



Feathers

A Torquere Press Single Shot by Vincent Diamond

Brandon Reston noticed the red-shouldered hawk as he drove into the feed store that morning. It dive-bombed his truck in a flurry of wings and yellow talons, almost scraping the windshield. Brandon jerked back in the seat and slammed on the brakes. The bird zipped over to perch on the split rail fence that ran along the property line and kept his horses inside their ten acres of grazing land. The hawk watched him with black eyes, turning its head left and right, then it focused on something in the tall grass beneath it.

Must have breakfast on the run. Maybe one of those big juicy rats who've been getting at my feed bags.

Once he unlocked the store, the hawk slipped his mind. The phone rang as soon as he turned on the lights and the Pro Feed tractor-trailer pulled in and Celeste had left a note on the cash register that she'd be in late because of a dentist appointment. The morning flew away in a rush of signing invoices, counting stock, and ringing up sales for the walk-in customers.

“Sorry I’m late!” Celeste said when she came in just after noon. “Emergency root canal.”

“Are you sure you’re okay to work?” Brandon asked. “Your face is kinda.... puffy.”

“I’m fine. The novocaine is starting to wear off. And I’m on antibiotics for the infection,” Celeste said.

Brandon stepped closer. Celeste’s eyes were drawn tight and beneath her blush, her face was pale. “You should go home, Sis. Take some pain meds, stay on your sofa and watch Oprah. Go on.”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.” Brandon touched her shoulder. “The truck already came; I’ve got most of this inventory put away already. I can handle this. Go home.”

“Thanks, Brandon.” She gave him a wave as she pulled away in her scruffy SUV.

So much for taking a ride today.

He grabbed the phone—it was hooked to the security system and would buzz if someone walked into the store. He snagged three apples from the mini-fridge in the store’s backroom. When he stepped out the back door, he regretted he didn’t have a saddle in hand. The February sky was clear and cool, a perfect Florida winter afternoon. A light haze lent a fuzzy wash to the landscape. His horses, Nit and Wit, grazed two hundred yards away, their outlines curved at neck and haunch. When he whistled, they raised their heads, then loped toward him with soft nickers of greeting.

“Heya, guys, how are ya?” Brandon petted Nit first; the gelding was adamant about being the first to greet him and he would nip his sister, Wit, to get her out of the way. They took the apples from him with soft muzzles, teeth crunching. The odor of fresh apples and horse enveloped him, comforting and homey.

If only I had someone to ride with.

Valentine’s Day had come and gone last week. It seemed the road was filled with flower delivery drivers that day; Brandon had seen four of them on his drive into the store. Stan had sent Celeste flowers at the store and they sat there on the front counter, nearly baleful in their cheery colors and soft scents. Even Brandon’s customers seemed to conspire against him; most wore red or pink for the holiday, mock-sighing about the hassle of the holiday, getting reservations for dinner, buying gifts.

I’d love to have someone to buy gifts for and I wouldn’t complain about it.

It had been nearly two years since his father had died, leaving him the store, twenty acres, and a scruffy trailer on the outskirts of Tampa. And heartbroken. Brandon's mother had died when he was six and this new, adult grief flattened him.

Paul, his lover of five years, left him a few months after the funeral.

"I can't take all this depression, I just can't," Paul had said one gray afternoon. Brandon looked up from stoking the logs in the fireplace. Paul's face was torn, his conflict clear on his golden-boy features. "I'm sorry, really sorry. I know this is a terrible time... but this isn't working for me anymore."

Brandon blinked, too stunned to react. He knew Paul was right; there was nothing more Paul could do to make his grief lessen, to make his heart open up again, to take away the pain of feeling orphaned. Nothing.

Brandon set down the poker on the hearth and walked out the door on shaking legs. The keys to his truck were on the kitchen counter but he couldn't bear to go back inside Paul's house so he push started it: ran next to it, pushing the weight of the truck which felt lighter than his own heart. He jumped in and popped the clutch. When the engine kicked on, it loosened something twisted inside his chest. He felt warm tears down his face as he drove home.

Now, he took turns riding Nit and Wit. When he left the pasture, the horse remaining would whinny, stamp its hooves, and gallop the fence-line until Brandon was out of sight. It wrenched at him each time it happened, reminded him that he and Paul usually rode four times a week and now he was lucky to ride each horse once a week.

Alone.

Wit nuzzled him. He arched over her strong neck and hugged her. "How ya doing, baby girl?" He scratched her withers—that oh-yeah-just-right spot for horses—and she nibbled at his hip, her teeth on his jeans.

He saw a flutter of movement to his left. The hawk swooped over the grass, then landed on the fence once more. It screeched and Brandon noticed it held a mouse in its talons. The hawk jumped down into the grass and disappeared. After a few seconds, it flew up to the fence once more, then looked down. The mouse was gone.

Who's she feeding down there?

The UPS truck chugged into the drive. It backed up to the door, as usual; the driver locked the door, as usual. But when he stepped outside, Brandon saw not Roger, the regular driver, but a wiry young man, short and slight. The driver spotted Brandon and gave a little wave.

The hawk swooped over Brandon's head, screaming, its wings close enough to stir a breeze in his hair. The bird hovered near the UPS driver, wings flapping. The driver looked up, his eyes wide open.

“She’s protecting something. Watch out!” Brandon called.

The driver waved his arms gently and the hawk zipped back to the fence. When Brandon stepped closer, he saw the driver’s intense, dark eyes and deep-toned skin.

Whoa. Who is this?

Brandon straightened his shoulders.

The young driver kept his gaze on the hawk and moved towards it. After a few steps through the tall grass, he bent down.

“What’s going on?” Brandon asked. He kept one eye on the hawk. She re-settled on the fence post, fluffing her feathers, her sharp claws digging into the wood. On the ground, a young hawk floundered, emitting squeals of alarm. One wing flapped and the bird flailed through the grass as it tried to get away. The other wing was bloody, torn. The hawk got some lift with one wing flapping but it mostly scrabbled in the grass.

The young man wore the standard brown uniform, “Ramon” stenciled over one pocket. He squatted, gave Brandon a quick glance and focused on the bird once more. “He’s been hurt. Maybe he flew into the barbed wire. Probably didn’t know any better.”

“What can we do for him? I’ve seen foxes around here; he won’t be safe even with Momma Bird around,” Brandon said.

The young hawk wobbled through the grass, screeching, his injured wing dragging beside him. They hopped along with him, arms waving. To Brandon’s surprise, the mother hawk didn’t come at them. She cocked her head, seeming puzzled by the awkward humans.

Ramon took off his uniform shirt, and threw it over the hawk. The hawk screeched and flapped its one good wing as it tried to fly away. Ramon grabbed his shirt, twisted it with the hawk in it and stood up.

“You have a box we can put him in? Something small and dark to calm him down?” Ramon’s voice was calm but urgent, his breath showing in the cool morning air. Ramon’s nipples were black and hard, distracting. Brandon had to make himself think.

“In the store, this way.” They walked towards the back door.

The hawk called again and Ramon struggled with the shirt, its sleeves flapping. “It’s okay, little hawk, it’s all right. We’re gonna take care of you, quiet now, quiet.”

They stepped inside the store’s backroom. “How about this?” Brandon rearranged a half-dozen equine supplement canisters to get a box down from the shelf. “This is pretty small.”

“That’s fine, thanks. Can we take him to a backroom, someplace quiet?” Ramon’s accent was soft, not traditional Mexican exactly, smoother with that just-a-little-off lilt. Brandon recognized the cadence of his childhood—the soft voices of the barn’s grooms as they cleaned out stalls—a comforting touch of safety in the younger man’s voice.

Brandon led the way to his small office behind the stockroom. A few of the stable’s racing trophies sat on the shelves, five years’ worth of Bloodhorse monthly magazines in cardboard organizers next to them. A pile of Daily Racing Forms lay on the floor next to a shabby plaid loveseat, its pillows leaking stuffing and showing wear.

The office had heat and it felt stuffy, too warm to Brandon with Ramon so close by. Ramon’s skin was caramel-brown, smooth and soft-looking. His chest was smooth, not a trace of hair between his nipples. He had one mole on his left shoulder, brown and raised and the sight of that one imperfection made Brandon’s knees go weak.

Brandon shook himself.

“Can I make a phone call here? To the raptor center?” Ramon asked. He put the box on the loveseat, then waited for permission.

“Raptors? You mean like Jurassic Park raptors?”

“No, raptors like owls and hawks and osprey. There’s a rehab center over in Lakeland. I interned there last semester,” Ramon said through a smile.

“Help yourself to the phone. How about a shirt?” Brandon handed Ramon one of his own clean undershirts from the stash he kept on the shelf.

Ramon smiled and tugged it on. “Thanks. Can we use another one to keep him warm?” The shirt drooped off Ramon’s slender shoulders and made him look delicate, almost frail.

“Will a saddle sheet work?” Brandon tugged one from beneath his saddle. The smell of oiled leather puffed out at him and beneath, horse-smell, the smell of home.

“That’d be great.”

They got the navy sheet arranged in the hawk’s box. It peered up at them, its pink tongue out, beak open and panting. They closed the box lid and Ramon carefully cut some air holes with his box cutter.

Brandon sat down and bent down to hear for the hawk’s breathing and kept his gaze on Ramon, not wanting to, but he couldn’t make himself leave the office. He noticed Ramon’s slender neck, the smoothness of his skin, the soft hair on his slim arms. He was about five-six and probably didn’t weigh much more than a hundred thirty pounds.

Easy enough to carry to bed.

The months without a steady lover panged at him. There had been a few quick grapplings down at the beach with faceless men and a two-week fling with a customer's houseguest who had ridden the horses— and Brandon— until they were all soaked. He'd spent a few weekends in Atlanta, cruising the gay bars, but it was never enough.

