"Oui. I made the washing just other day. Je pense. Ce week, at least. Ou more correcte, André made the washing, I keep him company au washing shop." That was it, subject dropped.

"Thanks for doing that. I'll go on Thursday and do a couple of loads." He kept his sigh purely internal. Aube would not appreciate being pressured. Daniel wrapped a towel around his waist and opened the door, surprising Charlie who had had his ear pressed up to the wood. "Something I can help you with?"

His nephew looked at him, eyes round as saucers. He backed up quickly, bumping into the small table on the landing and knocking it over. "I just wanted to check and see if you guys were done." He stammered out as his face flushed deep red.

"Done showering? Yes," he said evenly. He hid a smile as he felt Aube poking him in the back, unable to see what was going on. "I'm gonna grab my razor and shave downstairs so you can get started."

He advanced, watching Charlie back away from him. With as much nonchalance as he could muster he picked up the table and righted it. "And if there are things you want to know, you should ask instead of spying on me, okay?"

"Yessir." Charlie mumbled as he beat a hasty retreat toward the bathroom, giving both of them wide berth. The sound of the shampoo bottle being dropped into the basin let him know that Charlie was truly rattled by being caught.

Aubin looked at Daniel and smiled. He shrugged, a wider grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Peut-être it would help that you tell him he will not need press his ear against la porte if we are making sex? You are tel loud."

He purposely raised his voice. "I'm loud? It was you who got the cops called on us."

There was another thunk from the bathroom.

"Daniel, méchant. You will send le pauvre mec home with un crise de nerfs." His lover tapped him on the arm lightly and winked at him. "That is my job." Aubin kissed him again, quickly, and then headed into their bedroom.

He trailed behind, watching Aube's hips. "Awww, you never let me have any fun...."

"Si ton nephew go out tonight, him, I let you have all le fun you wish." He heard his lover start to snicker. "Mais, si we start now, us, we never get to lunch."

"And that's way more than Charlie really needs to know about us." He got in a grope before heading to the dresser and pulling out underwear and jeans.

He was just finished properly admiring Aubin in his snug blue jeans and new white poet's shirt and about the head down to the kitchen to shave, when Charlie appeared from out of the bathroom again, dressed and smelling heavily of cologne. He covered his cough as best he could. "Ten minutes, okay?"

Charlie nodded at him, and then followed him down the stairs. Charlie sat at the table when they got to the kitchen and looked at him. "Can I watch?" It was a simple, neutral question. Charlie was probably at the age where he'd start making attempts to scrape the peach fuzz off his own cheeks. Or he wanted to talk to Daniel alone.

"Yeah." He shrugged and set his kit on the edge of the sink and let the water run. "You sleep okay?"

Charlie nodded and watched his movements intently. "Yes sir. After I got used to the sound of the people walkin' around and talkin' and the cars. It's a pretty busy place at night. And the... your... guy... He snores pretty loud."

He swirled the brush on the soap, getting a lather going. "You can call him Aubin, or Mr. Marchand, or my lover or roommate. Any of the above are accurate. And it's much louder when you're lying next to him, trust me."

His nephew nodded slowly, leaning up against the counter next to him. "Uncle Jim used to come over and complain to mom about your snoring when you first got back from overseas. You should tell him about Mr. Marchand."

Daniel tossed the towel over his shoulder and dabbed the soap on, covering the lower third of his face in the frothy stuff. "I need to give James a call, see how he's doing in school."

Charlie smiled at this, tracing the movements of the razor with his eyes. "He'd like to hear from you. He's avoidin' grampa right now. Grandpa's been ridin' Uncle Jim hard about his marks and stuff, but grampa does that to everyone."

"Got me through college." He shrugged carefully and rinsed the blade before going back to get a spot on his chin. "How did you do?"

"OK. I got mostly Cs. Mom said I should take French next year because of Mr. Marchand, but I dunno." Charlie turned and leaned back against the counter, looking down at the floor. "I mean if you guys break up, then I wouldn't have to know it."

"Yeah, and if I get shot again you wouldn't have to know it either." He said it quietly, not looking at his nephew. "That's a shitty reason to learn something, or not learn it."

"I don't wanna learn it. Mom wants me to. I wanna take an elective in outdoor phys. ed." There was a hint of a whine edging into Charlie's voice: obviously a discussion he had often with his mother. "Maybe you could talk to her?"

"How many PE classes have you had already? Maybe one semester of PE and one of something your mom wants. That's what I did -- and that I can get behind."

"I've got two already and that's what you need for the outdoor one. And that one is real cool and you learn some survival stuff, then at the end you go on a campin' trip. The whole class." Charlie's words became more hurried as he spoke and he looked over at Daniel with an earnest expression.

"Up to the Cascades? The rafting and camping thing?" He kept his best poker face on.

"Yeah that one!" Charlie's eyes lit up and he nodded excitedly. "Mom said she thinks it's way too dangerous, but I KNOW she'll listen to you if you think I'm old enough to go."

He'd heard all about it from his sister, and yeah she thought it was dangerous. More though, she thought her son wasn't mature enough to handle it. "I'll think about it. It'll depend on how you are while you visit. But tentatively? I'm okay with it, enough to say if you need a chaperone I'll volunteer."

"Way cool! Thanks Uncle Dan. That would be so cool, cuz you always know the neatest things. And with you there she'll let me go for sure!" Charlie was practically bouncing with excitement.

"I think ce classe sound like b'en du fun, me." Aubin walked into the room and sat down, straddling one of the kitchen chairs backward, leaning his chin on the backrest. "Pardonnez-moi for interruption, but I could not stay upstairs anymore tout seul."

"S'okay, I'm done." He gave Aubin a warm look. "You could fly out with me and meet the rest of the family then do the museums in Portland. Go shopping at Powells."

His lover smiled back and laughed. "You mean you do not want to make repeat of one time we make camping, us? I thought it was grand succès."

He had to chuckle, both at the memories and at Charlie's horrified expression. "I don't think you really want to go camping with several dozen teenage boys and shoot the rapids."

"Non. Do not look si scare, Charle. I was tease ton oncle. He take me camping une fois. Just once. It start as grand disastre. I do not think there will be repeat any time soon. I stay in city et fait du shopping."

"Meet some of Helen's west coast contacts," he muttered through the towel as he wiped the last of the soap away. "And go shopping with my momma who can spend money with the best of them."

Charlie snorted back a laugh. "You should have heard Granddad when the last bill came in from one of her sprees."

"If la réaction is very similar to cela de ton oncle, then I think I have me. He make a face comme cela." Aubin made a really grumpy face. "Then he go on about de money et tree."

"Yep, that's the face and the rant." This time Charlie didn't bother to hold back his laugh as Daniel snapped his towel out in Aube's direction.

His lover snickered along, relaxing his face into his normal bright smile. "It okay. I think peut-être ta grandmère, she listen to him same as I listen to mon Daniel." Aubin caught the end of the towel and pulled on it gently.

Daniel held back the 'but money doesn't grow on trees, damnit' rant by the skin of his teeth, instead giving in to Aube's gentle pull. "These things are passed on to each generation, like china and silver."

His lover kissed his knuckles when he was close enough. and then looked to Charlie. "Then un jour, Charle, you will say it to ta épouse also, you."

"Ick." Charlie made a retching sound. "No getting married for me."

"Your opinion will change un jour, oui? When I was seize ans, sixteen year, me, I think I never fall en amour. Keep cette opinion until I meet Daniel." Aube smiled gently, his eyes looking very far away for a moment, then they refocused and he laughed. "Many thing change after you are sixteen."

Daniel just shrugged and dodged around the table to put on his sneakers. "You grow up or the world makes you." He was surprised by the depth of the bitterness in his own voice. With effort he modulated it. "Breakfast, let's go."

This seemed to spur Charlie and Aube into immediate action. Aubin getting up and slipping on his sandals and Charlie starting to head for the front door, still not getting too close to Aube. "Yeah, I'm starved, Uncle Dan. Where we gonna go? Can I drive your car later?"

He heard his lover start to laugh. "Bonne chance on get mon Daniel to let you drive, Charle."

Daniel chose to not rise to the bait. "Café du Monde is going to be packed, let's go to a café near the streetcar station in Old Jax. The coffee is good and the food will be something Charlie'll like."

His lover took his hand as they headed to the door, following Charlie's lead. "That sound bon, Daniel. We can walk là et after we take the streetcar jusqu'à Mall Riverwalk, us."

"We're not takin' the car?" Charlie looked back at Daniel, his disappointment clear in his tone and expression.

"Nah, it's expensive to park in the Quarter. I'll take you out cruising later. Promise."

That seemed to placate his nephew who was now out on the sidewalk taking in his first really good look at the French Quarter with the same fascinated expression most people had when they first saw it in person. They made their way fairly quickly along the narrow streets, Charlie having fallen behind Daniel and Aube to follow them down Burgundy with its upscale shops, and then turn toward the river at St. Ann. Daniel turned back and noticed his nephew had stopped dead when they crossed Bourbon and was staring down the street.

"See something you like?" he teased.

Charlie shook his head quickly, too quickly, a blush creeping into his cheeks. "Nah... are we at the place for breakfast?" The teen trudged quickly ahead of them, avoiding looking Daniel in the eyes.

"Seulement few more block, it just passed Jackson Square sur le levée." Daniel could hear the smile in his lover's voice.

"You can go ahead if you want and hold a table." Daniel called out, "Scope the cute chicks."

Charlie hunched his shoulders up and kicked at a pebble on the sidewalk, still not looking back. "Ha-ha, very funny, Uncle Dan."

Aubin started to snicker then. "Daniel, if you want to vas-y with him et scope out les chick, I can find mon route, me."

"I don't think Charlie wants me cutting in on his action." He grinned and danced backwards a few steps when Charlie turned and mock swung at him. "Then again, it could be fun."

"Peut-être you will both find des date for Friday, oui?" Aubin winked at him.

Daniel trapped Charlie in a playful headlock. He rubbed his knuckles over Charlie's hair, messing up the 'careful arrangement'. That had the boy howling and trying to get away from him. He evaded the twisting easily and then let go. "You're doomed now. No girl will look at you with that hair. Or boy either."

His nephew was still laughing and red-faced as he tried his best to flatten out his hair. "Uncle Dan! I wouldn't want guys lookin' at me anyway, I'm not a ..." Charlie looked from Daniel to Aubin and dropped his voice, still flattening his hair. "I don't like guys... like that."

"That's okay. Leaves more for the rest of us." He had to chuckle as his nephew's face grew red again. "Okay, I'll lay off so you don't rival the tomatoes on my salad."

"Thanks." Charlie gave him a lopsided smile and continued fuss with his hair. When they arrived at Old Jax he pointed at the Hard Rock Café. "Can we go there sometime?"

"Yeah, a weeknight so you can actually enjoy it." He was very amused at how quick the boy was turning tourist.

"Cool. Will you let me have a beer?" The teen looked at him hopefully.

"In your dreams. Your mother would put my balls in a jar and put them on her mantel as a keepsake."

"Et that would be un grand tragédie pour moi." Aubin laughed and held the door open to the café.

"Now that was something under the 'really don't wanna know' section." Charlie mumbled as he walked in.

Daniel leaned forward enough to whisper, "That isn't even close to what you don't wanna know."

"Then can we just not talk about it?" His nephew shot him a look before looking away again.

Daniel sighed. "Some people don't know when a tease is a tease." Internally he kept ranting, holding onto his temper. It wasn't *completely* Charlie's fault he was a redneck twit. Only mostly.

Aubin followed them into the old brewery building and up the stairs to Pat O's on the River. They sat at a table on the terrace overlooking the Mississippi. It was a beautiful and quiet place where people ate quietly while having private conversations, much different than the noise and bustle of Café du Monde. Daniel noticed his lover looking around at the people at other tables, but not chattering about them. They were in an unfamiliar café to him and so he'd probably not flirt with the wait staff either.

Daniel just tuned them both out, letting the table sit in silence until after the waiter had come and taken their breakfast orders. "I took today off to hang out, but I'm working the next three days after that. Any ideas about what you're going to do with the time?"

Charlie shrugged noncommittally, and mumbled something. Aubin's attention was brought back to the table and he waved his hand around casually while he spoke. "I was think, me, peut-être Charle would like tomorrow faire un tour des cemétaires ou go to la musée voudoienne. On week end, we can go watch un match de baseball et go to Six Flag when you can come also, you."

"You don't need to be down at the studio?"

"I can go evening, me. Give you un peu de temps together sans moi for talking. I am positif, me, Charle will be tire by then, him, of break his ear on my English, mon amour."

"Your English is fine." He gave Aube a smile. "Better than some of the people he's going to hear down in the Quarter."

His lover smiled back at him. "Peut-être you are just use to hear me talk, Daniel."

"Uncle Dan, I heard you, you said something to Mr. Marchand about going to see a guy named Kevin that he might know guys my age to hang with." Charlie interrupted, clearly dismayed at the idea of spending all his days with Aubin.

"Yeah, but most of them have jobs. And part of the point of the visit is getting to know *my* family."

Charlie's mouth hung open for a few seconds before he snapped it shut on what was likely to come out next, watching Daniel with wary eyes. Aubin took Daniel's hand across the table and gave it a squeeze. "Charle and I, we have b'en du fun, mon amour. Even si I am old man who do not like thing teenager do."

"You a lot closer to being a teenager than I am, so be careful who you call old." He gave Charlie a long look. "And if you aren't a complete shit I'll see about getting you a ride-along with Kevin or one of the uniforms."

His nephew's eyes brightened at that prospect and he smiled at Daniel. "Don't worry. Like he said, we'll have fun. Going to do 'toors' and 'moozies' or whatever will be cool."

Aube looked uncertain, but nodded. "Oui. Tout, it will be good."

The rest of breakfast passed companionably, each of them chatting. Daniel had to smile at Aubin really trying not to stare outright at the amount of food Charlie could consume in a single sitting. But then his lover had never sat back and watched himself eat on his hungry days. After breakfast was over, they caught the Riverfront Streetcar to Riverwalk Mall, Charlie keeping an adolescent distance from them while they strolled toward the arcade and Aubin stopped to admire the art and clothing boutiques.

"Daniel, you not mind si terriblement that I go take look aux shop while vous deux make des alien explode? Miriam, she say she have des pièces here."

"Go for it. I'll come find you if we finish up first."

"Si I do not find them, me, I will come back et kick both your ass. I am very good me aux jeux vidéos." His lover grinned at them and winked, then wandered off in his usual manner to people watch as much as anything else.

"So, just you an' me, huh?" Charlie grinned at him. "Your favorite still racing games?"

"Yeah, even if I'm not the best at it. Let's go see who can tear up Le Mons better, eh?"

"Cool. I'm glad you're still like you always were, Uncle Dan." His nephew headed into the arcade.

He followed along, bemusedly. Nothing like being made out of rubber, pizza and coke when you're sixteen.

