



Chapter One

"Guess we've got the same seating arrangement on this leg of the flight?" It's funny how awkward it feels talking to Rack. Daniel has a squiggly feeling in his stomach, along with a deep knot, when he looks at his lover, who has absolutely zero bounce in his step, but does seem to have a problem meeting Daniel's eyes.

"Reckon so," Rack says shortly. "It's not too long of a flight, anyhow." For some reason, to go from Dallas to Denver they've had a trip to North Dakota in between. Alas for the cheap seats.

Rack shoulders his carry-on, containing a dog-eared novel and a change of clothes; for some reason Daniel doesn't understand. Well, the clothes, anyway. He has a novel of his own, picked up at shop near the last hotel, and a CD player in his travel bag.

As soon as they hit the skies, he plans on letting the tunes take him away. *Just like Calgon.*

In the meantime, they're blocking the aisle. This feels seriously weird, like the two of them ought to kiss, but neither can really bring themselves close enough to touch lips. Daniel knows why he's hesitant -- he's still upset at Rack for kissing Josh. Why Rack's upset, he has no idea. He was the one who got to come out on top this morning.

"See you in Denver," Daniel says at last, when the bottleneck starts getting seriously impatient.

"Yeah, right. Denver." Rack ducks into his row, and Daniel, with a sigh, heads further toward the back of the plane. He's not sure if it's a sound of relief or regret, or something else altogether. All he knows is that, while it does feel strange not to be sitting with Rack during their flight, he's kind of glad to have the time by himself.

He's by the window -- again. Seems like he always gets crammed in to where he can't stretch his legs. Every leg of the flight so far, he's been packed in like a sardine. But what can you do? Heaving another breath, he jams his carry-on beneath the seat in front of him, wriggles to try and get comfortable, and gazes out at the tarmac.

"Whooh! Talk about going around your ass to reach your elbow. C'mon, North Dakota?" Daniel has only a moment's warning before his seatmate plops down next to him, a skinny old lady wearing a tank top and a lot of ink. She has a head of wild, loosely curled white hair. He turns to her automatically, and sees that she has a kind sort of face, with laugh lines around her eyes and multiple piercings in her ears.

It's the little old lady from Pasadena. Go Granny, go, Granny, go, Granny, go. He can't help cracking a grin. "I bet you drive a convertible," he blurts out before the words can bypass his brain on the way to his mouth.

Granny cracks up. "A red one. How'd you know? I'm Selma, by the way. You can call me Sally." She winks. "Wild Sally is what they call me sometimes, but you're young. The folks at the retirement center like the joke better than whippersnappers do."

Now Daniel really is laughing, and God, it feels good. "Wild Sally," he says with a broad grin. "You give 'em hell, right?"

"You bet your ass. That bunch of gray-haired knitters never saw the likes of me before." She tries wedging her oversized purple bag underneath the seat, then makes a noise of impatience and retrieves a book and CD player of her own before standing to shove the rest in their overhead compartment. As she raises her arms, Daniel sees that even her pits are tattooed. He's had his cock inked, but the thought of the pits... yeowch.

"There!" Wild Sally sits back down with a thump. She wriggles. "Jesus, I hate these armrests. They're not built for anyone who doesn't weigh ninety pounds wringing wet. You mind if I raise this up and crowd you a little bit?" She winks. "I promise not to smash you against the wall."

She's not too big to fit, not at all, but hey, the armrest is uncomfortable for Daniel at least, so he lifts it like a gentleman. Wild Sally approves. She stuffs her gear into the seatback in front of her and pats him on the knee. It's such a Rack-like maneuver that Daniel freezes for a moment, but then relaxes, remembering to breathe. This is definitely *not* Rack. Female, for one thing, and about forty years too old for another.

And even Rack hasn't gone as far as the pits yet. Ouch. Ow, ow, ow. It wasn't a complicated design, nothing like Daniel's own Celtic banding down his left arm, but there was more than one color and that sends Daniel right back to *ow*. He pictures being in a chair while someone shaves and works on his underarms, and shivers.

Wild Sally is, apparently, psychic. She raises her elbows, letting him get another look. "What, this freaks you out? You, with the cheek piercings? Christ, I'd never let anyone near my mouth with a needle. Well, except my dentist." She flashes a startlingly white smile. "Nice one on your left arm. Work in progress?"

"You could say that." Daniel isn't sure if Rack is going to feel like continuing for a while. They could land and things will go back to normal, or the strained silence will go on all the way through the Denver con and then... he doesn't know.

Just ahead, he sees Josh boarding the plane. He doesn't seem to see Rack or Daniel, finding his seat ahead of both. Daniel relaxes muscles he hadn't known were tense. Thank God.

Wild Sally notices this. But then again, Daniel is beginning to have the suspicion that she misses nothing. She stretches up to get a better look at Josh, and gives a low whistle. "Ex-military, huh? Pretty cute if you go for a little soldier in your man." She gives the dirtiest chuckle anyone outside of Rack can muster.

Rack may no longer be number one with a bullet when it comes to innuendo.

Wild Sally digs in the pocket of her royal purple tank top and comes out with a pack of Juicy Fruit. "Gum? It's hell when they start going up and your ears pop. Trust me, I've flown enough to know."

Daniel has his own pack of Big Red, but what the hell? He accepts a piece and unwraps the thing, popping it into his mouth. The flavors of his childhood, fruity and sweet, burst over his tongue. Wild Sally grins at him. "Outside of Bubble Yum, there's nothing like it, is there? Makes me feel like a kid again."

The decision is official: Daniel likes Wild Sally. He likes her even better when she suggests, "Hey, wanna switch? You're so tall you've got to be dying there. Sit on the aisle so you can stretch your legs. Me, I'm short, I can handle the cramped space. But a long drink of water like you? No way. Move it, buster."

"I could kiss you," Daniel says gratefully, standing so they can make the switch.

Sally cracks up. "Save it for your boyfriend."

"How did you -- do I have a sign stapled to my forehead or something?"

"Nah. I'm just a fag hag from way back." Sally thumps Daniel's thigh. "I can tell, easy. Besides, I saw the book you're reading. Top Gay Love Stories? This is airline fare?"

Daniel cranes his neck to look at Sally's choice of reading material. "And I'm guessing that 'Locker Room Love' is a better choice?"

Sally laughs again. "We all take our pleasures where we can get them, sweetie. Besides, I'm old. Who's gonna care?"

"I get the feeling that you're plenty young at heart."

That earns him a wink and a grin. "Good call." The plane's engine starts, fasten seatbelt lights come on, and Sally grunts as she starts working with her extender and the latches. "Okay, kid, table it for now. We'll talk more once we're in the air. I like to watch the plane take off."

Daniel settles back, feeling better somehow. He doesn't know exactly why, but there you have it. As seatmates go, if he can't have Rack -- and he's still not sure about that one -- Sally is damned good company.

This should be an entertaining flight.

Once the plane levels off and the flight attendants are in their seats, poised for action if anyone needs a pillow or a blanket, one of them up front rattling around with a drink cart, Sally pulls reluctantly away from her rapt fascination with the window. "Always goes too fast," she says with a sigh. "Okay, so where were we?"

"Talking about reading material?" Daniel's been flicking through his book of gay romance. The stories are all good, if a little depressing. Surely not everyone's life is that full of angst?

Sally whacks him with her own omnibus in a deeper shade of blue. "Nah, smartass. We were talking about boyfriends, and I was about to ask you who yours was. If he's with you. And if he is, why the hell aren't you sitting with him?"

Sally, it appears, pulls no punches. Daniel keeps his voice down as he points to the spiky blond hair just visible above the head of Rack's seat. He's wearing a pair of earphones and listening to something loud enough that Daniel can catch a crashing chord or two even from where he's sitting. "That's him. Up there, with the hair that you could cut yourself on."

"Yeah?" Sally rises up to get a better look. "No shit? That looks like Rack."

Daniel blinks. "You know him?"

"Hell, he's the one who did a lot of my ink at a convention a few years back. I stood in his line every day until we got to know each other. We'd bum smokes off each other standing outside, even one day when it was raining like fuck and there was just this bitty overhang to huddle underneath." She whistles. "I'm flying out to Denver 'cause I heard he was on this tattoo tour. So you're with him? Be damned. I mean, I knew he was gay, but back then he was with this one guy who --"

"Tossed him over for a woman."

Sally winces. "Ouch. That had to hurt. Too bad for him, but good for you, huh? Rack do your tattoos? Really is nice work on the arm, by the way."

Daniel touches his purple ink automatically. "Yeah. This one's about halfway there."

Sally studies it. "Nice, very nice. Gonna cause an uproar when you get back to wherever you work, unless you're in a shop with Rack."

"Not exactly. I'm a carpenter. I have my own place." Daniel attempts a grin. "No one to report to except me."

"Not a bad deal. What about Rack? He used to talk about how he dreamed of having a place to call his own. That ever come true?"

Visions of the tattoo parlor, welcoming and homey, with Mei Li and Rufus and even Luz, flash through Daniel's mind. "Yeah, he did. I helped him build it. That's how we met."

Sally grins broadly enough to see a glint of gold near the back of her mouth. "Now there's a love story. And let me guess, he jumped your bones the first chance he got."

Daniel almost swallows his Juicy Fruit. "Sally!"

"What? I strike a nerve?" Sally settles back into her seat and laces her fingers together over her stomach. "Rack was always a horny little bastard. A guy like you? I can't imagine he kept his hands off for long."

Daniel can feel the heat rising in his cheeks. People keep on saying this, but he still doesn't quite believe them. "I'm nothing special..."

"Bullshit. You're cute. If I were young enough and you were straight, I'd do more than pat you on the leg." Sally gives him a nudge with her elbow. "So you're happy together, you and Rack?"

Daniel's eyes flick toward the back of Josh's head. It's only a momentary look, but Sally misses nothing. She nods sagely. "I get it. Trouble in Paradise, huh? So who's that ex-soldier going after, you or Rack?"

There's a moment of indecision where Daniel considers telling Sally to back off, but again, why the hell should he? "Both of us," he admits. "Rack and I... we're in it for life, you know?" He holds up his hand with the tattooed ring. "Partners all the way. Then this guy comes along and he wants to get in the middle. And I mean literally."