Brandon didn't hang out at the track anymore, not that racetracks were prime cruising spots for gay men. Most nights he went home alone. Turning thirty alone had punched at him with the whump of a heavyweight boxer. The stabbing want of youthful horniness had changed for him. Sure, he still wanted sex. More than once he'd sat in his truck after a blowjob from some anonymous pick-up at the beach or a bar and wondered—is this it? Is this all I can hope for?

Ramon's voice pierced his musings, its cadence a soft comfort. "They can take him in this afternoon. I'm already off schedule. Do you mind if I leave him here 'til later?"

"I only know how to take care of sick horses. Will he be okay?" Brandon asked.

"I'll make him warm as I can, that's about all we can do." Ramon shrugged.

"Sure, come back when you're ready. I'll try to keep out of the office so he can have quiet."

Brandon spent the afternoon resetting the boot display in between customers. He knew that spring would bring new students to the riding stables along Morris Bridge Road and he wanted to be ready for sales. Five o'clock came and went but he had three customers in the store, browsing, so he just stayed open. He was happy to get the three hundred dollars of sales from them. When Ramon peeked around the spurs display, Brandon was startled for a second, then remembered the bird.

"I forgot all about him--sorry," Brandon said.

"It's okay, let's see if he's still alive," Ramon answered. Ramon eagerly led the way to the office and stepped in first but left the light off. Brandon bumped into him in the dimness.

"Sorry 'bout that," Brandon said.

Well, not that sorry.

"I want to leave the light off to check him." Ramon knelt next to the loveseat then bent to listen at the box. He grinned. "I can hear him breathing—he's still alive!" His smile was sunny, full of relief and warmth.

Brandon had to smile back. Who knew that happiness came from a hawk? He wanted to give Ramon a hug of affection, of camaraderie after the success, but he stopped himself. He settled for one palm on Ramon's arm. "I'm glad he made it. It was good of you to take on the rescue."

Ramon shrugged. “Ah, I’m just a sucker for animals. You should see my apartment.”

Maybe I will someday.

“Let me guess—a half dozen dogs, a dozen cats and a parrot.”

“Pretty close. No dogs, the landlord won’t allow it, but three cats, six birds, two turtles, a ferret and tons of fish. I’m in the vet tech program over at JC and we’re always getting animals. Hazard of the job.” Ramon secured the flaps on the box and stepped out of the office. He’d parked behind the shop, the brown box truck squeezed in beside Brandon’s F-150 and a customer’s car. He stepped up into the truck and settled the bird’s box in the rear.

Brandon stood with his hands on either side of the driver’s side door and a flash of hotness arrowed down his torso. Ramon--so gentle and giving, a caretaker.

Celeste’s words after his father’s funeral came back to him—who takes care of the caretaker?

Ramon turned back to him. His gaze moved over Brandon’s arms and shoulders and he wore the faintest grin. “Thanks again for letting me leave him here. Let me buy you lunch one day next week, okay?”

“You don’t have to do that.” Brandon waved one hand then leaned back inside the truck, just a little.

“I want to, really. I’ll check with you on Tuesday when I drop off again.”

Say yes. Give him a chance.

“Sure, we’ll work it out then. Good luck with the bird.”

“It’s less than an hour over to the rehab center. He should make it now that he’s settled and not in shock.” They clasped hands—the street shake goodbye—and Brandon held Ramon’s slender fingers for a second. Cool and hot at the same time. He had to suppress a shiver.

Saturday morning, Brandon slept in. He woke just before eight, hard, his dream of Paul bent double beneath him still hot in his mind. A few strokes of his hand and Brandon’s mind flitted back to Ramon, his soft skin darker than his own. It made Brandon wonder if his cock would be black-ish, if he was cut, what he would taste like. Brandon’s left hand palmed his testicles; he tugged them and rolled them the way Paul had done so many times. His cock twitched in his grip, hips thrusting now, he gasped for breath as he pumped away and the pleasure started low in his belly, between his legs then up to his penis. He came with a thick groan, crying out, but he didn’t know whose name he called.

Paul? Ramon?

He grabbed the second pillow and pulled it to his chest. Sometimes he thought that was what he missed about sex, not coming but the connection afterward, the soft words cooed across a pillow, gazing into another's eyes and finding love there. Was anything lonelier than coming alone?

"Enough of this, Reston," he said out loud. "Get your ass in gear."

Within a half-hour he was showered, shaved and on his way to the shop. Nit and Wit needed a good grooming—their winter coats had grown so shaggy that they barely looked like Thoroughbreds anymore. Celeste had teased him last week. "Hey, you grazing Mongolian ponies back there, big brother?" He'd get their hooves really cleaned out and then he could go for a ride this afternoon. A nice break.

He had a three-stall barn at the southwest corner of the ten acres in back of the store. Nit was happy to stand in the cross-ties and let Brandon use the curry comb and the body brush. Dirt and loose hair wafted around him, making him sneeze a couple times. Wit waited her turn, grazing nearby, tail swishing. It was a brisk day, in the fifties, and a steady breeze kicked up the bedding and errant pieces of hay, even with the north side door closed. Brandon warmed up as he worked and slipped off his jacket as the sun moved overhead.

He heard the tinny toot of a car horn but didn't look up from painting hoof dressing on Nit's feet. Wit snorted and moved into the barn. Brandon stood up and slapped Nit on the haunch. "Go on, beast. It's her turn now."

He heard the car horn again. Probably a customer at the back of the store, waiting for Celeste to help load some feed or hay bales. He snapped Wit's halter to the cross-ties and just as he started working her with the curry comb, the horn blatted once more, just outside. Too loud.

"Dammit!" Brandon strode to the barn door, ready to chew someone a new asshole. He didn't want his nice Saturday spoiled; he wanted to play with the horses, enjoy the cool day and be left alone.

Brandon snatched the door open. "What the hell do you...."

Ramon stood there, wearing a bulky olive sweater over his jeans. "Oh, hey, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to piss you off. Sorry." He shivered.

"I didn't know it was you. Come on in."

"You sure? You don't seem like you want company."

"It's okay. I just didn't want to deal with someone from the store."

“What’s going on?” Ramon grinned up at him. He was flushed, whether from the cold or being yelled at, Brandon couldn’t tell. “I just saw your truck and wondered if I could take you to lunch.”

How does he know that’s my truck?

“I’ve got to finish grooming her and then I can take a break. Wanna hang for a little while?”

“Sure!”

“Know anything about horses?” Brandon asked.

“Not much. Our vet tech program mostly works on small domestics.”

“Want to help?”

“Love to.”

They chatted across the horse, Ramon talking about his classes at the junior college, Brandon about the store. Wit was a little over sixteen hands tall so Brandon could *just* see Ramon’s warm eyes over her back. When it was time to comb out her tail, Ramon sat on the bench, legs swinging in the air, fidget-y. Even in his sweater, Ramon shivered noticeably. After a few minutes, Brandon stepped over to him, one knee against Ramon’s leg and he briskly rubbed the other man’s arms and shoulders.

“You’re freezing. Why don’t you go get us some coffee? Take my jacket.” Brandon pulled a five from his pocket.

“That would be great. Thanks.” He hopped up from the bench, balanced with one icy hand on Brandon’s arm. Even through his shirt, Brandon could feel those slender fingers. He instantly conjured up the image of Ramon’s hands wrapped over his cock and now it was Brandon’s turn to shiver. “What flavor do you want?”

“Surprise me.” Brandon wrapped his jacket over Ramon, hands stroking over Ramon’s slender shoulders as he got the coat settled. Brandon wanted to hold him close, nuzzle his soft neck, then spread his legs and bend him over the bench. Ramon kept his face down which was fine with Brandon—he was nervous that his feelings showed on his face and he couldn’t read this man yet.

Fifteen minutes later, Ramon brought back frothy caramel cappuccino for Brandon and hot chocolate for himself. Ramon got whipped cream on his nose as he drank and Brandon had to stop himself from kissing it off. He settled for a swipe with one finger and a smile.

Ramon smiled back. “Tell me I didn’t look like an idiot just then.”

“You look pretty delicious, actually.” Ramon flushed and gazed down, his long eyelashes grazing his cheeks. Brandon laid the sheepskin saddle pad on Wit. “Wanna go for a ride?”

“I haven’t been on a horse since Boy Scout camp when I was ten.” Ramon looked a little worried.

“She’s an easy ride and we can start out in the pasture here. Come on.”

“You’ll ride with me?”

Count on it.

“Sure, she can take both of us. As long as we don’t run her.”

“Run? Tell me we won’t be running!”

Brandon smiled. He led Wit out to the mounting stool.

“You use this? You can’t get on by yourself tall as you are?” Ramon asked.

“I can when she’s saddled but I don’t like jumping up on her when she’s bareback. Not good for her.”

Ramon pressed his hands together as he stepped up on the stool. His face was flushed and Brandon noticed that his fingers were squeezed together and tight.

“We’ll be fine,” Brandon reassured him.

Ramon scrabbled up on the horse, grabbing Wit’s mane, and got settled. Wit snorted and Ramon tightened his slender legs around her.

“Here, move up here a little.” Brandon put one hand on Ramon’s thigh and pushed him forward. “You okay?” He gazed up at the other man. Ramon gave him a shaky smile and nodded.

Brandon swung up. He caught a whiff of Ramon’s shampoo—something melon-y and sweet—and he settled up tight against Ramon. Just bigger than jockey-sized, the younger man fit perfectly between Brandon’s thighs. Brandon’s arms brushed against Ramon’s waist as he gathered the reins.

“You ready to go?” Ramon nodded and Brandon pressed his heels gently into Wit’s flanks; she walked calmly away from the barn.

Brandon reined Wit back into the pasture, leaning down to open the gate from above, pressing into Ramon. Ramon didn’t stretch away but Brandon thought a straight guy probably wouldn’t have been willing to ride double this way in the first place. Wit’s easy walk rolled their hips and shifted their pelvises with every step. Nit paced alongside them for a bit, head bobbing as he bumped against his sister, then he skipped away, kicking up dust and grass.

“Why don’t you take the reins?” Brandon got Ramon’s hands on the leather and rested his hands on Ramon’s waist.

