

# SPARE PARTS

A Romantics Novel

SCOTT  
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(A Romentics Novel)

Scott & Scott

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## Chapter One

Dan slammed his boot against the brake. He nearly slammed into the car in front of him, too. Traffic was unbearable on the highway, and he was trying to force the truck through the congestion too hard and too fast.

It was just the anger boiling inside him that needed release.

*There is nothing wrong with the suburbs*, Dan reminded himself. *It's not so bad, really. Not even the commute.* Usually, returning home was an escape for Dan, a journey of freedom away from his hectic business of six bustling garages scattered throughout the large city.

But on nights like this, it didn't seem worth the long drive north to return to the lies and accusations that awaited him in the little bedroom town of Glen Mills.

Lately, everywhere Dan went in that town where he grew up and still lived, he encountered sudden silence when he entered a room. He saw guilty glances as he walked by. He knew there was gossip before he heard it. Before he heard Rodney's name whispered under his neighbors' breath.

Dan thought he had left all that in the past -- he thought he had left Rodney behind. But he should have known better. History had a way of repeating itself in a small hometown. Enemies had a way of resurfacing. Especially when that enemy lived across town. Especially when he used to be your best friend.

Dan remembered Rodney before the spite, before the protruding belly and the receding hairline. At one time, he had been handsome and full of ideas and conversation.

They had both shot out of high school fueled by youth and ambition. Dan had been the sidekick. Rodney was the forward one. He was pushy. He was the one who talked their way

into their first real job at a garage. The attitude had seemed grown-up and almost charming in an eighteen-year-old.

The old guy who owned Glen Mills Mechanics was never even there. After a few months, Dan and Rodney practically ran the place. At least, that's how Rodney saw it. But his greed was the force that had really been running things.

He was impatient. He was short-tempered. And sidekick Dan tagged right along with every decision he made. A few shortcuts here and there became the norm. Recycled parts, quick fixes, extra charges, and a friendly smile became their business. Two talented kids had become crooks.

Looking back, their mistakes were so much clearer to Dan. He knew they were corrupt. He saw how easily they had chosen the wrong path. What was harder for Dan to admit, even to himself, even now, was that he had been in love with Rodney.

Love is a strong word, probably too strong. Dan hadn't really understood his feelings then. But that first big crush is a powerful force, like hormones and rebellion all rolled into one. Adding confusion and sexuality made for a volatile mix.

He had fallen for his friend. As with any big fall, he ended up hurt. If he'd only bruised his heart, he might have healed. He might have mended his feelings and their friendship. But a lot more had been at stake.

The extra money they'd stolen didn't go far. What seemed like a lot to a couple of teenagers was pretty easy to spend. Dan and Rodney's cars were flawless, gleaming models that purred and revved with every conceivable luxury. But when customers started to complain about their own patched-up wrecks, the two young mechanics had been caught in the headlights. They had to replace parts, fix mistakes, take even longer to retrace and repair their shortcuts.

The old mechanic had not been as blind as Rodney thought. He was too old, the owner told them. He was never around. He said it was time to pass on the business. He said he was cutting them a deal. He was selling them the garage on account of all their hard work. And that was the price -- the two custom cars they had worked so hard on, their pride and joy.

Suddenly Glen Mills Mechanics turned into a trap. What would have been a dream a year earlier became their nightmare. They were stuck with no cars and one broken-down garage.

Dan had known what he had to do. He had to make a clean break, no matter what more it cost him. He had to leave Rodney. But the conflicting elements of loyalty, guilt, and secret desire made it nearly impossible. He told himself it was the kind of devotion that buddies shared. It all seemed worth it when they had a moment to sit and try to laugh. He would have given up most anything for shared beers and a pat on the back. Whenever Rodney touched him, Dan could feel the heat of his friend's hand. He could feel the shadow of his touch lingering between his shoulders.

But as Dan continued to struggle and pay their debt, even this warmth had faded. Their friendship and Dan's adolescent hope for more were not enough reason to risk ruining everything. So Dan had emptied his savings and paid off his share. He had fixed his mistakes. And he gave his best wishes and his half of nothing to his best friend.

That was almost twenty years ago. Today, Glen Mills Mechanics was still there, and so was Rodney. He'd managed to keep it going, barely, but Rodney's morals hadn't improved any more than the business had. Nothing and everything had changed.

After he left Rodney, Dan had found another garage and another old mechanic. But the similarities ended there. Santom was always there under the hood of a car, and there was nothing blind about him. He was willing to forgive, but not forget, mistakes. Dan had to work harder and longer and learn more than he thought any mechanic should ever know. Eventually, he had earned Santom's respect. He'd earned a true friendship based on trust and hard work. And when old age finally caught up with his old friend Santom, Dan inherited his business. It was one of the businesses that he still ran, the one that had grown with its younger owner into a chain of six garages -- each with SANTOM'S on its sign.

Both Rodney and Dan were still mechanics. They both still lived in Glen Mills. But they were not still friends. They avoided the topic and each other. Rodney had grown old and fat in his jealousy, and Dan had grown distant and silent running his businesses in the city. They were only miles apart, but they were worlds from where their friendship had started.

Leaving Rodney had been the biggest turning point in Dan's life. It had changed the direction of every moment that followed. But now, at thirty-five, it all seemed less traumatic. It didn't hurt as much in retrospect. Scar tissue is thick and numb.

Amid the gridlock traffic, the sports car behind Dan beeped its pitiful little horn. Dan had to grit his teeth to keep from throwing the pickup into park and grabbing the tire iron in the backseat. He gripped the steering wheel and exhaled slowly. He was beyond that youthful anger. He put it inside.

Now there was a little gray touching Dan's dark temples, but he was solid. Years of twisting wrenches and lifting steel had made his workingman's body as hard as his resolve. And he was determined that all that hard work would not be undone by small-town rumors.

Dan tried not to blame Glen Mills. He knew that he owed part of his success to that hometown. His business and his business sense had both stemmed from his blue-collar background. His hardworking roots were in that suburb, but he was not going to let his past destroy his future.

He was not going to let Rodney destroy his name. But Dan really couldn't hold his neighbors' shock against them. No one saw it coming. No one thought the smart, responsible one was going to turn out that different after thirty. No one expected him to leave his fiancée. No one expected a handsome, hard worker with broad shoulders and a square jaw to



end up a confirmed bachelor. Honestly, no one expected the confirmation. No one expected him to be gay.

And once they knew the truth, it became easy to believe Rodney's lies.

When a timid customer in her fifties picked up her car and said, "Rodney's been talking," Dan could tell by the quick, embarrassed way she looked down at her shoes just what he'd been talking about.

The woman, who had probably known Dan since he was a child, finally admitted, "He says it's no coincidence you hire all these young, handsome mechanics." She shuffled into her car and left Dan speechless.

Sure, he worked with a lot of younger guys. Some were still in high school and only worked weekends and late afternoons. But this was where the talent was. Dan remembered what it was like to be young and ambitious. He remembered how it could go wrong so easily and so fast. Dan wanted to teach them and mold them and turn them into amazing mechanics and men. It had everything to do with success for himself and them. It had nothing to do with being gay.

Everybody needed a good mechanic, someone to trust. And that was the belief he had built his business on. There were plenty of kids out there who could rebuild a carburetor in their sleep, but teaching them to do it honestly was another story. Dan spent most of his time teaching the most simplistic business principles: No one gets arrested for taking parts out of cars if he replaces them with new ones. The real money is in loyalty. Long-term customers bring in long-term profits. A quick buck doesn't even last as long as that recycled, rebuilt part you used to cheat the customer. Trust lasts forever.

And that was Dan's business. That's what had earned him a modest empire of garages that circled the bustling city like protective wagons. And now that was all being attacked.

Yes, Dan paid those kids well to learn. And soon, they became invaluable. It worked out well for all involved. He made sure it worked out better for them than it had for him at their age.

But the idea that anything else was going on with those young guys was ridiculous. It was exactly the kind of scandal people would secretly believe despite themselves. It was the kind of thing people whispered and said, "That can't be true." But that didn't stop the rumors, the speculation, the suspicion that it just might have a kernel of truth in it. And it was exactly the kind of ignorant, evil lie Rodney would invent. By the time the whispers had spread throughout town, no one even remembered who whispered first.

Dan scowled as he finally pulled his truck out of traffic and onto the back roads. He drove north, choosing the potholes and twisting pavement over the clogged, slick arteries of commuters. This was the same choice he had made all his life. Driving the bumpy roads takes its toll. But to Dan, the easy route was never that easy. The straight and narrow was always backed up. He'd paid the price for some choices, but he'd always been able to hammer out the dents and get things running smoothly again.

Dan knew there were more rough roads ahead of him. But he had no idea how to repair the rumors and the resulting damage.

If only he had come out sooner. If only he had been the one to tell his customers and neighbors about his sexuality instead of Rodney. If only Rodney hadn't spotted Dan's truck in front of a certain bar on a certain night.

But there was no time for regrets now. Dan's homosexuality was not a secret. He wasn't ashamed. He just didn't broadcast it. He didn't mix business with pleasure; he didn't fly a pride flag over his garages. In fact, he didn't actually have time for pleasure, with all the business in his life. But now his business was defined by sex. He was the gay mechanic.

Dan tried not to think about irreparable mistakes. He just wished people could have had their own chance for acceptance. He wished his parents had lived long enough to accept the real him. But he had waited too long to come out, and now he'd never know. And he knew that he'd waited too long for himself, too. He was comfortable with himself now. However, getting to that point was a struggle he couldn't understand and didn't want to remember.

He hit a pothole and cranked the wheel all the way to the right. He forgot about whispers and lies. He forgot about how fast and unexpectedly life can change course. He forgot about decades living in the closet, keeping himself and everyone in the dark. He forgot how small and scared a big man like himself could feel creeping out of denial and into the light at thirty.

Dan pulled into his driveway and shut off the engine. He pulled his key out of the ignition and put another one into the door of his empty house. Time to stop dwelling on the past. He had enough to deal with in the present.

His house was large, comfortable without pretense. It was just a little too big for a bachelor. The suburbs had grown up around the ideal of children and family and happily ever after. What they didn't accommodate were self-sufficient gay men in their thirties who were too used to being alone.

He looked around his home and laughed at the thought that anything scandalous was happening in his life. The rumor that it was happening in his sex life was practically impossible.

But people will believe what they want. *There is nothing wrong with the suburbs*, he reminded himself. But a small town like Glen Mills could be like a big, dysfunctional family.

He was the town's estranged son, its success and failure all at once. It wasn't surprising that they would talk about the gay guy who had gone wrong and made it good. It was crazy gossip, but it wasn't hard to believe.

Sexual indiscretion. Manipulation. Molestation. Nothing could have been more damaging, and nothing could have been farther from the truth.

Dan admitted, at least to himself, that the gossip bothered him. It hurt his pride and quite possibly his business.

Over the past weeks, several customers who worked in the city had decided to have their cars serviced closer to home. The kid down the street changed his mind and chose to work for a tiny garage twenty miles out of his way. Dan knew this was not just innocent gossip.

The real truth about his gayness was something Dan had grown comfortable with over the years. He just didn't date. His business and his home and his entire life seemed out of sync with urban gay living. He was not that mechanic in the porn video. After three decades of denial, just being honest was enough.

Nobody believed it. Well-to-do women from downtown winked and patted his solid shoulders in a way that wasn't flirting. They readjusted their hairdos and said, "How does a catch like you stay single for so long?" or "What you need, darling, is a relationship to screw up this perfect life you have."

Even the kids in the garages joked and hinted in friendly tones, "When you going to relieve that stress and work over something other than an engine?" and "Why don't you go find something to get your own motor running, Dan?" They laughed and avoided the use of pronouns and specific anatomical references.

Dan was flattered by their discretion and their intentions. They knew and accepted the truth. It didn't matter to them. And that was what mattered most to Dan.

Mechanical puns and inside jokes were the closest he came to sexually explicit talks with his employees. The most intimate conversations they shared involved wires and belts and good business sense.

But for some reason, Rodney was trying to ruin everything Dan had worked for. Now that Rodney had found out Dan was gay, he was making it everyone else's business. And business was one thing Dan took very seriously. It was one thing he didn't trust Rodney with at all.

Dan refused to let his own mind rot with the same kind of poison and hate that drove Rodney. Sitting here staring at the blank walls of his house wasn't going to solve his problems. Stewing in his own solitude was not going to prove to the town that he was a loner, that his life was much more boring and solitary than Rodney's lie.