"Ooh, damn. That's rough." Sally's voice is sympathetic. "And I'm guessing you don't want to take him up on his offer?"

Daniel shakes his head. "Not so much. I mean, he's a great guy, but he's not *Rack*. And I get the feeling that Rack thinks he's not *me*. Thing is, neither of us has a clue what to do about it."

"Hence the trouble between you two." Sally nods sagely. "You get to be as old as I am, you'll have seen it all. Done it all, too. Threesomes can be damn good fun, but only if everyone's into it. Otherwise..." She makes a raspberry sound with her tongue. "Know what I mean?"

"And then some."

"That'd be why you're not sitting together? Had a fight about things, not that long ago?"

Daniel half-turns to stare at the woman. She looks completely comfortable in her tattoos and piercings, secure in the knowledge that her white hair gives her complete and total license to say whatever the hell is on her mind. "Are you psychic, or have you just been around?"

"Little of both." Sally turns herself, leaning against the window. "Am I right, or am I right?"

Ahead of them, Rack's bopping to the music, but the movement looks half-hearted. Daniel gives him a longing look, wishing to God he were up there with the guy. "The airline put us in separate rows..."

"Horseshit. The plane isn't full. He's in a row by himself. You could have snuck up there once we leveled out, but you didn't. And I have to wonder why. I'm a nosy old lady, so if it's not my business, I dig on in. Don't tell me to shut up or anything."

Daniel can't even imagine trying. Sally's like a bulldog. Friendly enough that she wants to play, but when she sees a bone she chomps down and won't let go. "Okay, fine," he gives in. "I kind of wanted some time apart."

"On account of this third guy. You needed some thinking space."

"More or less."

"Hmm." Sally's eyes narrow. "Better think fast, then. Looks like he's headed back this way."

Daniel's head whips around and sure enough, Rack is making his way down the row. He can't help but stare at the man, he looks so edible in his tight vest and his painted-on jeans. Thing is, though, he's got an expression on his face that could either mean big trouble as they're leaving Little Texas -- or he's lost in thought as he heads for the bathroom.

As it turns out, he's got both on his mind. Rack stops at Daniel's row and grabs him by the hand. "You, come with me," he orders. Then he pauses. "Wild Sally? That you, love?"

Sally pumps her fist in the air. "Knew you'd recognize me."

"You tryin' to charm my boy away?"

And be damned if the words don't cause a glow to light up in Daniel's chest. He's still Rack's "boy".

Sally hoots. "As if. He's gayer than you are, sugar, and that says a lot."

"Oh, go on with you. Heading for the Denver con? We'll talk later. Meantime, Dan and I have a few things to discuss." Rack tugs on Daniel's hand. "You coming or what?"

Sally's rough nudge and the pull of Rack's hand combined get Daniel out of his seat. He stands, careful not to bash his head on the overhead compartment, and steps cautiously out into the aisle. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see. Just you follow me."

Daniel isn't surprised when they reach the back of the plane and the bathrooms. "Rack, I don't know --"

"Inside," Rack growls, giving Daniel a light shove between the shoulder blades. "These things are soundproofed, right?"

"Yeah, and they're filthy."

"Not at all! Sanitation at its best. Come on, now, come with me." Hurricane Rack manages to bundle Daniel inside, and wedges himself in afterwards. He clicks the "occupied" sign shut and stands facing Daniel, looking up into his eyes. "Look," he says in his most frank tones, "I've been a right tosser, yeah? You can't help it if this Josh bloke fancies both you and me. If I know you, you've just been a friend to the lad, like you say." He raises Daniel's hand to kiss it. "And I reckon I do know you, after all we've been through."

The knot in Daniel's chest begins to loosen. He half-grins. "And you had to drag me back here to tell me this?"

"Nah. I had to tell you, and I wanted some privacy besides. Can't go that long without being inside you, or you in me." Rack flashes him a Look. He fumbles in his pocket and produces a small tube of lubricant. "You were kind enough to introduce me to the Mile High Club. Figure it's about time for a little turn and turn about."

Daniel holds back a fit of laughter. "God, Rack. Only you."

"So?" Rack's mischievous humor is infectious. "You want to do me, or the other way around?"

Daniel takes the tube and turns it thoughtfully over in his hands. "So you're sorry about this morning? The whole mess? Even kissing Josh?"

"Completely sorry about that, I am." Rack looked abashed. "Wasn't the right thing to do. I get a bit of fire in my gut when I think someone's lookin' at you and wanting what's mine." He runs a finger down the tattoo on Daniel's lower belly, then gestures at his matching territory marker. He lifts their hands, the tattooed rings touching. "You're mine, and I can act like a complete git when I'm threatened."

"I still don't get why you kissed him."

"Wanted you to see what it felt like," Rack admits. "Didn't enjoy it one bit. And I'm sorry as I can be, I am. Forgive me?"

Daniel sighs. His knot unravels completely. "Wild Sally's gonna know exactly what we're doing back here."

Rack grins wickedly. "You can count on it. She's a lecherous old broad, and she'd use those exact words to describe herself. She's probably plannin' to grill you on the details when you get back in your seat." He pauses. "That is, unless you come an' sit with me. I've a free seat on the aisle and everything."

Daniel gazes at Rack, feeling his heart thump in his chest. "I'll sit with you," he says softly. "But I'm going to make sure you feel it when you park your ass."

Rack's eyes sparkle. "That a promise?"

"Pants down, sailor." Daniel pushes Rack around until he's pressed up against the door. "We have to make it quick, but I don't think that's gonna be a problem."

"You touch me an' I'll go off like a shot," Rack agrees hoarsely. "Need to feel you in me, though. Reclamation, if you want to use the fancy word. I was hopin' it would be this way around."

Daniel's busy undoing his belt buckle and unsnapping the button fly on his jeans. "I don't see those jeans coming down." He shoves his own pants to mid-thigh and reaches around to unzip Rack. "Touch you like this, you mean?"

Rack groans, although he keeps it quiet. "God, yeah. Make another mess on a wall, shall we?"

"Your turn to clean it up," Daniel warns Rack. He makes quick use of the lube, slicking up the crease between Rack's ass cheeks and anointing the man's hole, which is already relaxed for him. "Did you have this planned all along?"

"Hoped for it," Rack admits.

"Guess I'm the one who's gonna make your dreams come true." Daniel pushes his cock between those slick cheeks and poises it at Rack's entrance. He can hear the blood rushing in his ears, and knows that he's not going to last past the first thrust. If he can hold back that long, that is. He's playing with Rack's cock, and it feels like a handful of pure heaven. Looks like it, too, with Rack undulating against the metal door.

"Get ready," Daniel whispers. "Here I come." He pushes himself into Rack in one long, deep stroke. Rack bears down with his muscles, squeezing like an anaconda, and Daniel has to bite down on Rack's shoulder to keep from yelling.

They stand there for a moment that seems to stretch on forever, the noise of the airplane surrounding them along with their heavy breathing, but in that space of time Daniel knows somehow that it's all going to be okay. They haven't talked about everything they need to, and they haven't decided what happens next, but they're still a team. A lot of what needs to be right with the world is back in place.

"I'm gonna fuck you into next week," Daniel whispers. Rack moans softly. "But when we get off the plane, we have a talk. Deal?"

Rack nods, seemingly lost for speech.

It's good enough for Daniel.

He fucks Rack so hard the door rattles. And God *damn*, but it feels good. He's got his man again.

On their way back out, both of their coloring suspiciously high, Daniel pauses to grab his book and CD player from the seat he's just left. Sally winks at him and gives a soft wolf-whistle.

"Reprobate," Rack chides softly. "See you in Denver, eh? I'll put you down for whatever ink you like."

"It's a deal." Sally leans forward to catch Rack by the hand. "This guy here is special, you hear me? Take good care of him. Hell, you too. Take care of Rack."

Never ignore the advice of a woman old enough to be your mother and tough enough to snap you in half over her knee. Daniel grins and nods.

Then he follows Rack up to sit in the same row with the man, where he ought to be. It's not the end of the road, not by any means... but they've made a decent start.

Chapter Two

"Bloody hell, love, you ever seen such a place as this?" Rack's bounding ahead of Daniel, carrying a suitcase in each hand as if they weigh no more than a pillow full of feathers. "Denver, now, I knew it'd be posh. But this? Fuck me!"

I'd love to, Daniel thinks, watching Rack's tight ass in his sinfully close-fitting jeans. But he's a little further behind, lugging his own baggage, which apparently weighs much more.

Rack does a spin around to face Daniel. "I mean, did you see that chandelier down in the lobby? Must take someone half a day to dust and polish that thing. And what about the convention center, eh? Spacious as any I've ever seen and all shined up for us to start work tomorrow morning."

"Or later tonight," Daniel argues. "It takes longer than you think to put your booth together, Rack. In a place like this, I want everything to be perfect. Besides, witness Wild Sally. If people are coming from out of state to meet you here, you're gonna have a line out the door. You'll have to be ready early."

"Bah. No worries, pet, no worries. Tonight belongs to us." Rack scans the doors, then zeros in on one in particular. "Here we are, 303. You got the key cards, then?"

Daniel puts one of his suitcases down, flexes his fingers, and reaches into his hip pocket. He holds out one of the flat rectangles, which Rack snatches from his hand and inserts into the lock. "Fuck me!" Daniel hears as Rack plunges inside. Makes him want to hurry up, himself, and so he does, catching the door with his foot before it swings closed.

Once inside, he drops his suitcase and stares around. "This... this is a joke, Rack. This has to be someone's idea of funny."

This room isn't just opulent, it's embarrassing. He's kind of gotten used to hotel accommodations on this tour, everything from the sunny but quiet elegance of Dallas to the plain old two-double-bed in St. Louis. But this place... Daniel turns around in a slow circle. This transcends belief.

There are mirrors everywhere. He's reflected everywhere he turns, from the gilt-framed piece that hangs over a very nicely carved desk, to the broad expanse behind the double-plus queen bed. And... yep. A glance above his head proves that there's a mirror on the ceiling, as well.

"Rack, this isn't a hotel room. It's someone's idea of the luxury suite, cathouse style."