“Do I steer like this?” Ramon tugged—too hard—on the left rein and Wit jerked her head around and shifted quickly. “Whoa!” Ramon’s voice was sharp, full of nerves. He wobbled on the saddle pad and grabbed Wit’s mane with his right hand.

“Actually, it works like this. Just raise the rein a little—“ Brandon took the left rein and pulled gently up, “—turn your head in the direction you want to go—she’ll feel it--give her a little heel on that side and she’ll turn for you. You never have to jerk on her mouth.”

Wit gracefully turned in a circle. Ramon switched, looking to the right, raising the right rein, and Brandon felt his slender leg press into Wit’s side. She obediently turned to the right.

“Hey! She’s really cool.” Ramon glanced back, his face pink with pleasure.

Brandon smiled. “It’s actually easier in the saddle because you can shift your weight better and really lean. Try some figure eights and then we’ll go out on the trail.”

Five minutes later they were on the dirt road that led them past the store. Celeste came out on the store’s front porch, the phone in one hand, a coffee cup in the other. Wit ambled over to her, looking for apples.

After introductions, Celeste chatted with them. “You’re at JC? Is Rhonda Dermast still teaching there?”

“Yeah, she teaches Intro to Zoology and a few labs. And I think she’s in charge of the equestrian club. How do you know her?” Ramon answered.

“We were at University of Florida together in the veterinarian program.” Celeste’s face tightened; Brandon recognized the regret she felt at leaving school.

Ramon patted Wit’s neck. “Are you still studying?”

“No. After Dad died, we came back here to help with the store.... And all.” Celeste waved one hand and coffee slurped over the cup. She didn’t seem to notice.

Ramon went still; Brandon felt his body tighten down. “I’m sorry; I didn’t realize you lost your father.”

Celeste looked up at them. “It’s been two years now. Not as bad as it was.” But her face didn’t change; her eyes were gray with disappointment. “Enough of this. You guys go have fun. Wit’s a nice ride!”

“See you later, Sis.” Brandon gathered Wit’s reins.

Celeste patted Brandon's boot, out of Ramon's sight. She grinned, her eyes a little wicked. "Ride 'em, cowboy!"

Brandon smiled back at her and nudged Wit into a slow trot. Ramon bounced a little and he grabbed Wit's mane once more. "Sit deeper and let your butt take the bounce. I know it's hard not to, but don't tighten your knees, let your legs get longer," Brandon said.

After a few seconds, Ramon got it. Brandon kept them trotting down the main road until they came upon the trail leading into the citrus groves that surrounded the store. He pulled Wit back into her easy walk and he felt Ramon relax again, his slender body leaning into Brandon. The air was filled with the scent of orange and grapefruit blossoms, enriching the air with sweetness. Bees buzzed around them, harmless and jovial.

"I didn't mean to upset your sister," Ramon said.

"She's okay, don't worry about it. You didn't know."

"And how about you? Are you okay?" Ramon glanced back, brown eyes soft.

"Sure." Brandon felt Ramon stiffen again.

"Did you leave school, too?"

"No. Celeste was the one who was going to school. I was running the farm and helping with the store."

"The farm?"

"We had a thoroughbred farm up in Brooksville."

"Had?"

"We had to sell it after Dad died. We had forty broodmares and three stallions but the bank had mortgage on the property and foreclosed. I sold the horses and moved down here. Celeste came to help." Brandon heard his voice get tight, the syllables short and angry. His happy life as a farm manager wrecked with one phone call from the emergency room where his father died. Now he had the store and two horses and no Paul.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

Brandon rested his chin on Ramon's shoulder. "No offense, but I don't really want to talk about this on a first date, okay?"

"Is this a date?" Ramon smiled and pushed back.

"I sure hope so."

Ramon turned to him, just enough. Brandon pulled Wit to a halt. He feathered soft kisses over Ramon's cheek and forehead. Ramon groaned and twisted further, his shoulder piercing into Brandon's chest, but Brandon didn't care. Ramon's lips were soft. Brandon made himself go slowly when he was ready to wrest Ramon off the horse, stretch him out on the earth, and work him into a frenzy. The kiss turned magical, the air loud with the buzz of happy bees.

Their soft kisses filled Brandon's head with sunlight. Ramon opened his mouth and Brandon tongue-fucked him, easing in and out until Ramon moaned and squirmed in his arms. Ramon gripped Brandon's neck, bruise-tight, and he thumbed open Brandon's mouth and Brandon went hard at the touch. Ramon's tongue was deep in his own mouth, and Brandon sucked on it, sucked on it as if it were Ramon's cock. Brandon eased his hand to Ramon's crotch and stroked the hardness he found there. The scrape of his fingers on the denim seemed loud; Ramon's panting grew more fierce.

After a few minutes, Ramon pulled away with a groan. "Oh, wait, we have to stop....." His eyes were filmy, fogged over with lust.

Brandon kissed his ear. "Let's not stop." He had to concentrate to speak clearly. His cock strained, fully erect in his stretch riding breeches. He pressed against Ramon's butt. "Let's fuck."

Ramon shook his head and turned away. He took Wit's reins, raised her head and squeezed her into a walk. Brandon felt him taking deep breaths, as if trying to calm himself. Ramon's voice was shaky. "I'm sorry. But I can't do this."

Whoa. Double whoa.

Brandon leaned away, puzzled. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No, it's not you. It's me. I hope you're not mad, thinking I'm a cocktease." Ramon gazed up at Brandon, quick, then down again, his face flushed.

"I'm not mad. Just confused."

Ramon was silent for a few seconds. Wit walked on, her neck bobbing as she maneuvered among the roots of the older trees. "I'm just not ready for this, okay?"

"Not ready for snuggling or not ready for fucking?" Maddening, especially with Wit's gait thrusting Brandon up against Ramon in all sorts of interesting ways.

"Both, I think. You're way too sexy to be snuggling around with."

Now it was Brandon's turn to go silent. Ramon looked back at him, his eyes too wide, almost fearful. "You're mad," Ramon said.

“No, I’m not. I’ve just never....” He took his hands off Ramon’s hips and put them on his own legs. “I’ve never had this happen before. It’s a little frustrating.”

“I’m sorry,” Ramon said too quickly.

“What’s going on here? You’re acting kind of, well, scared.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just nervous. I shouldn’t have come out with you like this.”

“Are you a virgin?” Ramon had to be at least twenty-one. Could he be inexperienced?

“No.”

“Are you sick?” Dreadful possibility but one that had to be addressed.

“No, I’ve tested negative every time.” Ramon put a quick kiss on Brandon’s cheek. “Look, I can’t talk about this right now. Should we go back?”

“No, let’s keep riding. There’s a hill on the east side of this grove with a great view; I’ll show you.”

“You still want to?”

“Sure. It’s a nice afternoon; let’s enjoy it. Fucking or no.”

Brandon felt Ramon relax against him. Brandon had to concentrate on not getting worked up again, difficult with Ramon’s ass rubbing against his thighs and cock. Wit snorted as she started up the hill and Brandon felt her working hard. When he rode her alone, she sometimes ran up the hill—wanting to gallop was hardwired into her Thoroughbred lines—but today, she trotted it slowly. Bluejays screeched ahead of them, warning the groves that intruders were nearby. A breeze fluttered Ramon’s soft hair and Brandon had to stop himself from nuzzling Ramon’s neck.

At the top of the hill, they sat quietly. Wit put her head down to graze. Brandon took a deep breath, enjoying the fresh air with its scent of citrus blossoms and the smell of the horse beneath him.

“Wow!” Ramon said. “This doesn’t even look like Florida. The hills.... They’re amazing.”

“Amazing for Florida, that’s for sure.”

“I mean, I drive this neighborhood every day in the truck and I know the hilly areas of the streets but this! This is incredible.”

“I come up here sometimes and just sit. It’s nice.”

“Is this your property?”

“No. I wish it was. The grove owners are someplace in New York and don’t care if we ride up here.”

“Cool.” Ramon sighed and leaned back against Brandon—just a little.

Brandon was content to sit quietly. He didn’t expect Ramon to pass the test, didn’t even think all that much about it. After Paul, it seemed there was no point in getting his hopes up. Besides, Ramon was so young, boyish almost, he was still in school, he had more growing up to do and...

“Hey, look at that!” Ramon arched forward and pointed to a dead pine in the trees to their left. “Do you see that?”

Oh my God, he passed the test.

“See what?” Brandon knew what it was and prodded Ramon just to make sure.

“There’s an eagle in that tree over there! Wow! A bald eagle!” Ramon turned back to Brandon, a happy grin on his face, cheeks flushed. “Do you see it?”

“Yeah, I see it.”

“Is that a nest?”

“They’ve been sitting on it for two weeks. There’s probably eggs in there. I think that’s Momma Bird.” As if she had heard them, the eagle spread her massive wings and glided across the hills below them. She looked enormous, her wings moving in seeming slow motion, her white head gleaming in the sunlight. Her bright yellow talons folded neatly under her belly as she gained altitude.

“The whole time I was at the rehab, we never had an eagle come in. Not that I wanted one to come in hurt, you know, but to see them up close. This is just so... wow!” The eagle left their sight. Ramon bounced up and down and Wit raised her head, disturbed from grazing.

“I’m glad you got to see her.”

“Next time we come up, can we bring binoculars? Or would that bother them?”

Next time? This guy’s not backing down.

“Sure. As long as we don’t move any closer, they’ll let us watch. I’d guess by April, the chicks will be hatched and maybe we can spot them, too.”

“That would be great.”

Brandon turned Ramon's chin toward him. He looked into Ramon's happy eyes and felt his heart lift. Something beyond lust and fire and rutting, something like shaking off snow, brushing the cold from his chest and stepping into warmth. "We can come up here anytime you want. Just ask."

Ramon pressed a soft kiss on Brandon's mouth. Gentle, soft. "Thanks. Really."