For once, Dan was tired of being alone. All these thoughts were horrible company. He certainly wasn't going to discover a solution there on his couch entertaining them. He was just going to drive himself mad.

He knew his only recourse was to continue the same honest hard work he had done every day since he and Rodney parted ways. That was the lesson he had learned in life. That was the principle, the foundation, that supported his business and himself. As far as Dan was concerned, honesty really was the best policy. Truth was the best companion he had found.

He was going to do whatever he had to in order to prove that. He hadn't struggled for over fifteen years to slip back into the failures of his past. He would put the facts straight and put his business back on track. But not tonight.

Sometime between working late and worrying, the sun had set beyond the sliding glass doors. Now the last glow of the day hung deep and orange along the horizon. Dan watched it beyond his porch. It was intense but fading, like his anger. He wasn't one to dwell on things he couldn't change.

So as night settled around his house, he forced his mood to brighten. He let go of his anxiety as the last light slipped from the back-stabbing little suburb he had always called home.

What Dan needed was to get out of this town, even if only for a night. He needed to get these thoughts completely out of his system. It was Friday, after all, and Dan hadn't been out in ages. He was always busy. It was always business.

So he set out another pair of jeans on his way to shower. This pair was a little cleaner and a little tighter. They weren't exactly what he needed to crawl under a car, but that wasn't really the position he had in mind.

He grabbed a towel and actually whistled a couple notes as he walked naked in front of the sliding glass doors. That should give the neighbors something to talk about.

## Chapter Two

The images floated slowly onto the paper: a woman knitting on the subway, a priest smoking behind a steeple, the reflection of a television in the eyes of two young men.

Trent hung the dripping photos like fresh laundry. He inspected them critically. He watched them dry in the red light of the darkroom. The developing solutions seeped like blood from the corners of sheets. He almost laughed at the thought -- the open wounds of the tortured artist. Trent was not a tortured artist. He wasn't bleak and sullen. He never wore all black. He simply loved photography -- deciding which moments deserved to be captured, choosing the split second when he should hit the pause button.

Torture was everything outside the darkroom. Beyond that door, the rest of the Photo Lab was waiting for Trent to sweep and file envelopes of vacation snapshots. Beyond that door was the real world, and that was pretty disappointing.

It was worth the free time in the darkroom, he told himself. After hours, no one cared how much time he spent back there. When the owner arrived in the morning, the money was counted, the safe was locked, and everything was neat and orderly and accounted for. Trent was a good worker and a good photographer. No one cared about the extra developing solution or how late the red lamps burned.

But a quarter above minimum wage made rent his only luxury, and wearing a nametag while working a cash register made his master's of fine arts degree useless. It was just another piece of paper, another loan to pay.

Trent changed the scene back to glaring reality with the flip of a fluorescent light switch. It always surprised him that photographers would choose such harsh, unnatural lighting. It clashed with the deep red glow his eyes wanted. The empty store was a sad landscape of machinery and film displays. It was too sterile and too generic. It could be

anywhere he didn't want to be and would never remember, a moment he wanted lost in time. It would never make a decent photograph.

Trent swept quickly, pushing piles of dirt toward the center of the room. Normally he paid more attention to detail. Tonight, however, the details were the last thing he wanted to focus on. It wasn't just the job or the apartment or the fact that his art would never support more than his aspirations. His part-time job that had helped him through grad school had turned into a full-time dead end. He was out of cash and almost out of credit. He was going nowhere fast. In fact, he was pretty sure he'd already arrived.

\* \* \* \* \*

The twisting hall to their apartment was wrapped in creaking stairs and covered in plaster dust. Hospital green and dingy white seemed phosphorescent where streetlights spilled through broken windows. This was where his money went. Living in the city wasn't cheap. Living on the noisy corner of two otherwise decent streets commanded an even heftier price tag.

Inside the clutter of the apartment, Trent blazed a trail to his room as quickly as he could. He avoided discarded half bags of chips and overflowing ashtrays, which were the only signs of his roommates. His own room was a refuge. Things were his own. There was nothing special about the room, but there was also nothing rotting on the floor.

A hard single bed was pressed against the wall. There were two piles of clothes, one obviously dirty and the other less obviously clean. Everywhere else, there were photographs. The walls were covered with whimsy and history. There was really nothing artistic about the arrangement. Pictures were tacked and strewn like thoughts and inspiration. This wasn't a gallery. It was a work in progress.

Trent took the latest photos from his bag. He could still smell the freshly dried solution on them -- like vermouth and oily tires. He rearranged and shifted and covered up old memories and ideas. He pinned a streaked image of city lights next to his mother hanging clothes in front of a black-and-white sunset. It was one of those unique moments that Trent wanted to last.

It was hard to tell from the picture that the house he grew up in was just another cookie-cutter image in the town's developmental growth spurt, that there were houses just out of view on either side. No one would ever know that his mother hung laundry exactly once a year when all the bedspreads were washed for spring cleaning. It could have been any time in the past two hundred years, anywhere in America. But it was his backyard and his home.

Trent remembered throwing footballs and playing tag where she had strung up the makeshift line. All the typical events of his childhood were rooted in that scene. Mud puddles gathered right there at the stoop. And there wasn't quite enough room for batting practice in the tiny yard.

Trent had discovered that when he was thirteen and broke Mr. Bartlett's bathroom window. There was a picture of it somewhere -- a furious man replacing a window. Trent had snapped it, hidden behind his mother's drapes, and immediately filed the painful memory away in a shoebox.

Trent had never liked Mr. Bartlett. He could be a raging ass. He'd stomped around in his work boots and fought with his fiancée every once in a while. He wasn't really a bad guy, but he was just one of those men in their early twenties with a full-time job and life and scowl that made you call them mister despite their actual age. Mr. Bartlett had a subterranean anger you didn't want to erupt. And a broken window was an ideal fault line. Trent knew it the moment it happened.

He looked up at the perfect circle and the spider-web veins surrounding it, and he just stood there, waiting for the explosion. Trent could envision Mr. Bartlett napping on the couch in dirty clothes. He could imagine how the shattering disturbed his sleep and the hum of the racing cars that turned fast circles on his television.

"What the hell?" The front door burst open.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bartlett." Trent didn't have words. "It was an accident. I'll pay for it, promise."

"Damn right you will!" Mr. Bartlett stared up the window, his hands on his hips, as if he were angry with the sky. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"Sorry." Trent thought about throwing the ball into the air, pitching to himself. He hardly ever hit it. He hadn't expected to make contact, so he'd swung as hard as he could. The crack of the bat against the ball had been almost as surprising as the pop and shatter of glass. "I guess I'm just not that good at baseball."

"Yeah, I guess not, you stupid fucking fairy!"

Trent walked up the porch steps and went into his house without a word. He was too hurt to speak, to breathe, to cry. He felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach. In truth, he would have preferred a fist to those hateful words.

He left Mr. Bartlett there in his boots, fuming. Trent wondered if the man's cruelty and glaring could melt glass and repair the damage. He couldn't think of any other reason to stand alone on the lawn and contemplate sharp edges and poor athletes.

That evening, after he watched Mr. Bartlett go back to work from behind the protection of his own unbroken window, Trent had walked across the front lawn. He put cash in an envelope, and he placed it in the mailbox next door. He wrote "Bartlett" across the front in capital letters. No note. No explanation. He didn't say sorry again.

It was the first time Trent remembered anyone using homosexuality as a curse. It was the first time someone had ever used it against him. He knew people must do it reflexively all the time. It rolled off the tongue the way people took the Lord's name in vain without ever thinking of the Ten Commandments. He wondered how insulting it would be if you

yelled, “Jesus Christ,” in front of the Messiah. Maybe Jesus wouldn’t understand the expletive, thinking you were simply calling him to dinner.

Trent wondered if it hurt him more than anyone else because it was true. Honestly, before that day, he had never given his sexual orientation much thought. It was there, but it hadn’t become an issue yet. He ignored it like a birthmark no one ever saw.

In the years that followed, Trent heard many choice words about queers and fags and fairies. Sometimes they were directed at him out of hate or humor. Sometimes they were dropped into sentences for emphasis or style or some awkward joke.

Over the years, he was forced to consider his sexuality as well. He had to recognize it for what it was. He realized it wasn’t ugly to everyone. Most importantly, he realized it wasn’t ugly to him. A birthmark could be a beauty spot, but not if he was ashamed of it and kept it hidden.

Later, he had even heard those same slurs used in friendship, like codenames passed back and forth between members in secret clubs. However, that secrecy was displayed under disco balls; it was announced over loudspeakers with a thumping beat. The words couldn’t hurt if you claimed them for yourself. They were just names, just truth. They weren’t sticks and stones.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Hey, homo,” Nathan said. “How’s it hanging?” While Trent was locked in his room, his roommates had materialized on the filthy couch.

“Nice, Nate.” Trent knew Nathan hated being called by a nickname. He would have preferred it if he had been named Nathaniel or something even longer, like the title of a European royal.

“We call them ‘Michael and Robert,’ not ‘Mike and Bob,’” Nathan repeated his classic example yet again. “This isn’t a sports bar. Homos deserve extra syllables.”

“Yeah, didn’t anybody ever give you the *Gay Handbook*?” Rick -- not Richard -- finished the joke like the obedient token hetero he was.

“I must have lost my copy.” Trent settled into a chair. He was not interested in becoming reacquainted with the bylaws of queerness that existed solely in Nathan’s head -- the *Gay Handbook*. Trent glanced at the muted rerun on the TV. He tried to get comfortable for his Friday night.

“Well, girl, you need you some learning.” Nathan was quintessential, or at least he tried to be. Trent assumed that phrase was Nathan’s best Hispanic drag queen. He seemed to revel in stereotype. He actually mentioned becoming a hairdresser -- or a “stylist,” as he preferred to call it. But for now he seemed content fulfilling another cliché. He was a waiter.

Trent laughed. Rick leaned forward on the couch and took a hit from his bong. Obviously, he agreed.



"Yeah, girl." Rick giggled in that tight, breathless way pot smokers have when they're concentrating on holding the cloud in their lungs. Rick was like a piece of dorm furniture Trent had acquired in college. Old and comfortable and just there. Trent didn't have the heart to throw it out. Also, this particular piece of furniture helped pay rent. Gay, straight, employed, drug dealer, Rick didn't give a shit one way or the other. He kept the freshmen in weed and kept himself on the couch with stringy hair, a dirty tie-dye T-shirt, and a bag of nachos.

"I am *so* serious," Nathan said. "You should come out with me tonight."

It was no surprise that Nathan was on his way out. He lived from club to club the way others went from Monday to Tuesday.

"Can't afford it, Nate." Trent wasn't in the mood tonight. He stared ahead at some child actress who was old enough to be his mother now.

"What's up your ass, sister?" Nathan pursed his lips and ruffled his bleach-blond bangs. "Your sweet little bod could afford anything, if you weren't such a prude. You and your rock-star hair, all black and shiny with perfect bedhead. And your I-don't-give-a-damn, Don Johnson five-o'clock shadow. You know how much people'd pay for that shit?"

"I'm not a hooker." Trent didn't even let his eyes stray from whatever it was he was watching.

"*Please*. I would give my left eye for your tight little figure. Hell, I'd give both eyes if I could have your baby blues."

Nathan patted his small paunch and smoothed his tight black tee across his flat chest. Nathan may have been a big girl, but he wasn't the pretty one. His skin was lightly pocked here and there, and that new blond certainly didn't match his pasty complexion. "It's in the *Gay Handbook*. If you got the goods, you gotta sell 'em. Anyway, it's not like you're using them."

"Hey," Trent snapped. He shot Nathan a disapproving glare.

"God, when was the last time you got laid? Pretty soon, *you're* gonna be paying for it. If you're not gonna find a rich husband, you might as well profit from your assets." He managed to stress the "ass" syllable just too much. "Use it or lose it, sweetheart -- rule number one in the *Handbook*."

"Fuck the *Gay Handbook*. I am not selling myself."

Rick broke his stoned silence. "We all sell ourselves one way or the other, buddy," he said. He took another bong hit. "And it sure as hell don't pay minimum wage."

"That's a pretty liberal interpretation of the law, Mr. Dealer," Trent said. He could hear himself getting bitchy. Nathan must have rubbed off on him, or rubbed him the wrong way.

"I thought all artists interpreted, darling," Nathan shot back. He wasn't giving up tonight. Trent had nicknamed him and insulted the *Gay Handbook*. This was war.