"Brilliant, innit?" Rack bounces off and, barely pausing to kick off his sneakers, starts to jump up and down on the bed. "Check me out!"

"Rack, for the love of God, calm down! You'll break something." Daniel rushes the bed and grabs Rack by the legs, tugging him down onto his ass. Rack looks momentarily surprised, but then laughs, loud and free. "See? Like that. You'll bust your butt doing trampoline tricks on a bed."

"Not the only kind of trick I can pull on a bed like this," Rack teases. He flops down on his back and spies the ceiling mirror. "Oi, *fantastic!*"

"Uh-huh." Daniel's hunting for the coin-operated Magic Fingers and the heart-shaped chocolates that should be on their pillows. Neither one appears to be in sight, but they really ought to have been there. "Rack, this is probably a honeymoon suite."

"D'you reckon?" Rack bounces up and aims straight for the bathroom. "Yes! Hot tub!"

"What now?" Daniel hurries after him, hearing water turn on full blast. Sure enough, there's an en-suite Jacuzzi, and Rack's already shimmying out of his jeans and vest. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me."

"No joke, love." Rack waggles his tongue at Daniel. "Well? Go on and get that lot off. I want you in here with me."

"It's not even close to full yet. What am I supposed to do, sit there with my ass freezing on a plastic seat while we wait however-long for the water to get chest-level?"

Rack glances up, glittering with mischief. "You might think that's all there is to do while a tub fills, but I know differently, pet. Go on and have a seat. Rack's gonna take care of you proper-like. A thank-you for what we did on the flight in."

Oh. Sex. This perks Daniel up no end. "Just give me a minute, okay?" he asks. "I want to put the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door."

Rack laughs, full and free. "We're gonna be leaving that one up from now until the moment we leave," he says. "Go on, but hurry back."

Daniel hurries. He's got no idea what Rack has in mind, but it feels so damn good to see the bounce in his partner's step and the wildness back in his demeanor that he'll do anything to accommodate the man. Besides... sex. Sex with Rack. There is no bad here.

That is, until he steps outside. Josh is passing by, his eyes fixed on the carved number 303. Daniel and he both freeze in place, or do until Josh drops a suitcase. "I'm -- God, I'm -- sorry," he stammers. "I'm in 305. I wasn't -- wasn't stalking you. I swear."

Daniel exhales. "I know. But tell me one thing. Were you responsible for putting Rack and I in the honeymoon suite?" Josh's blush is telling. Daniel nods. "Thanks," he says simply. "We'll enjoy it."

Josh looks up. "Alone?"

Daniel shakes his head. "No. Rack and I will, together."

Josh's shoulders sag, and Daniel can't take it. Quickly hanging the sign on the door, he heads back in. Josh is more than he can deal with right now. Way more.

Rack is kneeling over the hot tub, his perfectly shaped ass high in the air as he leans down into the interior to test the temperature of the water. Daniel can't resist, and grabs himself a double handful as he comes up behind his partner.

"Oi!" Rack pops up, laughing. He grabs Daniel and whirls him around. "Not bad, this, eh?"

"Lap of luxury," Daniel has to agree. "You're still sure about getting in there before it's full?"

"You know I like sitting in a tub while it's filling," Rack argues. "'S nice hearing the water fall. Besides, I've a plan or two for you while the level rises. So get your kit off and into the water with you, eh? It's ankle-deep now and coming along nicely."

Daniel appraises the situation. This is one hell of a Jacuzzi, big enough for four people to sit comfortably. Rack has the water on as hard as it'll flow, so hot that steam is rising off what's already covered the bottom. The sound of the taps gushing is kind of nice, now that he thinks about it. "You're right. It is peaceful," he agrees. "You sure? Last chance to back out of freezing your ass off."

Rack laughs, devil-may-care. "Not on your Nellie. In, both of us. Now." To demonstrate, he steps carefully down a small set of stairs -- but instead of sitting, he kneels on the bottom, water cascading down his back. He pats the seat in front of him with a wicked look. "Are you gettin' a clue yet?"

Oh. *Oh*. Well... damn. "Time's a-wasting," Daniel agrees, quickly shimmying out of his jeans. They get kicked over into a corner. He catches a glimpse of himself in yet another mirror, all bright colors and darkly tanned skin where his usual wifebeater doesn't cover him up. His groin and thighs are white, too, but his calves are dark again. He grins. "I'm piebald."

"Yeah? Well, I'm gonna snatch you bald if you don't get in." Rack pats the seat. "Or are you turnin' down what I've got on offer?"

Turning down? Hell, no! Daniel makes his own way down the stairs and sits in front of Rack. The water sears his feet, but he knows he'll get used to it soon enough. Rack's turning pink from the steam and the water, but he looks downright munchable.

And yes, the plastic seat is just as cold as he'd imagined. His balls try to crawl up inside his body, and his cock goes utterly soft, probably wishing it could hide, too.

"Oh, that won't do at all," Rack croons, sliding between Daniel's thighs. "I want this all bright and shiny for me, jeweled studs blazin' an' everything. Nice and hard." He cups Daniel's cock in his hand and closes his fingers around the thickness. "You want this, too, don't you?"

Daniel can't help a small moan at the feel of Rack's hand on him. It turns him on every time as if it were the first ever. Clever fingers tickle at him, sending tingles of sensation up his groin into his lower belly. Despite the cold, his cock begins to grow, swelling in Rack's hand.

"That's a bit more like it," Rack says, petting the organ as if it's a favorite toy. Which, well... "Get nice an' big for me, pet. I want to see you hard and leaking for need of this."

The water's rising, covering Rack's knees. Rack cups Daniel's balls, which loosen in the heat of his palm, coming down full and heavy. Daniel makes another noise of pleasure, this time tilting his head back. He wants to watch, but more than that he wants to *feel*.

Besides, as it turns out, there's a mirror on this ceiling as well. He gets the best of both worlds.

As Daniel watches, Rack nuzzles his way in between both thighs and lowers his mouth to Daniel's cock. Daniel pretty much forgets about watching then, shutting his eyes tight and letting out a cry. Rack's not being gentle at all -- he's using his lips and tongue to create a tight, hot suction, and he's scraping his teeth lightly over each piercing. He holds onto the base of Daniel's cock with one hand, and roughly jostles Daniel's balls with the other.

It feels beyond good. It feels unreal. And with the heat of the water rising around them, mist and steam curling around his face, Daniel feels like he's floating in fire that's going to consume him, but hell, what a way to go.

Rack doesn't let up, either, working hard at Daniel's cock. He loves to do this and it shows in every lick, nibble, and suck. He swallows greedily around Daniel's length, taking in every inch that he can and then pushing for more. Daniel can feel himself sliding down Rack's throat. He hears someone babbling and realizes it's himself.

Rack chuckles, which almost makes Daniel come then and there, and rakes his nails lightly down Daniel's thighs. He twists his tongue around in a candy-cane pattern, cheeks hollowed, as he pulls off, and then plunges back in, silently ordering Daniel to start moving his hips.

The water is up to Rack's waist now. Daniel's legs feel like they've been steam-cleaned, but that's fitting considering that he's got a Hoover on his dick. He curls his toes in the hot wetness as Rack sucks harder still, digging his fingers into flesh.

Then Rack bites. Not hard, but roughly enough to send a shock of pleasure/pain punching through Daniel and whoo, that's all she wrote. Daniel roars as he comes, shooting his load deep into Rack's throat. Rack works his balls as if he wants to squeeze even more come out, the rough handling actually doing a pretty good job.

When Daniel collapses against the side of the tub, damned near boneless, he hears a chuckle. Opening one eye, he looks down to see Rack sitting on his heels, one hand working busily away at his own erection.

"Hey," he slurs. "Come 'ere. Want that for myself."

"Not this time," Rack says, spreading his legs wide and tilting his head. "You just watch. Get yourself an eyeful. You've never seen anything like me, have you?"

"Never." Daniel stares in fascination as Rack jacks his own cock, the metal glinting and thin strings of pre-come floating off into the water.

"Tell me."

"You're... you're a punk, Rack. You're like nothing I ever looked for, but I've never been happier since I met you. You look like sin on a stick sitting there with your hand wrapped around your cock, and if I could *move* right now I'd be down on my hands and knees, sucking it into my mouth."

Rack makes a low sound of approval. "Go on," he commands.

"I'd suck you in so hard and fast and wet that it would hit you in the stomach like a punch, you'd feel so good so fast."

Rack's hand is moving faster. "Yeah, yeah," he pants. "More."

"If I were hard again, I've have you bent over this seat and I'd be spreading your ass open. You're still slick from the plane, aren't you? Still got my load swimming around inside your gut. I'd have you doubled in two, this hot water surrounding us, and I'd fuck you so hard you had no choice but to grab yourself, but no, I wouldn't let you, because it would be *my* hand around your cock, and--"

Rack howls and lets loose, spurts of come shooting from his cock into the steaming water. Daniel manages to grab his shoulders and keep him from jerking so hard that he splashes water outside of the hot tub, he's shaking so hard with the force of his orgasm.

"Want to share next time?" he asks as soon as he thinks Rack can hear him again. Rack's eyes are open but dazed, clouded with lust and afterglow. All the same, he nods. "What was all this, a show?"

Rack licks his lips as if they're dry, and nods. "Wanted a little display so you'd know what you've got. I heard you talkin' to Josh outside."

"And you wanted to make sure he heard us."

"Nah. Place like this, walls are thick. I wanted to make sure *you* got the point." Rack looks down ruefully. "Guess I spoiled the water, then, eh?"

"It's not beyond repair." Daniel turns the taps off and pulls the stopper out. "We can fill it up again."

Later, they're sitting side by side, Rack's head resting on Daniel's shoulder. The steam from the water slowly filling the hot tub has made his hair soft, easy to nestle into. Rack's still back in Orgasm Land, tremors running through his body from time to time. Daniel would have to admit he feels the same way, tiny aftershocks making their presence known, especially when the water reaches groin level and kisses him like a heated lover.

Rack lets out a hiss of appreciation. "This is more like it, eh? Wonder if all the artists have posh accommodations too."

"Somehow I think it's just us."

"Could be." Rack looks up with a wicked grin. "I'm the star of the show, after all."