Brandon got Wit moving again and let her amble down the backside of the hill, heading home. They didn't talk. Brandon held Ramon's waist with both hands.

Back at the barn, Ramon helped him wipe down Wit again and get her out to pasture. They walked back to Ramon's car, hands brushing one another's.

"Can I see you again?" Ramon jangled his car keys, seeming antsy. He glanced at Brandon, then away.

"Sure. You know where to find me." Brandon smiled and held out one hand.

Ramon shook his head and stepped against him, pressing a kiss on his cheek. "Thanks for the ride, Brandon. And understanding. And everything."

When Brandon went to check on Nit and Wit on Sunday, he hung around, cleaning off tack and re-organizing the feed stall. He heard a car pull up, took a deep breath and turned, hoping it was Ramon.

It was Celeste.

"Hey, big brother. Wanna go for a ride?" Celeste hoisted her custom saddle from the back of her truck.

"Let's go!"

They saddled up and worked Nit and Wit in the pasture for a bit. Celeste led the way, doing figure eights and extended trots and gentle canters over the three low jumps to get the horses calmed down. They got keyed up going out on the trail together—wanting to race-- so Brandon and Celeste had learned to work them for a while before leaving the property. When Brandon leaned down to open the pasture gate, Nit's neck was heated, almost sweaty.

Celeste chatted on as they rode north on the dirt road leading past the store. Brandon half-listened to her, giving appropriate grunts and 'uh-huhs'. He was only mildly interested in her husband, Stan, and his work as a computer programmer and more than once had wondered why Celeste had married him. Stan was a good enough guy, Brandon thought, just, well—a little dull. But he did love animals and their house was filled with a menagerie so maybe that was enough.

Having the horses hadn't been enough for him and Paul.

"You're off in your own little world over there, bro. What's up?" Celeste eased Wit closer until their legs nearly touched.

"Eh, just thinking."

"Thinking about that cutie pie, Ramon?"

"Maybe."

Celeste punched his arm. "Maybe my big butt. He's a doll. What's the story?"

"He goes to JC, works part-time for UPS. And he's gay."

"And????"

"Come on, Sis."

"*Come on, bro.* What happened?"

"We made out."

"That's it? No bumpy-McHumpy in the empty stall?"

"No, definitely not." Brandon looked at Celeste. Her even gaze met his. There was no point in bullshitting his sister. Why lie to the only family he had left?

"He seems very sweet," she said.

"I think he is. He's just holding back for some reason and won't tell me why."

"Geez, give it some time. You gay guys and jumping in the sack first thing. Take it slow for once."

Brandon grinned. "Geez, you straight people and holding back from jumping in the sack first thing."

"There's something to be said for getting to know someone first. I know everything worked out for you and Paul but how many guys did you go through before you two settled down? Twenty? Thirty?"

"I never counted."

"I'm just saying, don't rush him. If he's antsy, let him get comfortable. See movies, spend some time together, go on real dates."

“Dates? That’s like a fig, right, but bigger?”

“You sex-crazed cretin. Come on. Race you to the top of the hill.”

Celeste chirped Wit into a gallop. Brandon and Nit followed, Nit snorting and chewing at the bit to get loose. Brandon let him go, let the reins flow through his fingers. He bent over, up in the stirrups, mimicking the tight curl of a jockey’s ride. He let his heels go down, deeper, and he felt Nit’s mane scratching at his chin, the wind made his eyes water a little, but it was worth it—the thump of Nit’s hooves beneath them, the power of the gallop, feeling like part of the horse. All worth it.

The next Wednesday, when the UPS truck pulled around to the back of the store, Brandon squatted down to check himself in the mirror by the boot display. Hair—good; teeth—clean, no Danish goo leftover from breakfast. He re-tucked his shirt into his jeans and strode to the back door.

But it was burly, blond Roger, the regular drive, who trundled a hand truck filled with boxes up the ramp.

Brandon signed the digital board as Roger stacked the load to the side. “Where’s Ramon this week?”

“Oh, he just covers for sick days and vacations. He’s probably down in south Tampa today.”

Shit. I don’t even know how to get hold of him.

At home that night, Brandon cleaned out his home office, shredding joint bank statements that still had Paul’s name on them, clearing out two file cabinet drawers of old papers. When he was done, still restless, he started cleaning out his laundry room. He sneezed as he poured laundry soap from a partial container into another partial and then slammed the box onto the shelf.

“Screw this.”

Within a half-hour he was at the gay beach on the west side of Tampa, cruising for a slender, Hispanic man. He found two of them, had them both and went home empty, sad.

On Saturday morning, he opened the store, waiting for Bud, their high school age part-timer, to show. Once Bud got settled in at the register, Brandon went back to the barn. Nit and Wit followed him in from the pasture. Just as he’d hoped, Ramon showed up just after noon, the engine on his car sputtering.

He walked up to Brandon, smiling. He wore tight jeans, faded and soft-looking, and a mocha-colored shirt that nearly matched his skin tone. His eyes were bright. He held Brandon's hand and leaned against his shoulder. "How about I take you out for that lunch I promised?"

Brandon pulled him close and nuzzled in Ramon's hair. "How about we stay in for lunch and eat whatever we can find?" Ramon smelled just-from-the-shower clean. Brandon caught a whiff of shaving gel on Ramon's cheek and neck.

Ramon pulled away. "Probably not a good idea. I'd like to show you the rehab center. There's a place on the way that has great grouper sandwiches. You up for that?"

"I'm up for anything."

Ramon blushed and they got in his car.

The grouper place was out in Plant City, a log cabin that had been retrofitted into a diner. Everything was served family-style: big bowls of chili and coleslaw, plates of grouper, baskets of onion rings, hush puppies, and fries. Brandon and Ramon elected to eat outside, seated with a tourist family of six—mother, father, a set of twin girls and two older brothers. The hostess led them to picnic benches and a long, narrow table. Ramon tagged carefully behind Brandon and sat down next to him.

The father sat across from Brandon and Ramon, trying to chat politely but mostly focused on getting the twins to eat their food and not play with it. The blonde girls were about three years old and had their long hair tucked beneath bright red ski caps.

"Eh, I give up." The father tossed down the hush puppies and sighed. "The airplane hangar method doesn't work anymore." He grinned at them.

Ramon piped up. "Let me give it a try?"

The father nodded, then watched with envy as Ramon took turns wearing the girls' little hats, made them giggle when he sang in Spanish to them, and somehow managed to get half a grouper sandwich and six hush puppies down between them. Brandon had to smile.

"You got kids?" The father used the restaurant wipes on his girls' faces and hands. The sharp odor of the alcohol and antiseptic mingled with the smell of the food and the tangy breeze.

"No," Brandon said. Memories of a 4th of July picnic for Paul's office zinged at Brandon like a bat. He'd played in the pool most of the afternoon with a dozen kids, lifting them high, arcing them into the pool and splashing around. When the fireworks started, four kids settled in with him and Paul, a tangle of knobby legs and arms, kid-sweat, giggles, Paul's head resting on his belly. In the darkness, Paul held his hand while the sky exploded above them. That feeling of

family again, belonging, months after his father's death had made Brandon weak. He lay on the ground and his tears wet the grass beneath him, glad of the darkness.

"Kids? Maybe someday," Ramon answered. He wiggled his eyebrows at Brandon.

Brandon leaned over, spoke low into Ramon's ear. "Are you flirting with me?"

"I think so." Ramon pushed back with one shoulder and let one hand slip down to Brandon's thigh.

They ate key lime pie for dessert, their fingers clasped together under the table.

The bird sanctuary was open for another twenty minutes when they arrived. "I've volunteered here last semester; I can show him around," Ramon told the chesty brunette at the front gate.

They walked among cages filled with injured birds—blinded hawks, owls with broken wings, cormorants with missing limbs from being caught in fishing lines. Brandon stopped at a cage that held a solitary great blue heron. The bird was stunning up close, nearly four feet tall, his black eye outlined with bright yellow skin, his topknot a dramatic set of black and white feathers. As they watched, the heron twisted its head to gaze at the blue sky. In a flurry of beating wings, a smaller heron landed atop the chicken wire of the cage and dropped a still-thrashing small fish inside. The big heron gobbled it up.

"Mates?" Brandon asked.

"Maybe, or mother and chick."

They watched as the herons cawed quietly to one another and then the free one took off, broad wings fighting the wind. Brandon knew it was silly but it seemed the caged heron gave a sigh as its friend winged away. It ruffled its wing feathers, turned towards them, and then Brandon saw the terrible hole in its breast, two inches around, pink scar tissue puffing up sorely from the steel blue-gray of its feathers.

"What happened to him?"

"Looks like a gunshot wound. Probably some asshole on a boat, popping a twenty-two." Ramon's voice went bitter and sharp.

Ramon led the way to the medical clinic on the north side. They stepped inside to a cacophony of bird screeches; it seemed louder to Brandon than any dance club he'd ever cruised. The pitch was nerve-shredding and constant.

Ramon moved to the Dutch door on the left and called in. "Hey, Renee! Como esta?"

Renee appeared in the doorway, a pudgy woman with one hand wrapped around a seahawk chick, the other wore a leather glove, reeking of fish. “Air kiss,” she said with a smile. Ramon smooched next to her ears. “And who is this? Oh, *finally*, I get to meet the famous Leslie?”

“Uh, no, uh, this is my friend, Brandon. Brandon, meet Renee. She’s the assistant keeper here. She supervised my internship, graded my papers.” Ramon’s words raced along, his face flushed.

“Hello, Brandon. I won’t shake unless you want fish-y fingers.” Renee smiled. “Did you get to see the rest of the place?” She eyed him and moved the conversation on.

“Yeah, we walked through, saw the birds,” Brandon answered.

“That’s only about a fourth of the birds we have here. The ones on display are the ones who can’t be re-released into the wild; the rehabbers we keep in another section where they don’t interact with humans--much.”

“That hawk I brought in last week, how is he?” Ramon asked.

“Let me check for you, hon. Wanna hold him?”