“Okay, you win. Hell, I need a drink now anyway. But just drinks, not a new career path.”

“Woo-hoo!” Nathan gave a little cheer and clapped his hands. The basketball team had really missed out not having him on the sidelines.

“You go, girl,” Rick said sleepily. He settled back into the couch and his stupor and his evening.

Trent dug out something dark from the bottom of his clean-ish pile of clothes. It was tight enough that the wrinkles pulled flat and smooth across his wide chest and pinched a little around his biceps. Nathan was right -- he had a nice body. Trent almost felt guilty for the lack of effort it took. He felt worse for the lack of use it got. Not that he wanted to peddle it on the street, but the boyfriend front looked nearly as bleak as the job front lately.

He looked up at his walls, at all those black-and-white bits of inspiration. He watched as they fluttered in the wake of the air vent. There really should have been an easier way. He'd be eating canned soup for a week to make up for tonight's expense. This had to be worth it. So he buttoned his pants and checked his ass one last time in the mirror. He couldn't ignore all the rules in the *Handbook*.

Even though Trent was twenty-seven, they checked his ID at the door. Then they waved Nathan's familiar, glittered face through without a thought.

Trent looked around at the crowd and wondered if this had been the right decision. Thirty bucks would have bought a lot of ramen noodles. But it never could have paid for enough beauty products to compete with the sea of hairspray and cologne that he faced inside. Everyone was preened and pretty, or trying hard to pass something bottled for beauty. But they were having fun. They were a hundred Nathans, all working it to the max. And if no one else noticed, at least they were entertaining themselves.

The familiar beat of pop and dance surged through speakers. Lights spun rainbows and dizzying dots across the floor. Trent caught his breath, and suddenly he felt a sense of comfort wash over him that a pot of mac and cheese couldn't have given him. He felt belonging. This hole in the wall led to a sanctuary. This dark cave was a safe haven and a party for him and Nathan and every bleach-blond boy and leather daddy in the city.

This is what he had been missing out in the 'burbs at his mother's, where he had been alone and confused, where some asshole neighbor like Bartlett could injure him with words. Out there, he'd had to hide in the open. But here, his kind ruled. They were like explorers, staking out new territory in an existing city.

“What's it gonna be, sailor?” Nathan spoke over the music as he stepped up to the bar, sucked in his gut, and checked himself out in the mirror.

“Beer.”

“Two shots of tequila, Doug.” Nathan winked at Trent in the mirror.

One. Two. Three. Their arms shot up, and the drinks poured back. Trent felt the warmth roll over in his stomach. He felt a friendly hand graze the back of his jeans as its owner passed by. He remembered that he'd skipped dinner.

Suddenly, they had more friends. He had more drinks. The crowd grew and squeezed together. Liquor mingled in his belly. It danced and jostled along with them. Trent couldn't remember anyone's name, but they all moved together on the dance floor; they all tossed back drinks and tossed back their heads to laugh silently as their sound was lost in the music.

He laughed with them at nothing. He moved his feet, his arms. He felt liquid slosh golden in the hollow of his stomach. Men teased him to take off his shirt. He smiled instead. He felt hot and dizzy, and it all felt wonderful.

The night grew thick, like his sight through the haze of sweet, scented sweat. Nathan and his friends came and went, leaving, returning, bringing back drinks or boys or both. Trent could no longer tell if they were drifting in and out of the scene or just his vision. Every dance step started to feel like an effort, like a stumble. He kept rescuing himself from gravity.

Trent excused himself to nobody and left the floor. It had been a long time since he had been this drunk, or been drunk at all. He found a bench. But when he stopped, the room swam, his feet prickled with movement. He was drunk, not tired. He needed to walk, and he needed some air.

So Trent made his way to the door with as much poise as he could muster. He made his way into the night. The air felt so much cooler out there. The humidity of clustered bodies had dropped, as if a weather front had suddenly blown through the dark streets. The breeze felt refreshing, but it also felt a bit too real. It washed over Trent and reminded him of morning. It didn't clear his head; it cluttered it with everything that waited for him in daylight: the headache, the Photo Lab, his emaciated checking account, a couple cans of soup, student loans, his life.

Trent turned away from the main street and the line of cabs that waited there for dancers to slur addresses and intersections at their drivers. He worked his way down the block instinctively, away from the lights and toward the river.

There were answers out there somewhere. There were possibilities in life, and maybe there were a few right there in the darkness. He stepped onto the path that ran along the river. A stranger's head circled to follow his movement. Trent turned and smiled.

"I like watching you walk," the man said. He sounded fifty, probably married.

"Watch all you want. That much's free."

He turned his fake smile forward and kept walking.

## Chapter Three

Dan took a deep breath of the cool night air. He had done his part. He had cleaned himself up and taken himself out. He had paid five bucks a beer and watched the pretty boys dance. He had smiled politely and excused himself when the tired old men in leather started getting friendly.

This was the way it always was. Dan tried not to be bitter. Actually, it was refreshing to watch youth and beauty throw themselves into the party, the music, the celebration of themselves. He was a bit envious of the honesty they had so early. They didn't know what they wanted any more than anyone their age, but they knew who they were.

Dan walked along the river slowly. He tried not to think about how different his life would have been if he'd been up front with himself back then. Where would honesty have taken him ten years ago? Where would he have ended up? He probably wouldn't have his business or his house or the confidence and strength he treasured above everything else. He had earned all this, and he had paid the price. It was a trade-off.

Dan also tried not to think about what went on down here by the river. He told himself he was just getting a breath of fresh air, clearing his head before the drive back to Glen Mills. He ignored the sounds in the bushes and the eyes in the dark. He tried not to look at the men who passed a little too close and a little too slowly. It was hard to avoid eye contact. Hard not to return glances out of politeness or reflex or curiosity. He just kept walking, waiting to see where this path would take him.

He saw the boys for sale. He saw the men with their hands on their wallets. He watched the ones in between, standing in shadows, leaning against trees. He reminded himself that he was just getting some air. It was not his scene, his habit, his idea of a good time. This was not him.

Dan settled onto a park bench covered in sweethearts' initials and watched the moonlight glinting along the river. It was the only real light. In the distance, the city gleamed, but no illumination fell on these dark pathways.

Dan saw shapes approaching against the backdrop of the city. They were wobbling silhouettes. As they came closer, he could see features revealed in moonlight. The figure in front was a young man, somewhere near twenty-five and even closer to falling-down drunk. Dark bangs hung in his face, and creamy white arms flew out to maintain balance every few steps. Directly behind him, an older man followed.

As they passed, Dan reflexively grabbed the younger one's wrist.

"Matt, I've been looking everywhere for you." Dan eased the slumping body onto the bench beside him.

The older man passed, but he looked back skeptically. He didn't believe Dan's trick. But he didn't know what he could do about it. The finders-keepers rule didn't seem to apply here. He may have seen the kid first, but he didn't own him. He hadn't even made a down payment yet.

"I thought I told you to meet me out front," Dan said loudly. He was wondering how long he could keep this up. His story wasn't very convincing.

"I don't remember that," the younger one slurred. It sounded genuine. Dan wondered how many other things this guy would forget by the morning.

"My name's not Matt," Trent said. He wiped his bangs from his eyes and tried to clear his head with a few cool breaths.

Trent looked at the man. He was handsome, rugged, and wide. Dark hair and tan skin were offset by soft eyes the color of fresh rainwater. He looked young, but he also looked like someone who had worked hard all his life. The clashing elements weren't unattractive. But Trent didn't let the gentle expression around the man's mouth fool him. It wasn't quite a smile. He wasn't going to mistake desire for kindness. He wasn't going to let this guy keep playing his rescue game just because he was good-looking.

Trent didn't need to be rescued. This was no knight in shining armor. This was just another man along the river, waiting to see how much he could get for nothing.

"Thanks," Trent said. He squeezed as much bitter sarcasm as he could between his words. "I think I can take care of myself."

"I'm sure you can."

Dan didn't know how these things went. He wasn't sure he wanted to find out. But he'd gotten this far. Here he was, in the middle of the night, sitting on a park bench with a prostitute. Granted, this was a very cute and very drunk prostitute, but that didn't change the rules of the game any. And Dan didn't know the rules. He was just looking, just curious.

Dan wasn't sure what had made him reach out. It could have just been his protective nature. Or it could have been the way this kid's dark hair kept falling in his eyes. Or the way

those eyes were half-shut with drink or something that approximated sexy sleepiness. Or how incredibly white his skin glowed in the moonlight, his neck curving, smooth like marble, toward his collarbone and then disappeared beneath his shirt.

It could have been any of these things. But Dan decided it was more. No matter how stable or successful he was, there would always be something missing. No matter how many fat librarians and blond hairdressers his customers introduced him to, he was never going to be stirred the way he was sitting here, waiting to pay for sex.

He hated himself for the honesty, and he desperately wanted to hate this boy. This was what it had come to.

Dan reached over and touched a T-shirt-covered shoulder. He felt the immediate tension under his fingers, but neither of them pulled away. It was pretty much what Dan expected -- reluctant cooperation. It was a service that was being provided, after all. If this young thing wanted it, it wouldn't cost money.

Dan let his thumb stray from the shirt and touch the smooth whiteness of skin along that neck. He stroked the delicate curve lightly, like testing fabric before buying a shirt.

"You want me to get you a cab?" Dan asked, opening the bidding with kindness.

"I don't really feel like going home." It didn't sound true. It sounded as if he was speaking through clenched teeth.

"You could come to my place," Dan offered. He almost qualified the possibility with "if you want," but he knew it didn't matter. What this one wanted was in Dan's wallet.

"I could," Trent answered. "But nothing's for free."

"I know."

As they walked to the parking lot, Trent wondered if this was how it always went. He wondered if he had done it right, or if it even mattered. This guy seemed to know the ropes. Trent wondered how often this man came here. He wondered how many others had followed him to his pickup. He watched the man lead the way, his broad shoulders and confident strut several feet ahead, giving Trent the unwanted possibility of escape.

*It's only one night, he thought. It doesn't matter.* Nothing he hadn't done free, as Nathan said. He'd never admit it, but maybe Nathan had been right. Maybe this was the only way out. There was no harm in trying. At least Trent hoped there wasn't. He bit his lip and walked on. He had made his decision. At least he was shit-faced drunk. At least this man was handsome and solid, with an ass that bobbed pleasantly in front of Trent as they walked.

Trent hopped into the truck and settled into the cool seat. Hell, if this guy wasn't such a scumbag, the night might actually be fun. But the entire situation rubbed Trent the wrong way. It was just sex. Trent had no problem with that. But somehow the money tainted his libido. It turned his stomach and prickled his skin. It wasn't just sex. It was something less.

"What's your name again?" Dan asked.

"Trent."

Suddenly everything made sense. Actually, it got unbelievably complicated. Dan remembered the only other time he had met someone with that name. He glanced away from the road to confirm his suspicion. Looking at Trent, Dan subtracted ten years or so, and he was speechless with recognition.

Dan remembered all the times he had seen that beautiful face that was now being revealed all too harshly in the flashing lights of passing cars.

Trent was the kid next door. He had spent his adolescence less than twenty feet from the house Dan rented. He imagined Trent in his early teens, listening to every fight Dan and his fiancée had used to pass their time together. He imagined himself back then, dragging home with his boots untied, exhausted from days under cars. He must have looked ancient in his early twenties. No wonder the kid had always called him Mr. Bartlett.

After Rodney, Dan had struggled to rebuild his life like a very complicated foreign engine. There was never enough money or time or opportunity. Every morning, dawn seemed to come earlier. Every free moment was spent asleep on his couch, avoiding the hard mattress that he shared with a woman.

Dan had been exhausted and unhappy. By the time he was twenty-five, he had already arrived at the end of the road. He'd feel the same at fifty. He'd still be tired. She'd still be there to yell and get yelled at. The couch springs would be even less comfortable, and his back would hurt even more.

He had known exactly where his life was headed. It was miles and miles away, but the destination was clear. And the scenery was flat and empty. There didn't seem to be anywhere to turn off.

Dan looked at Trent across the short distance of the truck's cab. He wondered what Trent remembered from those days. He wondered if Trent's memories of that life were as painful as his own. How was it that he had ended up stumbling along the river? Did he imagine himself walking that same path for years to come?

Dan wondered if Trent would have the chance to turn off his destructive course as Dan had when Santom's kindness had given him a new direction in life. Most of all, Dan wondered if Trent remembered his neighbor from those dark days before he had found his way out of anger.