"And smart money is on keeping you happy." It's good business sense. Daniel hadn't realized before how famous Rack is, and how many people he's bringing to the conventions. They'd be busy otherwise, but maybe not as packed. "Think it's working?"

"Only need you to keep me satisfied, but oh..." Rack stretches out his legs. "Wouldn't say no to one of these back home."

"I can build a room onto the house," Daniel offers. "Two rooms. One for dry steam, and one for a hot tub. We can both relax after a hard day's work."

"Mmm." Rack moistens his lips again. "Sounds about like heaven. Why didn't you think of it before, you git?"

"Hey! You could have had the bright idea yourself, you know." Daniel dives for Rack's ribs.

Rack wriggles away, or tries to, but Daniel's got a good hold on him and he's not letting go. "Oi, uncle, uncle! God, you're merciless, aren't you? 'S one of the things I love best."

"You better believe it. Now settle down and enjoy."

"You'll really build a room for this lot onto the house?"

Daniel does a few mental calculations and figures that he does have the yard space. "It'll be a while -- I'll have a lot of orders to catch up on -- but yeah, we can have one of these at the house."

"House." Rack sighs. "Nice as these digs are, I'm missin' the old place something fierce. You?"

"Yeah, me, too," Daniel has to admit. "The tour isn't going to last much longer, though. Five more cities besides this one."

"Mmm." Rack sounds discontented. "What d'you say we head home after Denver, love? Get back to where we belong."

Daniel feels something tight inside him unravel into relieved smoothness. "No more setting up and breaking down," he agrees. "Back to the parlor, if Mei Li hasn't run it into the ground."

"Back to Luz and your workshop, where you feel at home."

"Sounds like a plan to me."

There's a pause, and Daniel can almost feel Rack thinking. "Just got a few loose ends to tidy up first."

"Rack, please don't go there. Not now, not like this."

"Easy, there. We might be comfy an' all, but that doesn't mean our problem's going to go away. And the problem has a name that I might as well mention, since I know you well enough to know it's on your mind now: Josh."

Daniel sighs. "Yeah. Josh. Rack, what do we do? I mean, a threesome is out. Completely out. Call me a girl if you want to, but I already have all the man I want in my life."

"Don't think you're a girl for that." Rack elbows him in the ribs. "Do think I'm glad you feel the same as I do. You're as much as a man can handle, and the only one I want."

"So that'd be a big 'no' to what Josh is asking for?"

"Well... sort of." Rack lifts a leg out of the water and watches droplets of water run off it, diamond-bright, then lowers his limb back into the steaming liquid. "I've been doin' a lot of thinking, love, and I believe I have an idea. No, no, hear me out. Josh is just now comin' into his own, right? Ex-military, first time inked and pierced... he makes me think of another dark-haired young man who just needed a little push into this world."

Daniel feels his heart sink. "So you *do* want a threesome."

"Nah, nah." Rack brings a wet hand up behind him to pop Daniel lightly on the head. "Don't go jumpin' to conclusions. See, here's what I think: Josh doesn't want you or I so much as he wants what we have together. Miserable sod sees us and thinks *that's happiness*. And, well, he's right. But he has to get it across that there's no room for a third."

Shaking his head, Daniel tries to understand, then gives up. "I'm confused."

"Well, let me put it this way, love. How d'you feel about puttin' on a bit of a show?"

"Ah, man, Rack..."

"Come on, you know you have a thing for exhibitionism. Wouldn't have all that ink on you otherwise, not to mention the metal. All's I'm sayin' is, have a talk with our Josh. Let him know what's what, and give him a chance to see what makes us special in action. That'll show him where both you and I stand, and let him know what he can have if he looks hard enough for it."

Daniel exhales. He swims his hand through the near-boiling water. He's pruned up on his fingertips. He concentrates on the small details, any detail, just to avoid what Rack's talking about. But he can't escape it, not in the end, and he has to circle back around to Rack's original point. "A show," he says reluctantly. "You don't think that's unfair to Josh?"

"I think it's the only way he's gonna get over this crush. And the sooner the better, if you ask me."

"We can't just be all lovey-dovey in public?"

"Well, that he's seen. I say we let him have a good hard look. Show him the ropes. Odds are he's never been with a man before in his life, or at least nothing that wasn't hurried with no names exchanged, and he needs a good lesson or two. It'll be giving him what he wants, in a way, and it'll let us make our point." Rack tilts again, letting Daniel look into his eyes. "I want this, pet. Doesn't matter which one of us started it, we have to finish it. And if Josh is agreeable, then we'll have done with the whole affair."

The thought of making love to Rack with an audience has Daniel flushed and breathing hard. With arousal, he realizes in surprise. And it's true -- he does want to drive it home how much he and Rack belong together, only together.

It might be the worst idea ever, but... "All right," he agrees. "I'll talk to him after I set up your booth."

"Then we'll get this done tomorrow night." Rack tucks himself more securely against Daniel. "I know you're thinkin' this is another of my daft ideas, but roll it over a bit and you'll see that I'm right. We do what we have to do, what we want to do -- admit it to yourself -- and Josh learns how things lie. No broken hearts, no more battles over breakfasts that go uneaten, and no more silence between the two of us." He shifts again, tucking himself in. The water's chest-level now. "Deal?"

Daniel reaches over to turn the taps off and switch the jets on. "Deal," he says slowly, thinking hard to himself.

This is going to be one of the hardest things he's ever done.

Yet in some ways, it'll be the easiest.

It's the weirdest way he's ever let someone down easy, but then again, he's with Rack now. Weird is the norm.

And he has a feeling that it'll all work out. 'Cause he knows one thing for sure -- Rack may be impulsive and his plans are usually nuts, but damned if he doesn't usually get what he wants. The world works for him, and Daniel's learned to go along for the ride.

He'll talk to Josh tomorrow.

And then, the whole thing will be over.

He hopes.

Chapter Three

It's early morning in Denver, and Daniel can still taste the hotel coffee and cinnamon doughnuts on his tongue as he sits back in Rack's chair and props his arm up for the examination of the artist. Rack wheels himself into position and runs his fingers up and down Daniel's arm. It's a bit more like being at the doctor's office than being caressed by a lover, except that almost as much as Rack loves Daniel, he's in love with the work he does.

"Yeah, definitely the red today, I think," he mutters, scooting back to fill a set of caps with the fantastic saturated crimson that's his specialty. He mixes it from a bit of this color and a bit of that one, keeping the combination secret. The tat on his lower belly is done in the same shade, and it's still startlingly bright after all this time.

Daniel tries not to wiggle in anticipation as Rack snaps on rubber gloves and peels the paper off a sterilized needle. A few test whirs with the shading machine, and Rack's coming in for a landing again. "Ready, love?"

"So very." They share a fond and ironic look born out of their mutual love of pain that leads to pleasure. Rack lowers his needle to Daniel's flesh to begin. The buzz of the machine is like a dentist's drill, and the pain is a white-hot burn at first, but pretty soon Daniel's got that high and he's soaring away.

Shading is the worst part of a tattoo. The skin gets sore and inflamed after a little while, and just when you think you can't stand it anymore, the artist dips his needle back in the ink and starts up again. Funny thing, though, Daniel never minds the pain. He knows what the end result is going to look like, and watching the swirls and loops of red take shape on his arm are more than worth it.

They're going to begin the tattoo on his opposite wrist today as well. Just a black outline for starters. It'll look like a cuff, but with intricate detailing. Sepia tones, as if it's leather that's somehow melted into his skin. It's gonna be fucking gorgeous, and Daniel can't wait.

It's while he's sitting in the chair, eagerly watching everything, that he catches a glimpse of a familiar shape walking by. He looks up to see Josh and his ever-present clipboard, pausing for just a second. You can't call it hovering, but there's a look of longing in his eyes, and he's wearing a sleeveless T to show off his own new ink.

Daniel feels a tap on his belly. "S all right," Rack murmurs. "You go to him afterwards, and then the two of you can talk. For right now, he can get in line or he can move on. We're busy."

Fair enough. Daniel looks away from Josh, down at the tattoo taking shape. He can almost feel Josh's disappointment like a palpable presence in the vast room, but it fades as he hears the man walk away. Then there's nothing but the buzz of needles and soon,

Wild Sally entertaining Rack's growing queue with stories about when she first met him and how fabulous he is with the ink.

She's probably showing off her pits. With Sally, Daniel wouldn't be surprised. From Rack's soft chuckle, Daniel can tell he's probably thinking the same thing.

The whole process probably takes an hour or so, but the minutes fly past for Daniel. He's still racing on that endorphin high when Rack wipes off the last of the blood and ink, sits back to consider his work, and gives a decisive nod. "Wristband tomorrow instead, yeah?" he asks. "The crowd's gonna get violent if I don't let them have a go, and Sally can only hold 'em off for so long."

Daniel wants to pout, but that's very unmanly, so he holds it in. Besides, God, the job Rack did with the red is too damn gorgeous for him to even think about pouting. Along with the purple, he's getting positively colorful, and he's able to see how the other two colors will fit in now. His arm's going to be like an abstract painting when it's done.

Rack knows his work.

After a bandage has been applied, Rack slips off his gloves and gives Daniel's ass a light spank. "Off you get. Plenty of folks to take your place. Go and find him. He's bound to be around. Oh, but come back in say two hours if you don't get lucky. I'll need a break around then."

Daniel nods, flexing his arm to feel the soreness that seems to go down deep into the muscle. Fresh ink -- there's nothing like it. He grins, amused at himself. When did he go from farm-fresh boy-next-door to pain junkie? Probably the first time he came like a fire hydrant when Rack gave him his first piercing. Once you're hooked, you're hooked.

He gets down off the table, Wild Sally bustling in to take his place. She's already hiking up her long hippie skirt to show off a calf that's mostly bare. "How about a design here?" she asks. "Doesn't have to be anything big, just something that says 'Rack was here'." Her cackle is wicked. Rack laughs back, but a little absently, and Daniel can tell that his mind is already working away on what design to apply.

Gotta love a man who loves his job. Daniel slips away from the booth, still moving his arm a little to feel the delicious soreness, and heads for the nearest kiosk to grab a cup of coffee.