Chapter 8

Aubin had been not so much refusing Daniel's amorous advances since Charlie's arrival a few days earlier as he had been postponing them. Or so he was telling himself. His lover made a good argument that life for them should not stop because they had a guest in the house. And the correct answer to that was probably not that he was afraid of being too loud.

But then the correct answer probably also would not have found him face-down on the bed, trying not to moan as Daniel endeavored to slowly drive him out of his mind.

The things Daniel could do with his tongue should be illegal. No, not illegal because then Daniel wouldn't do them. He moaned into the pillow and let his hips arch upward into Daniel's hands.

He felt his lover chuckle wickedly against his sensitive skin and he fought not to cry out at the too-pleasant torture. It was a battle he would lose, he knew it and so did Daniel; but it was always fun to see how long he could hold out.

His hips pressed back rhythmically and he twisted his head to the side letting out a ragged moan. Daniel chuckled again, and then kissed his way up Aubin's back, finally taking Aubin's mouth in a deep kiss, repeating the actions with his tongue that he'd only moments before been performing on other areas.

Aubin pulled back for a moment, panting. "You try and kill me, you."

"Yes, and such a pleasant death it will be, too." Daniel's erection slipped between Aube's thighs, rubbing against the soft skin there. "Make you crazy with passion."

He would have answered but his lover kissed him again and slipped a hand underneath to grasp Aubin's erection and pump it in counter measure to Daniel's thrusts. Aube felt his eyes cross as he fought not to come yet.

Another battle he knew he was destined to lose. He let go and just gave into the sensations, riding back against Daniel and bringing his lover with him.

"God, yes. That's it," Daniel muttered into his ear. "Oh. Close. Close."

He squeezed his thighs tighter and conceded the battle to Daniel. Gasping harshly then crying out as he pumped into Daniel's hand and spilled into the sheets under him.

Daniel's groan echoed his, face burying in Aube's neck.

Semi-boneless and happy, Aube reached behind him to stroke his lover's leg as they lay, panting heavily, against the mattress. Sweat cooled on their bodies but he was still

reticent to give up the contact. "Daniel, peut-être you take day off, you? We send Charle out see des mecs his age, we just stay au lit, us."

"Very tempting." Daniel's voice was muffled. "Just lie here stuck to you all day."

"Oui... et après we have un very late breakfast, us." He continued to stroke Daniel's leg then reached up to thread their fingers together and hold his lover's hand. "Je t'adore."

"Love you." Daniel pressed a kiss to their joined hands.

"Mais, you have need to go to work, maintenant." He sighed and pulled the joined hands in closer cuddling under his lover. "Aujourd'hui, I will need notre carte du credit, me."

"Yeah, I figured. Don't buy too much for my nephew, okay? I love him but he'll bleed us dry."

"Alors, le donne-moi with limite of five hundred dollar." He snickered and tensed in anticipation of the smack.

"Five hundred!" Daniel's voice went up a half-octave. "Aube!"

"Daniel. Am I not worth five hundred, me?" He tried to sound innocent, but the snickering was giving him away.

"Uncle Dan. Is it okay if I use the shower or do you need it still?"

"That would be still as in not yet," Daniel yelled back. "Go ahead and shower."

There was the sound of the bathroom door closing rather loudly and the shower running after a few moments. Aubin sighed inwardly. This was going to be a long day. "Then après, you need shower, you. I will prend la-mienne last, me."

"You want me to wait and take you guys somewhere in the car? First meeting isn't until ten."

"Cela would be très bon, Daniel. Maybe he tell you where he would like go aujourd'hui. " He rolled onto his side, slowly tipping them both over and still cuddling against Daniel. "Peut-être he like see Lac Pontchantrain ou les cimetères?"

"He did mention a swamp boat ride -- or going to the nature preserve."

"Is that something you would like do also, you? We do thing you are not over intéresse in yourself, mon amour. That why I save trip to Six Flag until Saturday, me." He knew that the swamps and maybe a hydrofoil ride would be something Daniel would love to do. Probably even more than him.

"Yeah, we can save that one for one of my days off. I'm sure the cemetery or the voodoo shops will catch his eye. He studied the Cajun culture before coming, even if he pretends not to know."

"Do not worry. We find things to keep all entertained. By the time you are home, we will be the best friend, us." He tilted his head back and smiled at Daniel. The sound of water stopped and then the bathroom door opened.

There was a long silence as Daniel grinned at Aube, and then yelled through the closed door. "Move along you auditory peeper."

There were footsteps heading for the guest room and another door slam. Aube kissed Daniel's chin. "It's your turn maintenant, mon amour. I will go to get laundry, me."

Daniel sighed and heaved himself off the bed. "Right." He grabbed his robe and belted it loosely around his waist. He took a moment to gather up his clothes and he was gone.

The water started again and finally Aubin managed to get motivated enough to get up and put on a pair of pajama bottoms. He pulled the sheets from the bed and balled them up, carrying them out of the room. He ran into Charlie coming out of the spare bedroom. "Bon matin, Charlie. Your uncle is just taking his shower, then I will be. Alors, you have time for a good breakfast, you. Unless you want to wait and I will take you to Café du Monde for beignets."

"Nah, I'll just do cereal and toast for breakfast, thanks." Charlie nodded and brushed past him, headed down the stairs. "I'll start coffee."

He nodded and then sighed at the teenager's retreating form. He got the distinct feeling if it weren't for Daniel telling the kid he had to spend time with Aube, he just wouldn't. Plus, Aubin himself wanted beignets that morning and generally he didn't eat breakfast. Unless it was stealing half a bagel from Daniel's plate.

He walked down the stairs with his armful of sheets and walked through the kitchen into the laundry room. Looking back through the door he said, "That's too bad. I think, me, I still get some. They are pretty good, them."

"Some weird French thing for breakfast? No thanks. I'm an American."

He shrugged as he put the detergent into the washer and started it up. "Et je suis Canadien. I like them because of all the sugar on them. Mais, you do not have to eat them. I just make a warning that I will make stop there and get some."

"Canadian? So that's why you talk funny."

"I am still learn English, merci. Je suis de Québec and ma langue maternelle est français. I do not talk funny, me." He folded his arms and felt his face grow hot. It had not been pointed out to him in a very long time that he spoke English oddly at all.

Charlie snorted and poked at his cereal with a spoon as Daniel bounced down the stairs noisily.

"Yo, Aube. Shower is free." Daniel walked into the kitchen and gave Aube a kiss on the cheek. "Go clean up so I can take us to breakfast."

Aube gave Daniel a kiss and then shot a pointed look at Charlie. "D'accord, mon amour but you better make us reservation au MacDonald. Charle not want eat anything he not consider américain, him." He headed up the stairs and got into the shower, still feeling burned about being told he spoke oddly.

When he got out, he could smell coffee and hear muffled voices downstairs. He put on his black jeans and one of Daniel's tee shirts before heading back downstairs. If nothing else, the shirt smelled like Daniel and so that would keep him centered.

Daniel was waiting, keys in hand. Charlie, was not. "My beloved nephew has decided he doesn't want to go out to breakfast. I figure we'll eat and then I'll call the house and come back and pick him up."

He sighed and slipped his sandals on. He'd expected as much. "Je suis désolé, mon amour. I should not have said something de son choice of cuisine, me. Peut-être he would be happy if we call a André and see si he have something plan avec les jeunes aujourd'hui. I have thing I need do in la maison."

Daniel pulled Aube into his arms. "I can just take him with me today, if you like."

He rested his head on his lover's shoulder and closed his eyes a moment. "Mais si je concède le bataille, I may lose la war also, me. Oui?"

"It's not a war or a battle, Aubin. It's just family." Daniel pressed a kiss to the top of Aube's head. "And I'll take him today. He'll learn manners eventually. You could come, too. See the boys, ride in a squad car."

"Peut-être. Kevin say I make des disruptions, me, when I am there." He chuckled and kissed Daniel's shoulder. It might only serve to cause more friction than there already was with Charlie if he went, even if he did love riding in the squad car. "Peut-être you and Charle need some time together, aussi. He learn tolerate me éventuellement. I go see André, find out when he take les jeunes play des sports."

"If you're sure." Daniel tipped Aube's chin up so they could look into each other's eyes. "I don't want to leave you out of anything."

He smiled and kissed his lover gently. "Daniel You worry about moi tant. I will make ma décision on breakfast, me. Who know, peut-être après café et des beignets, I will feel comme je peux take on les insultes d'un teenager, me."

Daniel snorted and wrapped an arm around Aube's waist, then he directed them out the door and down the steps to the car. "Sugar, the world's best courage."

"Only because you will not let me take him around la ville if I am drunk." He smiled at his fiancé and climbed in the passenger side of the car.

Daniel laughed hard at that. "On your scooter? When you can barely drive it sober?"

He whacked Daniel softly on the arm when he finally got in the car, still snickering to himself. "Daniel! I am not si bad anymore, me. I only have two accident and they were week ago."

He stuck his tongue out at Daniel as they pulled out of the drive and set off for Decatur Street and Café du Monde

"But the flower box will never recover...." Daniel said, trying to look innocent.

"Daniel. I only hit it un petit peu. And how is ton nephew suppose take me sérieux when you make joke of me all time, you?" He laughed and poked Daniel's ribs, making his lover jump.

"He's not here to see me make fun of you." Daniel grabbed his hand and held on. "No poking the driver."

He wiggled his fingers and held Daniel's hand, looking out the window of the Mustang for a parking spot close to the French Market. "I think peut-être I go to les classes à nuit, me. I can take English there."

"You speak English just fine." Daniel shot him a look. "But if that's what you want...."

"I look at them, me. I do not speak English comme toi ou Charle. Peut-être many people notice cela." He ignored the look from Daniel and pointed out a parking spot close to the café. They were lucky it was just past rush hour and something had opened up. "It seulement une idée."

"A refresher course wouldn't hurt." Daniel shrugged. "For someone who learned English on his own, and only in the last few years you speak it very well."

He smiled at Daniel and squeezed his lover's hand gently before getting out of the car. For someone who stood out all his life you'd think he'd be used to it by now, but he still hated the thought of people watching him and noticing all the differences between him and everyone else, talking about him behind their hands.

Some things he could not control, some things he didn't want to. But this was one thing he could do. And Daniel would understand and be happy when he no longer had to half interpret for him in social situations.

They found a table next to the outer rail of the patio, on the side that overlooked Jackson Square and St. Louis Cathedral. He watched the buskers for a moment before the harried-looking waitress came by. "I would like un café au lait et des beignets, s'il-te plaît. Daniel?"

"The same." Daniel dug a twenty out of his wallet and handed it over to her. "And don't worry about the check or anything. Keep the change and try not to drown between us and the tourists, okay?"

Aube smiled at Daniel and took his hand under the table. "You are feeling very généreux, you, with the tip aujourd'hui. Make sure we get all serve très vite. Peut-être I will have time go see Madame Coco later on. She make me un bon gris-gris she say."

"We can afford the extra this month and the lady looked like she needed the pick-me-up." Daniel grinned. "And what is the gris-gris for?"

"To make replace to celui you threw out last week, Daniel." He laughed and winked. "Peut-être I get un for patience and un qui help me learn speak English comme un américain."

His lover winked at him. "Now, now. I am very patient with your English."

"Daniel. You are très mechant, you. You be gentil à moi or I will have Madame Coco put un vex contre toi." He snickered again and leaned back as the waitress brought them their order and even set out a small plate of extra icing sugar for dipping, smiling at Daniel as she did. "Merci, mademoiselle. This look très bon."

"Thank you!" Daniel beamed up at the waitress and scooped up a beignet. "And I have the greatest respect for Madame. Coco, you know that. That's why I don't go by her place. Scary woman."

"Je sais you have du respect for Madame Coco, Daniel. It is to me you have un attitude blasé." He picked up one of the hot pastries and dipped it in the extra sugar, taking a huge bite from it.

"I do not!" Daniel looked very offended. "You're in nearly every thought I have -- every day."

He looked up at Daniel, startled by the vehemence in the statement. He was also very touched to be thought of so often. He put a placating hand on his lover's knee and

squeezed it. "Daniel. I make tease to you. Je sais you think on me all time, you. I get les message texte all time."

"Okay then." Daniel nodded and looked away, color coming up on his cheeks. "Sorry. Sorry."

"Je t'adore, Daniel. There is no one comme toi. You need eat ton breakfast. Les beignets are très bons et I am very hungry, me."

"I will, or you'll eat them all for me and then have an upset stomach." Daniel bit down on his own, making the sugar scatter across the plate and his shirt.

He giggled at Daniel and grabbed one of the paper napkins from the dispenser and reached over to brush off his lover's shirt. "You very silly, you."

"I am -- and I'm very glad you put up with me." There was something very serious behind Daniel's eyes today.

"Daniel. What is it? You look all trouble, you." He lingered, wiping off his lover's shirt and then let his hand fall to grasp Daniel's. "Something bother you."

"Nothing." His lover smiled at him, but there was still a shadow there. "It's nothing."

"Daniel. Do not dites-moi un lie. I can tell when something wrong. You sick? Worry? Quoi?" He was beginning to worry. Daniel looked troubled and it was not like him to lie.

"It just surprised me that you'd even tease I wouldn't take you and our relationship seriously."

"Because that is how we do thing. You make joke to me et I make joke to you. Je suis désolé if you think it mean I think you not take notre relationship sérieux. I misjuge." He tried to smile. There might be more to it than that even; why Daniel chose now to take him at face value was a mystery.

Daniel nodded and poked at his plate of beignets. "Something came up with the guys at work and I guess it just hit a sore spot."

"What did someone say, Daniel? That I not take notre relationship sérieux, me?" He felt his skin begin the prickle. He knew where this was going. Somewhere he dealt with most of his adult life.

"No, no. That I didn't." Daniel drank his coffee. "That I should hurry up and make an honest man out of you."

Aubin shrugged and tried to smile, but his cheeks felt numb. "Daniel, we marry when we marry. I know you m'adore. That is enough. Other people not understand notre

relationship that not notre fault. Beside, you think already we not have enough time to get tous done before wedding we have plan, what you mean hurry?"

"Right." Daniel nodded sharply, then leaned over and gave Aube a kiss on the cheek.

Aube had watched and waited, listening to what he could of the rising and falling voices. Daniel, he noticed, yelled less and less as time went by, and Charlie got louder. More self-righteous. Then there was a long silence. No words. The sort of quiet that made you hold your breath.

Daniel's voice floated down from their bedroom windows. "You're so very sure of that, are you?"

"Yes," Charlie's voice hissed, cold and nearly pure malice. "Being a soldier broke you, didn't it? Being in the military made you a faggot and a coward and...."

"That's enough." Daniel's voice was cold enough to cut rolled steel. "You have no idea what you're talking about and until you do -- don't talk to me. Tomorrow I put you on a bus back to your mother. The four days it'll take you to get there should be long enough for her to figure out if boarding school or your father will take you."

"But--"

"Save it for someone who gives a shit, Charles. You don't get to insult me like that, not without knowing the facts. Be very," there was a heavy footstep that made the floorboards creak. Aube could picture the look on Daniel's face in that moment, "very glad you're underage and I don't just dump you out on the front porch until morning. Shut. Up."