"I'm Dan," he said, trying to return to the present. "Trent," he added. "That's a unique name."

"Well, it's not 'Dan.' That's for sure," Trent snapped. His head lolled before he had the chance to catch himself. "You have a last name? No, don't tell me -- Smith, right?"

Dan hesitated. It wasn't Trent's bitterness. It was the memory of "Mr. Bartlett" fuming in his mind. Dan reassured himself that most men in his position didn't tell the whole truth. Clients pay the bills; they don't supply information.

“Santom,” he lied. Using the garage’s name might not have been the smartest move, but it was the only one that came to mind.

“Well, isn’t that a *unique* name,” Trent mocked halfheartedly. His attitude was the only thing keeping him awake.

There was no more small talk on the drive home. Trent’s nervous drunkenness seemed to throw off his sense of direction as they followed the back roads into Glen Mills. He didn’t notice, and Dan just let the miles to his house pass slowly in silence. When he turned off the engine, the night went dead. The slamming of his door echoed across the front lawn.

Only one night, Trent thought again as he followed Dan across the green grass, up the path to his big house. Things could be worse.

Inside, everything seemed huge and empty. The contrast between the open space in the suburbs and the cramped corridors of city apartments made Trent dizzy. Of course, it could have been the vodka or the tequila or his nerves. But his head swam as he looked around in half darkness at shadows streaked across bare walls and high ceilings. No curtains or pictures. Not a photograph in sight. The house of an immaculate bachelor. Hollow.

A light came on, and he saw Dan framed in a doorway. If Trent didn’t know better, he could definitely let his attraction forget the business at hand. There was a different kind of dizziness that coursed through his head and chest when he looked at Dan’s square shoulders filling the doorframe. There was something about the way he stood with one foot resting on its toes. It was more about being comfortable and confident than the way it caused the muscles of his thigh to test the fabric of his jeans.

When Trent looked up at Dan’s face, he found a slight smile. Dan had caught Trent looking, and he was returning the favor. The lines around his pale blue eyes were fine and flattering, more from sun and work than age. They made his smile deeper.

“You don’t have to stand in the hall all night,” Dan said, breaking the silence.

Trent put on the most sarcastic expression he could muster and followed him into the light. Trent had to remind himself: this was a deal, a job, an unpleasant task to be completed.

Dan offered him water. Trent refused. He knew he probably needed the hydration, but the last thing he wanted was more liquid sloshing inside him. The mere thought turned his stomach. A wave of nausea rose through his chest and into his head. Things were swimming. At this point, it was difficult to distinguish drunk from tired. There might have been a little nervousness floating around in there as well.

Dan’s hand passed lightly across his back. Trent felt himself sway and nearly lean into the man’s supportive touch. At the same time, he felt scared repulsion at what he was allowing himself to do. He stood up straight. Dan’s hand was rough with work, and his warm fingers seemed to span both Trent’s shoulder blades. Tension and excitement bundled together in the pit of Trent’s stomach. Emotion and confusion bobbed around in all the booze.



If a word had been spoken, Trent was sure he would have run. He would have bolted into the night and the suburban streets. But neither of them said a thing. Dan's hand found the small of Trent's back, rested there softly. Trent let his drunken weight press into the man's palm. He let Dan lead him slowly up the stairs.

The bedroom was pitch black. But the light from the hall crept just far enough through the doorway to hint at the shape of the bed. It loomed silent and foreboding. Trent thought of monsters under beds and bogeymen in closets. Childhood fears. Then he thought of sweaty dollar bills crumpled on nightstands. He thought of charming strangers with big smiles and even bigger fists.

Dan's hand was almost delicate as it eased Trent into the darkness and the plush comforter. Trent felt his heartbeat quicken in the softness. He felt the stir of Dan's breath as he leaned close to shift a pillow. It was as soft and gentle as his hand had been.

Trent's muscles tightened reflexively with apprehension. His back arched a little closer; he inhaled the scent of this man in the dark. He couldn't quite see Dan's features. The room was black, but it was spinning around the pivot of Trent's head. His vision was jumpy and drunk. He felt the weight of Dan's arm. He felt thick fingers loosen his laces and remove his shoes.

The whirling darkness and sensation melded into shadow. His lids closed to shut out its motion. Trent could no longer distinguish between the foreign feelings outside himself and the slow, sickening pull of sleep as the world continued to turn.

Dan looked down at Trent there in his bed, clutching the comforter protectively. Trent was very drunk, and he was exhausted. But Dan recognized him as that same boy who used to live next door. He had certainly grown into a beautiful man.

Dan smiled to himself in the darkness. He was glad he didn't have to make this decision tonight. Just like the old days, Dan thought. Trent was twenty feet away, and Dan fell asleep on the couch.

## Chapter Four

Sunlight found the spaces between the blinds. It pierced the protective darkness and burned its presence into Trent's eyelids like a brand. He was angry at himself before he was even half awake. He couldn't quite remember what he had done, but the weight of his headache alone was indication of some severe wrongdoing.

He watched the painful pulse of blood throb through his sunlit lids. His world was red and excruciating. He hated morning and sunshine and happy people everywhere. He hated himself for whatever the hell he had done to himself.

Trent rolled over. It was a monumental effort, but he couldn't stand the sun's glaring spotlight illuminating his mistakes. So without opening his eyes to this evil morning, he rolled right away from the window.

Sunlight hit him full force. It slapped him in the face with the open palm of reality. The truth easily outdid his headache. There was no window on the right side of Trent's bed, but that was not where he'd woken up. Trent opened his eyes. Nausea and nerves chilled his blood under the down comforter.

The room was bright and white and clean and glowing unpleasantly. The corners of the room seemed to be held down by dark, heavy furniture: a bureau, a nightstand, a dresser, even an armoire. They were big, masculine pieces, simple and solid.

Trent heard a door shut somewhere inside the house. He reminded himself that strange surroundings usually came with strangers. Suddenly his breath caught in frightened anticipation. Cold sweat jumped to his skin's surface. He listened for footsteps in the hall, but he couldn't hear anything. He closed his eyes and counted to ten. Then he opened them quickly, afraid someone would be standing over him. Nothing.

Trent remembered the previous night in pieces. He remembered drinks and dancing and the way the night air swam around him as he walked. He remembered the man, or men.

He remembered the mistake. But details escaped him. There was a long ride in a truck with someone he couldn't quite like. The name Santom rang in his head like a distant bell, like a memory that was part of his headache. He remembered rugged features and desire mingled with disgust. Like mixed liquors, the two flavors didn't combine well. They sloshed and collided and made him even more confused.

But all evidence pointed to the obvious. He had finally drowned himself in enough booze to jump into the inevitable. He had taken the plunge.

Trent snapped his head toward the nightstand. His headache made him pay the price, but he was rewarded by its empty surface. There were no crumpled bills lying there. Then out of the corner of his eye he caught the tips of his shoes, resting on white carpet. He lifted the covers quickly over his head, and he was immediately hit in the face with the stench of smoke and beer and everything that had seemed like a good idea the night before.

Somehow during the night, everything had turned sour and repulsive. Trent smelled himself, and he reeked of club gone wrong. *This is what club trash smells like*, he thought.

But for a moment he was almost glad to smell it, to be nauseated by his own filth. Every rancid shred of clothing was clinging to him like sweat. Every button was in place. He even had his socks on.

Well, at least he'd had the good sense to stop or pass out before he had sealed the deal. Relief rose within his nervousness and self-loathing. He breathed a painful sigh and let the covers fall back into place. The fluttering comforter blew the scent of last night and Trent's own stale breath over him like an ominous wind.

And outside the covers, there was Dan, standing cautiously inside the door. He would have looked polite and inquiring, but the entire scene was distracted by his outfit. He was wearing a towel.

"Sorry," Dan said, dripping and leaving dark footprints on the light carpet as he approached. "I just thought you might need these."

He held out a handful of aspirin. He'd even had the forethought to include a few extra tablets. It may have been more than the recommended dosage, but Trent's alcohol intake wasn't exactly what the doctor prescribed either.

"Thanks," Trent replied. His manners felt almost as out of place as he did.

Trent stole another look at Dan as he accepted the pills. Did this guy really need to pick up tricks along the river? Trent couldn't take his eyes off the wet torso above him. Dan set a glass of water on the nightstand, and droplets rolled down the curve of his shoulder into the crease where tricep met bicep. As he turned back, Trent could see the path of water from the hollow of Dan's throat through a swatch of chest hair between square muscles and then straight down the dark line that blazed the middle of his hard, flat stomach. Trent saw where the line ended and the water stopped at the moist knot of the towel. He wished he could see a little further. He wondered how much wetter and darker it was beneath that soggy waistline.

Trent had the sudden urge to retrace the water's path with his tongue, to lap the remaining moisture from navel to throat. He couldn't help imagining those wide shoulders above him, this man rubbing himself dry on Trent's own smooth skin.

Trent shook his aching head gently to clear the morning fog and fantasies. But the distraction was still standing right there in a towel. Trent reminded himself why he was here, what kind of man was standing above him. No matter what he looked like, this guy paid for sex. He'd fully intended to pay Trent for it.

Trent propped himself defiantly against the headboard and swallowed aspirin. Cold water coursed through him like a refreshing chill. He swore he could feel the icy liquid pumping through his veins. Hydration did more good than medication ever could.

"Thanks," he repeated. But now the harshness from last night had seeped back into his speech, as if the aspirin's bitterness had stuck in his throat.

Dan practically forgot he was standing there half-naked. The remnants of his shower clung to him coolly. His skin shivered slightly, and his nipples drew tight against his chest. But the warmth under his towel kept him from noticing, and he doubted the chill was really from the water at all. Dan was sure it had more to do with the sleepy-eyed man in his bed.

He watched Trent drink again thirstily, eyes closed, head tilted back. Dan watched the throat move with each gulp, Adam's apple bobbing smoothly between dark stubble and porcelain white. Trent's rumpled shirt fit even better this morning. The wrinkles tugged hems and sleeves upward, revealing glimpses of hard body and smooth skin. Trent had all the right pieces in all the right places. He had the flowing, firm curves of young muscle draped on delicate bones. His features were just sharp enough to give him an edge without detracting from his classically handsome face. Someone would want to paint those cheekbones, Dan thought. A mechanic, however, just wanted to run his hands over that body, admiring the angles and lines like a new sports car that was modeled on a classic automobile.

Anyone who looked this beautiful first thing in the morning with a hangover was dangerous. This kid must make a killing along that river, Dan thought. His admiration dipped as he reminded himself of the circumstances and reality of their situation. He couldn't let this happen. He couldn't let this gorgeous young man treat himself that way. He knew he couldn't change Trent's life, but he didn't have to contribute to his degradation.

It really was a waste. There must be more to Trent than those blue eyes and tight ass. Dan's body surged at the thought. His reaction to Trent could have easily caused his towel to pop open. It could cause him to lose his resolve. Dan couldn't trust himself this close to something so desirable.

"Would you like more water?" Dan reached for the empty glass.

Their hands met around the glass, heating its surface from either side. Trent didn't let go. He let their fingers linger there, touching, circling a glass of air. Dan's question went unanswered.

It was impossible to tell who pulled or pounced first. The glass tumbled safely and silently to the carpeted floor. Suddenly, Dan was on the bed, on top of the comforter. His mouth covered Trent's with warmth and desire. The kiss was eager but deep, pacing its hunger with savoring.

Trent could feel the heat and wetness of Dan's chest soaking through his own shirt. He struggled out of the tight tee, pushing closer and harder into their embrace with each tug of material, only splitting their kiss for a second as the cotton passed between their lips.

Dan plastered himself against the soft, dry skin. That first moment of flesh on flesh seemed charged and intensified with the contrast of wet and dry, desire and denial. They shared the moisture, mingling its warmth with the taste of each other and the passion that ignored hundreds of reasons they shouldn't be doing this.

Trent felt every drop of water, every wet, dark hair of Dan's chest clinging to him, every breath that pressed muscles and ribs against each other. Trent relished the sheer weight of this solid man on top of him. The sensation outweighed the pressure between his temples. His entire body ached with pleasure and craving.

Trent sampled the cavernous kiss with his tongue. He scraped his lips along stubble and let the small prickles of pain shoot through him. He opened his eyes. He couldn't deny himself the sight of shoulders and the twist of tendons as Dan's arms encircled him. Trent reached around that breadth and found the hollow of upper back between sharp blades of bone. A few rogue droplets there had escaped the friction of their torsos. Trent smoothed the coolness down a valley of spine and muscle.