“Sure!” Ramon deftly held the chick against his chest and fed him small bits of hamburger. The chick seemed lethargic and not interested in food.

“Maybe you should sing to him, too.” Brandon smiled and stepped closer.

“Here, stroke under his chin with one finger, see if you can get his head back a little,” Ramon said.

Brandon’s fingered the tiny throat. It quivered against him, delicate, the downy feathers so soft. The hawk puts it head back and Ramon got all the meat into him.

“Good job, Brandon! We faked him out.”

Renee returned, her face downcast. She took the chick back. “I knew you’d manage him, you always do. But, bad news, Ramon. Your hawk didn’t make it. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, shoot.” Ramon let his head drop for a second and he sighed. “I thought he’d live, I really did.”

“It was more than a broken wing; Dr. Epstein said his ribs were shattered and that impaired his lung function.”

“We tried.” Ramon’s voice quavered.

“We always do.” Renee stepped away. “I’ve got to run, it’s time for meds. Good to see you, Ramon. Nice to meet you, Brandon.”

Ramon was quiet on the drive home, eyes on the road for the most part. Brandon sneaked sideways glances now and again but he couldn't read the other man's mood. Sad? Angry? Pensive? Paul had been easy to read; the flush of his face, and his bright blue eyes couldn't hide his emotions.

Back at the store, Ramon sat in the car.

Brandon eased around to the driver's side and squatted down inside the door. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, just...." Ramon shrugged. "Just a little down, you know."

"I'm sorry about the hawk; I know you wanted to save him."

"Yeah, that too."

"What else is wrong?"

"I should go." Ramon winced and looked embarrassed.

Brandon held onto the door for balance. "Thanks for the ride out there and—"

Ramon was flushed, his brown skin sheened. He wouldn't look over at Brandon. "I should go."

"Ramon, what's wrong?" Brandon reached over put a hand on Ramon's neck. His skin felt as soft as the hawk's delicate feathers had.

"I, uh... I have to go. Really." For a quick second his soft brown eyes met Brandon's gaze, then he pulled away.

Brandon sat there, awkward, not sure what had happened or what he'd done wrong to change the mood of the afternoon so quickly. Was the hawk's death that hard on Ramon? Or was it something more?

"Thanks for the lunch." Brandon held out his hand. Unsettlingly, now a handshake seemed proper-- formal and distancing.

Ramon grabbed his neck, fast, and pulled him close. Brandon's knees bonked against the car but he didn't mind. A touch of feathery bird smell clung to Ramon. Brandon held Ramon's face against his own and let loose a sigh of contentment. Brandon pulled Ramon's chin up—*just one kiss, please just one*—but the look of pain on Ramon's face stopped him cold.

Ramon gave Brandon's neck a hard squeeze then pulled away. "I have to go. I'll see you around, I guess."

“What the hell is wrong?!” Brandon couldn’t keep the snap out of his voice. And then it was obvious—Ramon’s guilty face-- so clear that he should have figured it out an hour ago. “So, who’s Leslie?”

“Les is my boyfriend.”

For two months, Ramon was just the UPS Guy again. Brandon saw Ramon on the road a couple of times. Once, Ramon recognized him and waved to him with a cheery grin. He came in with his occasional deliveries, as usual, but after that first uncomfortable time, Brandon let Celeste sign the board. When Brandon saw the brown truck pull into the store’s drive he was careful to be in the storeroom or busy at the register. Having Ramon so close and not wrenching him off his feet and into a grappling hug wasn’t something Brandon trusted himself with. And clearly, he couldn’t trust Ramon with his heart.

The first Saturday in May, Brandon drove over to Celeste and Stan’s for a Kentucky Derby party. He showed up with two bowls of still-warm German potato salad, his fingers smelling of the onions he’d sliced and the bacon drippings he drizzled into it. Paul had taught him to save bacon drippings in a small jar by the stove to use later as extra flavoring. Brandon still saved the drippings but until today hadn’t bothered to use it for anything.

He kissed Celeste on the cheek, “Heya, Sis!” and followed her into the kitchen and put down the bowls. The countertop was filled with bags of chips, salsa, soft drinks, and deli packs of sliced meats and cheese. “How many folks you got coming, Sal?”

“We invited about thirty, so that means about twenty will show up,” she said, her voice cheery. She gave Brandon an appraising glance. “You could have dressed up a little, you know.”

“What’s wrong with jeans and a T-shirt? It’s clean.” Brandon looked down at his jeans. Okay, so the jeans were ripped on one knee and the cuffs frayed. “They’re old, they’re comfortable.”

She just grinned and threw a carrot at him. “Get to work scraping. I want to get this salad in the fridge and marinate the dressing.”

They stood at the kitchen sink, chatting occasionally, looking out the window. They laughed at the sight of Stan trying to get the gas grill going, watching guests arrive. Three guys Brandon vaguely remembered from previous parties showed up with a keg and spent some minutes icing it down and getting the pump set up. As Brandon watched, a slender dark-haired boyish figure stepped into the backyard, looking a little lost and out of place.

As the young man turned to the house, Brandon realized what Celeste had done.

“You invited Ramon??”

Celeste smiled, coy. “Sure, why not?”

“Not cool, Sis.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Did it occur to you that I don’t want to see him?”

“No, especially when he was so tickled that I invited him. He always asks about you when he comes to the store. What’s wrong?”

Ramon climbed to the deck just outside the kitchen, one arm around a brown grocery bag. He knocked on the open French doors. “Hello?”

Brandon gave her a glare, his back to Ramon. Celeste flicked off her wet hands off against Brandon’s shirt. “Hey, Ramon, I’m glad you made it!”

Brandon spent a few seconds listening to their greetings, the rustle of the bag as they emptied its contents onto the counter. Ramon’s clean aftershave drifted over Brandon, stronger than the green smell of the carrots in his hands. Brandon kept his gaze out the window until Celeste stepped out. “I’ve got to check on the grill,” she said.

Silence in the kitchen except for the clock’s tick. Brandon felt Ramon behind him, a few steps away.

Brandon turned. Ramon leaned against the kitchen island, arms crossed, his face still and expectant. He spoke quickly as their gazes met. “Hey, Brandon, como esta? It’s good to see you.”

Ramon looked—delicious. His black hair gleamed in the sunlight streaming into the kitchen. His skin was tanned, a warm brown shade, and he wore a peach polo shirt. A little baggier than Brandon liked but that was the style these days. Ramon’s pants were low on his hips, loose.

Easy to pull down.

Brandon swallowed and pushed the thought away. “I’m fine.” He crossed his arms, saw Ramon’s gaze over his shoulders and arms, then uncrossed them, feeling awkward, flustered.

What’s wrong with me? This isn’t high school.

But it felt that way—that breathless *oh look at me let me look at you let me touch you let me taste you* heated jumble of feelings and thoughts all mixed in Brandon’s brain. Ramon stepped closer and put one hand on Brandon’s chest. Sounds drifted in from the backyard: the murmur of voices around the keg, a bluejay fussing from the oak tree, the country music station warbling from the portable player balanced on the deck’s railing. Ramon took a shaky breath and pressed closer.

Brandon leaned back against the sink and pulled Ramon to him. He let his hands comb through Ramon's soft hair. Ramon's exhale was soft against Brandon's neck. Ramon pushed upwards and brushed a soft kiss on Brandon's cheek.

More. Oh God, more.

Brandon turned his head, caught Ramon's mouth with his own, a little too fast, a rushed kiss but a kiss. Brandon grasped Ramon's face and pulled him closer, their bodies rubbing in just the right places, Ramon's hand on his neck, his chest and then fumbling beneath Brandon's T-shirt, Ramon's fingers warm.

Stan stepped into the kitchen, laughing, talking to someone behind him. Brandon felt his weight on the old floorboards and then Stan bellowed, "Hey! No making out in the kitchen! Get a room!" and he smiled.

Celeste came up behind Stan and wrapped her arms around him. "Yeah, we've got dibs on sex in the kitchen."

Stan flushed and tickled her. Celeste's face was pink, happy.

Brandon and Ramon broke apart, grinning. "Sorry, Sis," Brandon said. "I wasn't in the loop on the sex in the kitchen policy here."

They all laughed and the afternoon settled into an easy camaraderie.

After lunch, a group of people started playing target Frisbee. They cleared the backyard and set up paper plates as targets on the fence, the railings, a few chairs. Ramon was dreadful; he knocked over a squirrel statue on his second throw and sent the Frisbee sailing over the fence into the neighbor's yard on his fourth. But he laughed at himself, getting the group to make fun of him, and Brandon was charmed at how well he fit in. Ramon was one of the youngest in the crowd but he kept up with conversations.

The kid's got balls.

Once the pre-Derby races started, most of the guests crowded into the family room, sprawled on the sofas or on the floor. Brandon hit the bathroom, washing his sweaty face and wiping down his arms. He was gritty from the Frisbee game.

Ramon wasn't in the family room when Brandon wandered in. Not in the kitchen either. He glanced out the back doors and spotted Celeste and Ramon re-setting the bird feeders. Their heads were close together as they drove in the shepherd's crook. Ramon hung the three feeders up and got them balanced. Brandon expected Celeste and Ramon to walk away but they stood there, talking, Ramon's hands digging into the bird seed bag at their feet, refilling the containers.

Ramon stood up and put one hand on Celeste's shoulder. She glanced over at him, then smiled unsurely. Ramon nodded, then lifted the feed bag onto one shoulder and turned back to the deck.

Brandon stepped back into the family room before Ramon got up on the deck. He felt a little flushed, as if he'd witnessed something unsavory but surely that wasn't what was going on. Ramon making a play for his sister? Or something else? Brandon felt his belly tighten with unease. What the hell was going on?

Brandon found a spot on the floor in front of the TV, his back against the sofa, trying to keep his mind focused on the horse racing. He kept his eyes on the screen when Ramon came into the room, looking around for a place to sit.

"Room for one more?" Ramon asked and plopped down next to Brandon on the floor.