"Yes, sir."

"Go away, Charles. I'm done talking to you."

He heard the door to the guest room shut but then heard nothing after. He slowly made his way inside to find Daniel, apprehensively knocking on the door jamb to their room when he saw his lover sitting on the edge of their bed.

He didn't remember ever seeing his lover looking quite so angry and distraught. "Daniel?"

Daniel's expression smoothed out, or mostly did. The pain lines remained around his eyes. "Come on in."

He sat next to Daniel and took his hand before pulling him into a light embrace, kissing his temple. "He is very young encore, mon amour. I do not think he realize what he say hurt. He hope he peut-être shame you into come home et be son father figure."

"That's contradictory. And that young man knew exactly what he was saying and how much it hurt." Daniel leaned against Aube for a moment before pulling his weight away. "It...hit too close to home for comfort."

Aube ran a hand over Daniel's hair before pulling him in again and holding him. Aube didn't know how to make the hurt go away at all. "Daniel, la militaire cannot make someone gay."

Daniel's laughter sounded incredibly bitter. "That? I knew."

He didn't know what else to say; nothing he could say would take the sting out. He couldn't imagine what it was like to have someone you loved that much and was a member of your own family throw purposefully hurtful things at you. His mother was no saint, but even she was only trying to do what she thought was helpful.

"I'll be okay." Daniel patted Aube's arm. "I think I'm gonna go downstairs and smoke for a while."

He nodded and let Daniel go. "D'accord. I will be down dans un petit peu, si tu veux."

"Suit yourself." Daniel kicked off his shoes, peeled out of his socks, and got the bottle of scotch down from the shelf in the closet. He grabbed a couple of CDs off the nightstand and headed downstairs.

Aubin took a deep breath and watched him go. Daniel had never taken down the bottle of scotch while he was home. This was not a good sign at all. He steeled himself, got up from the bed and made his way quietly to the guest room. He knocked on the door softly.

"Uncle Dan?" Charlie sounded all stuffed up and sniffly.

"Non, c'est Aubin. Can we talk un petit peu?" He felt vaguely sorry for the teen. While Charlie was intent on being a shit, that much was true, it was also obvious that he'd had a close relationship with Daniel at one point.

There was the faint sound of sock feet against the hardwood floor and then the door opened enough to see one red-rimmed eye. "Yeah, I guess so."

He waited for Charlie to open the door and he entered. The room was a mess of clothes on the floor and strewn over furniture. He sat down gingerly on the laundry pile that used to be a chair and looked at the young man. "Ton oncle love you very much, Charle. Why you say thing hurt him?"

"Because I was mad. It happens a lot. Fight with people all the time."

"Parce-que you are angry against ton father, oui?" He looked over at the boy who no longer looked very angry, just young and sad. "I know how that feel, me. Seule fois in all my life I see mon father was at his funeral. I was five. Mais, you have thing I did not, Charle. You have un uncle who love you very much, un peu comme father un peu comme big brother, him. Do not fuck cela up because you are angry against someone else."

Charlie looked at him, eyes over-bright. "Why couldn't you be a girl?"

"Parce-que je suis un boy. Peut-être it would be much more easy for ton oncle if he had fallen in love with girl, but he did not. He cannot make explanation on this to you any more than you make explanation why you like girl et not boy. It happen."

"You think I don't know that? I might only be sixteen but I'm not a complete idiot." The words were said without heat.

"Then keep cela in mind et do not acte like one to ton oncle when you are in his home, Charle. Be angry against ton father for leave, be angry against me for being boy; mais do not push Daniel away. He still same man you knew forever." He didn't put any anger into his voice, nor pity. He kept it as neutral as possible. He got up and looked around. "Et do not let him see room in mess like this, it make him crazy."

"I was trying to pack...."

"Do you want go home, Charle?" He looked around for a sign of a suitcase, but saw none. He didn't point this out to the already distraught boy.

"No, but Uncle Dan said he was putting me on a bus or something and I don't want to go home without my stuff."

"Alors, you think of good apologie for tomorrow et maybe it best if you stay in ta chambre for a while. Read something. Think on how you treat Daniel. I will go downstairs and talk to him." He tried to smile reassuringly at Charlie, then he walked out of the room and shut the door softly again.

Sometimes when Daniel's mind was made up, it just was and nothing could change it. But he didn't think his lover really wanted to be rid of his nephew any more than the kid wanted to go. He walked out into the back yard and saw Daniel lying in his hammock, drink in hand, smoking. The sound of a pretty female voice singing over the speakers they had installed in the trees filled the air.

He sat in the lawn chair next to his lover and petted Daniel's arm.

"From the fact that I didn't hear any yelling, I assume y'all both kept your tempers?"

"We just talk un peu, Daniel. He carry a lot of anger in him." He moved closer to Daniel rubbing his lover's shoulder. "How you hold out, you?"

"Had better days." Daniel took a long drag on the cigarette and then offered it to Aube. "Just when I think I'm past being hurt by stupid crap some kid hands it to me."

"You want talk about, Daniel?" Even as he said it he felt apprehensive as to what the answer might be. If his lover did want to talk about it, he'd just have to deal with what was said. He took the cigarette and took a drag from it, toying with the idea of lighting up a joint, but squashing it again.

"I think I need to drink more if you want me to talk about it."

He nodded and kept his hand on Daniel's shoulder, massaging just barely. "D'accord, mon amour. How ever you feel comfortable, you." Daniel poured another two fingers of scotch into his glass, and set the bottle gently back down on the flagstones.

"A toast, to the world and how it made us."

"Oui. Toutes les choses for good or ill." He watched as Daniel drained the glass and made a face. He knew very well the need for escape every once in a while and so just watched calmly as Daniel slowly got drunk.

"I joined the army after college, but as an enlisted man." Daniel's voice was softer, the accent thicker. "Pay off the school loans and see something of the world. Defend my country."

Aube nodded and lit another cigarette, taking a drag before handing it off to Daniel. "Oui. C'est understandable, mon amour." He settled more, getting ready for the story.

"Tried to be straight because the army doesn't tolerate 'different' too well." Daniel tilted his head back, staring up at the afternoon sky. "I did okay. My family would say I did better than all right, but they weren't there. Anyway, in due time I got promoted, got into Special Forces and eventually was one of the two senior NCOs in my squad. Which means that I was on the middle part of the slope in the 'shit rolls downhill' line."

Aubin took out a smoke for himself and lit it, listening to what Daniel had to say. He was still rubbing his lover's shoulder as gently and supportively as he could, letting Daniel know he was in a safe place.

"Did a couple of years in various hotspots and missions. Some peacekeeping. A few...well, let's call them selective weeding. Then the Middle East fired up hot and we were all busy, all the time. No leave home, no getting out of the line of fire, no way to let off stress. Pressure cooker time. One of the guys got killed and they rotated in a replacement. Now, it was understood that my tastes ran... more widely than most people's. And the guys were cool with it since I never did anything about it. To do

anything else is asking for trouble. Trouble in the form of beatings or getting 'accidentally shot' or any number of other unpleasant things. Besides, they were some of the most ugly sons of bitches you ever met."

Aube smiled grimly and nodded. "You have told me before that they were not best looking them." He offered up the bottle of scotch for another pour for his lover.

Daniel watched as two more fingers of the amber liquid dribbled into his glass. "Yeah. So. We're on in the field for a long haul, about 30 days on our own and someone starts teasing and joking." He drank most of the scotch in one long swallow. "Only they forgot the new guy doesn't know. Things get out of hand and then Paul stood up, trying to defend me. That's when the sniper got him."

Aubin's eyes got wide and he tried not to gasp. "I am sorry, mon amour. You were very close à Paul, you?" He'd not heard Paul mentioned before. Sam, sure, and a few other names. But not Paul.

"Known him a couple of years," was the reluctant answer. "We were friends, off base."

Understanding dawned on him. "Oh, Daniel. I am very sorry." He took the glass from his lover's hand and squeezed it. Daniel was right, he'd never know what that was like, nor did he want to.

"It wasn't a great love affair or anything, Aube. He could never touch my heart the way you do, but he was a good friend. Ten days later we were back on base and it came out in the inquiry. The new guy was more than happy to lay it at my feet since I was the most senior NCO in our team for the op. That's when they suggested I get a transfer to another unit. Three days after that I was patrolling when the landmine went off and I got shipped home."

"But still, you think on him." His heart melted and warmed at still being Daniel's one true love, then chastised himself for it. "Your famille, they did not know them, oui?"

"My parents know, and I told my sister about it later. I think Charles overheard about it or something. There are some rumors floating around with the family as to why I came home when I did, instead of staying in." Daniel shrugged and finished off the scotch in his glass. "They didn't quite dare to take away the honorable discharge. Getting hurt and getting the disability retirement made it easy for the boys upstairs to explain why I was gone."

"That is quelque chose terrible to go through, mon amour. And so close to time you lose someone who you care for. Have you ever try and make explanation to Charle?" He looked at Daniel softly and ran his hand soothingly over his lover's hair. "He love you very much, Daniel."

"No, because he was right. I went into the military because for a while, I was afraid of who and what I was. Who knows what might have happened if I'd been honest. There is nothing to explain."

"D'accord, Daniel." He leaned over and kissed his lover's forehead. It could wait until morning for him to deal with Charlie. "Je t'adore." He picked up the bottle again to see if Daniel wanted any more.

"I have any more and you're going to have to bring me a pillow and a blanket because I won't be able to navigate the stairs." Daniel closed his eyes. "I'll sleep it off for a couple of hours and then do something about dinner."

He chuckled and smoothed his hand over Daniel's hair again. "Oui. Maybe make grille ce soir later on. Mais first, I help you get to notre chambre. Then we talk de Charle."

"I'd bought steaks, bell peppers and onions for the grill. A treat for the two of you," Daniel muttered.

"We still do cela, Daniel. I make un salad macaroni, me. Avec tout mes skill en cuisine." He smiled and helped Daniel up out of the hammock.

"Whoa, headrush." Daniel wobbled and then steadied himself with a hand on Aube's shoulder.

He helped his lover get steady and then they made their way back into the house. When they got to the top of the stairs, the door to the guest room quickly clicked shut. He sat Daniel down on the side of the bed. "You need anything, you?"

"Nah. I think I've done plenty for one day, don't you?"

"You are always so hard on you, Daniel." He got Daniel to lie down and sat next to him. "There have been many who have been to you already. I not add to cela."

"You never add to it, Aube. Never. You...." Daniel smiled at him, a sweet gentle smile. "You make it worthwhile."

He lay down next to his lover and returned the smile, holding Daniel gently. "Merci. Mais I know I try ta patience from time to time."

"Well, otherwise it wouldn't get any exercise, you see." Daniel grinned. "I'm very drunk."

"Et alors, this is time I am suppose to take avantage de toi, oui? Have my way avec toi." He grinned back and gave Daniel a soft kiss while pulling the covers up.

"You can take advantage all you want, but I'm not sure it would get you anywhere." Daniel snuggled into the blankets and yawned. "Getting all warm and sleepy now."

"You sleep, Daniel. When you wake we make diner. I get Charle help me en cuisine with salade de macaroni." He smiled gently and tucked the covers up further, There was a dull ache in his stomach and heart, though. Daniel had lost so much in his life. But he knew his lover would say anything less and he wouldn't be himself anymore.

"Don't burn down the house," Daniel murmured and rolled over onto his side. "Love you."

"Je t'adore aussi. mon amour." Aube kissed Daniel's hair and got up from the bed when his lover started snoring softly. He left the room's door slightly ajar and then went back down to the guest room knocking again. "It safe, Charle. Daniel is sleeping for un peu. You will come help me au cuisine."

Something muffled that sounded like an affirmation came to Aube through the door.

He went downstairs and got out the Cooking for Beginners book Daniel'd bought him and flipped it open, looking at the pictures mostly and waiting for Charlie.

It took a few minutes, but Charlie finally shuffled downstairs. "Whaddya want me to do, Mr. Marchand?"

"You will look dans le frigo and see if we have celery, green onion et snow pea. After, you wash et les coupe." He flicked his eyes up from the book and looked at the teen. Charlie had obviously still been upset as his eyes were still swollen, but Aube pretended he didn't see that.

"Coupe?" Charlie gave him a helpless look. "I'm sorry but I don't know that word."

He smiled as gently as he could and pointed to the knife block with the completely unused knives in it. "Chop them up, Charle. We make un bon salade."

"Okay." Charlie went digging in the fridge, pulling out the vegetables as he found them. "Is Uncle Dan all right?"

Aube kept his voice neutral as he looked in some of the cupboards for a large pot to boil pasta in. "Ton oncle has many memoires, Charle. Some good et some very much that make him upset. Normalement, he is good. Sometime he get very sad, him."

"But that was a long time ago. He should be over it by now."

He watched the young man, gauging Chalie's reactions. "Sometime there are thing you not get over, Charle. Maybe you are still very young to comprends cela, but sometime thing happen you never leave behind completely."

"Like the dad thing."

"Oui. Comme cela. Et... Charle are you still vièrge, you?" He braced for the possible tirade.

Charlie stopped slicing the veggies to look at him. "Yeah," was the slow answer. "Why?"

"Then there are still thing you not understand about how les gens can be after." Aubin shrugged and filled the pot with water, putting it on the stove to boil.

"Believe it or not, I'm not in a hurry."

"That is b'en wise décision. Some thing it complicate very much. Mais when you are ready to deal with les complications, it b'en worth it also."

"Right now I'm trying not to fail school or get kicked out of the house." The next chop to the celery was rather more fierce than the last.

"Est-ce qu'il y a someone you can talk to at home? Ta mère? Un counsellor? You seem like un smart boy you should not be fail en école." He measured out the pasta according to the book and waited for the water to boil. Trying to keep his voice neutral.

"They say I'm too angry to talk to. Guess that's why they sent me here, so Uncle Dan could do that man to man talking thing. I guess."

"Then you must give to him respecte that un homme like him deserve. Regardless of who he sleep with, Charle, he is very smart with much compassion. You talk to him like we talk now."

Charlie flushed under Aube's regard.

"That would explain why he exploded when I said... stuff... about you."

"Ah oui? Et he get angry against you?" He kept his gaze steady and impersonal for now, absently pouring the measured pasta into the boiling water.

"That's one way to put it."

"You did not count on fact he might love me, hmm?" He watched Daniel's nephew shift uncomfortably at that.

"Nah, that I knew. Uncle Dan isn't the casual type. It was other stuff that he got mad about. Said and I should know better. Especially with the stuff at home."

He nodded. "You did not know these thing. Or you were being very big jerk. Either way, it en passé maintenant. Now, you know. Next time you try et pull bullshit comme cela with Daniel, I kick you ass moi-même. Are we b'en clear?"

"Yes sir."

"I may be faggot, p'tit, but I am b'en wiry when I need be. Et maintenant, finish chop les vegetable et think what you say comme apologie to ton oncle." He tried to hide the small smile that was creeping in.