He figures he really shouldn't act surprised when he smells Josh's cologne and, coffee in hand, turns around to see him there. Josh grins shyly, offering his own two dollars to the operator for a cup, and mumbles a hello that's lost in the noise of the crowd.

Daniel feels like he did back in high school, trying to turn down a date to the prom because he really, really wasn't interested, no matter how cute the girl was. It's a mixture of awkwardness, tongue-tie, and actively not wanting to be there.

Still, gotta do this. He jerks his head toward a quiet corner with a few chairs, and indicates that Josh should follow him. As Daniel walks, he can feel Josh just a few steps behind, so eager that it makes him ache.

They sit down and Daniel stalls for a minute, sipping at his coffee. It's not good but it's not too bad, and he has yet to find a cup that's truly undrinkable, even at gas stations. He watches Josh, who blushes and looks down at his own cup, stirring it a little too quickly with a small wooden stick, trying to get powdered creamer to dissolve. He's nervous, and Daniel can't blame him. Courage is just doing what you're afraid of, after all. He knows what's on Josh's mind, and he has to give the guy props for being persistent.

The active bitch of this all is that a couple of years or so ago, Daniel would have been head over heels for the guy. Josh has brought out Daniel's protective side, just as he would have back then, and besides he's cute as all hell with that short haircut growing out all messy and his dark, expressive eyes. And built? Oh, yeah, not to mention built.

If they'd met back then, before Rack... but then, there's no use wondering, is there? It doesn't change the past, and it doesn't make Daniel want to turn back the clock. They've met *because* of Rack, and frankly Daniel wouldn't trade his mouthy punk for any of the open-hearted, doe-eyed boys next door in the world.

He takes another sip of his coffee and clears his throat. "Josh," he begins, "we've got to talk."

Josh looks up so quickly that Daniel winces, thinking about cricks in necks. "I'm really sorry about breakfast the other day," Josh says all in a rush. "I...I didn't know. I thought that--"

Daniel holds up a hand. He's done a lot of thinking, and the more he thinks, the more he realizes how Rack's nailed this particular problem and solution. "Easy. It's okay. I didn't know either, but since then Rack and I have been doing a lot of talking, and, well, we've come to a decision." *Damn, this isn't easy.* "Rack and I are aware that you want both of us."

Josh nods slowly.

"Thing is," Daniel says, swirling the remains of his coffee in its cup, "I don't think you do. Want us both, that is. I don't think you want us at all."

"No! Daniel, I...I... how can you say--"

"I think you just want the *idea* of us." Daniel meets Josh's eyes. "You want what we have, two guys devoted to each other. What Rack and I have is special, and we spend every day just about tucked into one another's pockets. You've seen that, and you want to be a part of it. But you don't. Not really. You just wish you could have it for yourself."

Daniel draws a breath, but Josh's eyes flash a steely color, and for a second Daniel can see the soldier in him. "You're going to sit there and tell me -- like I don't know my own mind -- I...I..." He sits down his coffee cup. "I guess the answer -- the answer is no, then. Sorry to have wasted your time. I'll...I'll go."

He slams his coffee cup down and begins to stand. Daniel just manages to grab Josh's arm with his good hand. "Hold on a second," he orders. "Sit back down. I wasn't done."

Whether it's training or just the guy's nature, he looks pissed as all hell but he does sit. And he does have the balls to meet Daniel eye to eye, staring him down.

There's a long moment of silence, and then Daniel tries again. "Let me explain."

"I...I think you've explained enough. I'm just a...a kid with delusions, right? I don't know what I...I want, not enough to understand where I'm not...not wanted."

Daniel winces. "It's not like that, Josh."

"No? Well, sure sounds like it to...to me. You're turning me down because you think I've got stars...stars in my eyes. Well, you're wrong. Both you and...and Rack are...are gorgeous, and talented, and...and nice. Or I thought you were."

"And that's why you were so into the *idea* of us," Daniel presses when Josh takes a breath. He's aching for the poor guy now, wishing that he had something else to say. It hurts him to turn Josh's offer down, but what else can he do? He's not giving up Rack for someone else. Not now, not ever. "Josh, I know this whole thing has got to be hard for you, but --"

"Hard...hard for me?" Josh barks a humorless laugh. "You have no...no idea. I've been in the closet my...my whole life. I went into the ar...army so I could keep on hiding. So I didn't have to face myself when I graduated high school. I...I hid under the don't ask, don't tell thing. I could...could pretend I wasn't who I knew I...I was."

Josh's face turns dark. "And then I went to Iraq. Do you have any -- *any* -- idea what it's like over there? The...the bombs, and the g...guns, and the...the screams--" His hands are shaking so hard his coffee is slopping over the side of his cup. He takes a deep breath and puts it down. Patches of his hands are red where the coffee has scalded him. "I got out...out of there as soon as I could and came...came home. But it wasn't the same." He waved in disgust. "Everyone wanted me to be this big war hero. I come from a really...really small town. I was everybody's news. Do you know how...how many girls were on me, asking me...me out on dates? Do you know what it was like to say no to every...every one of them? Because I was sick...sick of living a lie. That's why I got this...this job. And when I saw you...you and Rack -- I thought *yes*. I wanted -- want -- you. You're the first guys I had the nerve to approach. And now you're turning me down. Well thanks, but no...no thanks for the easy put-down, okay?"

"Josh." Daniel wonders if Josh realizes they're still touching. "I'm not saying Rack and I don't want you in our lives."

Josh scoffs. "Is this where...where you say we can still be friends?"

"It is, sort of. But before you get all mad, let me tell you this much. You come from a small town? Mine is probably smaller. It's spread out over a bunch of acres, most of them farming, but the total population is something like four hundred people, young and old. I knew who I was way back in high school, and I know what it's like to turn girls down who think you're hot because of something you did, not who you are."

There's a flicker of curiosity in Josh's eyes. "What...what did you do?"

"The idea backfired on me, but I went 8.7 seconds on a half-wild, totally insane bull."

Josh bursts into laughter. Daniel chuckles with him. "Okay, so it's not half as impressive as your story. But that was one mean-ass bull. He'd tossed off riders way more experienced than I was. I just got lucky and hit him on a day when he didn't have as much fire in his belly. But God, you should have seen the girls lining up afterwards. Big mistake for me, see? I didn't have the heart to tell them I really wanted their brothers, instead."

"When did you...did you--"

"Right after graduation. I told my parents and my brother and my cousin, because frankly they were the only ones I thought had any business knowing. There were a few tears, mostly my mother's, but after a few days they were okay with it. With me. And then my cousin and I moved across country to the city where Rack and I live now. I started a woodshop, she started an aerobics studio." Josh snickers, and Daniel grins. "So we were both sort of misfits. By the way, she's tried dating men, but right now she's with a kick-ass Asian tattoo artist named Mei Li. I think. Maybe it runs in the family."

Josh grows serious. "I don't...don't have any family left to tell. No brothers or...or sisters. No cousins. My mom died when I was a...a kid, and my dad passed away when I was on...on active duty. I was all alone."

"And the convention? Why'd you sign on?" Daniel presses. He has a feeling that they're getting into the real heart of the matter here, and while it might be painful, it's where they need to be. "How'd you get this job?"

Josh sighs. "The guys in my platoon, they had...had some tattoos, right? And I always thought, how...how cool. But even though I was a...a medic, I was scared of needles. I figured that if I was going to... going to face my fears about coming...coming out, then I should try and get over the...the needles, too." He shrugs. "I had a friend of a...a friend

who was working this tour. He got me the...the job. I couldn't turn it down. I didn't have a home, just an...an empty house."

"So you left the quiet behind and came out into the noise."

"Not so much quiet," Josh points out. "You...you know small towns, right? I think I have more than forty...forty frozen casseroles and pies in my freezer back there."

"Okay, granted. But still, it would have been quiet when you were alone. On this tour, there is never a moment of quiet." Daniel takes a drink of his rapidly cooling coffee. "How are you handling all the noise with your shell shock?"

Josh looks momentarily surprised, then shrugs. "I guess you can tell with the shaking...shaking hands, and the...the stammer. It's not so...so bad. Everyone's so...so alive here. There's so much energy. Everyone is...is..." Josh struggles for words. "Vibrant."

And that Daniel can understand. There's nothing like the world of ink and piercing. Nothing like a little pain to wake you up and make you realize that while others are gone, you're still alive. It's a brightly colored world full of laughter and activity. Life goes on, and with pizzazz.

"I think I understand you now," he says. "But what about you? Do you get where I'm coming from?"

Josh looks defiant for a moment, then leans back with a sigh and a nod. "I...I don't know. Both you and Rack are...are hot, and you know it. But maybe you're...you're..."

"I'm right, and you know it, if you just think about it hard enough," Daniel presses gently. "You realize you don't have to go back to that little town. If you have enough of a stake, you can set up camp in any city and send a truck back for the things you want to keep. Did the army train you for anything besides being an emergency medic? What about the GI bill?"

Josh shrugs and shakes his head. "I'm not sure about the details. I could maybe go through a paramedics course," he says, and looks proud of himself for getting that out without a stutter. "But my...my hands." He holds one up. Daniel can see it shaking. "After the...the bomb that nearly killed us, I...I can't hold steady anymore."

"That'll pass with time. You said you were going to see a therapist, right? Does she have you doing any exercises?"

He gets another disconsolate shrug. "Squeezing a...a ball."

"It's a start. Besides, even if you end up somewhere just flipping burgers, but where you're free to be yourself, wouldn't that be worth it?"

Josh is quiet, but Daniel can tell that he's thinking. "You're already out to two people," he presses. "Live out loud. Don't hide anymore. You've got the ink that says you're your own man. Go someplace where you can be loud and proud. Find someone who loves you."

"But not...not you."

Daniel takes in a deep breath. "Well, that's something Rack wanted me to talk to you about. Have you ever... been with anyone before?"

Josh looks startled, then offended, then ashamed. He shakes his head.

"Rack thinks that he and I should show you what it's all about. Not as a permanent threesome," Daniel hastens to add. "But just let you take a look and see what the big hoorah is all about."

Josh looks baffled. "I don't...don't understand."

"I sort of don't myself, either," Daniel admits. "In all honesty? I think Rack wants you to watch while he and I have sex."