Trent's thoughts raced. This was exactly what he wasn't supposed to let himself do. This was exactly what Dan wanted, what he was paying for. Trent tried not to admit to himself that it was what he wanted as well. So he just pulled Dan closer, but it still wasn't close enough. He wrenched at the comforter between them. He tugged the towel at the base of Dan's spine. He didn't want fabric to come between their bodies. He wanted their pulses and their kiss to be their only sources of warmth.

Dan settled naked between Trent's legs and felt the roughness of jeans. Dan's own hardness challenged the material's as he pressed insistently against it. The smooth, exposed skin above the denim was the exact opposite. Dan marveled at the soft, powdery sensation of the young flesh under him. No matter how hard he leaned into the kiss, no matter how tightly Trent clung to him, every touch was like a feather -- a feather that had knocked him over completely.

Dan's hands wouldn't listen to the reason in his head. The rest of his body was having trouble complying with his morals, too. He couldn't remember such hunger. His desire was so strong, he felt as if he could devour this boy with one long kiss. He could grind him into the mattress with the need to be closer, to touch more.

He calmed himself with a breath. It was useless. But he paused to admire this beauty, and he ached at the sight of it. His hand lifted Trent's bangs, parted the kiss with a soft touch.

His fingers traced the lines of that exquisite face. He brushed his lips across Trent's, and the sudden gentleness burned hot and slow, sent a confusing shiver through them as their bodies changed pace, changed temperature. Dan watched the pale tan nipple harden against the porcelain of Trent's chest. He ran his rough hand over that smooth stone and let his thumb brush the small, brown pebble. Trent shuddered. And Dan followed the same path with his mouth.

Trent arched into the hot kiss around his nipple. Dan let the warmth of his tongue relax the taut flesh, and he restored its hardness with the slightest nibble. He felt Trent's breath before he heard it. The firm chest lifted suddenly under Dan's mouth. Kissing downward, he explored the silky whiteness like a sand beach. He lapped at the pool of Trent's navel. He lingered and let his need grow from denial.

Trent's own heat pressed hard through jeans and buttons to prod Dan's breastbone. It was like a pang of hunger. When Dan felt he was on the verge of starvation, he attacked the button-fly with both hands and mouth. He peeled back the fabric and consumed the flavors of youth and man and desire. He slurped greedily at Trent's straight, hard penis, burrowing his nose into the soft patch of dark hair at its base. Dan's ravenous feasting was rewarded with a light hand on the back of his head. Trent's touch became braver with pleasure, and he fed himself to Dan, relieving their dual hungers.

Trent couldn't believe what he was watching or what he was doing. He felt his hand rise and fall, like the tide, on the back of Dan's head. He looked across the plain of his stomach and watched the man's mouth work furiously and expertly along his slick shaft. The sight of such a big, strong man bent over him and focused on him so fully, thrilled Trent more than he could understand.

It was taboo and electrifying. Like that first touch from a man. That first excruciating moment, secretive and forbidden. A completely unique sensation, this slow-long suction of want. It was the transfer of desire, need and pleasure passed back and forth, intensified by its passing, like static electricity.

Trent lost himself in that moment. He lost sight of all his determination to resist. He felt Dan's mouth and tongue. He felt the man's strong fist clench around the bottom of his erection. He felt fingers slide up softly, slipping along saliva and tripping the electric nerves along his swollen head. He felt as Dan reached around his thighs and clasped his buttocks. He felt Dan lifting his entire body into the depths of Dan's throat. Trent felt fingers and teeth and lips as one frantic caress. He felt the dense shape of Dan's rigidity pressed hotly against Trent's calf.

Dan dug the tips of his fingers into the flesh of Trent's ass, kneading that delicious resilience. The pressure became desperate and insistent. Suddenly Dan's strong forearms lifted and turned the man under him.

Trent's pulse quickened at the thought, and his mind raced with the possibility. He didn't have to go this far, he thought. Suck him off. Jerk him off. There were alternatives.

Trent didn't know what was expected in this situation. Who was calling the shots? Was this part of the price?

But there were no answers. This anxiety was like the remainder of his headache, the leftovers of his hangover. So he let the desire of the moment flood his mind and drown out his thoughts. This was more intoxicating than any cocktail.

He rolled over onto his stomach. He reached behind him for Dan's body, and it was already there. This position was so vulnerable and submissive. It was not one Trent often allowed, especially not with a stranger, not the first time, not a time that was being paid for. But he didn't respond to reason and rules. He simply responded to Dan's touch.

Dan managed to turn the awkward process of condom and a dollop of lube into a caress with slow fingers and a gentle touch. Then he lowered himself onto that smooth, white back. Trent stretched his arms above his head, under the pillow and along cool sheets. He offered himself to this man. And as Dan eased gradually inside him, Trent's entire body released a long, slow exhalation. It literally took his breath away.

Dan's arms wrapped around Trent's body, enveloping him entirely. He couldn't find enough places to touch. Dan moved slowly against the tight body under him. He rocked gently with their pulse. As their blood quickened and their breath came faster, so did the pace of his exquisite entry and exit, sliding into the warmth that he held so close.

Trent felt Dan's breath on his neck, and he turned his head on the pillow to kiss the mound of Dan's shoulder where the man covered him. Dan fit on him and in him perfectly. His weight and his motion were one strong embrace, from within and without simultaneously.

Dan felt the hollow of Trent's back, arching and wriggling to accentuate the hot friction. He felt the shield of Trent's stomach tighten like armor. When he heard the boy's throaty whimper, Dan knew he was close. Dan let Trent's pleasure intensify his own. He pushed further and firmer into that tense muscle. Every thrust was a breath, like inhaling and holding, like diving deeper.

Trent's fingers dug into Dan's biceps to hold something solid, to remind himself of reality as he felt the liquid heat rise below his waist. Trent felt his own body tense as he ascended the peak of this pleasure. He felt Dan's strength above and inside him, clenched like a fist and as sweet as the brush of fingertips.

Dan watched the dark hair at the base of Trent's neck, the angle of his face and jaw, the way his eyes remained closed, but fluttered beneath their lids. He held him tighter, squeezed him closer as he reached all the way into him, feeling the soft depths of this firm body. Dan reached his embrace lower, holding Trent's waist as he pushed harder and faster. He reached under them both, grasping the aching hardness of young flesh in his hand and echoing his motion from behind with his fingers in front.

Trent's entire body seized like a single muscle. It hefted the weight of ecstasy and held it for as long as it could.

Dan burrowed into the incredible pressure of Trent's clenched cheeks. The tight squeeze was more than he could take. He heard Trent's breath, released fast and sudden. Dan felt the abrupt shock shoot through the boy under him, down his spine to pulse electric through his pelvis, into Dan's hand.

Dan fell onto Trent's back in deep, undulating shudders. They rocked together for long, slow moments against each other's bodies and each other's climaxes.

Breath and muscle relaxed silently into sheets. Dan's fingers loosened warm and wet and trembling beneath them. He held Trent there under him. Their weight was sodden and exhausted. The moment lasted forever. But its end was sudden, as if it never happened.

The beauty of silence became intimidating. Neither one dared breathe. Without warning, it became the awkward fumbling of untangling limbs, the passing of a towel back and forth. It was the embarrassment of being naked and exposed and dirty.

Above all else, it was disappointment in themselves.

How in the world had he let himself do this? Dan asked himself as he searched for clothing, realizing that the soiled towel would no longer suffice. He stared into his darkened closet and pulled on pants stained with grease and work. He was the older, responsible one. This was not how he was supposed to show his resolve. He was supposed to show this poor boy that there were people out there who saw something more than affordable sex when they looked at his beautiful body.

But Dan had proven to be like all the others. He was no different. And there was no reason Trent would have expected more from him. After all, the kid was just doing his job.

Dan looked at the young man in his bed. He saw the way Trent covered himself with a sheet. There was no way he was really sleeping. Dan's mind reeled. There must be some way for him to make it up, make a difference. He couldn't just drive into town and drop Trent off at the river to repeat the same mistakes with some other weak-willed man.

Dan had wronged Trent more than the boy would ever guess. He was not just another dirty old man. He had hurt Trent in his youth, years before. Dan's guilt doubled. He felt responsible for it all. It wasn't just his fault that Trent had ended up naked, covered in his bedding. Dan could almost blame himself for Trent ending up along that river in the first place.

"You don't have to go back, you know," Dan said. He wasn't exactly sure what he meant. But he had to give the boy a chance. He had helped put Trent on this path. The least he could do was offer him a different route. "I could give you a job."

The voice made Trent jump under the sheets. His headache was gone, but nausea had returned full force. He wasn't sure it had anything to do with drinking. Trent couldn't believe himself. He was a prostitute. He had sealed the deal.

"I don't need a job," Trent lied.



“A real job. A better way,” Dan tried to explain without being insulting. He tried to find the words that would make sense to both of them. “No strings. Really.”

Dan faced the bed. All he could see was the back of Trent’s head. It didn’t move. He was motionless. He seemed to be emotionless as well.

“There aren’t any strings now,” Trent said. His voice was flat. The sheets didn’t even budge as he spoke. “It’s a done deal.”

“Fine.”

Dan felt helpless and enraged at his own weakness, his own failure. He took his wallet from a drawer and emptied its contents onto the nightstand. There must have been hundreds there. “Here. It’s not nearly enough. Nothing would be. You’re worth a lot more than that. I hope someday you realize it.”

Doors slammed, and silence returned. It was the loudest sound either of them had ever heard.

## Chapter Five

Trent looked around the empty room again. The sun was somewhere over the house now, and the indirect light wasn't nearly as glaring as it had been this morning. Trent guessed these windows faced east. That meant it was somewhere around noon. However, the newly discovered orientation didn't help him get his bearings. He didn't find any comfort in the mundane details.

What kind of man wanted an east-facing room? Trent wondered how early Dan awoke every morning, and his mere curiosity angered him. More importantly, what kind of man brought home prostitutes and then offered them jobs? Hadn't Trent served his purpose?

He rolled over and caught the scent of their sex. The memory thrilled and repulsed him at once. So what if it had been good, amazing? It didn't make it right. It didn't make Trent feel any better about himself. He remembered the touch of Dan's hands around him and his insistent tenderness. He remembered Dan's sounds, close to his ear, sighing honestly as he came.

Trent still felt relaxed and exhausted from the effort of pleasure. His body's tension had been absorbed some by the morning's experience. Now he was just left with guilt and the sensation of their heat seeping from the sheets. It made him cold.

Scattered bills covered the nightstand. The sight of them made Trent clench his teeth, tight with anger and hopelessness. It brought his senses back to reality for a moment. There were bills of every denomination as far as he could tell. Twenties and hundreds, tens and ones. He didn't think about how much was there. He didn't think about how much he needed that cash. All he would allow himself to think about was how he had earned it.

It had all happened too fast and too drunk. He had only walked along the river to clear his head, to walk on the wild side, tempt fate. It was like a dare he made for himself. He

never expected to follow through. And he hadn't, last night. Somehow he had ended up right here, in Dan's bed, but without Dan.

But this morning had been another story. How was he supposed to react when a handsome man in a towel walked up to him? Trent was just a man, after all. Historically, temptation had never been his gender's strong suit. However, Trent would have chosen Dan in a towel over Eve with an apple any day.

If he had met Dan inside the club or at the store or on a bus instead, he very well might have ended up right here in his bed. There was no denying that Trent found Dan attractive. In fact, the electric pulse that jumped through him when he looked at Dan was a little scary.

Dan was just the right guy in the wrong place at the right time. In retrospect, Trent was lucky to have had him there. Who knew where Trent could have ended up otherwise? But meeting him under those circumstances with these results and several hundred dollars on the nightstand made the very thought of attraction irrelevant. There were too many variables and questions and doubts. Considering it was not even an option.

Trent took a deep breath and stood up to dress. He was grateful for that last breath as he reached for his pants, because he was immediately reminded of the stale odor that had permeated last night's wardrobe. So he struggled into the filthy clothes as he breathed out of his mouth.

Trent felt a little silly stretching the tight club shirt over his chest in the daylight. But even the thought was ridiculous. What he was wearing was the last thing that mattered after what had just happened. He couldn't stand in this stranger's bedroom forever. He had to leave sooner or later, and his outfit for the dramatic exit hardly made a difference.