"Yes sir. I will." Charlie began chopping the veggies up smaller and smaller, his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth as he concentrated.

After, Aubin drained the pasta and ran cold water over it to cool it quickly, then he gently stilled the furious chopping. "Je pense that is good, Charle. We want still find them un peu. Thank you for ton help, si tu veux Daniel has un hoop de basketball in back yard, You can shoot some hoop et I will see if Daniel awake yet."

"Maybe I should go up... Talk to him."

"Si tu veux." He poured a large glass of water and gave it to Charlie. "Give him this. He will need. Et if he get grumpy against you, you take it. You soit polis et maybe he let you stay."

Charlie took the glass and looked uncertain. "Did you just say to suck up and be nice?"

"En effet, oui. That is what I say. Otherwise, no matter what I say you will find yourself on bus back to ta mère." He smiled.

"Four days on a bus. Ugh." Charlie trudged towards the stairs. Just shy of the bottom he stopped, straightened his shoulders and visibly gathered himself.

Aube covered his mouth to keep his smile hidden. Daniel would grouch at the kid, but he was a softie under it all. Also, family was just as important to Daniel as it was to Aubin. He turned back toward his cookbook and begin to prepare the dressing for the salad waiting for the fallout.

Fifteen minutes later the salad was done and chilling in the fridge, the shower was running and Charlie had blown past him with a grin. Now the sounds of the basketball hitting the hoop could be heard over the jazz playing on the stereo.

He smiled and went upstairs, knocking on the bathroom door, and then opening it. A puff of steam greeted him and he sat down on the toilet. "I take it you told Charle he could stay."

Daniel stuck his head around the curtain. "Yeah. Is that a problem?"

"Non. Pas de tout. I think he need you, Daniel." He leaned up and gave his lover a gentle kiss on the mouth.

"He needs a boot to the head, but I'll do." Daniel vanished behind the curtain again. "He said you were far nicer to him than he had any right to expect."

Aubin shrugged and checked out his hazy reflection in the mirror. "Je pense I understand him un peu, Daniel. He fuck up, that human."

Daniel grunted, his way of agreeing.

Aube stuck his hand into the shower and poked Daniel's ribs gently. "Et once someone know me, how can they help but to m'adore?"

Daniel squeaked. "Okay, fine, but keep the cold fingers off me."

"D'accord, Daniel. I keep cold hand tous a myself... Do not worry de cela." He pulled his hand back and checked his reflection again. "Very soon you will have to put les steak in to marinate, them."

"No problem. Just some garlic and red wine, I think."

"D'accord. I will put them in cela, me. Marinate me also un peu."

"Too good to me." Daniel stuck his head around the curtain again. "And just as handsome as you were this morning, you vain thing."

"I am not vain, me." He poked his tongue out. "I think I make appointment tomorrow get wax."

"Maybe some more highlights in your hair, too." Daniel squinted. "Or it could be the light in here, I can't tell."

"Oui. I need tout je pense. Otherwise, you may find someone younger et plus attractif." He winked and grinned at his lover.

Daniel shook his head hard, splattering Aube with water. "Oh yeah, that's gonna happen."

He tried to dodge the water, but still got splattered. He laughed and started to leave the bathroom. "Ou peut-être I am having affaire avec mon estheticien."

"Not an affair -- a grand affair!" Daniel yelled out after him.

He snickered to himself and went downstairs again, putting the steaks into a marinade and then pouring himself a large glass of wine before heading to their back yard. He pretended to check on the flowers for a moment but then sat down in his chair and lit a cigarette.

He was half-way through it when Daniel appeared wearing an ancient pair of cut-offs, his favorite sweater, and sneakers that were more hole than shoe. Aube smiled over at his groggy fiancé. He looked Daniel up and down slowly, taking in the loveliness that was his lover before gazing at the shoes again. "I need add des nouvelles souliers to the list of thing to buy, mon amour?"

"Nope. These are my favorites."

"D'accord. Les steak they are marinate, them, et ton nephew is playing basketball. You have un choix d'activités."

"You want company or quiet?" Daniel bent down and gave him a quick kiss.

He returned the kiss and opened his arms, moving back on the chair to let Daniel squeeze in. "You know I never turn down ta company, mon amour."

Daniel settled in front of him, resting his back against Aube's chest. "Wasn't sure after this afternoon . Sour mood."

"Daniel. Je t'adore. I can never think on anyone I would rather spend time with, me." He wrapped his arms around Daniel's shoulders, taking a sip from his wine before kissing his lover's hair.

"I tried that new shampoo you bought me."

"It smell very good." He took a deep breath against Daniel's hair. "You smell formidable."

"I am *so* glad that I know what that means now," Daniel muttered.

He chuckled and bent his head down more to kiss Daniel's neck. "Moi aussi. Then I can say it more. Je pense later on, after Charle asleep, him, I see where all you have use ton new shampoo."

Daniel chuckled and relaxed against him. "Oh, please do."

He rubbed his hand over his lover's chest, kissing Daniel's ear and sucking on his neck gently. "You look tel sexie, you."

"Mmmm. Thank you."

"You have un date later on? Ou are you still single for evening?"

"Believe it or not, I didn't find any cute young thing to date between the shower and coming out here, so I am all yours for the evening."

"Ah, c'est dommage. You should try harder next time, mon amour." He smiled and bit harder on Daniel's neck.

"I could just walk around naked next time. Maybe that will work."

"It work for me every time, mon amour. Alors, it should."

"Especially if I leave the blinds open, eh?" Daniel tilted his head back so he could get a look at Aube's face.

"Oui. Then you can make date avec Madame Rosewood across street from us. I think she might still be wild woman under all her stern look." He giggled and kissed Daniel's cheek.

Daniel mock-shivered. "And the corset that would hold back Mount Everest."

"Mais, I thought you would think tout ce latex would be très sexie." He couldn't help it, now he was laughing.

"Um...no." This close he could see the laugh lines around Daniel's eyes.

He smoothed his thumb over them and grinned. He took another mouthful of wine and kissed Daniel lingeringly. "You are si beau, you."

"You are the world to me."

"Mon amour et ma vie. I am very lucky man."

One corner of Daniel's mouth quirked up in a grin.

He kissed that quirk and held Daniel close. "I am happy you decide let Charle stay, Daniel. What make you change your mind?"

"Because we all have our stupid days."

"Oui. I can understand cela." He smiled and nuzzled his lover.

"Besides, his mother would kill me."

He snickered resting his chin on Daniel's shoulder. "Oui, I can imagine cela. Grumpy Butt."

"She went out for the football team in high school. That's one tough girl."

"She is ta sister. I would imagine she need be to keep you en ligne." He had seen pictures of Merry and she looked unassuming enough, but he knew that generally those were the last ones you tangled with.

"Everyone always thought I was the one that would be trouble. Nope, it was Merry sneaking out the bedroom window at three a.m., not that Charlie needs to know that." Daniel nodded and craned his neck to get a look at Charlie. "He been playing the whole time?"

"Oui. Since you have talk et say he could stay. You want play avec lui?" He moved back, allowing his lover to turn more.

"Nah, he's got more energy than I know what to do with."

"He is seize ans. They have un amount of énergie supernaturel." He laughed and waved as he saw Charlie turn to look at them before showing off and missing his next basket.

"I should set him up with André's league for while he's here."

"Oui. I think he would like cela, meet les mecs his own age. Then he not have hang around old men comme moi."

"Yeah, that'll help."

"Oui. Et André, he know how get people talk sometime. You tell him what going on and maybe he talk to Charle also, him."

Daniel nodded and went silent, watching Charlie play.

He rubbed Daniel's chest absently and took another sip of his wine. He let Daniel have his quiet time to think about what he was going to do with his nephew.

Daniel wasn't exactly sure what Aube had said to Charlie, but things calmed down around the house. His nephew wasn't exactly scared of Aube but they were at least being pleasant to each other. A blessing he would take for as long as it lasted. Things were as quiet as they ever got with a sixteen year old and Aube co-habiting. Competing radios in the morning, polite scuffles over the TV in the evening, that he could deal with.

Aube had started to wear his own clothes again instead of stealing Daniel's all the time. He had mixed feelings about that. It meant the laundry was lasting a lot longer, for one thing. Still, there was something cool about seeing your lover in your big over-sized clothes. Now Charlie was building up to something. Daniel recognized the signs: fidgeting, sighs, scribbled notes and, of course, the testiness.

Aube had gone out to his studio fairly early to get some work done on a new commission from a local gallery and so Daniel was taking advantage of a few moments quiet to have a leisurely breakfast and read his paper without a dozen small interruptions.

Or so was the dream.

He'd just sat down with his coffee when Charlie appeared at the edge of the doorway to the kitchen, lingering there like an adolescent ghost. Daniel folded the paper up and tossed it on the counter. Maybe he'd get to it this afternoon. "Come on in, Charles. Help me eat this giant sized cinnamon roll."

His nephew grinned and came in, taking the seat opposite him and helping himself to a large chunk of the pastry. "Thanks, Uncle Dan. It looks really good. Bet we're lucky to get any the way Mister Marchand eats sometimes, huh?"

"Nothing at all like you eat," he murmured softly. With a smile he pushed the rest of his breakfast towards Charlie. "So, what brings you down here before ten a.m.?"

Charlie started to eat the rest of the pastry with a shamelessness only an adolescent boy could muster, talking to Daniel with his mouth half full. "I was thinkin' that soon mom and Sarah would be here and then you are gonna make me go home with them. And school is gonna start soon."

"Yeah, that's what's planned. I figure two weeks before school starts we ship you home." He had an idea where this was going.

"I was thinking, well... Maybe you'd like to think about coming back home again? For a while and stuff. Then I'd have someone I can talk to. I know I don't get in fights when you're around, Uncle Dan. But well, mom doesn't know what it's like to be a guy." The words were spilling from the boy fast and furious.

"I am...touched by your request, Charlie. Really touched."

"So you'll come back then? It can be like it was when you got back from the Mid-East. We can go to baseball games and stuff. My team needs a coach and I know you'd be so cool at it." Charlie's voice was starting to take on a pleading tone.

"I'm not ready to leave New Orleans," he said as gently as he could.

"But grandpa knows people and could get you in with the police at home and then you'd be real close if there's a problem. And then if you have kids you got me and Sarah there and stuff..."

"And what about Aubin? You think he'd be happy in Portland?"

"I didn't really think about him coming much... I mean maybe it would be after he goes back to Canada or something? Or is he getting his Green Card?" The hopeful edge was fading from Charlie's voice, but Daniel had to admire his nephew's perseverance.

"He hasn't said one way or the other to me." Daniel kept his expression neutral. "And actually, I was thinking of talking my sister into moving out here."

Charlie's expression lightened considerably and he sat forward in the chair, grinning at Daniel. "Really? Then I could come over all the time and stuff? I could help you finish restoring the Mustang like you wanted."

"Merry's been less than happy out there and we've been battling it back and forth."

"It will be so cool to be living all near you again. If mom wasn't going to move I was gonna ask if I can move in with ya. Then you'd have someone to watch football with and stuff."

He chuckled. "No one has agreed to anything yet, though if you want to call and yap her ear off, I don't mind."

Charlie suddenly closed his mouth with an audible snap and his face blanched. "Awwwww shit... I mean... Sorry, sir. But I was supposed to call when I got in and tell her I got here. But with stuff going on and well, I forgot."

Daniel grinned. "I know, which is why I called her. We've talked a couple times since you've arrived, doofus."

His nephew smiled. "Yeah, I shoulda known. But well, can I call her now or do ya want me to wait until after dinner or something? I mean I can call her later and we can go do something."

"I'm going to eat breakfast and then you and I'll head out and do something. So go call your momma before she boxes *my* ears."

"Yes, sir." Charlie snickered as he got up, scooping the last of the cinnamon roll before heading upstairs. Daniel could hear the heavy footsteps above him and the door to the guest room shut.

"He only thinks I'm kidding about her beating me up," he said to the salt and pepper shaker. Daniel poured himself a rehear on the coffee and pulled the paper out again. Maybe now he could read it.

He'd managed to read a page or two and catch up on some world events when he heard his cell ring, loudly and unmistakably "Super Freak." Which meant Aubin had been using Daniel's phone to call his mother and friends back in Montreal again. Daniel checked the display.

Speak of the Devil.

"Super freak, super freaky-- yeah," he sang into the phone.

His lover snickered. "Allô Super-Freak... I was just making call to you, find out if you are enjoying ton day off, mon amour."

"I really haven't been up long enough to find out yet."

"I always find, me, that is best thing do on day off. Sleep un peu. Alors, you have big plan aujourd'hui or you et Charlie want meet me for lunch chez Ugly? I am buying, me."

Daniel leaned back in the chair and stretched. "I like having a rich boyfriend."

Aubin chuckled, and Daniel could imagine him cradling the small phone to his ear. "Moi aussi, mon amour. Si you find one, maybe we share him."

"Hey, I hear André's employer has a lot of cash. Maybe we could get him to join us."

Aubin laughed out loud for a moment, and then murmured into the phone. "You are méchant, p'tit. If I home I would be force to make spank to you."

"Mmmm, save that for later." He chuckled wickedly. "I'll bend over the bed and let you tie me up."

"Et when you are tout helpless, you, I can do as I please, alors. Et b'en, it was not good day for me to wear leather pant." There was a small moan from the other end of the line.

"Just imagine. Me with my arms spread and tied tight so I can't do anything as you...." He let the thought hang in the air between them.

The moan was more distinct this time and he could imagine his lover, cheeks slightly flushed, shifting uncomfortably. "It is une promesse... tonight I make you cry out until you have no voice left, you. You not sit for day."

"Sounds perfect to me," he rumbled.

Chapter 9

Aube stared at the forms in front of him. They'd seemed innocuous enough when he'd first seen them, but on close inspection, they were the most confusing things he'd ever seen. They didn't even seem to be in English anymore.

He chewed on the end of his pen and pouted. "Miriam? Under occupation why not I put artiste?"

"Good, except spell it artist, k?" She looked over from her latest piece. "I always think honest is best. I hear there is an interview and keeping track of the lies would be tough."

He scrunched up his face and wrote down a-r-t-i-s-t-e before remembering to scratch out the 'e'. "It will be hard enough remember the story for my raison for wanting a Green Card, me. Daniel tell me it probablement not a good idee to tell them so I can marry mon gay lover and not be deport."

"Uh. No."

"I will think of something fill in there, me." Aube looked up from his forms and smiled at Miriam, who was just sparking up a blowtorch. "Tu sais, after Pierre leave here we have much room now, alors, maybe I rent out to student at cheap and tell immigration I am entrepreneur."

"That'd be cool. Or you could talk about how much you love the city and want to stay here forevah and evah...." She waved the blowtorch around expansively.

"Et the climate much better here." He chuckled and tried not to get nervous as Miriam got a little too close for his comfort to some cleaning rags.