"I guess," Brandon replied. He kept his eyes on the TV, not wanting to see Ramon's slim waist or mocha skin or the soft hair on his arms.

Ramon leaned over a little, whispering. "Don't keep me guessing, just tell me."

"What the hell are you doing with Celeste?"

Ramon sat back, his brows furrowed. "It's not for me to say. You should talk to your sister."

"Now is not the time or place, kid."

"Don't call me kid!" Ramon sat back.

Brandon glanced around. A couple folks had noticed them; they looked away as Brandon eyed the rest of the room. "Let's just watch the races," he said, his voice softer.

"Fine." Ramon sat up straight, yoga style, his legs crossed, his back straight.

The afternoon's glow faded for Brandon. The crowd around them shouted at the horses on the screen and threw popcorn. There were hoots as trainers they knew appeared in a paddock, saddling up a horse or sweating nervously through an interview. Ramon asked quiet questions now and again about the race proceedings—who is the person wearing the red coat? Is there really a strategy to running a horse race?—and Brandon answered, leaning over to speak into Ramon's ear. Every time he did, Brandon caught a delectable whiff of Ramon's aftershave and soap and skin smell.

At a break between races, Ramon stood up and stretched. He touched Brandon's shoulder. "Want a beer or something?"

"No."

People stepped over them or around them to head into the kitchen. Brandon heard a sharp "hey, I'm in here" as someone opened the guest bathroom's door. Ramon reached over and muted the sound on the TV, then squatted down to meet Brandon's gaze.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Ramon’s eyes narrowed and he balanced on his Keds. “Hey, you give me the courtesy of an answer. Don’t you pull that macho silent treatment with me. That’s bullshit.”

Ballsy kid.

He stood up and held out one hand to Brandon.

Brandon took it.

They sat on the steps of the deck, watching people zing the Frisbee back and forth. Ramon had gotten them both beer from the keg; Brandon’s sat untouched on the railing. Ramon sat quietly next to him, their legs just touching. Ramon swallowed down half his cup, then spoke.

“Brandon, please. We don’t know each other that well and I don’t understand how to read you or why you’re pissed or if you’re sick or what—“

“What the fuck are you doing with my sister?” The words snapped out of Brandon.

“We were talking—“

“Looked like quite a little talk to me.”

“Wait, we were just talking about some things.”

“Are you bi?”

“What?”

“You heard me. Are. You. Bisexual?”

“No! You think I was putting a move on Celeste? Ah, geez.” Ramon slapped his forehead. “Oh, Brandon, no, you’ve got it all wrong. I don’t do girls. Really. And even if I did, I sure wouldn’t go after a married woman.”

“Really?” Brandon looked at him, those soft brown eyes and long eyelashes.

“I like cock. Trust me.”

“Can I?”

Ramon scooped closer to Brandon. He put one slender hand on Brandon’s arm. “Yes, you can.”

Brandon took his hand, squeezed it gently. "So, what were you doing with my sister?"

"I think you should talk to her. It's not my place."

"I'll do that. In the meantime..." He let his gaze drop to Ramon's lips. "Can we kiss and make up?"

"Absolutely!" Ramon surged against him, smiling, his lips smooth, soft.

After the Derby, the party started to break up. By seven thirty, Brandon and Ramon were cleaning up the kitchen while Celeste and Stan said good-bye to their guests in the driveway. Ramon fumbled in the pantry, "Hey, where is the Saran wrap?" and Brandon's chest filled up.

He fits in here. With me.

They moved to the backyard and cleaned up the trash until Stan and Celeste shooed them out. "Go on now, no more working," Celeste said.

"You sure?" Brandon asked. He bent down and kissed Celeste's cheek. "Is everything okay?"

Celeste looked up at him, her eyes bright. "Okay for now."

"We'll talk later?"

"Sure," she replied.

Ramon had parked down the block so Brandon walked with him down to his little truck. They leaned against its rusty bed, chatting.

Brandon pianoed his fingers against the cool metal of the truck. "So, what's the deal with you and Leslie?"

Ramon looked away. "It's complicated."

"You probably made it more complicated by coming here today."

"Yeah, a little."

"What's up? Really?"

"Things are going to be changing there. They'll have to."

"You live together?"

"Since Christmas." Ramon shrugged. "It's not the fairy-tale I imagined."

Brandon put an arm over Ramon's shoulders and gave him a friendly squeeze. He kissed Ramon on the top of the head, brotherly, trying to keep it light. "You know how you said you don't go after married women? Well, I don't go after married men."

Ramon looked up at him, eyes full. "I understand."

"Do you?" Brandon held his gaze. "I'm serious about this. I like you—a lot. And I want to take you to bed in the worst kind of way but I'm not getting sucked into a three-way drama. Just so we're clear."

"Clear."

Brandon stood in the street, lifted his hand at Ramon's wave good-bye as he watched the little truck leave.

One Friday night two weeks later, Brandon heard a big box truck pull up behind the shop just after six o'clock. Celeste was in the storeroom, looking for paper towels. When Brandon looked up from counting out the cash drawer, Ramon stood there, fidgeting.

"Hey, uh, como esta?"

"Fine."

"Listen, I was hoping, you, uh, might have some boxes I could have for packing. I'm moving this weekend."

It had been a long week. Celeste had missed three days work for jury duty, so Brandon had worked eight hours every day, plus his normal store management routine, and taking care of the horses. He still had quarterly payroll taxes to figure out tonight at home, something Paul had always helped him with. Brandon wasn't in a charitable mood, even for Ramon.

"Check by the back door, you can have whatever's empty," Brandon told him.

He turned back to the register, saw Ramon leave in the window's reflection. He finished counting the drawer and bent down to stuff the checks and bills in the floor safe. When he stood, Ramon walked back in, balancing five empty boxes that towered over his head. They wobbled and tipped, Brandon lurched forward, and caught the top two as they fell off the stack.

"Sorry," Ramon said.

Brandon noticed his skin was darker than it been in winter, a rich brown shade now. He smelled Ramon, a combination of work-day sweat, crisp uniform shirt and mouthwash. Brandon's curiosity pinged at him. "So, where are you moving to?"

“Back in with my parents for a while. ‘Til I can get some money saved up again and get a place of my own.”

“You done with Leslie?”

“Yeah, I have to leave.... “ Ramon’s fingers picked at a box, opening and closing the lid without looking. He took a deep breath. “It’s time.”

“You guys break up?”

“Yeah.”

“So.... Are you feeling okay?”

“Sometimes. It changes from hour to hour. Before lunch, I was feeling really good about the whole thing. Now? I feel like shit.”

“You look like shit.” But he said it with a grin. He thought Ramon needed some teasing.

Ramon turned away, let the boxes fall onto the floor. His shoulders hunched over and his head dropped. Brandon stepped close but Ramon didn’t respond.

“Ramon, babe, what is it?” *I shouldn’t have teased him about that. Reston, you are such an asshole sometimes.*

Ramon just shook his head. He wasn’t crying, Brandon could tell, but he had drawn in on himself like a kicked puppy. Brandon lay one hand on him, just enough to make contact, and he felt Ramon’s back loosen at his touch. They stood there, close enough for their body heat to merge, but Brandon felt so disconnected from him that his head ached.

Ramon took a shaky breath and whispered, “He hit me.”

Oh, shit.

Brandon had no understanding of abuse, had no tolerance for it. He contributed to the local domestic violence shelter and several animal rescue charities but couldn’t bear to read the newsletters or see any pictures.

“I’m sorry.” Words were useless. Brandon wrapped his arms around Ramon’s waist and rocked him, side to side, gentle as he knew how. “I don’t know what else to say, nothing’s gonna help.”

“I know. Thanks.” Ramon put cool fingers over Brandon’s arms.

To Brandon’s surprise, he didn’t get worked up. His face rested against Ramon’s fine hair, lips close to one ear. Ramon was snugged against his belly and groin; they moved a little now and

again but it was comfort—just that—comfort and not a play for something more. They heard Celeste bang the storeroom door shut.

“Found 'em!” she called, and that broke them apart. They picked up the boxes and stepped out to Ramon’s car.

“I need to go. I’ve got a lot of packing to do. Brandon, thanks.” Ramon looked him straight on now; from the step of the truck they were the same height.

“You’re welcome.” He let his gaze run over Ramon’s slender form, let Ramon know he was doing it and smiled. “You know where to find me.”

“I sure do.”

The gears of the big truck ground and Ramon backed away. He raised one hand to Brandon and his smile was real, close to happy.

When Brandon went to the beach that night, he picked up three different guys, all slender and dark-haired. He kissed them and filled their mouths with semen that shot out of him like fireworks. He threw his head back, whispered “Ramon” with each orgasm and went home alone.

The next Friday, Ramon stopped by as Brandon was closing up the shop. He brought a six-pack of Michelob and Brandon didn’t have the heart to tell him that he thought any beer that wasn’t Coors tasted like weasel piss. He sipped at the Mich while they talked. Ramon’s mood was cheerier; they shared some laughs.

Brandon locked all the doors. “I need to get this deposit into the night drop. Let me count this out, okay?”

“I’ll stay out of your hair, promise.” Ramon said.

Brandon threw a bottle cap at him. While he got the deposit together, Ramon went to work on the shelves, straightening stock here and there.

Brandon took longer than normal to do his banking. He watched Ramon in the glass, and had to re-count the cash three times to get it add up right. He’d always been able to get by enough to do the basic books for the business but it wasn’t his strength. It made him feel like he was in high school again, sweating through Algebra. Paul could zip through a month’s worth of invoices and the checkbook and get things to balance in a few minutes. Brandon had struggled with it ever since.

“Okay, this is right. Wanna come with me to drop this off and we can grab some dinner somewhere?” Brandon asked.

“Sure. Want another beer?”

“Nah, thanks. And finish that one up; I don’t want an open bottle in the car.”

“Oh, come on, I need another one. It’s been a long week.”