Whatever had happened here didn't really matter either, Trent told himself. He didn't have to feel great about it, but he couldn't change it. And the truth was, it couldn't change him. Nothing and no one except Trent himself could make him feel cheap.

Before he shut the door behind him, Trent turned and looked at the untouched money on the nightstand. For a moment, he almost had the self-respect to smile. But then he caught a whiff of himself as he stepped out into the hall and tried not to inhale while walking down the stairs.

Dan heard the steps on the stairs, but he didn't move. He stood shirtless in the kitchen, resting a glass of water against his chest and staring out the window. He wondered how many drawers the boy had gone through and what he'd discover missing later. It didn't matter, Dan told himself. He didn't keep anything valuable around the house anyway. Not that he really expected theft from Trent. But the real problem was, he had absolutely no idea what exactly to expect from him.

Dan rolled the cool glass across the hairs that sprouted along his breastbone and watched the tiny cars on the distant highway. They sped silently along, miles away. It was almost relaxing to know he was that far from the commotion. His house sat on a hill away from that side of town, the side of town where both he and Trent were raised.

He could look down and see the factory and the rows of identical houses. He remembered what it was like down there, and he wondered if Trent's memories were the same. Dan wanted to kick himself for what he'd done up there. He was pushing the kid down lower than where he'd started from. It was ridiculous for Dan to think he could save him. The best thing he could do was give him a good tip and wish him well. And that's exactly what he'd done.

But Dan couldn't help it. He knew that sometimes, against all odds, things worked out for the best. He really did believe that everyone deserved a second chance. He didn't want to know where he would have ended up without his. That's why he had such a soft spot for hard cases. Other spots, however, weren't quite so soft. And Trent certainly was a hard case, as the returning bulge in Dan's jeans could attest.

He couldn't explain to himself how this young man had caused him to lose control. Dan wasn't one to let his libido make decisions for him. There were plenty of pretty boys out there, and Dan never had the small amount of patience it took to bring them home. He reassured himself that he was not really a dirty old man. He tried to approximate the math from memory, and he was surprised when their ages came within ten years of one another. Not that it mattered. There was no reason for him to try to justify it. This relationship didn't have to be okay. There really was nothing okay about it. And after all, it wasn't a relationship at all, Dan reminded himself.

Dan had to admit that this young guy stirred something in him that he had been trying to repress for a long time. It wasn't just his dark looks and pale skin. It wasn't just the pain his beauty caused, or the pain the memory of Dan's cruelty brought on. It wasn't pity. And it wasn't just the way his body felt against Dan's, a feeling Dan hadn't experienced in a long time, one he could never remember being that intense.

Dan took a long gulp of water and tried to clear the taste of Trent from his mouth. He had to stop thinking like this. Sex was just sex. Dan was sure it was actually much less so Trent. It was a commodity, a bag of tricks, a trick of the trade. That's what Dan was to Trent, just another trick, just another handful of cash.

Dan tried to imagine all that pleasure as an oil change or a transmission overhaul. But how could that just be part of Trent's job? Dan couldn't erase the reality of Trent's shiver, the shy sound of his whimper. It wasn't the aggression and technique he expected from a professional. There was no show. Trent was so soft and genuine, the memory made Dan ache. A greedy part of him wanted to keep Trent for his own sake. Charity and good intentions only went so far.

But his intentions didn't matter. Dan had given it his best shot. Dan didn't have anything else to offer but a job and some good business sense. The garages were his life. Granted, they practically ran themselves at this point, but Dan knew he could never let that happen. He looked around his big house and marveled, not for the first time, how hard it was to fill.

Trent's steps echoed across the kitchen floor. Dan didn't need the sound; he could feel the approach from behind like a warm breeze. He felt Trent stop, pause, and look out the window with him. They looked down on the town together, at the silent cars and the familiar shapes of that place.

"Hey, this is Glen Mills. We're just a couple miles from where I grew up!" Trent exclaimed.

The familiar sight added comfort to the moment. Somehow the tension Trent had expected just wasn't there. Despite the situation, Dan had been nothing but kind to him. Despite Trent's confusion, maybe there was a lesson to learn from that kindness. Maybe something more than self-hatred could come from all this.

"Yeah," Dan agreed knowingly. He looked straight ahead and tried to pick out the house where Trent had spent his childhood. He tried to locate the nearly identical house beside it where he had wasted his twenties, but he couldn't tell them apart. "You could live here again, you know. For a while, until you get settled. Everyone deserves a second chance."

Dan regretted the words as he spoke them. Not because he didn't want it, but because he knew he shouldn't. *What kind of disaster are you trying to cause?* Dan asked himself silently.

But he left the offer hanging in the air, and they both looked out onto the scenery of their past without a sound. Dan wondered if Trent was trying to find the old houses, too. Silently, they considered their options as they watched the highway pass along the edge of the hometown they both shared.

Even if Trent didn't know it, he and Dan had the same roots. They'd come from the same place and fought the same battles. Their victories and losses might have been different, but Dan was determined to give them both the opportunity to repair their mistakes.

"So, what's this job?" Trent was too proud to accept explicitly, but this time the broken silence was a beautiful sound.

"You ever worked on cars before?" Dan asked.

"A mechanic?"

"That's right."

Dan felt Trent's hand lightly on his waist. He felt the boy's face rest gently against his back. Dan could see the reflection of blue eyes in the window, gazing out over the top of his shoulder.

"Santom. I knew I recognized the name. It's a garage, right?"

"Yeah, a garage." The reminder of his lie stabbed Dan in the gut. "A couple of them, actually."

Of course, Trent had never worked on cars. He hardly ever got the chance to drive one. He had no idea what went on under a hood or inside an engine. But for all he knew, he could end up being the best mechanic around. Maybe it was the day job that would subsidize his

photography. Maybe it was the solution he had gone looking for in the completely wrong direction last night. It had to be better than that night job, stumbling along the river, waiting to find someone new to hate just so he could hate himself more.

In one day, Trent had gone from being a photo clerk to a hooker to a mechanic. He was exhausted and confused. He yawned against Dan's shoulder blade, and the sound surprised him. They both laughed softly in the big, empty kitchen.

For the second time in twelve hours, Dan helped the younger man to his bed. He tucked the covers up around that beautiful face. But before he could pull his hand away and head for the couch, Trent reached out and grabbed his wrist. Dan looked down at the long white fingers around his arm. Beyond their hands, he spotted the pile of money untouched.

When Trent tugged at Dan, he found no resistance in the man's strong arm.

Their limbs found each other easily and wound into a complex embrace that felt simple and real. Despite their intentions, they ended up in bed together again, falling asleep in broad daylight in each other's arms, the way they should have earlier.

Their sleepy kiss was deep and slow. It was exhausted passion and inextinguishable desire. They were too tired to do anything about it, including denying it. So they didn't. They just held each other softly and drifted into a warm, afternoon slumber. Now they could rest easier.

Now they had a new direction. Somehow, after years of two very different lives, their paths had crossed again, and this time they had merged. They had decided to travel the road together, but they had no idea where they were headed.

## Chapter Six

The metallic clang of wrenches skittering across concrete had ceased making Dan's heart jump. Over the past few days, he had gotten quite accustomed to the various sounds of mistakes and Trent's mumbled, apologetic curses.

Such crashes would normally have Dan's blood boiling. But he reminded himself to be patient. Everyone needs time. Not everyone is a natural. Every time Dan approached the vehicle and saw Trent bent at the waist, hands on hips, peering at the mechanical mystery under the hood, he felt his blood boil for completely different reasons.

The young mechanic at Trent's side smiled goodheartedly. At first Dan had worried that it was his own blind infatuation that had made him think Trent was special. But everyone liked his energy and spark. All the guys slapped Trent on the back and laughed at his errors in a way that said everything was all right.

"How are things working out over here, fellas?"

"No prob, Dan," Mark answered immediately. He was short and stocky, too big for his own frame, but he could crawl under a car with the best of them. "Just showing Trent here how to check fluid levels."

"You're using a wrench to check fluids?"

"There are just so many caps and stuff under here." Trent looked genuinely confused. "I guess I just forgot I was holding it."

The three shared a good chuckle. Dan picked up the tool and tousled the back of Trent's hair in a way that could have been playful joking if he hadn't allowed his fingers to linger along the nape of Trent's neck for a moment. It was just long enough for distracted contemplation to wash over his face as he touched the soft skin.

Mark just smiled. The guys in the garage hadn't asked any questions or whispered any accusations when Dan marched Trent into the office one morning. They didn't stare at the

glances Trent and Dan shared. They never looked surprised when the two walked in together every morning and left together every night.

Dan had started Trent out in the garage closest to the house, on the edge of the city, with his most trusted employees. After all these years at Santom's Garage, they knew the boss pretty well. And even if Dan didn't drive a pink Cadillac to work, they knew what was going on under the boss's hood.

They also worked close enough to Glen Mills to know what was being whispered there. This was the garage where all the loyal folk from his early years came -- and some less loyal ones as well. These customers knew Dan and his past and every guttural lie that was whispered back home. But his employees knew the truth -- Dan may have been gay, but he wasn't a harassing boss.

So they didn't say a word about Trent. No matter what, the mechanics didn't comment on Dan's smile or the bounce in his step. They didn't even look twice when he whistled through the echoing garage bays. Maybe they didn't even notice. Or maybe everyone was just happy for him.

Dan had never thought that a single thing was missing from his life. But somehow he had surprised himself. Actually, Trent had surprised him.

The other surprising thing was that this twenty-seven-year-old didn't have a mechanical bone in his body. Maybe he was past the point of training. Maybe he was too soft or sweet or artistic to grasp the grinding of motors and the nuts and bolts that held it all together. There were just too many maybes and possibilities and things that could go wrong or go perfectly right.

"Why don't you just watch Mark until I get back," Dan suggested, his smile taking the edge off his instruction.

He headed outside, into the bright light and the sunny warmth of his pickup's cab. It was time to make the rounds, make sure the other garages were getting along in the shadow of his neglect. Most of all, it was time to take a break, give Trent some space, stop fawning around like a silly schoolboy.

On his way out, Dan tried to stomp authoritatively. But no matter how heavily his boots fell on the stained cement floor, he felt as if he were skipping. Halfway to the door, he let himself glance back quickly. Trent was watching him leave.

The truck pulled away a little too fast, and Trent could see the taillights fluttering into traffic. Trent watched Dan through the bright square of the open garage door like a cave dweller gazing out into the bright world. It was a warm and protective feeling, but it was also completely foreign.

He looked back at Mark and the tangle of steel and wire. After nearly a week, he still had no idea what anything in there did. He was fairly certain he could locate the dipstick to check the oil, but once or twice he'd checked the transmission fluid instead. The entire operation was filthy and complicated, intricate circuit boards hidden in soot and grease.



“Okay, I’ll just watch.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Mark said, wiping his hands across his coveralls. “You’ll pick it up in no time.”

“Sure,” Trent said, but he didn’t sound it.

“It’s easy, really. The sticks all have marks where the fluids should be. Just remember to wipe ’em clean first and stick ’em back in. Just a matter of tellin’ ’em apart. People could do it at home, really. If they wanted. I usually start with the oil and then move clockwise...”

Mark’s hands and words flew across the machinery effortlessly, mixing into a mysterious rhythm like a foreign language no matter how Trent tried to focus. Poor Mark. For him it must have been like explaining how to breathe. Because he did live and breathe this. He was a natural. Trent bet he hadn’t spent weeks learning where the dipstick was or how to hold on to a lug nut for more than five seconds.

Trent clasped his hands behind his back to reduce the risk of knocking or slamming or breaking anything. Every knuckle was skinned and mended with grease. And he always managed to have a smudge somewhere on his face. He couldn’t tell if he was smelling a greasy smear under his nose or just the saturation of oil and fumes that filled the garage. The scent smelled like something faraway to Trent, like the smoke from a factory’s stack. It wasn’t something that he could imagine breathing every day.

Automotive confusion wasn’t the only thing troubling Trent. These past few days had been so fast and surreal. Now, he couldn’t remember making this decision or what exactly the decision was.

He had been staying at Dan’s place, but he hadn’t moved in. At least, that’s what he was telling himself. And everyone else.

“So who is this guy?” Rick would ask in between reruns and bong hits.

“Fess up, sister,” Nathan insisted. “You done found yourself a daddy.”

“I haven’t *done* anything,” Trent would counter-insist.

“Speaking of daddies,” Rick suddenly remembered, “your mommy called.”