He looked down at the forms again and scrutinized what he'd written so far. Name, age, sex, country of birth; all of these were pretty straight forward. Now the questions were getting a little more involved.

"Do you think it okay if I write down un guess to income gross? I do not know how much I make. All cheque get sent et I sign et Daniel deposit them."

"Maybe call Daniel for that one?"

Aube flipped open his cell and dialed Daniel's number and just prayed his lover would pick up. Daniel had taken Charles to a Zephyrs' game and it was a nice afternoon, so he might have turned it off.

"Nichols." In the background were all the sounds of the game.

"Daniel? Off top of your head, how much money I make gross?"

"I'd say about forty thousand or so. Judging on the amount you spend, but you never told me."

"Alors, I can put down estimate on this form? Or you want me wait until we get home?" Aube started to write down 40,000 in the Gross Income space.

"Nah, that's about right and what form?"

Aube paused a moment. That was right, he was going to surprise Daniel when he got his Green Card. Make it all exciting. "Euhm. Income Tax de Canada. Ma maman has send me my form for it."

"Cool. Anything else?"

"Ah... Do I own any property?" Aube held the phone away from his ear as Daniel cheered. The Zephyrs must have got a hit.

"Yeah. Half of the house and my car."

Aube hovered the pen over the "yes" box and stopped. He'd ask Miriam about that, she might know. "Et alors, how is le match?"

"It's really good. You want me to help you with the forms and stuff tonight?"

"Euhm... non... I think I will be okay now with them. Perhaps instead, you maybe want send your nephew out with boy his own age et we get some temps privée?" Aube lowered his voice so that Miriam didn't overhear and start commenting about sending the kid to the movies so the grown ups could have sex.

"Sure. Andre said something about a youth basketball game."

"That sound good, alors, see if he is interesse et I will go back to fill out these form. I will see you at home."

"Later." There was a click as the line went dead.

Aube flipped his phone shut again and wondered if Daniel had actually registered one word he said. It was like that when Daniel watched football on TV as well, but of course, he himself was nothing like that during hockey.

"Miriam? It ask about property, mais I own thing conjoint with Daniel."

"The house, right?"

"Oui, yes. The house and I own his car... even if he do not let me drive it very much."

Miriam shut off the blow torch and pulled off her goggles. "So, you put that down on the paper, right?"

"Non, I have not put down anything, yet." Aube shrugged and watched Miriam ponder this one. He pointed to her latest creation. "Et I think you miss a spot from weld, right there."

"Yeah, I know. I'm afraid it'll collapse if I do. There's so much weight above it." Miriam stepped back and stared at the work. "Or maybe I just did it wrong and need to start over."

"Maybe you need just re-inforce le base with some more color pipe?" Aube was now bored of filling out the government forms and his attention had officially wandered.

"The gun metal blue would be strong enough. Yeah."

"Et it would also be very pretty, it, in with all the yellow." Aube got up and went over to take a closer look, taking out his pack of cigarettes he pulled out his joint and lit it.

Miriam nodded. "Given up on the form?"

"It was giving me a big headache." He grinned at her and offered up the smoke.

She took a long draw off of it. "Good stuff."

He nodded and took it back, taking a hit. "Oui. I have found new guy. Young et he is in Business District. Alors, not le shit they sell to touriste."

"Nice." She grinned at him. "So, wedding after you get the paperwork done or what?"

"When I get mon Green Card, Daniel and I are going to Montreal and getting marry, oui. Just small. Then we come back here and make huge party."

"Plenty of notice for me. I'm going to have to find a new dress and hat for the occasion."

"Oui." He laughed and gave her a one-armed hug and a kiss on the head. "I am sure it will be your most grand creation!"

"Yeah, I don't have anything now that says 'gay artist marrying his favorite authority figure' in my closet."

"That is okay, moi non plus. I do not have anything to wear." He giggled to himself as her condensing of events sounded very much like the plot to a gay porn movie.

"Oooh. Naked. That could be fun, too."

"Oh, b'en alors! We make whole party clothing option."

"Optional," she corrected, patting him on the shoulder. "You're English is getting really good."

"It is still very long way to go before it is like I speak it all my life, alors." He smiled at her and shrugged. His accent still caused people to snicker sometimes, he knew it. Charles made no secret out of it.

"It's part of your charm. I like it."

"Merci. That is very kind. Alors, you still feel like work today or we go to Rue Bourbon et get a biere and watch men take their clothing off? We can then decide on wedding outfit."

"Perfect. I like that sort of inspiration."

"And hopeful after that kind of inspiration, Daniel nephew decide go out tonight. Otherwise..." Aube bounded back over to his worktable, cleaned up all the forms, and stuck them in his bag.

Miriam started to cackle. "Well, you can always come over to my place and work out that frustration."

He blew her a kiss. "Miriam, ma cher, if I were ever to decide to try it with a woman, you are first person on my speed dial."

Aube was still a little dizzy from the pot and beer when he wandered home later that afternoon. It had been fun to go in and out of the most seedy of the strip clubs with Miriam, pretending to be on the hunt for the "just right color of g-string". He held back a giggle as he opened the door to the house. He could hear Daniel talking to Charles in the kitchen. "Salut! Je suis a la maison."

"Hey. We were just debating how much meat to burn for dinner."

He checked his eyes in the mirror, pupils were still dilated and goofy. And he was hungry just now. He straightened up again and headed into the kitchen. "Anything sound good. So, up to you."

"Chicken and hot dogs it is then. Charlie, go fire up the grill. No more than a quarter can of lighter fluid this time. We don't need to singe the tree again."

"Yes sir." Charles grabbed the matches off the counter and rushed toward the back door. He turned back to grin at Daniel. "Uncle Dan? Mesquite or Apple?"

"Apple. I'll do onions with the chicken." Daniel grinned back at him before giving Aube a head-to-toe lookover. "So how'd the day go at the studio?"

"Very good. Miriam et me, we leave to go to Bourbon about two hour ago. We make discussion of important wedding item." He let his bag drop from his arm onto the floor, but waited until he heard the screen door bang shut before pulling out the fluorescent pink g-string and tossing it at Daniel.

Daniel caught it out of the air and held it up. "How fetching."

"I am glad you like it, you. That one, she is yours."

His lover laughed. "Sure, if you get one to match."

He grinned at Daniel and moved close enough to lean in and whisper to him. "Non... I was thinking maybe I just go au naturel."

"Sure," Daniel whispered back, "as long as your shirt is long enough to hide the evidence."

"Well, that would be a defeat to le purpose, non?" Aube laughed and gave Daniel a kiss on the cheek. "Et alors, how was your day avec Charles?"

"Had a good time. After dinner he's going to head over to the church."

"Bel et bon, he will have fun play soccer ou basketball with young mecs." Aube smiled and watched Daniel take out some onions and start to chop them.

"And we'll get to play with another sort of balls after he's gone."

"Perhaps. Perhaps we just watch le télé."

Daniel smiled. "Sure, I'm up for that."

"Bon, then it's settle." He laughed and leaned in for a kiss, pulling back when he caught the silhouette of Charles lingering by the door. "Don't worry, Charles, it is safe to come in."

Daniel just gave Aube a quirky smile before chopping up the rest of the onions and adding them to the bar-b-que pan.

Charles opened the door and came into the room, still giving Aube a wide berth and going right to Daniel's side to talk to him. "I got the fire going like you said, but it needs to burn down to coals. Can I help with anything?"

"Get out the ketchup and stuff. Oh, and go down to Bebe's and get some of the soda you want." Daniel pulled out a ten. "Chips, too."

Aube almost laughed at the look on the teen's face as he eyed the money before taking it from his uncle and running to the front door. "I am guessing perhaps there will be no change, oui?"

"A time honored tradition in my family. You run the errand, you keep the change."

"Alors, that is good. He will have spending money for the evening."

"Yeah. He'll buy two cans of soda and a small bag of chips and pocket the rest."

Aube's stomach growled in response. "That sound very good."

"I'd offer you a beer but you've started the day already."

"I am fine. I only had maybe un ou deux." Aube grinned at Daniel, even if he knew it was fruitless. Daniel didn't want him drunk or passed out.

"There's stuff in the fridge, or water. Whatever works for you." Daniel leaned over and gave Aube a kiss. "Good to see you home."

Aube stole another one. "It is good be home. This week has been telle busy with your nephew here."

"Between that, your shows and my job it's a wonder we have time to breathe. I don't understand how people do it."

"Maybe that is why so many people fall away from their lover? Mais, we not let that happen. I will be in town most of time now. I will find un job here."

"So you finally told Helen to cut back on the shows?" They'd discussed it on and off for months.

"I told her no more than one out of town per season. Alors, one every three month I go out, other than that? Non. I am here." He smiled at Daniel and waited for the reaction, sometimes it was hard to tell if his lover'd be happy or feel that Aube was tossing away his chances.

The smile he got from Daniel was the answer he'd been looking for. "Great. I think that'll be more your speed."

He grinned back and pressed his forehead to Daniel's. "You never know...perhaps in a few month you will be paying Helene to get me out of town..."

His thought was cut off by the front screen door banging shut and Charles calling out from the hallway. He snickered. "I get feeling he is desperate afraid he is going to walk in on a romance scene."

"Scar his young mind forever." Daniel called out, "Come on in. We're ready to cook."

Charles came into the kitchen, grinning as he put down his soda and chips. "Uncle Dan, tomorrow you still gonna take me up to see the swamps?"

"Yeah. I have to be back by six or so for a shift but the rest of the day tomorrow is yours."

"Cool!" Charles then turned to Aube and smiled at him. "Uncle Dan's gonna take me to see them feed the gators on a mayfly."

Aube smiled back before heading over to gather up his bag from the floor. There was no way he'd ever convince Charles it didn't have to be a contest. "That sound good. Do not lean too far off side. No one want to explain to your maman that you had your head bit off by alligator."

Daniel snorted back a laugh as he dumped the chicken into the pan with the onions. "Charlie, put this on the grill on the hottest part and put the lid on. We'll start the dogs in a few minutes."

He heard Charles mumble something to Daniel, but then the back door opened again. Aube stifled a sigh. "Et Daniel, you make sure you not get anything bit off either, oui?"

"He does like you, Aube. He's just afraid of what that means."

He shrugged and opened up his bag, taking out his water bottle to put in the dishwasher. "I am sorry it has mean anything other than perhaps I am person who is likeable."

"Charlie's a teenager, with all the pressures that means. Society as a whole sucks."

"Oui, je sais." He turned back and gave Daniel a small smile. "Which is why I still like him as well."

"Wait till you meet Merry and the little one. You'll see."

"I already like Merry... Danny."

Daniel stopped, turned and put his hands on his hips. One eyebrow went up slightly.
"Pardon?"

Aube tried to keep a straight face, but his muscles twitched. He got ready to flee.
"Danny!"

His lover took a step forward. "Feeling brave, aren't you?"

"Moi? Non de plus. I just figure that you have to be outside soon to observe notre dinner and you not have time to chase me all over." He took a step back instinctually.

"My name is Daniel...."

"Oui. I know this. Danny." He didn't even look back. He ran and headed to the stairs up to the second floor.

Daniel took off after him.

Laughter filled the house as Daniel chased him into the guest room and then, doubling back, into their room. Aube was trying to catch his breath. Daniel caught him about the waist and started to tickle. "Danny! You need let me go now!"

"Hah. Call uncle first, bud."

He gave another short, sharp burst of laughter as his lover's fingers cleverly sought out the very ticklish places between his ribs. Aube's breath was barely more than a desperate gasp. "Danny... that... seem... kinky.. even... for... you."

"Just for that..." Daniel blew a raspberry against Aube's neck.

Aube nearly howled at the almost painful tickle against the sensitive skin, and he bucked, trying to get away. But another problem had crept up on him and might force him to concede the battle. The beer had processed. "Daniel! You must let me go, now, I must piss."

Daniel promptly let go. "Don't think you're off the hook."

He winked at Daniel, his lover's breath was shallow and quick, and his face was flushed. Aube swallowed against a dry throat. "I look forward to a new match, later."

"Yes. After dinner."

"Speak of which, you should go et supervise the barbeque. I will join with you outside after I go relieve myself."

Daniel smiled and bounced down the stairs. "Charlie, put the hot dogs on and let's have a game of basketball."

Aube headed straight into the toilet, feeling the instant relief of some of the pressure. Some of it was from finally emptying an overfull bladder, but some had to do with seeing Daniel and Charlie getting along so well. After, he decided to change out of his jeans and into his cargo pants and a tank top. The afternoon sun always made the backyard swelter as far as he was concerned.

When he got to the back yard, Daniel and Charles were over in the corner playing a game of one on one, so he decided to lay claim to the hammock before Daniel noticed.

"This was a lot easier when you weighed less than me," Daniel panted, trying to block Charles from putting the ball into the makeshift basket they'd nailed to the top of the fence.

"Bet it helped when I was shorter than you, too," Charles retorted, shouldering his way past to score.

Daniel bent over, resting his hands on his thighs. "Yeah, and I was younger."

Aube snorted and rolled his eyes. "You are plenty young, Daniel. You keep up better than most guy in their twenty."

"I need some excuse." Daniel fetched the ball and began dribbling it again. "Okay, one more point and then we eat."

Aube watched as Charles stole the ball again and evaded Daniel, scoring the 'winning' point. Daniel was out of breath and flushed, and his nephew had barely broken a sweat. Aube had to admit, Daniel was in very good shape, but his lover was starting to slow down very slightly.

Aube smiled as Charles danced in a bizarre display of odd moves until Daniel good heartedly cuffed him one and told him to go mind the barbeque and quit rubbing it in. "You both play very well."

"Nah. I've been sitting at a desk too much. I should go play with the kids again on Fridays."

He made room for Daniel in the hammock and started to rub his lover's shoulders for him. "You can always join my team d'hockey as well."

"I'm not sure I'm brave enough for that." Daniel leaned against him.

He continued to rub gently, making sure the muscles didn't stiffen. "We are not *that* rough, Daniel."

He heard Charles snort out a laugh.

"Only mostly." Daniel turned his head to glance at Charles. "Check the food, eh?"

The boy went back to carefully taking the only slightly charred meat off the grill. "I'm sorry, Uncle Dan, but well, I was trying to imagine Mister Marchand body checking someone."

"Actually he led his league in points last year. You're in for a surprise if you see him in a game. Him and Father Michel both, actually."

Aube gave his lover a kiss on the cheek. The probability was higher that he'd convince Merry and little Sarah to see Aube play before Charles would go.

The young man looked at Aube skeptically. "Well, Father Michel I can see, he's a bigger guy."

"Oui, je sais. And I am a little skinny."

"But fast." Daniel shrugged. "You'll see."

"Oui. I have play hockey all my life et I have many scar who prove it. That is how my nose get broke few time. It was not from sidewalk sale, for sure on that." Aube nodded for good measure.

"Okay, I get it." Charles held his hands up in the air. "Tough guy."

Aube got the feeling deep down, he was still being made fun of, but he let it drop for Daniel's sake. "Alors, dinner smell like she is ready."