This time, he has to haul Josh down bodily. "Sit down," he orders. "It's not what you're thinking. Rack isn't doing this to flaunt what he and I have in your face."

"No? Sure...sure sounds like it to me." Josh's face is flushed with anger. "What else could it be?"

Daniel shakes his head. "I have no idea. But that's the thing with Rack. He's spring-loaded and he's full of crazy ideas, but they usually work out. Whatever he has up his sleeve, it's probably exactly what you need. I don't get it, and I probably won't until we're actually past the point of no return, but I'm asking you to do this for me. We've been friends, right?"

Josh nods slowly.

"So, come to our room tonight. I know for sure that Rack doesn't want to hurt you. He told me so." Daniel holds up a hand. "And yes, I believe him. He's never lied to me. I learned that the hard way, a while back. He's honest to a fault and sometimes the truth hurts, but he'll tell it the way it is. I don't blame you for not wanting to come, but I'm asking you to trust him. Us."

Josh is looking hesitant. He bites his lip, and then, after a long pause, nods again. "You trust him. And I...I trust you. So I'm gonna take a chance. But if this is some...some game, I--"

"It's not a game. I know that much for damn sure." Daniel stands, throwing his cup away. "Room 303, at ten p.m., after the convention has closed down for the night. It'll be your last chance. Rack and I are leaving the day after."

"Leaving?"

"Yeah. We're calling it quits early on the tour. We're ready to go home."

Josh seems startled, but there's that core of military steel rising up in him again. "Last...last chance. Okay. I'm in."

"You're sure?" Daniel has to know. He gets a clipped nod in return.

"I'm...I'm sure." Josh stands as well, his shoulder back and his chin high. He tucks his clipboard under his arm. "I've got to...got to get back to work." His voice is stronger than it's ever been, despite the awkward pauses as he struggles for each word. "Things to do. But ten p.m. tonight. Right?"

"We'll be there."

Josh inclines his head, and then he's gone, disappearing into the swirling, multi-colored crowd. Daniel watches him go, wishing he could cross his arms over his chest and get lost in thought. He compromises with one arm and a lighter shade of contemplation.

He really, *really* hopes Rack knows what he's doing here.

And he guesses he'll find out tonight.

Chapter Four

Josh is as good as his word. Come ten p.m., right after Rack and Daniel have finished soaking away the day's aches in that glorious hot tub -- Daniel keeping his new tattoo free of the water -- there's a knock on the door. If you could identify a knock from a mug shot, Daniel would be able to pick Josh out of any line-up. The sound is tentative at first, tap-tap-tap, then firmer, then dwindling down into a timorous *tap*.

Rack, naked, leans against the bathroom counter. "Guess that's our company, eh?"

Daniel's putting on a pair of silk boxer shorts, the ones Rack has insisted he wear. He seems to have laid in a stock of these things. "Must be. And I still feel like a dork in silk."

"Mmm. My dork." Rack wraps his arms around Daniel's waist and tilts up for a kiss. He pulls Daniel's head down for better access. A few inches really do make a difference, but Daniel doesn't mind bowing his head before the master.

Ooh. Kinky thought. Save that one for later. Even if I can just picture myself naked and tied up, Rack wielding a flogger of some kind... whoa, down, boy. Down. You don't want to greet Josh with a hard-on, especially not in these shorts.

Rack chuckles and rubs against Daniel. "Gettin' a little excited about the show, are you?"

"Not so much. I still don't know how all this is going to go down, Rack."

"Hush. It'll be a night to remember, you trust me." Rack gives Daniel's ass a spank. "Now go and answer the door like a good boy. I'll come out when I'm ready."

"Yeah, and you'd better be wearing something that makes you look just as ridiculous," Daniel grumbles as he stomps toward the door. There's another set of knocks that speak volumes: Josh is here, but his confidence is fading fast, and he's about to go. That is a no-go. Josh must stay. Rack has spoken. So let it be written, so let it be done.

Daniel pulls the door open -- not jerking it, like he wants to -- *ooh, bad choice of words* -- and faces Josh, who's wearing a clean sleeveless T and some jean shorts that are just this side of *way* too short. He's got nice, muscled legs, and without the clipboard he suddenly looks a lot more like a man to be reckoned with -- that is, until you check out his expression. Then, you can tell that despite his age, he's just a kid and needs a few lessons.

"Josh," Daniel greets him, feeling a genuine surge of warmth. "Come in."

Josh bobs his head and steps in as Daniel moves to one side. "Thanks. I still think I'm crazy for doing this."

"You ain't the only one, bub." Daniel indicates the chair that Rack has placed just so, moving the table and other chair well out of the way. All that's left are the mirrors, the

bed, and a wide open space. He has an uncomfortable feeling that the gap is center ring at this particular circus.

God, Rack, whatever you have in mind, let's get it over with, okay? Daniel shifts from one foot to another as Josh hesitantly makes his way to the seat. The uncomfortable feeling in the air is nearly enough to choke on.

Josh is almost there when he half-turns, glancing up and down the length of Daniel's body. "You look... you look amazing," he says, a light flaring in his eyes. He turns and walks back toward Daniel. "Good enough to...to eat."

Daniel has a bad feeling about this. "Josh, go and sit down, okay?"

"What if I...if I don't want to?" Josh is closer now, and Daniel can sense how while Josh isn't taller, he's a hell of a lot stronger -- and it takes serious muscle to best a carpenter. Daniel flattens himself against the wall as Josh puts one hand on either side of his shoulders, flat-palming the textured surface behind Daniel's back. "What if I...I want to kiss you?"

Daniel's trying to think of a nice way to say "back the hell off" when Rack steps out of the bathroom, dressed in his own crimson-colored boxers and robe, and stands there, very still, yet somehow with the same effect of a rhinoceros thundering into the room. Observers are wise to stand very, very still.

Josh isn't any dummy. He freezes, staring at Rack. In no way does the fact that Rack once again looks like he fell off an X-rated wedding cake stop him from being a physical force of nature. "Hands off, eh?" he requests mildly, in a way that suggests if Josh doesn't move he's going to get a Glasgow kiss. Not the sort of embrace Josh was looking for.

Josh moves away slowly, backing down. To his credit, he doesn't apologize. He does raise his hands, keeping them in plain sight. Rack nods and comes up to Daniel's side. "Nothing happened, so we'll go ahead as planned," he says in Daniel's ear. "Can't blame the lad for one last try. 'Sides, I could hear how desperate he was all the way in there."

Daniel isn't sure he's as forgiving as Rack, but he takes a deep breath and lets the surge of emotion go. Rack manhandles him around until he's leaning back against his partner, with Rack's head resting on his shoulder. "Mine," Rack says, plain and simple. "And I don't go sharing, so you needn't ask. Now if you want to leave, I won't stop you. But if you care to stay, your place is in that chair yonder."

Josh looks like he's been asked to do a complicated algorithm in his head, on a timer, but then he firms his jaw and nods. And, adding weight to his balls, he speaks up. "Daniel says...says that he and you think I don't want the two of you. I just want the idea of you. Do you think you're right?"

"Know we're right," Rack replies. "I also know the rest of what my pet told you, don't I? And I have two good eyes. I can see you're new to this whole thing, this big gay world, and you need a few lessons in what's what."

Daniel feels sheepish. "So this is a practical demonstration," he puts in, hoping he's not wrong.

He's not. Rack rubs up against him like a cat wanting some cream, almost purring. "Care to watch the show?" he asks Josh. "You'll learn a few things you never even dreamed of."

"I've read magazines," Josh fires back. "I've seen porn."

"Yeah, but you've never been up close and personal, have you? It's not like you see in the films or in those air-brushed glossies. Real sex is messy. It's sweat and come. Sounds like you're dying but you're more alive than you've ever been. Look, you. We're not doin' this to rub your face in things, pun not intended. We just want you to experience as much of it as you can, then send you on your way with a few things to think over. Yeah?"

Josh subsides, sitting down in his chair. "So all I can do is watch?"

"Watch, and if you feel the need, get yourself off," Rack says generously. "We'll be talkin' a good bit during this, so mind you listen, though."

"You're treating me like a...a deficient."

"Not so. I'll be plain. You wanted both of us? You'll get both of us. Just not quite the way you pictured. Now, are you in, or you out?"

Josh settles himself more firmly into the chair. "I'm here. I'll stay."

"Good," Rack purrs. He undulates against Daniel's backside again, letting Daniel know that a part of him is waking up. *Just like Folgers's in the cup*, Daniel thinks with an internal hysterical giggle. *The best part of*.

"This here, what we're doin', this is strictly vanilla." Rack's voice has dropped down into the tones of pure, molten sex that he's only ever used before when he and Daniel were alone. "I've got me cock pressed up against the seam of his ass, and I'm about halfway hard. Just sayin' a friendly hello."

He nudges Daniel, who feels like a prime idiot -- something he never expected to go through when having sex with Rack -- but manages to improvise. "I can feel him behind me. Not just his body. His cock. It feels good. Rack, come on." He rounds on his lover. "This is stupid."

"You don't want to talk? Fine, then. Keep it shut, and I'll do this on my own." Rack seems happy enough to have them face to face. "Tell you what, just forget about the whole

thing, right? Not that it isn't goin' to happen. Just forget that our Josh is in the room. It'll be you an' I, like the first honeymoon night all over again." He turns slightly. "An' you keep a sharp eye out. There's sex, and then there's sex with piercings. A fine difference between the two. You'll see."

Daniel can hear a hitch in Josh's breathing, but tries to shut it out. He focuses on Rack, who's never led him wrong before. Rack looks up at him, eyes half-shut, a teasing grin on his face. "That's right," he murmurs. "There's my boy. Just look at me, and don't think about anythin' else."

He reaches down, sliding his hand under the waistband of Daniel's boxers, and grips his cock. One gentle squeeze and Daniel's rising to the occasion. Rack's worn his chunky silver rings for the occasion, and the metal clinking against metal is headier than any aphrodisiac. Unable to help himself, Daniel lets out a little moan.