Shit. Trent wondered how long ago his mother had phoned and what his roommates had told her. He hadn’t been home much, and Rick’s memory was even less consistent than Trent’s residency.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Well, it’s nice to know you’re alive.”

“Sorry. I’ve been really busy.”

“So I hear. The boys tell me you’ve had a career change.” Shit! Trent’s mother mixed humor and truth so that it never quite sounded like guilt or criticism. Especially when he already knew he was guilty.

“So who is this guy?” she asked. “Only a man could make someone act crazy. Trust me. I know.”

“Oh, you’re not going to play the single-mother card again?”

“I’m not playing. A fact’s a fact. If you want to drop out of school or lose a job or get pregnant, it takes a man or a miracle. And those two things tend to be complete opposites.”

“Well, I’ve got my diploma, and I’m pretty sure I’m barren, so pregnancy would be a real miracle.” Laughter bought him a second or two. She wouldn’t be crushed that he’d phoned in his resignation to the Photo Lab, but Trent doubted she’d prefer the career path he’d taken along the river. “I’m thinking about becoming a mechanic.”

“Half the boys in Glen Mills became mechanics. All the ones that didn’t go work for the factory. You just never struck me as either half.” She would have believed prostitute sooner. “So is this man a mechanic?”

Busted. “Mom, don’t you want me to be happy?” Trent played his own trump card. “It’s not a big deal. Just a job.”

“It’s always a big deal. But I’m sure you’ll be just fine,” she said, ending on a positive note. “I love you, Trent.”

“Love you, too.”

He hadn’t lied to his mother, he told himself as he watched Mark pointing and poking under the hood. This was a job.

Dan had kept his word. He had given Trent a job and the extra bedroom. Trent just wasn’t making the best use of either. He couldn’t stand knowing Dan was just across the hall, his big chest rising and falling in slumber. The thought caused several responses in Trent’s body, but sleep wasn’t one of them. So the guest bed remained unused.

Regardless of sleeping arrangements, they were up at dawn and at the garage by seven. Dan was determined to give Trent a new career. Trent could see the patience in his furrowed brows and gentle smiles. It barely covered the look of desire beneath.

The manager of the Photo Lab had understood completely when his best clerk had quit without notice. But Trent couldn’t go back now. He did regret the loss of developing solution and long nights under the red of darkroom lights. But against the old saying, he had quit his day job, and he was determined he would never return to his “night job.”

And that was the other point of confusion. Trent hadn’t exactly made it clear to Dan that the river wasn’t really his previous place of employment. In an odd way, his pride wouldn’t let him admit that Dan had been the first, the only, the one who saved him from the riverway. Trent didn’t want to be rescued. He didn’t want to need rescuing.

But he also didn’t want Dan to wonder where he was if he returned to the city after work. Was Trent stumbling along the river again? Was he working overtime? So he stayed at Dan’s for many reasons. That was one thing he did want.

But Trent didn't really know the first thing about Dan or mechanics. He could get Dan's motor running without any problems. But the wires and caps and thingamabobs that Mark was explaining were another story. He had to shake himself back to attention. That must have been the clue to Mark that he was talking to himself.

"You're looking a little overwhelmed, buddy."

"Sorry, it's just a lot to think about," Trent explained. If Mark only knew. Trent wasn't even talking about the hodgepodge of machinery.

"Why don't you make a coffee run?" Mark suggested. "The other guys will be finishing up soon, and Dan should be right back."

"Great idea." Trent would have taken any excuse to stop staring at greasy metal. And he was glad to be able to do one thing right. He should be able to get coffee without too much of a disaster.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan shut off the radio. The song was too upbeat and young and optimistic. A few hours of traffic and bad news had changed his mood completely. He just wanted to listen to the roar of the truck's engine as he forced his way through rush hour. He wanted to detect some rattle or grinding flaw in the motor, anything he could fix. There were just too many things in his life that were out of his hands and rapidly flying out of control.

The situation at the other garages had not been good. The mechanics could get along just fine without him; that wasn't the problem. Actually, Dan was worried that *he* was the problem. It could very well be Dan himself who was hurting business.

Things were slow, too slow in too many locations. Calls weren't coming in. Regular maintenance wasn't being performed. Customers who normally pampered and indulged their cars with lube jobs and wheel alignments every thousand miles just weren't dropping by.

Dan had heard the rumors, and he was sure the gossip got much juicier when he left the room. He knew people talked. He knew people lied. He even knew that some people wouldn't agree with the truth. But he'd never thought they could hurt more than his pride. The fact that they were hurting his business was more than Dan ever expected -- more than he could stand.

If Rodney would cheat his own customers, what would he do to the competition and his ex-best friend? There was no stopping his lies now.

Dan slammed the steering wheel and honked his horn at someone who was going just too slow at just the wrong time. The thought angered him more than he wanted to admit. After all these years, Rodney was still capable of ruining his life.

All Rodney had to do was twist the facts and plant the seed of scandal. Gay Dan lived alone. He had his own business and money. He worked one-on-one with young guys every

day. They earned their living from him and looked up to him and answered to him and... It was all lies.

Or it had been all lies. But now there was Trent.

Trent would be proof positive of every dirty rumor Rodney could fabricate. And it was even worse than taking advantage of an employee. No one in his right mind would bring home a prostitute, have sex with him, pay him, and then invite him into his home and his business. No one but Dan. And then he had even lied to the prostitute about his identity. He could never explain the situation.

Right this minute, Dan was having a hard time explaining it to himself. So he cursed at a cabby and ran a red light. That didn't even make him feel better.

Dan knew what he had to do. He had learned his lesson about cutting his losses years ago. That was a truth that even Rodney couldn't deny. Dan had rebuilt his life before. He could do it again. He was going to have to relieve Trent of his duties, in and out of the garage.

\* \* \* \* \*

Trent's muscles strained and ached. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but he was beginning to regret the literal weight of his decision. Luggage straps dug into each shoulder and crossed his chest in a tight X. He couldn't determine if the overstuffed camera bag or his clothes weighed more. And he could barely balance the double-decker trays of coffee cups. He must have been a sight walking down the street.

When he'd gone for coffee, he'd nearly stepped in front of a bus. The realization could have been impending death and living for the moment, or it could have been much less dramatic. That bus stopped at the corner where he shared an apartment with Rick and Nathan.

Trent discovered he was only a handful of change and twenty minutes away from his room, his clothes, his camera. He was on the bus and settled into its midday emptiness before he realized what this meant. He had decided to move in with Dan.

"Seize the gay -- I mean, the day." Nathan snorted. He giggled at his own cleverness and handed Trent another borrowed shirt.

"Was that a typo in the *Gay Handbook*?" Rick laughed at himself. Everyone seemed to be happy about this situation.

Of course, Trent had left a few details out of his story. But his roommates hadn't supplied the expected resistance and pessimism that Trent needed to question his impulse.

Maybe it wasn't such a big deal after all, Trent thought. Nathan ran out to the hair salon before Trent even had the chance for a long good-bye packed with second thoughts. Apparently having his roots touched up was more dire than nursing Trent's anxiety.

"Well, nice knowing you," Trent said as Nathan skipped down the stairs.

“Buddy, it’s not like you’re going off to war,” Rick said from the couch. “Damn, you’re as much of a drama queen as Nathan. Just don’t tell him I said that. He’d be jealous.”

Trent laughed, a little at himself, a little at Rick, a little at Nathan. Hell, it was just life, after all. And it was funny. Kinda.

It had almost been too easy. The hardest part was this awkward balancing act along the crowded street and the dangerously steaming coffee that was now an hour late. But as Trent slid the trays onto a table, no one seemed to notice. Mechanics from other bays and lots were just starting to pour in and clean up. Trent wriggled out of the binding straps and felt almost weightless as the baggage slumped to the floor. The lightness was more than relief. It was a feeling of accomplishment and decision and all the new possibilities that floated in front of him.

“Hey, Trent, going on a trip?” a tall, lanky mechanic guffawed, and the entire garage bay echoed as the others joined in.

But then they just swarmed in for coffee and mumbled appreciation for it and the end of the day. They traded stories and jokes, and even though Trent had no idea what a catalytic converter was, he was pleased to be included in this ritual of friendship. The big, hollow cave of a garage bubbled with the warm smell of coffee and the gurgling of conversation.

Trent leaned back against the wall and sipped at his coffee. His leg pressed against the pile of his belongings, and a smile spread above his Styrofoam cup as he detected the square corner of his camera bag.

It had been less than a week, but everything seemed different now. Trent’s job and living arrangements were suddenly completely foreign. What had seemed like an inescapable dead end was no longer even in sight. He’d found a turnoff. Actually, Dan had practically plowed through the rubble and built that new path for him.

Trent looked up at the clock and the one remaining cup of coffee and wondered where Dan was. It was almost quitting time. The thought was pure anticipation. This crazy place and situation and wonderful opportunity were all because of that gorgeous man. Trent couldn’t wait to get home and plant well-aimed kisses on Dan’s big, square jaw.

Until then, however, there were other passions that had been denied lately. Trent pulled his camera from its bag and felt the familiar weight of it in his hand. This must be how it was for all these guys to lift tire irons. Trent just knocked himself in the shin with them.

Before anyone noticed, Trent was snapping and clicking from all angles. He captured greasy faces sipping gently at scorching coffee. He found rags and newspapers poking from back pockets. Groups leaning on cars, arms dangling from open hoods, boys lost in their manly environment and discussion. Click. He caught Mark struggling out of his coveralls with his boot caught in the leg, hopping and balancing and nearly tipping. *Click*.

“Hello, men!”

Ida blew into the garage like a dust bunny full of glitter or a moth in butterfly's clothing. She sparkled in all the right places and draped mink from her outstretched arms like fluttering wings of fur. But underneath, there was something friendly and comforting, almost crude. "Nothing better than a whole building full of men covered in motor oil."

Trent didn't know the middle-aged diva, but he took her picture anyway. The contrast of grease and glam was more than he could resist.

"Work it, baby. I feel like a movie star."

The entire garage buzzed with her energy and laughter as she shimmied and shook her jewelry at Trent's lens. Everyone else knew Ida Strauss and shouted hellos and accolades about the condition of her luxury sedan. Ida sparkled and smiled at the attention, brushing away compliments with a wave of ringed fingers. Her presence was so bright that they almost didn't notice Dan walking in behind her. But his scowl was nearly dark enough to cast a shadow across the scene.

The only thing Dan saw as he approached the open garage door was Trent. It was the vision he hadn't been able to shake from his head for nearly a week. But now that beautiful image stood for something else. Trent was Dan's weakness, his lapse in judgment, his guilty feelings, and his proof of guilt.

Watching him snap scenes and wind film only emphasized how wrong this was. Trent was not a mechanic. Trent did not belong here. Dan was so distracted by his regret that he almost ran into Ida's mink-covered back.

"Danny boy!"

"Hey, Dan," Trent chimed as he beamed eagerly beside his luggage.

Ida didn't lose Trent's affectionate remark in her enthusiasm. She could quirk an eyebrow with the best of the elite women in town. But before she could add a quirky comment to the expression, Dan ushered her into the small cube of his office and shut the door as quickly as he could.

"Don't even start, Ida."

She was practically quaking with amusement and curiosity as she sat across from Dan's desk and sniggered into her fur collar. It was only a matter of time before she erupted.

"I'm not one to spread rumors, Danny. But if they're true, I sure as hell want to be the first to know."

"There's nothing to know, Ida." Dan had been working on Ida's cars since before she married well. She was too friendly, too honest, and knew too much. It was hard to keep a secret from a woman like her.

"Don't you lie to me, Danny boy, or to yourself. I'm not quite old enough to be your mother, so don't make me play the part."

Dan didn't reply. He wasn't lying. He wasn't saying anything. But he couldn't keep himself from glancing through the glass pane that separated them from the garage. Trent was

still clicking away. Dan hadn't known Trent was a photographer. He really didn't know anything about this person he'd invited into his life. But against all his best judgment, the mystery excited him. He wanted to find out everything there was to know about Trent.

"You do whatever makes you happy," Ida added. She decided to take his silence and his gaze as confirmation of her suspicions.

"It's more complicated than that," Dan said, dragging fingers through his hair. "A lot."

"It doesn't have to be. You deserve it. Just don't prove that idiot right."

"I don't know what you mean." Dan looked down at paperwork blankly. He didn't know what it said. But he knew exactly what Ida was saying.