"Yeah, it is," Daniel sounded a little defeated under his cheerful tone. "Eat out here or inside?"

Before Aube could even open his mouth, Charles piped up with "Outside! Please?" And he just couldn't disagree. Besides it was a beautiful afternoon and there was no sign of rain yet.

During dinner Charles kept up a steady stream of chatter with Daniel about baseball and alligators. Aube interjected where he could, surprising, he felt, even Daniel that he had learned something about baseball while pretending not to listen.

Finally it was time for Charles to take off and leave them alone for the evening. He promised several times to call before he left the basketball court so they'd have warning before he came home.

Aube gathered up the dishes to bring them inside. They were his favorite kind to help out with: outdoor paper plates. "You are really enjoying having him here, oui?"

"Yeah. Family is a good thing, when they aren't driving you crazy."

"I think even when they are, you enjoy having them around. It is good thing."

"Yeah. Merry is talking about moving out here."

"I think it would be very good for Charles. Then you can make more influence on him." He turned back to look at his lover and smiled.

"Less time for us."

"We will somehow make do, mon cher. Beside, I will be in New Orleans more, alors, it will even out."

Daniel nodded as he put the rest of the food, what little of it there was, away. "I just don't want a repeat of before, you know?"

"I do not think we are in any danger from that, oui? I have learnt my lesson." Aube came up behind his lover and slipped his arms around Daniel's waist.

Daniel nodded and let Aube hold him. "Yeah, it'll be good."

He kissed the back of his lover's neck. "You do not sound very convince, you."

"Let's just call it being skittish."

Aube sighed. "It will take b'en longtemps before you trust in me encore."

"No, I trust you." Daniel turned around, looking him in the eyes. "It's us I don't trust right now."

He knew it, but it still stung to hear it. Probably more than he thought it would. "Et b'en. That is fair. Perhaps thing move too quick or too slow."

"I wish it didn't bother me, but it does."

Aube nodded sadly and let his arms slip from Daniel's waist. "Moi aussi. But, it do et I do not know how change that. Maybe there is nothing I can do."

"Time will fix it, I have faith."

"Ah oui, je sais. I know this. So, then? I wait." There was nothing else he could do. Daniel asked for time and that was the least he could give him.

"Wanna go upstairs and canoodle?"

"Et what do 'canoe-del' it mean?"

Daniel grinned. "Cuddle up together and whisper sweet nothings as the sun goes down."

He smiled back. They would just have to build things back slowly. "D'accord. We can do that."

Aube opened his eyes and stretched, yawning widely. Daniel grunted and rolled over, still asleep. He was working the evening shift, having juggled his schedule around in order to take Charles out to see the alligators.

It had been nice last night, canoodling as his lover put it, but Aube still couldn't forget the look on Daniel's face when he said he just didn't trust "them" anymore.

Aube sat up, he had to find something to do. If he thought about this too much then that uncertain dark part of himself would creep in. He got out of the bed and headed downstairs, even though he could hear Charles in the kitchen already. Usually, he stayed away until Charles and Daniel left in the morning. The teenager made him feel uncomfortable.

"G'morning," Charles mumbled through his cereal.

"Good morning, Charles." Aube smiled and went over to the coffee maker and took out the filters. No doubt later, Daniel would complain that the coffee was way too strong. "You sleep well, you?"

"Like a rock. Uncle Dan keeps me busy."

"Alors, that is good, that. Et you guy will have fun today." He picked up an apple and bit into it.

"Hope so." Charles poured another bowl of cereal and started munching through it. "You gonna come?"

"Je ne sais pas. I do not know. This is special thing between you and your uncle." Aube poured out a cup of coffee from the half-brewed pot and winced as he took a swallow. Definitely needed sugar. And cream.

"Doesn't really seem like a thing you'd like, but I don't know you that well."

"There are many thing I am interesse in that maybe seem not like thing I know about. It is okay not to know these thing."

Charles nodded and scooped the last of his cereal into his mouth. "If you wanna come, you can."

Aube thought about it, in some ways it could be fun and usually he'd jump at the chance, but Daniel said he needed time. Perhaps that included space as well. "Well, if your uncle agree with you, then you can come get me on your way out of the city. I have an appointment to get my hair cut."

"Cool." Charles raised a hand in farewell and vanished back upstairs, his dirty bowl and spoon still on the table.

Aube sighed and picked up the bowl and spoon, putting them in the dishwasher. He went back upstairs to get dressed, getting out his older jeans and a 'normal' tee shirt, just in case.

Daniel was just beginning stir and yawn. "Hey."

He smiled and leaned down to give his lover a kiss. "Bon matin, Daniel."

"Morning." Daniel gave him a quick kiss, sitting up. "You off to your thing?"

"Oui. I have my appointment." He stepped back again and finished tucking in his shirt. "I make coffee, but maybe it is a little strong."

Daniel made a face. "When you say that it scares me."

"I was not paying very much attention to what I do. Et alors, I am going, now, me."

His lover nodded and got to his feet. "No red hair this time. Just the highlights."

"My hair is red naturellement."

"And no bringing home anything for me from there. Especially that floral stuff." Daniel wrinkled his nose, looking adorable with his bed head and sleepy eyes.

Aube couldn't resist anymore and went over to give him another kiss and just hold him for a moment. "But, the floral, it smell good on you."

"Sample bottle only," Daniel mumbled, leaning into him.

Aube kissed the tip of his lover's nose, then gave him a quick kiss to his mouth. "I will try and remember, me."

"kay." Daniel stepped back and shuffled off to the bathroom. "Have a good day, lover."

"D'accord." Aube stepped back and headed out of their room, he could see Charles watching them from the guest room. He pushed it to the back of his mind, if he had questions, he could ask Daniel.

Now it was time to go get handsome and adorable with the help of modern chemistry and Alise, the hair goddess. Alise's shop was just between the Quarter and Marigny, small and patched in places. Some of the posters were still from the '80's, but it was also busy and about the best place to go for a cut and highlights.

"Salut, Alise." he said as he entered the shop, setting off the electric chime to announce his presence.

"Hello there, honey. It's crazy today with Maudette out so just take a seat, okay?"

"D'accord." Aube sat down on one of the small dining room chairs that were used as the waiting area, next to the older ladies getting their hair set in the dryers. "Is Maudette ill?"

"No, she doesn't work on Tuesday, the full moon or mercury in retrograde."

"Ah oui, I forget this, me." Aube spoke up over the phone, which had been ringing incessantly since he got in, people being sent over to the loud answering machine. "You need hire reception, Alise."

"I can't get nobody to work for what I could pay."

He smiled over at Alise. The small shop was busy, but the peeling plaster told the tale that the lack of staff and empty seats meant it was not doing as well as it could. "You need to try again to make advertising."

She grinned at him and turned to the other customers. "Okay you bitches, talk me up."

He laughed along with the middle aged lady customers. The phone started to ring again, the shrill sound interrupting them. Aube sighed and got up from his seat, enough was enough already. "Allo? Bonjour you have reach Chez Alise. I can help you?"

"Uh, yeah. I need a coloring done on Thursday. Is there an appointment that morning?"

Aube opened the large, red appointment book and looked at Thursday. "Maudette, she is open, so long as moon is in seventh house... Et alors, what color is you hair et what color you think of going?"

"My roots are coming in and I always go blonde."

Aube looked at the appointment book again and frowned. One column was completely empty. He looked over where young Belle Trixie sat on her dressing chair and watched the proceedings, laughing along with something Alise said. "Et alors, c'est bon. I will put you in for an appointment for one hour and half with Belle Trixie at ten in morning."

"That's great, she's always squeezed me in before. You're a love. Ta!"

He was not a hundred percent sure that the woman on the phone didn't still think she was seeing Maudette, but that was okay. Belle Trixie did a good job.

Aube was about to get up when the phone rang again. "Allo? Chez Alise, I can help?"

"Tell Alise I'm gonna be late for my 1:30 appointment. I gotta take p'tite to the doctor." The creole accent was thick. "'allo? You hear me?"

"Oui. Mon t'entendre, m'zelle. What is wrong with ta p'tite?" He made himself as comfortable as he could in the rickety old office chair and poured himself a cup of coffee and changed Alise's 1:30 appointment to the next day, making a note to tell Mrs. Kennedy that she would also be seeing Belle Trixie that day. It would be good for her, the young woman might be able to talk her out of that horrible perm.

Next thing he knew it was 2:30 and he was holding the appointment book in his lap, along with the portable phone as Alise finished off the highlights on his hair.

He'd managed to even out the client load, making sure that people got in when they wanted and booked the length of their appointment as to how long he thought it would take. He knew most of the clientele and some of them needed major reconstruction.

He closed up the book, putting it aside and admiring Alise's handiwork. "Perfection, again."

"Of course, and today it's on the house with you covering for Maudette."

"I am telling you, you need someone who do this all time, Alise. Or at least sometime. Maudette, she is too busy cutting hair to do this."

"Monday, Wednesday and Friday, noon to five. Free cut and color for you or a friend." She looked at him in the mirror. "That's what I can afford."

"Si you throw in un pedicure for Daniel once month, so his toenail stop gouge back of my leg, you have a deal." As he said his lover's name, he looked up at the clock. He'd been having so much fun talking to people on the phone, he'd forgotten. Daniel and Charles would be out in the swamp by now and he guessed in the end, Daniel really didn't much want him there.

"Done, now get on outta my chair so I can do Arthur next."

"D'accord. No need get pushy." Aube hopped out of the chair, eyed Arthur and shook his head. "Alise, try and talk him out of these frosted tip? It is very 1999."

"I try every time, but we'll see how it goes today."

He grinned at her and gave Arthur a wide berth, just in case he wanted to retaliate for the frosting comment. The electronic chime sounded as he opened the door and walked out into the humid late afternoon.

After being in air conditioning for most of the day, it felt stifling. He thought about his options for the rest of the day, but decided just to head home. It slowly sank in as he walked, he'd gotten a job.

Ice cream would be in order to celebrate, or perhaps a beer or two in the garden. He grinned to himself. Okay, it might not be anything huge or important in the grand scheme of things. Might even be a bit clichéd, but it made him happy. He liked it there and it would get him out of the house a few days a week to someplace other than a café or the studio. It also got him out to see people. Perfect.

Chapter 10

Daniel glanced in the rearview mirror and then back out at the road. "Sorry about not making it to the arrival area. The traffic just totally sucked as---. Um. It was bad."

Merry grinned. "Almost got you, didn't she?"

"Well, yeah. I forgot." Another glance in the rearview showed Sarah, his five year old niece watching him seriously.

"Uncle Dan, when are we getting to your house?"

"In about twenty minutes."

"Okay."

He focused on traffic and was startled when Merry's voice broke over the sound of the radio. "What's up with you and Aube? Charlie says there is trouble."

"Nothing." Daniel shrugged and wished for a cigarette. "We had a fight."

Merry gave him a sideways glance and screwed up her mouth. "Oh, yes? Just a fight. Then I guess you can explain why he's spent next to no time with you and Charlie and why he's not here now?"

She'd been doing this since they were kids. Never giving an inch on anything. At least he knew where her kids got their tenacity.

"Actually he's working today so back off."

"I'm just sayin'..." Merry quieted down again and looked out the passenger window. Her jaw was still flexing, so the conversation was far from over.

"Uncle Dan? Are you mad at your boyfriend?" Sarah was craning her neck to look out of the window, but at least Barbie had a good view.

"No. Well, yeah. He was stupid."

Sarah nodded, that seemed good enough for her for the time being. But Merry was looking at him again, he could sense her sizing him up for the next round. "I think there is a lot we need to talk about, big brother, when little pitchers are out of earshot."

He shrugged again. "I love him but he did something stupid. It happens." He looped off the highway and down into the city. "Almost there."

"**Yay!**" Sarah strained against the seatbelt to see out. The colorful buildings of the French Quarter were now surrounding them, and traffic slowed to a crawl along the narrow streets, allowing everyone time to look at the distinctive architecture. "Ooooo! Lookit, mama! Uncle Daniel lives in Frontier Land!"

Daniel had to grin at that. "Feels like it a lot of the time." He turned and went up their street and parked. "Okay, this is it."

Merry's eyes scanned the house, the shutters still needed painting and there were a few dead plants out front that Aube had forgotten about, except to use them as an ashtray. She smiled. "You did good, Danny."

Sarah was now bouncing in place and trying to take her seatbelt off. "Can I go see my room now?"

Charlie was sitting on the front porch, waiting for them and got up to wave before shoving his hands into his pockets, keeping his cool.

"Yeah, you can. Your brother can take you up there, if you want Sarah." Daniel reached over and popped the button on her seatbelt and let her out. "Don't forget your Barbie stuff."

"Okay!" She grabbed the hatbox next to her and grabbed for the door handle, causing Barbie's head to do a completely astounding chiropractic move. The little girl clambered out and threw her arms around her older brother before announcing, "Uncle Dan said you **have** to take me to see **my** room."

Merry snorted out a laugh. "Seems like long ago that was you and me, Danny."

"It wasn't that long ago." He grinned as he got the bags out of the trunk.

"Seems like it sometimes. I mean, look at us. I'm divorced and a mom and you're about to get married to Aube."

"If he still wants me, yeah. Come on, I'll show you the place." He dodged the rest of her questions as he pointed out the different rooms and Aube's art, where it was wedged into a corner of the living room. "Aube'll be home about 5:30 and I thought we'd do a nice dinner out, if you are up to it."

"Sure, Charlie can watch Sarah for a bit and then I can get to know this mystery man of yours." Merry was flipping through some of the paintings, twisting her head this way and that to make out the image. "Unless your idea of a nice dinner out includes a place with color-in placemats."

"We can do that. Burgers, fries and shakes."

"It's up to you, Danny." She placed the paintings back in the corner and sat down on the couch. "He's got a lot of talent."

Daniel smiled and looked at the front most one. "Yeah, he believes it now, too."

"And in the end, that's what you wanted for him." Merry was still leaning back into the couch, not sitting forward in her usual interrogation pose.

"Yeah. It's always what I want for people I love."

"And so that's why you let him go gallivanting all over the place even though it was killing you a little inside."

He sipped at his iced tea. "I can't tie him down, Mer. It doesn't work that way."

Merry was now sitting forward on the couch and he could feel her eyes boring into the side of his head. "Then tell me how it does work."

"I love him and he always comes home to me."

"Ah." Merry grew quiet again and just held her iced tea. The whole room seemed to grow quiet, apart from the murmuring of the kids at the top of the stairs. "Just come on down, already. Stop eavesdropping at the top of the stairs."

Daniel blushed and stared down at his glass. "I should go mix up some kool-aid and get out the cookies."

"Not too many cookies, Sarah will spoil her appetite." Merry smiled at him and patted his hand.

Charlie and Sarah came down the stairs bowed slightly like dogs with their tails between their legs. They headed into the kitchen ahead of Daniel, not giving Merry the opportunity to get them alone. Daniel followed, getting out the big pitcher and the package of cookies, giving them each a stack of Oreos to tide them over while he finished their drinks.