“Not in the car.” Brandon’s voice was stern and he looked Ramon straight in the eye. “No bullshit.”

“You sound like my Dad.”

“Yeah, too old for you, probably.” His smile was soft; teasing and flirting like this was fun—he’d forgotten how much.

“How old *are* you?”

“How old do you think I am?” Stalling. Ramon had to be ten years younger than he was.

Ramon stepped around the counter and eyed him up and down. Flirting back. Brandon leaned against the counter, put his arms back and let him look. His undershirt was pulled tight across his chest and it eased up to just above his work pants as he stretched. His cock stirred.

Ramon stepped closer, close enough that Brandon could see the fray on his uniform shirt collar. His eyes were midnight dark. “I’m thinking you’re old enough to know what you’re doing.”

Ramon’s fingertip softly touched his belly where Brandon’s shirt and pants met. Brandon let his eyes close and he shivered. Ramon, not the quick grappling of the bars or the beach, but Ramon’s hands on him, real. Brandon’s cock grew, it rose up inside his pants and he groaned.

The younger man smiled and traced up Brandon’s chest to his nipples. He scraped them with a fingernail, made the small buds hard and then trailed down to Brandon’s belly button. Ramon tugged on the top button of Brandon’s pants. “What’s hiding in there, handsome?”

A ferocious banging on the front door just then. Brandon’s gaze snapped to the door, its glass shaking as a tall man with glasses pounded on it; the closed sign jostling against it with the vibration. Ramon’s face went slack and still.

“We’re closed!” Brandon called.

“Come out here, Ramon! Right now!” The man tapped the glass with his finger then pointed at the ground. “Now!”

Brandon looked at Ramon. “Who the hell is that giving you orders?”

“It’s Leslie.” Ramon’s shoulders went stiff and his arms wrapped over his waist.

“Come out here, pretty one. Come on, babe, we need to talk.” Leslie stepped away from the door, showed his palms. “I just want to talk to you....”

Ramon stepped towards the door. “I should talk to him.”

“Don’t go out there. He looks worked up. And how the hell did he find out you were here?” Brandon asked.

“I don’t know.”

“He must have followed you, Ramon. Think about this. Please.”

“It’ll be okay. I’ll just talk to him and come back in.”

“I don’t think you should go out there.” Brandon grabbed his arm, too hard. Ramon flinched and Brandon let go.

Ramon drifted to the door as if mesmerized. “I just need a couple minutes.”

“No. If you go out there, I’m going to the bank and going home. You’re on your own. Choose.”

Ramon looked up at him, his brown eyes wet, his mouth turned down. “I have to see him.”

“Suit yourself.” Brandon stalked to the door, not liking what he saw on the other side, hating that Ramon would go out to him. He snapped the deadbolt, held the door open and wouldn’t meet Ramon’s eyes as the younger man stepped outside. The sign banged on the door when he closed it. Brandon turned away, grabbed the bank bag, and zoomed out the back door, not wanting to hear or see them together.

That’s the last time. Last time he gets the chance to play me.

On Sunday morning, Brandon went over to Celeste’s for brunch. He found her in the kitchen, briskly scraping carrots, the water running hard. Brandon moved over to her. “Sis?”

Celeste deliberately turned her face away, her shoulders shaking. She dropped the carrot scraper into the sink. “Oh, dammit it to hell!”

“Baby doll, what’s wrong?” Brandon put one hand on her back. He’d called her baby doll when he was six and she was two and he could carry her around like a toy.

She shook her head.

Stan came into the kitchen, saw them standing there and halted. He raised his eyebrows at Brandon—should I stay, should I go?—and Brandon nodded him out. Stan shrugged and left.

“Sis, come on.” He dried her hands off and pulled her to face him. Her eyes were was red, puffy, dreadful looking, really. Her nose was pink and raw—she’d been wiping at it a lot, he could tell. Celeste was not a woman who cried prettily. “What’s bothering you?”

She leaned against him, hands against his chest. “Nothing. Nothing you can do anything about.”

“What is it and maybe I *can* help. Is it between you and Stan?”

“Oh God no, he’s a dear. He’s fine. Everything’s fine.” She took a deep breath and tried to pull away.

“Everything is not fine, not when I come in here and find you with a bad case of the crying uglies.”

“Thanks for the compliment.” It got a half-smile out of her. She shrugged her shoulders.

He let go of her waist and turned the water off. “I’m not leaving until you tell me.”

Celeste looked up at him. Beneath the smeared make-up and teary eyes was a determined woman, still young, still hurting. In her face Brandon saw the sweet child she had once been and the warm-natured woman she had become. Loving and sociable, she filled her home with people and animals, any creature that needed a home. Over the years of her marriage, Brandon had known of at least half-dozen people who had crashed with Celeste temporarily. Until a graduate job came through, until a thesis was completed, until an insurance settlement paid off. And now Celeste was the one looking worn and exhausted and in need of a crash pad.

“I didn’t want to have this talk today,” she said.

“This talk? What talk?”

“Oh, hell, let’s do it.” Celeste took Brandon’s hand and led him out to the wobbly patio in the backyard. “Stan, we’re going out back!” she called into the house. A muffled ‘yeah’ came from the family room.

They sat down beneath the oak tree, its leaves rustling softly in the breeze. Cardinals and bluejays fussed around the bird feeder in the planter.

“What’s going on, Sal?” Brandon asked.

“Stan and I have talked about this for—weeks, months.” She chewed on her thumb then deliberately put her hands in her lap. “The bottom line is that I hate it here. I’ve never liked Tampa. I miss Gainesville and I want to go back to school.”

Brandon sat back, surprised. “I knew you weren’t a hundred percent into it here, but I didn’t think you were that unhappy about it.”

“Well, I am. And Stan knows it and he supports whatever decision I make.”

“Sounds like you’ve made your decision.”

“I have. Well, sort of. I wanted to talk this over with you first. You know, before we did anything about selling the house or something like that.”

He’d have to hire someone else to help at the store. No more Celeste to count on. And no more Sunday family meals even if his family was now down to two. His chest flushed but just for a second. He leaned back and blew out his breath. “I’ll have to re-arrange some things at the store. Shit, and the holidays coming up.”

Dammit, could this come at a worse time?

“I’m sorry. You know I wanted to help out with the store and all after Dad died but I hadn’t planned on it being permanent.”

“I know. It’s okay. All of a sudden it’s two years later and you still don’t have your life back.”

And neither do I.

“Thanks for understanding, Brandon. I appreciate it.”

He waved one hand. “Can you give me some time to get someone else hired at the store and trained? Until Thanksgiving at least?”

“Sure. Winter semester doesn’t start until January. We can move in mid-December and I can still make it to classes.” She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek.

He stayed under the tree, its yellow pollen drifting onto his wine shirt in speckles, until other guests arrived and he had to be sociable. He went through the afternoon feeling like he was on a plane, the air pressurized and heavy on him, making it hard to breathe.

She has to make her own life and her life has never been in Tampa. Let her go.

Celeste was brighter as the afternoon turned to evening. She and Stan slow-danced to “Always and Forever” when it spilled over the CD player. After a bit, a few other couples joined them and the backyard was alight with flickering votives, a soft breeze and lovers.

On Wednesday night, Celeste poked her head into Brandon’s office. “You have a visitor!” She smiled and wiggled her eyebrows.

Brandon looked up to find Ramon in his office.

“Hey,” Ramon’s voice was soft.

Brandon looked down to his invoices. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, silent.

“So, uh, how are you doing?” Ramon said.

“Fine.”

Ramon stepped closer. Brandon saw the tremble of his fingers, felt his own stomach loosen.

He’s nervous, lighten up.

“How was your weekend?”

“What do you want, Ramon?”

“What’s wrong? Why are you mad?”

“Mad? Wasn’t that you running your hand over my belly last Friday night? Teasing me? Wasn’t that you making me hard and sweaty?”

“So, let’s pick up where we left off.” Ramon smiled, sensual promise in his so-dark eyes.

“Let’s not. I’m too old for your schoolboy games.”

“I’m no schoolboy.”

“You act like one.”

“I didn’t come here to argue. I wanted to ask you a favor.”

Brandon raised his eyebrows. “Now you’re really pushing it.”

“We’re doing a fundraising drive for the big cat refuge out on Morris Bridge Road. I was hoping to do a carwash and a dog wash here one Saturday. What do you think?”

“I think the neighborhood’s pretty rural and you won’t make much money.”

“Come on, Brandon. If you give people a chance to be generous, a lot of time, they will. I may not make as much as the folks up in Carrollwood, but I’ll make some. And we need every penny.”

Ramon’s eyes, deep and soft, pierced at Brandon. He knew Ramon’s heart was shattered, knew that the young man in front of him was hurting, knew that getting involved was illogical and risky. And yet he wanted to. Wanted to take care of Ramon and let Ramon take care of him.

What relief it would be to go home to a lover and be able to let go of his day's troubles, to sink into Ramon's soft flesh and forget the real world. More than just a fuck or a blowjob on the beach, Ramon was real, solid. Loving.

"I'll think about it." Brandon's voice grew softer.

"That's progress," Ramon said. "Now, can I take you to dinner?"

"That's a definite no. For now."

Ramon leaned back against the office door. "How long is for now?"

"Until I can feel sure that Leslie is really out of your life and you have room for me. And only me. I don't share."

"He's gone."

"You told me that last month, too. I'm not buying it."

Ramon stepped over and sat on Brandon's desk. The visceral memory of his first time with Paul on a desk rattled him. He smelled Ramon's aftershave; the thought that he had taken the time to fix up stirred him.

Ramon leaned close.

Brandon stood up, the chair's wheels rattling against vinyl floor. Ramon jerked back, eyes wide. He crossed his arms.

Ramon wanted him; Brandon knew it, felt its sensual energy between them. He could fill Ramon's throat with his own hard cock or flip him over and take him right there on the desk and Ramon would let him.

"No more flirty games, Ramon. Be serious or be gone."

"I am serious."

"You'll have to show me."