"Oh, yeah. That's the way." Rack runs his fingers up and down the length of Daniel's cock, nudging each stud in turn. Daniel feels the metal pull as he grows harder and harder, just a little sting that makes him feel -- *wow* -- alive. Rack uses his thumb to circle the thick head, a silver ring caressing the spot where Daniel was circumcised. "Never have gotten you a dolphin," he observes. "We'll have to take care of that when we get home. A bit of silver on the underside of your dick. You know how good it feels on mine. Time you got to play a bit with your own."

That seems to be some kind of a cue. Daniel's never been one not to live up to expectations. He pushes his own hand into Rack's boxers, and comes up with a handful of bristling metal plus a thick, hot cock. He runs his fingers over the metal and flesh with wonder, feeling for the dolphin and pressing against it, then weighing Rack's balls in his hands. "I'm one up on you," he says, halfway breathless. "I've got my nuts pierced and you don't."

He hears a groan, but it seems to be coming from a distance, so he ignores the sound.

Rack chuckles. "'S right, you do. I'll have to get a bit more metal myself when we're at home. You can be there in the room with me, holdin' my hand while Joey drives the metal into that tender, sensitive skin. Mmm." Rack leans forward and bites at Daniel's nipple. "What d'you think of that?"

"I think you should go back where you were just now," Daniel manages to get out. "More."

"Oh, you're pushin' from the bottom now, are you? Well, we'll see about that." But all the same, Rack nestles in close enough for their cocks to bump and presses his mouth against Daniel's flat male nipple, lashing it with his tongue until it rises into a hard nub, then using his teeth. Gentle nips and tugs on his piercings soon have Daniel tilting his head back and running his hands through Rack's hair.

Rack switches to the other nipple, leaving the first one glistening with saliva, the metal sparkling clean. He begins to thrust against Daniel while he sucks, not hard enough to get off, but just to remind him that he's there too.

When he stops, Rack raises his mouth for a kiss. Daniel, feeling dizzy, bends to give it to him, pressing their lips together and plunging his tongue into Rack's mouth, in and out, hard and fast, the way he'd like to be fucking right about then. Rack lets him take the lead, wrapping his arm around Daniel's neck and pulling him tight.

Daniel wants his own turn at Rack's nipples next, but Rack has other ideas. "Down on your knees for me, love? I want to see myself goin' in and out of your tasty mouth."

"Oh, yeah." Daniel can't get there fast enough. His hands are clumsy as he tugs at Rack's boxers, but he manages to get them down halfway. They're loose enough that they fall to Rack's ankles, where he kicks them off and then stands with his legs spread, his cock hard enough to strain against his stomach. "All for me?" Daniel asks hopefully.

"For no one but you," Rack replies, still sounding like pure molten sex. "Go on, then. Suck me."

Daniel obeys. Holding tight with a grip on Rack's thighs, he bobs up and catches that tantalizing swollen head in his mouth, sucking hard on the first thin strings of pre-come that start bubbling out. God, he loves the way Rack tastes. Rack's salty and musky like a man but also tangy like metal and there's the slight bitterness of ink smell at the back of Daniel's tongue.

He slides slowly and ecstatically down the length of Rack's cock, putting into practice what he learned a while back, until the tip bumps the back of his throat. He swallows for the fun of feeling Rack buck forward, and then he hollows out his cheeks and sucks, pulling backwards until just the head remains in his mouth.

Daniel would slide forward again, but a tap to his shoulder makes him look up. "Dan, a little slower this time," Rack says, making it more of a statement than a request.

No problem; can do. Daniel starts off with a tongue-tug on the reverse Prince Albert, catching more pre-come along his lips and drawing it into his mouth. Daniel starts the down stroke again, going so slowly that minutes tick past as he works his way along Rack's length one piercing at a time. He stops along the way to lavish each stud with strokes of his tongue. The metal is sharp-tasting, like sucking on nickels, but the undercurrent of pure male, pure *Rack*, makes the bitterness seem sweet.

Rack is breathing hard and ragged by the time Daniel's mouth is full of cock. Daniel feels another pat of the shoulder and glances up. Rack's face is set in lines of iron self-control. "Too good," he manages. "Pull off, quickly now. Don't want this to be over before it starts."

Daniel obeys, but wickedly gives the P.A. another tug on his way out. Rack thwacks him for that, but not hard. "Play by the rules," he scolds. Daniel sticks out his tongue, and Rack cocks his head. "Is that an invitation? Come here, you."

Standing, Daniel twines his arms around Rack and they share another long, probing kiss, each one battling for dominance in the other's mouth. He's almost completely forgotten that they have an audience -- that is, until Rack starts working Daniel's boxers off and he hears a gasp.

He breaks off the kiss to turn and stare at Josh. He seems different through lust-clouded eyes. Suddenly Daniel gets what Rack meant about being an exhibitionist, because as his own shorts head toward the floor, he says: "That was the best thing I'll ever have in my mouth."

"You're...you're..." Josh seems lost for words, not stammering.

"Yeah." Daniel leans into Rack, letting their naked cocks rub together. He throws his head back in pleasure. "We are."

"S'all right to look," Rack says, nuzzling into Daniel's neck. "Take your own shorts down, if you like. No sense in you sittin' there with a hard-on like ours and doing nothing about it."

Josh looks uncomfortable for a moment, and then reaches for his zipper. The sound is loud in the otherwise quiet of their hotel room, but Daniel doesn't mind. He stands swaying in Rack's grip, watching through a fog as Josh's cock comes into view. Josh's got a good package on him, probably eight full inches, flushed dark with blood and with a plum of a head.

As Daniel watches, Josh strokes himself lightly and groans. "Yeah, that's the way," Rack encourages. "Keep on goin'. An' keep an eye on us while you take care of yourself."

Daniel feels the full force of it when Rack turns all his attention back to him. "On your hands and knees now," he directs. "The carpet's soft enough. I want to see your luscious ass raised in the air for me."

A mental elevator dings in Daniel's head. *Going down*. He hunkers into the position Rack's requested, then adjusts himself as directed by small taps until he's resting his head on his folded arms and his ass is high in the air, right at a level with Rack's cock.

There's the loud click of some lubricant opening. Daniel gasps as the first cold drizzle hits his back, stifling the noise in his folded hands. "Go on," Rack encourages, though, rubbing lube down into his crease and fingering his hole. "Make all the noise you like. Who's to say *be quiet*? An' besides, I want to know you're more than just a body. You're a person an' all, an' my lover besides. I want to know you're feelin' good as I am."

Daniel groans and thrusts backwards as Rack plunges two fingers inside his ass, pumping them in and out. He swears a long, low string of oaths as a third and fourth finger are added, more than the usual, producing a deep-burning sting that makes his cock jump with animal glee.

"Yeah, yeah, you like that, don't you?" Rack is encouraging, rubbing Daniel's back with his free hand. "Beg for my cock, now. I want to hear how desperate you are to have me inside of you."

The words come flooding out of Daniel's mouth. "Oh God, oh God, oh God, please, Rack, please, need you in me now, now, now. Hurry."

"That's what I wanted to hear." Rack laughs softly, giving Daniel's back a pinch. He withdraws his fingers. Daniel keens at their loss until he feels the almost impossibly hard head of Rack's cock in their place, the metal cold and even harder against him. "You ready for me?"

Daniel nods hard.

"Then relax, just relax, and let me in..." They've done this so many times that Rack slides in on one graceful stroke, his piercings grating at Daniel's insides with the best, hottest feeling ever. Rack draws back and plunges back in, setting up a smooth rhythm. "This," he says shortly, between quick breaths, "this is fucking. An' making love. Can be one and the same thing, if you care about who you're with. Eh?"

Daniel vaguely recognizes that this must be for Josh's benefit, but right about then Rack could be talking to a crowd of hundreds and he wouldn't care.

"Yeah," he hears Rack say. "Just like that. God, you're a sight."

Daniel bears down around Rack's cock and hears his partner give a hiccupping sound. "Oh, hell, now, you had to go an' clamp down around me," he gasps. "Right, then, you've earned yourself an assful of come." His thrusts lose their smooth rhythm, becoming choppy and deeper and much, much harder. "You ready for me? Better be. Here I come."

Another thrust, another, maybe three, and Rack is gripping hard at Daniel's hips as his own snap forward and Daniel feels that load Rack was talking about spill deep inside him, hot pulses that make his own erection ache in sympathy. Rack doesn't seem to want to stop, but as the last spurt dies away, he pulls out.

Daniel makes a noise of protest, but Rack is pushing at him, rolling him over onto his back. "Such a pretty picture you make," he says, right before he sucks Daniel into his mouth. One flick of his tongue stud and Daniel's off like a rocket, spurting jets into Rack's eager mouth.

Rack laps him clean, and then slumps by his side. In the silence broken only by their heavy breathing, Daniel hears a thump and a deep groan, and realizes that the lesson hath been taught, and their audience is giving them a serious round of applause by coming his own brains out.

More silence follows until Josh gives an embarrassed-sounding chuckle. "I...I need a tissue."

"Box of Kleenex to your right, mate," Rack tells him without looking up. "So. You enjoy that, did you?"

"Yes. God, yes. It was... it was..." Josh clears his throat. "It was gorgeous. And yeah, I...I get the point now. I was an idiot to try and come between...between you two."

"Not an idiot, pet." Rack drags himself up into a sitting position, stroking Daniel's chest to let him know it's alright to stay draped across the floor. Daniel does turn his head to look at Josh, though. Rack's hands are gentle, and so is his voice. "Just saw a good thing and wanted a taste of it, is all."

"Yeah. I...I see what you mean. I do." Josh looks embarrassed as he tucks himself away and zips back up. "Sorry about...about that."

Rack waves the apology off. "Don't be. A good time was had by all, yeah?"

"Yeah," Josh admits with a slightly shaky laugh. "You're right. It's different than porn or magazines."

"Thought it would be." Rack leans up a little. "Question is, what do you do now, Josh?"

Josh opens his mouth, closes it, then slumps back. "I...I don't know," he admits. "I think I've seen...seen enough of the tattoo tour, myself. I went looking for...for myself, and I think I found me. But I don't...don't know where to go from here."

"Up," Rack says simply. "Up and out."

And that's when Daniel has his Big Idea. He tugs at Rack's hand, beckoning him down so he can whisper in Rack's ear. Rack listens to what he has to say, sits utterly still for minute, then bursts out laughing. "God, but you've got balls," he says in admiration.