"It'll be okay, guys. Really."

Sarah nodded and started to take apart her Oreos, licking the cream out of the centre before carefully discarding the cookie. Charlie was looking at him doubtfully.

The front door opened and then closed again and there was a sound of packages being dropped on the floor. "Daniel? I am home, me. Merry et Sarah, they make it in okay?"

"Yeah, they're here. Come in and meet them."

His lover came wandering in, looking around the corner first, before entering the living room. His outfit was rather sedate, and very new looking. Sarah's eyes grew round and she moved closer to Daniel.

Merry was about to get up when Aube took her hand and placed a kiss on the inside of her wrist. "It is good to meet with you."

She smiled up at Aube. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Marchand."

"Merry, you call me Aube. We are practical family." Aube smiled at her before looking into the kitchen. "Et the pretty one with the piggy tails, she must be Sarah."

Daniel could feel Sarah holding tight to the leg of his jeans before edging around to stand in front of him and nodding. Daniel spoke, "We're just having a bit of a snack before dinner. You want a cookie?"

"Non, merci." Aube patted his tummy. "I have been getting too fat recent, I need go to diet."

Merry snorted and got up from the couch. "If you're fat then the whole rest of the planet must be obese."

Daniel rolled his eyes and stuffed a whole cookie in his mouth as he poured the kool-aid. "You look nice, Aube. Sorry I didn't see you off this morning."

His lover nodded and shrugged, taking out a glass for some kool-aid. "Merci. Et you had thing to do before you go to work."

"I..." He didn't know what to say so he just poured some of the bright red sugar water into Aube's glass.

He could see Charlie and Merry exchange glances out of the corner of his eye. "So, then, Aube, where were you working today?" Merry asked.

"I was do things here and there. I go to studio et to salon. Then I get bore, me, and I go shopping."

"You look good," Daniel murmured.

"Merci. I have my highlight refresh." Aube smiled at him for the first time since getting home. He leaned in and gave Daniel a kiss on the cheek.

"Everyone okay down at the shop?"

"Ah, oui. I mean, they all complain, but they still have breath to complain, alors, it not so bad."

Sarah was now between Daniel and Aube, looking up. "Your boyfriend talks kinda funny."

"Not for where he's from, he doesn't," Daniel chided gently. "I like it."

"Where are you from?" Sarah asked, tugging at the hem of Aube's shirt.

"Montreal, it is in Canada." His lover smiled down at her and patted her head.

"You smell good."

Aube snickered, obviously not used to a five year old's sense of conversation. "Merci. It is le shampoo your uncle does not like that I bring home with me."

Daniel handed Merry a cookie and snorted. "Because I don't like it on me."

"Et it is way too much expensive. Mais, if you like it maybe I will take you to salon et they will use some on you." Aube smiled again before looking around. "Alors, where are going to go to have dinner? Maybe Ralph et Kacoo?"

Daniel wrinkled his nose. It was really touristy, but a great family place to eat. Perfect for out-of-towners like his family. "Yeah, that'll work. Just like Merry was asking for, actually."

Aube laughed and gave him a kiss on the end of the nose. "Daniel! I saw that face, you are becoming un vrai New Orleans restaurant snob." His lover teased him and winked.

"Yeah, but it'll be great for Sarah."

"Oui. Perhaps I should go et change, me. Merry maybe would like freshen up? I clean the bathroom for guest this morning." Aube gave a significant glance to Charlie.

Daniel held back a snort and tried to keep his face as innocent as possible as Merry fixed her son with a look.

Charlie slunk out of the room mumbling under his breath and Merry turned her attention back to them. "I think Sarah and I will go and freshen up a little, the plane ride always makes you feel the need to clean up."

"Thanks for the cookies, Uncle Dan." Sarah took off after her brother, pounding up the stairs.

Merry followed her, calling up after her children "Easy on the stairs, you sound like you're trying to bring the whole place down."

Aube snickered again. "Your sister seem very nice."

Daniel nodded. "She is. She's much nicer than me."

"I am told sometimes you can be very nice. Mais, you are probablement right."

That did it. He turned and went for Aubin's ribs, trying to get past his lover's defenses and get some tickling in.

Aube shrieked as Daniel's fingers managed to finally make contact with ticklish spots. His lover squirmed madly, trying to get away. "Daniel! Not fair!"

He grinned and stole a kiss. "That's what you get for being mean to me."

Aube nuzzled into his cheek. "Mean to you? I am never mean to you."

"No, you aren't," he murmured, holding Aube close. "Love you."

Another soft kiss and Aube finally relaxed enough to lean into him. "Je t'adore aussi."

"It can't be any worse than your mother's visit, right?"

"I think it will be very good et you will be much happy with your family here."

He nodded and held onto his lover, trying to keep that thought at the very front of his mind. It would be a good visit. Things would get resolved. His nephew would prove he'd grown up, at least a little. His niece would *not* get an education in cuss words and his sister would most assuredly butt out of his relationship with Aubin.

Yeah, and the city of New Orleans was home to the most god-fearing people on earth. Yeah, right.

The day was just not going Daniel's way at all. It started with a nice little bit of coitus interruptus involving a five year old knocking loudly on the door and asking, even more loudly, if they were up yet. Now was raining out, so he was trapped indoors. No escaping to the garden for some quiet. The initial moratorium on fighting seemed to be called off between Charlie and Sarah and they were making up for lost time.

Aube had given him a quick kiss before making his escape to the studio to help Miriam with her latest project and he knew Merry was lying in wait next to the coffee in the kitchen.

Pulling on his favorite t-shirt and shorts he walked into the kitchen and nodded to his little sister. "Morning."

"Morning, Danny." She smiled at him over the rim of her coffee cup. "Aube was kind enough to make coffee before he left this morning. I have fixed it since then."

"He's a little to used to the drek from drive-thrus in Montreal."

"He's a character." She chuckled and poured him a cup of coffee. "And I will try and curb Sarah's enthusiasm in the morning."

Daniel snorted. "I haven't met a child that could be curbed yet."

"Perhaps not, but they shouldn't cause a raging case of blue balls either."

He snorted again. "It's not like it is a big deal, Mer. You're here for a couple of weeks."

She grinned before taking another sip from her coffee. The earlier sounds of Sarah and Charlie fighting had quieted down. "When is the proper time for me to bring up the elephant in the room?"

"The you moving to New Orleans one?" He leaned against the counter.

"The one where I ask why you are punishing Aubin."

He felt his lips tightening. "I don't know what you're talking about."

She was looking at him out of the corner of her eye in the same fashion their mom did when she didn't believe him either. "So then everything is fine between you?"

"No."

"Did you want to talk about it? It's raining, the kids are quiet and I have time."

"He backed his way into another relationship." Daniel shrugged. "We're working it out."

"Working it out like Greg and I did?" One of her eyebrows arched at him and she was speaking more into her cup than to him.

He resisted the urge to shrug. "I missed most of that, so I can't say."

"Do you still love him or is it just comfortable for you?"

He'd thought about that over the last couple of days. "Both, but it's the same for him."

She sighed and put down the cup. "Is this the person you want to build a life with? Seems to me maybe you aren't so sure anymore."

"Seems to me you're judging based on very little evidence. I love him and that's not going to change."

"I'm just worried about you." Her tone softened again. "Lots of people think you're tougher and meaner than old leather, but you get hurt deeply when you do. I just don't want you to ride him so hard about it that he doesn't love you anymore, Danny."

"I'll work on it." Daniel finished off his coffee. "It's hard to let go of the pain and trust him."

"Sometimes you just have to before it's too late, y'know? Pushing him away won't help. He fucked up." She shrugged. "But we all do sometimes."

"I think I'm entitled to some time to regroup."

"Yes, you are. I just don't like seeing you so sad, big brother."

He made an effort to smile. "Especially since you're supposed to be here to help plan the wedding." Daniel pushed away from the counter. "Come on, let's go round up your spawn and get to Six Flags."

She ruffled his hair and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Yes, more witnesses there for when they decide to kill each other. You going to invite Aubin as well?"

"Yeah. He loves the park." Daniel pulled out his cell and dialed Aubin.

"Allo? Aubin a l'appareille." There was the sound of some sort of power tool screeching in the background and his lover was trying his best to talk over it.

"We're all going to Six Flags. You want to come with me?"

The screeching stopped and he could hear Aube saying something impatiently, muffled by his hand over the microphone. "Ah oui? You are going to Six Flag? That sound like b'en du fun."

"Yeah. Should I swing by and pick you up on our way?"

"If you want, d'accord. I am bit of mess right now, alors."

Daniel nodded to Merry and she headed off to round up the kids. "It's a theme park. I don't think anyone will notice - and I'd love it if you came."

"Okay, I will come, me. Give me only ten minute to clean off at least some." There was another moment of muffled conversation before he was back. "Oh, Daniel? Did mail come yet?"

"Um. Hang on." He checked through the stack on the counter and then headed out to the box. There was a couple of bills and then something with a seal on it from INS. "Yeah. There is a thing for you."

"Oh! C'est merveilleux! Can you bring it with you, Daniel? Thank you." His lover sounded very excited. INS meant one of two things, either Aube was applying for a green card or his visa was up and they were informing him of this. But Aube'd not be really excited about going back to Montreal.

"Of course. See you in a few minutes." Huh. Okay, so that paperwork really had been for a green card then and not taxes. Interesting.

"In a few minute, Daniel." There was a click and Aube's end went dead.

Well, it did explain all the questions about property. He shrugged and went to put on sneakers. In the end, he'd get an answer.

A week after he received the letter Aubin watched as Miriam stubbed out another cigarette and immediately lit the next one as they stood out in front of the INS offices.

"So, ten minutes and it's your turn right?"

"Oui, that is what they say. Mais they say that one hour ago, them." Aube grabbed the cigarette and took a drag from it. His pulse was racing and he was ready to pass out or bolt. Neither of which was an option right now. He was in his best suit and a dark paisley shirt -- only the best for immigration.

"Turn your phone off. You don't want Boogie Nights or whatever it is to be playing in the middle of your interview with The Man."

"Ah, oui." He took out his phone and looked to make sure he'd not missed any calls yet, before turning off the ringer. "I am so scare, me. If I do not get green card, then I will have go back to live en Montreal."

"You won't screw it up then. Remember, you're here for the art and the love. No mentioning Daniel."

"I promesse, no mentioning of Daniel. He is out of my mind for all the time!"

She nodded and inhaled deeply then blew the smoke out of the side of her mouth. "Right. Afterwards, we go for martinis."

He nodded vigorously. They would be needed. Okay, one more quick trip to the men's room and they should be ready for him. He gave Miriam a kiss on the cheek. "D'accord. I am ready. I will come to find you after."

"I'll be here." She dug around in her bag and pulled out a tattered paperback.

So this was it. Aube took a deep breath and headed back into the crowded office. Serious-looking men and women called out numbers and led people back into a long hallway. Aube swallowed against a dry throat and nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard a man call out "Aubin Marchand? Is there a Mister Aubin Marchand here?"

"Oui. I am here, me."

"Hello." The man glanced up from the paperwork to smile thinly at him. "My name is Albert Wossingham. Come back with me and we'll get this all going."

"D'accord." Aube nodded and followed the thin, balding man down the hallway and toward a row of non-descript offices. All uniform, desk cabinet and files, not a plant or family picture to be seen. Depressing. "Alors, how long have been work here, Albert?"

"Three years, give or take."

"It must be very reward to help people who want become citizen." This conversation was going to be laborious, he could just tell. What he wouldn't give to just fast forward to the martinis.

"It is when the people are worthy, which I'm sure you are." Albert settled into his chair and gestured to Aube to take the guest one. "Let's get started."

Aube sat down and tried to figure out how to cross his legs in a comfortable manner, and when that failed, hooked his feet behind the wrungs on the pedestal. "D'accord. I am ready, me."

The first few questions were easy, confirming address, date of birth, all the vital statistics stuff. Albert moved on to the second page. "So you've made a life for yourself here in New Orleans and you'd like to stay long term?"

Don't mention Daniel... Don't mention Daniel... "Eh, oui. I have a little studio, me, where I make art to sell. I have had several show in different city. I like this city very much." Aube twisted his fingers together and watched Albert write down what he was saying, the scratch of the pen was almost deafening when no one was talking. "Et, I own half a house."

"A duplex?" Albert glanced up at him and down at the paper. "Oh, co-own. Very impressive. Went into it with this...Mr. Nichols as an investor?"

"Euhm... Non. We both live there, like a house-mate situation." Aube could feel the color creeping into his cheeks. Stupid.

"Ah." It was noted down on the paper with the other things.

"He is police officer, him et had been a soldier. He fight in Gulf War. Very good man." Aube looked hopefully to see if the pen would move again, and was trying to stop the verbal explosions about Daniel.

There were faint scratchings. "Ties to the community...excellent. Okay, now we need to talk about your income. It's been a little erratic."

"Ah... oui. I had hard time getting start into mon cariere when I first get here, but for last while I have been making income steady."

More paper shuffling. "So why New Orleans?"

"It is very beautiful. I like the people very much et it is a French City at one point. I understand le culture et I not miss Montreal too close then." There, that sounded like a good answer. Well more appropriate than 'my lover is here'.

Albert nodded. "Did you bring your passport with you? And your visa?"

Aube took out his passport and almost took out his credit card, but one look at Albert's serious face and he took out the piece of paper from his pocket and handed it over, trying to smooth down it's ragged edges.

"Well used," Albert murmured, a tiny smile curling up his lips. He pulled a stamp out of the drawer and opened Aube's passport to the first blank page, then handed it over. "Here is your temporary grant of permanent residency. You can use this as proof while you're waiting for the card to come in the mail, which will take 4 to 6 months. Congratulations."

At first he thought maybe he head wrong, but then when he got his passport back and looked at the fresh stamp, his hands started to shake and he almost jumped up and kissed Albert on the top of his balding head. "Youppi!"

"You're welcome -- and tell your housemate congratulations as well, hmm?" Albert snapped the folder shut, and tossed it into his out-box.

"I will!" Aube said excitedly as he sprung up from the chair, almost knocking it over. He blushed again. "I mean, I am sure he will be glad to know he will not be responsible for all of the mortgage."

"Have a good life, Mr. Marchand." Albert stood and shook Aube's hand. "Let me walk you out and bring in the next victim, I mean appointment."

Aube snickered and let Albert walk him out, he tried to calm his expression down before he saw Miriam, but it was no good. She kissed him hard on the mouth and told him to go home. He spent the next several blocks, his knee shaking madly and driving the person next to him on the Canal Streetcar nuts, trying to get a grip on himself before he saw Daniel.

Chapter 11

When he was back in the Quarter, it was only a short walk home, and this time he didn't take the scenic wander-y route.

Daniel was making Sarah and Charles help him weed the front bed. "That is a flower, leave that. Anything with a spiky leaf? Goes."

"Salut. I see you have put some slave to work." He smiled at his lover, sitting on the urge just to rush directly into the news.