Ramon did just that. Over a month's time, they had six real dates—dinners, two movies, a Sunday afternoon playing Frisbee at a park, and a trip out to the big cat refuge that Brandon found surprisingly creepy; the power and size of the caged animals unsettled him. One night Ramon dragged him to a south Tampa gay bookstore/coffeeshop and they talked until the clerks closed the store at three a.m. There was no mention of Leslie, no reference to that attachment, just good laughs and the hours of talk.

He relented and let Ramon schedule the car and dog wash. Ramon hung dozens of signs in the neighborhood and that Saturday morning, there were ten cars lined up when Brandon got to the store at 7:30.

He watched Ramon take charge, organizing the volunteer washers, getting the dogs inside the shop bays, keeping the cars lined up in order, making sure they were clean and dry. The donation jar soon filled with silver coins and ones, a couple of fives. Once Brandon saw that Ramon had things under control, he did paperwork in his office, stepping out every half-hour or so to check in.

At 11:15, he closed up the checkbook and put stamps on the bills he had paid. When he got outside, he stared at Ramon in a washtub, his pants rolled up to his knees, his shirt off and an English bulldog in his soapy hands.

“There you are, you beautiful girl, yes, you are the most beautiful girl!” Ramon cooed to the ugly dog. Her tongue lolled out of her mouth and she kept her brown eyes on Ramon’s face adoringly. Her squashed face was comical.

His slender chest was brown, his nipples tiny, hard, black. When the dog was ready for rinsing, his arms bunched as he lifted her blocky body out onto the ground, all the while talking to her of her astonishing beauty.

Brandon stood still.

He could love me like Paul never could—or would.

Who takes care of the caretaker?

Ramon looked up at him in that second, eyes bright. His torso glistened in the morning light, wet with bathwater and sweat. They gazed at each other for so long that the crowd around them went still, curious or knowing.

A fuschia pick-up truck roared into the parking lot, a salsa beat slamming from its speakers, and the moment was broken. Brandon raised the envelopes to Ramon and turned away.

When he got back from the post office, he went through the front door, avoiding the wash in the back. He called Pizza Hut and was just finishing up with his order for six pizzas when Ramon tapped on the office window and came inside at Brandon’s wave.

“You want anything special on your pizza?” he asked.

“Extra cheese and mushroom, okay?”

“Make one extra cheese and mushroom. Yeah, okay, forty-five minutes. Cash.” Brandon hung up and leaned against the desk. “It looks like you’re making some money out there.”

“Yep, over two hundred dollars so far. Maybe we can go past noon? Do you mind?”

“That’s fine. You can get your crew to eat their lunch in shifts if it’s still busy.”

“Thanks for ordering the food. You didn’t have to do that.”

“You’re welcome.”

For the first time in weeks, silence was uncomfortable between them. Brandon flushed; he felt his face and neck pink.

Ramon took a step closer. “You looked kinda sad out there, Brandon. Are you all right?”

“I think I’m just wanting something I can’t have.” He tried to say it lightly but his deep voice went husky. His honesty surprised him but he was glad he’d said the words.

Ramon moved closer. “Something or someone?”

Brandon reached for him, put his hands on Ramon’s waist and pulled him between his own legs. He stroked up Ramon’s bare chest, watched the other man shiver at his touch. His fingers wrapped on either side of Ramon’s face and he gazed at the other man.

Should I try with him? Is it worth the risk?

Ramon looked back at him, his eyes wide and bright, his face flushed. Brandon bent to kiss him. Ramon pushed against him, and their lips met, gently at first, Brandon just spidering over Ramon’s mouth. Then deeper, lips suckling and tasting one another. Brandon’s cock lifted beneath his pants, stirred.

Brandon felt Ramon’s cock grow hard against him and he shifted his weight so they rubbed together. The small office filled with their sighs and moans.

Ramon used his tongue first and Brandon suckled on its warmth. Brandon used his thumb, pulled their mouths apart then watched as Ramon suckled his thumb—eyes deliberately on Brandon, watching his reaction--and felt a burning flash of desire pierce through him. He wanted to wrap Ramon’s slender legs around himself and sink into a lover. Ramon moaned and pushed against him, grinding.

Brandon pulled away. “Wait, I know this sounds silly, but....” Brandon’s brain was fuzzy; it was hard to concentrate on speaking.

“But what?”

“I want our first time to be in a bed, for real.” Not like Paul, not on a desk, furtive and quick and soulless.

Ramon let his head drop to Brandon's shoulder and he groaned. But he stood away and sighed with a smile. "Okay, that's fair. Damn frustrating, but fair."

"Tonight I take you to dinner, we have a real date and then I take you to bed. My bed."

Ramon nodded. "I'm not sure I can last all day."

"Neither am I but I'm willing to wait for you." Brandon brushed back Ramon's damp hair.

Ramon stepped away and laughed out loud. "I got you wet."

Brandon looked down at his damp clothes where Ramon had pressed against him so delightfully. The outline of his hard cock was clear under his khakis. "You got me a little more than wet."

They didn't speak; they just smiled at each other, eyes full, their bodies zinging with electricity, their hearts afire.

Brandon expected dinner to be excruciating, slow, but he enjoyed it. He took Ramon to Café Amaretto, a romantic Italian restaurant in west Tampa, elegant enough that they had to wear jackets and ties. The tie felt stiff, uncomfortable; the last time he had worn it was for his father's funeral.

The room glowed softly, lit with candles and old world chandeliers. Brandon was cook enough to recognize the fresh ingredients, the skill involved to present such a rich feast. The Italian waiters had such thickly accented English that they were hard to understand. Ramon spoke a little Spanish over dinner, soothing, as Brandon remembered the voices of the grooms in his father's barn and the comfort of his childhood. They split a carafe of wine with dinner and a mousse for dessert. Ramon paid the check and drove them back to Brandon's trailer.

He led Ramon to the bed he'd never shared with Paul. Brandon had put on clean sheets earlier and the bed glowed a cool white in the dimness. Condom packets were on the nightstand.

Ramon draped his jacket over the chair and held Brandon's gaze as he undid his tie. Ramon undressed slowly, never looking away from Brandon's eyes. Brandon's chest went tight, his heart throbbed, piercing as a glass wound, exhilarating.

Ramon pulled off his white briefs and his cock arced upwards, black-skinned sheathing pulling back to reveal a purple hardness. He raised his arms. "Come here and fuck me."

Brandon stalked to him, fast enough for Ramon's eyes to widen. He lifted the younger man up, felt Ramon's legs wrap around him and he walked them over to the bed. He meant to go slow, to lick down Ramon's chest, taste his caramel skin, but Ramon whispered in his ear, guttural words in Spanish, his voice rough, his hands soft on Brandon's belly.

Ramon unzipped Brandon, pulled his hardness out and positioned him. The thought of undressing completely wisped through his mind but Ramon's heat and thrusting pelvis made Brandon fumble around, rushed. Between the two of them, they managed to get a condom on Brandon.

"You need some lube," Brandon whispered but Ramon shook his head.

"I've been ready for you all day. Fuck me, Brandon. No more waiting, fuck me, now."

Brandon pushed inside, past the band of muscle, feeling Ramon warm and soft around him, hard and wet beneath him. Ramon's cock stretched and bounced against Brandon's belly. Ramon's eyes were wide and full. "Feel you, Brandon, I feel you," Ramon whispered and he gripped Brandon's waist tighter with his slender legs, throat working.

Brandon licked Ramon's throat as he thrust in.

Oh God, how long since this, too long, oh he feels good, so good....

Brandon nipped at Ramon's slender neck, soft bites, then harder, sucking his skin. Ramon eyes were closed. "Mas!" he cried out. "Fuck me, Brandon, ah dios, fuck me!"

It was nothing now but heat and energy and their sweat as Brandon worked them. Brandon's shirt felt too snug and the buttons rubbed against Ramon's chest, leaving red marks on his brown skin. Brandon sank into Ramon with his cock and sank deeper into his gaze. He palmed Ramon's face with his hands, watching Ramon take every thrust, seeing Ramon's body arch upwards as they slid up the bed. The pillows were pressed to the headboard as Brandon worked, and finally Ramon smacked against the headboard, their passion making it wobble against the wall. Ramon beneath him, eyes closed, mouth open, his legs over Brandon's back and his fingers clawed at Brandon's shoulders.

The headboard thumped against the wall.

Ramon was heat and fire and arched up to meet every thrust. Brandon felt and heard Ramon's gasp of pleasure and he looked down to see Ramon's dark cock gushing creamy semen and Ramon cried out, no words this time, just guttural syllables of pleasure.

Ramon's face tightened and then went slack with release and Brandon came, wet, spurting, wanting to cry out but his voice was gone, every fiber of himself concentrated on his cock and Ramon wrapped around him.

They lay together, Brandon's head on Ramon's shoulder, both of them panting, then that slow ease down to chesty breathing. Ramon twisted beneath him. "Just let me move my legs down," Ramon whispered.

Brandon elbowed up but when he tried to pull away, Ramon stopped him. “Stay right here.” Ramon smiled and caressed Brandon’s face with trembling fingers.

“I’m afraid I’ll smoosh you if I stay like this,” Brandon said. He bent and kissed Ramon’s neck where the skin was still red; there’d be a bruise there in the morning.

“I like having you smoosh me. Lie down and let me hold you.”

“Take some of these clothes off me, I’m hot,” Brandon said. Ramon worked off Brandon’s tie and the shirt. The pants would wrinkle but he didn’t care. He toed off his shoes, heard them thump to the floor.

“Lie down, lover,” Ramon said.

Brandon did as ordered. His eyes closed, his heartbeat slowed, he drifted into a soft doze, smelling their sweat and semen, feeling Ramon’s body beneath his own. Sweetness.

The duskligh t threw soft shadows into the room. In the distance, Brandon heard the faint cry of a hawk and imagined it tilting overhead, its wings healthy and whole, gleaming red-brown in the evening light.

End

Feathers

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