Then, he turns to Josh. "Right, mate. Daniel an' I have an idea as to what happens next in your life. You've trusted us so far. Ready to trust us a little further?"

Josh looks puzzled and curious, but nods. "Right, then," Rack starts. "Tomorrow morning, bright an' early, you call to get yourself a plane ticket, and..."

Chapter Five

"Eeeeeeeee!" Shelly's grabbed onto Rack by the neck and is, apparently, hugging the stuffing out of him while squealing at the top of her lungs. Rack doesn't seem to mind, grabbing his desk clerk by the waist and whirling her around in a circle, her shiny hair flying out in an arc.

When he puts her down, she darts from him to Daniel, giving him his own welcome home death squeeze. "You're early!" she accuses. "We thought you were going to be gone another four weeks, still!"

"Hey, you wanna keep it down out here? I've got a client who -- well, fuck me."

"Think that's Luz's job," Rack leers.

"Shaddup, you, and give me five." Mei Li takes off her rubber glove and holds up a palm for Rack to slap. "God almighty, why didn't you tell me before you took off that running this place is like a twenty-four seven kind of thing?"

Rack puts a finger to his chin. "Hmm. Seems to me I remember a slight dark-headed girl who told me something like 'piece of cake, I can handle this, no worries' -- any of that ringin' a bell with you, pet?"

"Yeah, yeah, throw my words back at me. But since you're home early, I'm tossing the daily operations back to you."

"Fair deal and no cheating." Rack slaps Mei Li's palm, then pulls her to him in a one-armed hug. "So am I right about Luz, or what?"

Mei Li looks smug. "Ask her yourself. Oh, wait, no, you can't. She took the day off from classes and she's still asleep. At my apartment. In my bed."

"And that's all the detail I want to hear," Daniel says, holding up his hand. Then, turning to Rack, he adds, "So I owe you twenty. You were right."

Rack waggles his tongue. "Never did say twenty of what, now did I?"

"You're back!" Rufus pops out of his own booth, Toby close on his heels. "Man, what did you do, get kicked out of there?"

"Nah. Decided it was time I came home to be with my own, is all. An' I had to take Dan here into consideration. He was pinin' for his pine."

They all groan. Rack grins, delighted. He hops up onto the counter. "Love, where's Amber? She on a break or -- God, she didn't quit us, did she?"

"Nah, no way. She loves this place as much as the rest of us do." Mei Li shakes out her short bob. "Whaddya think about the cut, by the way? And she's just on a break with Hannah." She gives Rack a wiggle for his previous waggle. "Ought to be back any time now."

"Good on her. I've got a customer." Rack glances around, then makes a *tsk* sound with his tongue. "Dan, go an' bring our reluctant friend in, would you? Be a love."

Daniel tips an imaginary hat, and heads back out into the parking lot. Josh is standing there, sheepishly kicking at the gravel and running his hand along the tarp covering Rack's precious motorcycle. "Sorry," he mumbles. "I just didn't...didn't want your homecoming to be...to be awkward, that's all."

"Bzzt. You chickened out." Josh reddens. Daniel leans on the bike next to him. "If you're gonna do what we agreed on, you've got to head on in there and grab the bull by the horns. And if you recall, I know from bulls and horns. It's noisy, it's chaos, it's a noisy sort of chaos, but it's a *family*."

"Yeah." Josh scuffs his foot along the ground. "That's kind of...kind of what the problem is." Josh looks up, his dark eyes worried. "What if they don't...don't like me?"

"Again I say bull. And I add a shit to the end of the word. Bull. Shit. They'll love you."

"They don't even know me."

"Yeah, well, if you don't hurry your ass on in there, Rack's gonna have told them everything there is to know."

Josh gives a start. "Crap," he mutters, hurrying past Daniel, who's hard on his heels. They enter just in time to see Hannah and Amber coming in the far end, and Rack holding sway over his audience.

"So we brought him home, an' all." He points at Josh. "There's the man. Check him out, eh?"

Mei Li puts her hands on her hips and gives him the once-over. "Independent contractor, huh?"

"Yeah, an' a bit more." Rack waves his hand. "Man's got some experience with accounting; not a degree, but more money matters sense than I can lay claim to, now we've hit the big time. He can set this place to rights -- not that there's anything wrong with it, mind, it just needs a bit more attention than I can afford -- an' he'll be takin' over Daniel's books, too. Treat him nice, now, he's just back from Iraq."

There's a collective nod of heads, but nothing more than that. Without even asking, they assimilate him in their minds as part of the group, and that's all there is to it. "So, you

want me to show you what's been going on around here since Rack up and left?" Mei Li asks, heading for Shelly's desk. "I've kept the books under here."

"I can pour you a cup of coffee," Amber offers shyly.

"Ac...actually, I was hoping you'd do my palms." Josh holds them up. "I'm...I'm told you're the best there is."

Amber blushes prettily. "I do my best. Oh! This is Hannah, my girlfriend." The chipper-looking redhead by her side gives Josh a grin and a wave. "She doesn't work here, but she comes around a lot."

"I drive her to outside appointments sometimes, too," Hannah volunteers. "So, welcome. Glad to have you here."

Josh visibly relaxes. "It's...it's good to be here."

Hannah puts her head to a side. "Breathing techniques," she says thoughtfully. "Shell shock?"

Amber puts her hand on Hannah's arm. Josh shakes his head. "No, it's...it's all right. Yeah. Shell-shock. PTSD. A whole bunch of letters. My old therapist was trying, but she...she wasn't really able to jump the gap."

"Then you're in luck. I'm not a therapist, but I'm a holistic wellness expert. Open for business if you want to check me out."

She offers a card, and Josh looks intrigued. "W...wow. Books and cards and henna, oh my," he jokes. "You're all a... you make me... thanks." He grins. A little of what must have been his old self peeks through. "Rack and Daniel brought me home."

"So Rack was telling us." Mei Li appears with a stack of binders. "You want to go over these now, or later?"

"Oi, give the man a chance to breathe," Rack complains. "We've only just now got home. Drove straight here from the airport. Man needs to find a place to live, preferably furnished. Know of anythin' that might fit the bill?"

Rufus rubs the back of his shaved head. "I've got a friend who might sub-lease," he offers. "Guy's a professor, going on sabbatical or something. He's been looking for a decent guy to house-sit at cost, sort of." He grins at Josh, who looks startled, but then grins back.

Daniel elbows Rack. "Now *you* owe *me* twenty," he whispers in Rack's ear.

"I'd...I'd like to check it out," Josh says, ducking his head. "If it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all. Let me just finish this tattoo I'm workin' on. I'll break for lunch, and we can grab some food before we go take a look at the place. I think he'll be there today." There's definitely more than a casual interest in Rufus' eyes, and if Daniel's not mistaken, Josh is intrigued by all the offers, spoken and unspoken, laid out on the table.

"Aw, shit." Mei Li drops her binders. "I've got one to finish myself." She smacks Rack hard in the arm. "That's for making me forget a client." Disappearing back toward her booth, she calls, "I want to see you and your new guy during my lunch break, though! We got a lot to go over and a little time to do it in."

"Not today, pet," Rack says. "Gonna take my boy, my bike, and head for home. Josh, you'll be all right by yourself?"

Josh looks a little thrown, but Daniel can tell he's adjusting better than they'd hoped. The tattoo crowd really is a family, and they've already adopted him. He gets the feeling Josh knows as much, and while it's still taking him time to adjust, the man is glad.

"I'll...I'll be okay," he says with a grin. "Everything but your suitcases is coming by van, right?"

"Yeah. Shouldn't be here for another day or so, though. Sodding bastards, chargin' me extra for shipping the stuff home early and then saying it'll take 'a while'. What's a bloody 'while' mean, anyway?"

"If the stuff shows up, I'll take care of it." Josh holds up a nearly-steady hand. "See? And the other...other guys can help me put things away where they need to go. I'll...I'll be fine."

Daniel has a definite feeling that he will be.

"Hey, Josh, man, you want to watch me finish this design?" Rufus asks at the same time as Amber offers him a free henna on both palms. Josh looks torn, then laughs.

"Henna first. I...I kinda want to talk to Hannah some about things." His cheeks are only faintly pink. "That okay with you, Rufus?"

"Sure thing. But if you get done before I do, feel free to walk on in. Anytime. For anything." No mistaking the invitation there, or the reappearance of Josh's small grin. Score.

Rufus disappears with a broader grin and a backward wave at Rack and Daniel. Josh heads for the henna table. His shoulders are straighter and his head higher.

They did the right thing. *Whew.*

The two of them stand there for a moment, Rack's arm around Daniel's waist. Daniel leans his head on Rack's arm and just watches their family enfold Josh as one of their own. It's a damn good sight.

"So," he whispers to Rack, "you were saying something about the bike and heading for home?"

Rack chuckles and roots for a set of keys in his pocket. "Never left my side -- well, most of the time," he says with a fondness normally reserved for the bedroom. "If she's still in good running shape, I'm gonna say let's go."

Daniel nods, and the two of them slip out. Feels kind of like playing hooky, but they have to be sure Josh can make it on his own. A day in the life of the parlor ought to make sure he feels he's at home. And if he needs them, they're only a phone call away.

Provided he doesn't call during sex. In which case, Josh will probably figure out why no one's answering and try again later.

Mmm. Home, sex, and Rack. Daniel watches as Rack whips off the tarp and makes noises of appreciation, running his fingers over polished chrome and butter-soft leather seats. He hops on, revving the bike up. "You ready?" he hollers over the engine. "Get on if you've a mind to!"

Daniel slips on the bike behind Rack, wrapping his arms around Rack's chest. Rack passes him a helmet, puts his own on, and then gives the engine a good shot of gas, making it roar. "Hang on tight!" he yells. "We're headed home!"

And as they peel out of the parking lot, Daniel knows they'll be back later on today. But that's good. Home is a house set in a wooded lot, and home is here in the parlor.

He's finally back where he belongs, and he's got Rack safely in his arms.

Thus endeth the Great Tattoo Tour, Daniel thinks. *And they all lived happily ever after.*

Damn right, they did.

Stranger Things Have Happened: Denver

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