"That's what the younger generation is for," Daniel dusted off his hands and stood. "You're looking rather dapper today."

"I had un meeting in Business Districte. Mais maybe I was little overdress for it." He let Daniel take a good look, he didn't put on his suit often, outside of going to church.

Daniel took a long look then leaned forward and gave him a kiss. "I'm afraid to touch you, as dirty as I am. You want to go change and then come help? We wouldn't want to take out anything important."

He grinned and moved closer to Daniel and murmured to him. "Alors, maybe you would like to come in for un moment while I get change?"

Daniel grinned back, the look getting hungry. "Sure, I can do that."

Sarah made a face, stopping digging for a moment. "You guys are gonna get mushy."

Aube snickered and winked at Daniel. "Only if your uncle is very lucky, him."

He waited until Daniel had given instructions to Charles not to try and bury his sister and to keep an eye on her, then his lover came inside and shut the door behind him. Aube didn't say anything, just took out his passport and handed it to Daniel.

Daniel looked at Aube, then down at the passport, flipping through it. He paused at the page with the new stamp on it. He squinted and tilted it towards the light. "This? You? You got it?"

"Oui, they will be sending me my carte in just a while, mais, I got it." He smiled at his lover and waited for the news to sink in.

Daniel handed back the passport and his smile slowly grew until it looked like it was going to swallow his whole face, then he stepped forward and pulled Aube into a tight hug. "Congratulations, lover."

"Merci." He buried his face into the side of Daniel's neck and just held onto him for a while, he kissed the spot softly before letting go. "Et alors, I should get change."

"Yeah. Come work on our yard with me." Daniel's voice gave special emphasis to the words. "Make our home look good."

"I will be out in just un moment." He kissed his lover one more time. Their home. He rolled those two words over in his mind.

They had a nice ring to them.

It seemed like it had been forever that Aube had gotten his green card, but it had only been a few weeks. Aube was leaning back against him and Daniel could hold his lover, tickle him and whisper things only for his ears.

Aube was warm and relaxed, snickering. Daniel wished for a moment they could just stay like this all day but sooner or later he'd have to get up and go to work. Aube had promised today he would take Merry and Sarah to the salon to be pampered, and it was only a matter of time before Sarah came to make him keep that promise. School was starting up soon and Merry had committed to staying in New Orleans. She'd gotten a job and was now apartment hunting.

"Weather is cooler in the mornings now. Summer is almost over."

"Oui. Soon, it will be time to make decorate for Halloween. Et we must have Thanksgiving also in October or else my maman might just walk here to kill us both." His lover grinned at him. Typical he was already onto the upcoming parties.

"No problem. School next week for Sarah and Charles, too."

"Oui. I make offerte to go shopping with Charles, but somehow I think he think I not know how to pick out his 'style'. I tell him, it easy. I take him to big and tall store, get him jean way to big, then we tie them on with belt."

"And he hitches them up every third step or so." Daniel snickered. "Merry was thinking about home schooling them, or private."

"There is very good ecole privée not far from here. I tell Merry about good one run by le couvent for little girl and she look at me skeptique. I tell her most people in New Orleans only nominal Catholic anyway et it not very expensive." Aube kissed Daniel's fingers, still playing with his hand.

"She'll work it out." Daniel pressed a kiss to Aube's neck. "Just like we did."

"Oui." His lover's smile was warm, bordering on predatory. "Alors, you have any idea for how to pass le temps before you get call in to work?"

Daniel skated his hands lower, playing with the waistband of Aube's boxers. "Yeah, I do."

His lover rolled onto his belly and kissed him softly. "Et c'est quoi, alors?" Aube's voice was laden with feigned innocence.

Daniel scooted down the bed. "Making love and hopefully not being interrupted."

Aube moaned as Daniel kissed him, and then nibbled the sensitive skin of his throat. "That is always the goal... oui."

Daniel bit down gently, leaving faint red marks. "A worthy goal."

His lover just nodded this time and leaned in to capture his mouth in another kiss. The chill of the dawn air was quickly giving way to an intense heat and humidity that had nothing to do with the rising sun.

Daniel loved it when they had sex like this. A slow build made of laughter and teasing, here in their bed and in their house. He blessed the days and nights they had together. The kisses gave way to bites and nips, the sheets ended up on the floor, along with underwear. Before long the bed was rocking with the movement of their hips, Aube pressed against the mattress and looking up at him.

Moments seemed to at once stretch on and condense into individual touches. The feeling of his lover's hands holding his hips, then moving to his shoulders. Being pulled down for another heated kiss. Small eruptions of snickers being smothered in them. With no frenzied race to climax, it almost took them by surprise, fingers clutching hard for a moment before being swept under by a warm wave.

"Je t'adore, Daniel."

"Love you, Aubin."

There was a soft snicker and another kiss. "Alors, then, marry me."

Daniel blinked. "We are, eventually."

"Et, what is wrong with right now?" Aube's eyes were crinkled in a wide smile; Daniel still couldn't tell if his lover was joking.

"We're naked?"

"I already tol' you Miriam and me, we make plan for you and I to get marry naked. Mais, you are allowed to put on boxer et robe."

Daniel sat up and pulled on his robe. "Okay. So, we're getting married now?" Some part of his brain wasn't quite connecting this all together, but it would be amusing, at the very least.

"Oui. You make call to who you want to be witness. I call Andre et Miriam. Merry, Charles et Sarah are here to make represent to your family. Alors? Why not?" Aube pulled on his boxers after wiping away the evidence of their previous activities from his abdomen.

"You're serious." Daniel scrubbed at his face with his hands. "Do I get to shave first?"

"Oui. Of course. You can take shower, if you like." Aube kissed him on the cheek before producing a sheaf of papers from seemingly nowhere. "Mais make call to Kevin first."

"Okay." He found his cell phone in the pocket of his jeans from yesterday and speed-dialed Kevin. "Dude, you need to come over to the house now. We're getting married and you're a witness. Bring me *coffee*." He snapped the phone shut without waiting for an answer.

He could hear Aube talking to Merry in the hallway before a loud burst of laughter filled the air along with the sound of Sarah squealing with the glee only a small child can muster at this time in the morning.

Aubin really was serious. Well, it was true to form that Aube never did anything by halves.

Underwear first. No, shower first and then underwear. He tossed the phone back into the dirty laundry and braved the hallway, dodging people to reach the safety of the bathroom and a hot shower.

He almost laughed when he tried to picture the look on Kevin's face as he lined up at Cafe du Monde to get coffee and beignets for everyone, trying to figure out if Daniel was having him on or not.

Twenty minutes later he was in clean clothes and sitting at his kitchen table and trying not to fidget as Merry took pictures. Aube was in his silk pajama bottoms, his hair still mussed from the morning, Sarah was trying very hard to press a bouquet of muguets and daisies into his hands; insisting that this was not doing it "right." Daniel almost collapsed from relief when he heard the crunch of gravel and Kevin and Andre's voices coming around the edge of the house.

"In here, guys. Rescue me from my relatives!"

Andre was the first one in the screen door at the back of the house, holding it open for Kevin. He was in his ancient Empire Strikes Back tee shirt and faded jeans. "I really wasn't sure what to wear to a kitchen table wedding at eight in the morning."

"Apparently it's a bathrobe and boxers, so you're well dressed," Daniel stood and gave Andre a quick hug, then another to Kevin.

Kevin was just shaking his head and chuckling. "I now know that there is nothing that can't be expected from you guys."

"This is a Marchand production, I just get a starring role," Daniel joked. "Come in, come in."

Andre was just putting a bakery box onto the kitchen counter and clapping Charles on the back before giving Aube a hug. The smell from the box was next to heavenly. "I stopped by Napoleon's on the way over. You have to have cake..." His voice cut off when Merry stepped forward to introduce herself.

"Hey, I'm Meredith, Daniel's sister." She held out her hand to Andre and Daniel was hard pressed not to laugh at the thunderstruck look on his face.

"No drooling, Father Michel."

Andre still didn't say anything, bent low over the hand and gave it a soft kiss. Merry snickered and looked at Daniel, Andre's cheeks were getting brighter.

Aube looked somewhere between amused and scandalized. "Andre!"

Andre shook his head and came back into himself. "Father Michel... I mean, Andre. My friends call me Andre."

"Bet you didn't know there was a cuter version of me out there, did you?" Daniel bumped Andre's shoulder companionably. "She's mean, too."

"Daniel! Taise-toi! He is my priest, alors." Aube was getting a little past thinking this was funny, judging by the tone.

"He can still be your priest, and your brother in law." Daniel grinned and egged him on some more.

Merry laughed and elbowed him one in the ribs. "Don't make the poor guy explode. And besides, Andre and I have only said hello. 'You had me at hello' only happens in horrible romantic comedies." But she was standing closer to Andre.

Kevin clapped his hands together. "Okay. So, we're here to see a wedding?"

"Yes. Well, mostly it's signing papers and a kiss and some cake."

"That's not getting married!" Sarah was tugging at Daniel's robe pocket. "You have to start with 'dearly beloved'!"

Daniel looked over at her. "You want to do it then?"

She rolled her eyes at him and sighed loudly, in that 'adults are **so** dumb' way. "You have to be a priest or a captain or something, silly."

"Not for this kind of marriage we don't." He glanced over at Aubin. "I think we start with the signing on the third page, no?"

"Oui. Yes, you start by signing third page, with date, then make initial to fourth with date, after you have read all of le contracte."

Daniel cleared his throat. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness Aubin and I getting married in the eyes of our friends and the soi distant government of Canada."

The back screen door banged open and then shut, causing everyone to jump. Miriam was rushing in, carrying four bottles of champagne. "Did I miss it? I had to strong arm Lola to open up and sell me some bubbly."

"Nope, we were just getting started." He felt her breeze past him. "I'm just signing my parts and then it's Aubin's turn."

"Oh good." She put the bottles down on the counter, huffing to catch her breath.

Daniel signed and initialed. It felt endless: this page here, that page there, date, date again. He smiled. "You know this is like being with you, endless baroque details that make the end result worth it."

He had to snicker when Aube bopped him on the elbow with a pen for that statement, nonetheless grinning widely.

Daniel watched as Aube signed, initialed and dated each part of the form, making sure to check off the right boxes and fill out all the information. "Alors, we are keeping our own name, oui?"

"Yeah."

"Et bon... I think then I am done, me." One more scribbled signature and Aube put the pen down and looked at Daniel.

"That's it?" It seemed so...done.

"Oui. That is it." His lover started to fold up the papers. "All there is left is to mail all of this à Canada."

"Wait." Daniel held Aube's hands still and looked around at all of their friends, pausing to hold this moment in his memory. He turned back to Aubin and gave him a kiss. "Okay, now we're married."

His lover nuzzled him, his grin getting wider. "Oui. Well, as soon as paper get mail anyway."

There was a loud pop, the sound of pottery shattering and fizzy liquid spilling to the floor. Miriam was looking sheepish. "Oooops. I hope that vase was not one of your favorites or didn't contain a relative or something."

Daniel grinned and stole the bottle from her, taking a swig out of it. "Salut!"

"Salut." His lover waited for his turn before taking a drink.

Kevin snickered, but tried to look stern. "You know, Nichols, getting plastered won't get you out of work today."

"Yeah, I know, but I can have one swig."

Merry interrupted, holding up her glass of champagne. "To the happy couple! May they grow in life and love and hand over the contract to someone responsible to mail."

Sarah promptly stole it and took off through the house. "Me! Me!"

Aube let go of Daniel to chase her around, laughing and trying to catch her. "Sarah... Viens ici! Maintenant!"

"I'm responsible! I'm going to mail it so you can be married forever and ever."

"You are very responsible, mais it is not even in envelope yet!"

"Oh." She dodged back around him. "Mom! I need an envelope and a stamp!"

Daniel could have laughed at Aube's expression of 'how'd she do that?'. Andre did. "He's so not used to being around kids for more than an hour at a time."

Daniel grinned. "Well, he'd better. Merry's shopping around for a place to live, probably mid-city."

"Oh..." Andre fell conspicuously silent again and looked at Merry.

"She'd love help looking...."

Andre blushed and mumbled something about keeping his eyes open for something. Luckily, Aube was distracted by the painstaking process of a five year old folding a document correctly to fit in an envelope.

Daniel stole the pen off the table and quickly scribbled Merry's number on it, stuffing it in Andre's pocket. "Now I think, we have lunch!"

"Oh! B'en! Where we all will go? It should be speciale." Aube's attention was back on him now, as Sarah sealed the envelope with Charlie's help.

"Uhhh. Pick someplace." He stole another swig out of the bottle as it went past him.

Aube looked around at the gathered crowd. Daniel could tell he was sizing up the proper cuisine. "Alors. for lunch we should go maybe to Court of Two Sister, then ce soir, you and I will make reservation chez Gallatoire."

"Excellent, but first? We dress!" He saluted the crowd and headed for the stairs.

He could hear his lover's footsteps following him up the stairs. His husband. He'd have to get used to that.

"So do we really gross them all out and wear matching clothes or what?" Daniel asked.

Aube winked at him. "We can, mon amour. But I think maybe les policiers will not appreciate you show up to work wearing a T-shirt that say Princess, it."

"True." Daniel mock sighed and went for his usual black instead. "Maybe next time."

"You plan on getting marry again, you?" Aube laughed as he rooted through the closet, tossing things out onto the floor.

"No, for our anniversaries," he said softly, watching Aubin. "Now you're really going to find out how much of a romantic I am."

"As oppose to before? I will die from being too pamper." His husband finally backed out of the closet, holding a pair of jeans he was giving the sniff test to.

Daniel smiled. "You surprised me this morning, or I would have had flowers for you."

Aube grinned back at him and winked. "Alors, then we know, I am in store for life of romance and you are in store for life of surprise." His husband chuckled before continuing more seriously. "I did not want to wait for one more moment, me. Too much plan and maybe it never happen, it."

He nodded. "Fair's fair."

He watched as Aube pulled on his jeans and the Princess tee before coming over to give him a kiss. "But I am very happy it did."

"Me too. It was becoming an ugly hassle and you made it beautiful, even in our 1950s yellow kitchen."

His husband smiled up at him and leaned in for another kiss. "If you have famille et friend et commitment? Nothing else matter.... et... shit. Remind me I must call maman."

"Are you kidding? My mother is going to string me up when she finds out." Daniel wrapped his arms around Aube's waist. "We're dead men. We better go eat and have fun while we can."

His husband nodded vigorously before nuzzling into his throat. "Eh oui. First? We make celebration, drink champagne et celebrate with those here. Then? We face la musique like men."

"Very cute, dead, gay men." Daniel laughed. "As it should be."

"Maybe if I call ta mere and you call ma maman, we will live to see another day." Aube laughed with him.

"Good. I plan on being married to you for a long long time."

"This is good news, it. Seeing as I plan on being marry for long time."

Daniel smiled and gave Aube one last kiss. "Okay, lunch and onto our new life, which will look remarkably like our old life."

End.