"You do, too. Rodney's just full of spite and full of shit." Ida always spoke her blue-collar mind through all her finery. "Damn, you made me say that word."

"Ida, I've heard stronger language than 'shit' come out of that mouth."

"I mean that asshole's name." She leaned across the desk and put a jeweled hand over the papers. "Like I said, I don't spread rumors. But I know where your missing customers have gone."

Now she glanced through the glass. Where there would normally be customers picking up and dropping off cars after work, there was just a bunch of mechanics joking and playing in front of Trent's lens.

Dan didn't need to look. The scene was the same at each garage he had visited. He felt anger boil up inside him again. Hearing Rodney's name spoken aloud just confirmed it, made the situation real.

"It's disgraceful, Dan." Under all her fabulous wrappings and attitude, Ida could be just as fabulously sincere. "You can't trust Rodney with your car, let alone the truth."

"Like I said, it's a lot more complicated." Dan's words were short and angry, but they sounded helpless, beaten.

"Did you really think you were going to get away living your boring, simple little life?" Ida wasn't going to let him give in so easily. "Complications make things interesting."

"It's business," Dan said. He was trying to return to something he knew, something he could control, "I don't need complications."

"And what about him?" She nodded toward the window. "I suppose he's just passing through your business world. He must be a tourist, with the camera...and the luggage."

Dan turned too fast. He hadn't even seen the stuffed bags at Trent's feet. They hadn't really talked about it since that morning in the kitchen. Dan had offered, but Trent never exactly accepted. The past few nights had been wonderful, but it had never seemed real. It was a dream, a fantasy that had suddenly been dragged into the light of day.

"Look, I'm just trying to help, get him back on his feet." Dan kept staring at the baggage and wondered if it was going to drag him down. "This is my life, Ida, my business. I won't let

rumors and backstabbing destroy that. I can't throw it all away on a whim, some fantasy that's never going to amount to anything, not even a real mechanic."

"So what he's young and artsy and cute as a button? So what that he's exactly what Rodney wants to prove all his lies?" Ida watched Dan watch Trent through the glass. "So what an important doctor from an important family went slumming with a waitress who put out on the first date?"

"This is nothing like you and Martin."

"Why not? I knew I was going to marry him that first night. It's not just his bank account that's well endowed, let me tell you." Ida laughed at herself. That ability was what kept her going. "People say I did it for money or status or middle-class revenge. Fuck them all. I love my furs, but I wouldn't miss one goodnight kiss for them. You just know, Danny. And I know you know."

"I know it's business." Dan looked back at her with resolve. "I'll work it out."

"Hell no, you won't! It will work you. Over and over. Then it'll spit you out, and you can see if you like where you land." Ida grabbed her keys from Dan's desk and stood. "So stop trying to control everything and save everyone. Just enjoy yourself, for Chrissakes."

She left Dan sitting there with her pronouncement and walked into the garage for her car. The mechanics paused at their play and nodded smiles at her. Ida clicked her high heels straight up to Trent.

"Howdy, handsome," she said, crossing her arms and appraising him. It wasn't a surprise that such a striking young man had Dan Bartlett in a tizzy. "What do they call you, Mr. Photographer?"

"Trent. Sorry I took your picture without asking, Mrs. Strauss." His formality amused her as much as the fact that he'd gone to the trouble of finding out who she was.

"You're going to call me Ida, honey. And you take as many pictures as you like." Her bangles jangled as she patted his arm. "I've seen enough artistic crap in my life to know more people should photograph greasy men and fabulous old ladies like myself."

Ida exited as glamorously as she'd entered, sashaying into her leather seat and purring away in her Mercedes.



## Chapter Seven

Breakfast was delicious. Neither of them had spoken about the garage or their doubts. Neither of them had even acknowledged Trent's luggage, except for the moment when Dan had taken the initiative to heft it into the bed of the truck.

For days, it had sat in the front hall like a pair of discarded boots.

They pushed around bits of bacon and eggs with corners of buttered toast, feeling lazy and satiated. It was almost too easy. They ignored the obvious difficulties. They smiled and ate and remembered how sweet it was to wake up in each other's arms.

This is how they celebrated their week "anniversary." This is how they spent their Saturday morning. But the difficulties were still there. Just like the silence. Just like the unpacked luggage.

To a large extent, Trent and Dan were strangers. Even though they ignored the obstacles, they were real. Dan's business was suffering. Trent was not a mechanic. And the combination of those two facts was even worse than the sum of their parts.

Trent looked up from his plate and met Dan's eyes. He looked away quickly. Still, there was a shyness between them, a level of uncertainty that disappeared when they touched in the dark.

Trent remembered Dan holding him just an hour earlier. He remembered how strong and soft his embrace felt, how safe. Trent had never known that another person could make him feel that way. In fact, he was having a hard time letting himself believe it.

Suddenly everything had changed in his life. It truly was unbelievable. But when he looked at Dan's square jaw and pale, sparkling eyes, he wanted more than anything to convince himself that what he felt was real.

But the best he could do was watch the last bite of egg as he shoveled it in and asked with a full mouth, "So, how are things at the garage?"

"They've been better."

"I'm not very good at it, am I?"

"That's not what I meant at all," Dan insisted. He tried to smile, to sound lighthearted. The last thing he wanted was to insult Trent or chase him away. His desire to stay close to him was almost compulsive. But the bitter thought of Rodney had been forced into his mind. "Don't you worry about it. Things will work out."

Exactly what *things* would work out? They both let the endless possibilities hang there in the air over their empty plates. This time their eyes did meet. And neither of them looked away. This time they both managed a smile.

"How about we unpack some of your things?" Dan suggested.

The house seemed absolutely immense to Trent. The contrast between it and the cramped, dusty apartment in town made the halls cavernous. Trent wasn't used to fresh paint and open space. He certainly wasn't accustomed to the stretches of blank walls and light carpet that reached into every corner of the house. It made him want to develop that roll of film. It made him want to take even more pictures. He wanted to make memories and put them where he could see them, where he could remember them every day.

Dan hesitated at the top of the stairs with Trent's luggage in his arms. He was confounded and a bit embarrassed. He was halfway between bedrooms. Dan had made a point of giving Trent his own room, his own freedom and choice. But Trent had yet to choose the room across the hall at bedtime. The choice he usually made kept them up far beyond their intended bedtime.

Dan's suggestion to unpack had been intended as a gesture of kindness and affection, some meaningful activity to overcome lingering awkwardness. But if he carried the luggage into his own room, was he implying that Trent no longer had a choice? And if he put it in the guest room, was he turning away the sweet tenderness of Trent's sleeping body?

Trent made the decision for him. He scooped the camera bag into his own arms. He turned directly into the spare room and started dumping contents onto the unused bed.

Dan suffered a stab of loss that made him worry how it would feel if Trent ever went farther away than across the hall. But the feeling was overcome by a wash of relief. Dan was glad not to have to take the lead all the time, make all the decisions. He was glad he hadn't made the wrong one. Yet.

Trent didn't even notice Dan's moment of weakness. To him, this wasn't a decision. Every night he wondered if Dan really wanted him in his bed, whether Dan had offered him his own room to keep him away until he was needed and called upon, like a maid or a dildo stashed in a drawer somewhere. But every night he found Dan's rough hands and hot skin eager and open. Despite the passion and the urgency, every night Trent felt the brush of soft kisses against the back of his neck as he fell asleep.

But that was not what this decision was about. This was about photography, pure and simple. Trent poured photos and folders onto the bedspread from his bag. The slippery images slid into a pool, covering the entire mattress like black-and-white fish on the deck of a boat. Here and there were splashes of color -- rainbow trout, sunsets, smiling children with dandelions. No matter how artsy he tried to be, Trent knew life was not just black and white.

Dan wondered again why he had so much extra space as he stood in front of the walk-in closet with Trent's modest duffel of clothing. It baffled him why a guest room needed so much storage, especially the guests Dan never had.

Stacking and hanging Trent's clothes gave Dan a striking sense of intimacy. This wasn't sex or business or some social experiment to give a hooker a second chance. This was domestic security. He was filling this emptiness with a sense of permanence.

Dan smiled at the simple contents of the bag. He was sure many gay men could fill up this closet easily with flamboyant trappings and big designer labels. But Trent's wardrobe looked remarkably like his own. Jeans and T-shirts dominated. Sweatshirts and sweaters. There were the couple necessary dress shirts and a tight tank top for hot weather or hotter dancing. When someone looked like Trent, they didn't have to wear a boa to get attention or a fistful of sweaty cash.

Dan turned to see him. He tried to banish his jealous thoughts. He couldn't keep his mind or his eyes off Trent. Dan had a hard enough time keeping his hands to himself.

He watched Trent from behind, sifting through photos, holding images up against the wall. Dan didn't know what it was about this young guy that drove him crazy. It could be the way he filled the back pockets of black denim from the inside, or the spheres of his shoulders as he held pictures above his head. But it was more than that. Dan was no expert on romance. He probably hadn't had as many lovers as a kid by the river needed to pay the rent. But Dan was no virgin. He was also no fool. And he knew it took more than a pretty face and a tight body to make him act like one.

He tried to enjoy the moment, but he couldn't help wondering how much you have to pay a prostitute to say "I love you." Dan bit his tongue.

He slipped up behind Trent and looked at the photo he was holding. It was a child on a see-saw. Simple, but unique. It was a moment caught in a way that made it innocent and memorable. The shot was taken from below, as the little girl reached the apex of her ride, as her smiling face briefly passed in front of the summer sun. Rays of light radiated from her like a halo of happiness, leaving a warm silhouette of reality in the foreground. Dan knew immediately that this was the first time she had ever dared surrender to the scary playground balancing game, and her nervous delight shined into every corner of the frame.

"Someone you know?"

"Almost."

Trent was a bit startled by the sudden proximity of Dan's voice. He was taken off guard so much that he answered truthfully, without pretense. Dan knew exactly what he meant. Just looking at the photo, Dan felt he had met the little girl.

"It's great," Dan said admiringly as he glanced at the piles of other images on the bed. "Feel free to spread them around the house. It could use it."

"Thanks."

"And you want to be able to see them. I mean, how much time do you really spend in here anyway?"

Trent tacked up the picture with its edges curling away from the wall, and he turned to the others on the bed. He saw bits and pieces of his life jumbled together. He wondered if he put them in order, lined them along a wall or numbered them in an album, would things look simpler? Would everything just fall into place? Would the next picture in the series be an obvious choice? Would the next memory follow logically from the others?

He pushed the glossy images back into folders and bags with a wide, arching sweep of his hand. He didn't pay attention to organization or sequence. Things were never that predictable. Capturing the spontaneity of the moment was what made it beautiful. So Trent grasped Dan's shoulders, holding him in a strong and confident kiss. He captured the moment as spontaneously as he could.

He felt the tense, muscular surprise in the man's body. And then he felt Dan soften, melting into his mouth and his embrace. He lowered Dan's pliant weight onto the bed, climbing onto him without breaking the union of their lips.

Dan's body under him felt dense and hot. In a moment, Trent felt that heat and density increase and surge against him. He leaned into the mechanic's need and pressed the shape and size of them through clothing to find each other.

Trent found the squared shelf of Dan's chest under his shirt and rubbed a thumb through the soft hairs there as he held the rigid flesh and felt the shudder and hardening of the man's nipple.

Trent opened his eyes and saw the kissing movements of cheekbone and jaw under stubbled skin. Surveying that rugged face, he saw that Dan's eyes were also open. There was a moment of secret discovery as their eyes met, a flicker of embarrassment, of being caught. The voyeurism was delicious. But the spying quickly turned to gazing as their eyes locked and the depth of their stare echoed that of their kiss. Pale blue and electric blue, like watery reflections of each other, mirror images of desire.

Dan wriggled beneath the smaller man, raising him with his hips and delighting in the gravity that pulled Trent downward into his lap, into the insistent ache that grew there. As Trent peeled the shirt from Dan, pinning arms behind his head, a sudden flash of surrender shot from Dan's belly to his chest, and he submitted to the younger man above him.

Dan left his hands above him as Trent shed his own shirt. He watched as each alabaster ab revealed itself, as each tawny nipple peeked from under the fabric. Dan teased himself with the display. He let Trent take the lead. His hands were wrapped in his shirt, bound above him. He could have broken his chains and run his fingers along every tight groove of Trent's smooth body. He could have touched that small dimple of navel, cupped that shoulder, feathered his fingertips along those ribs until flesh bristled and quivered with pinpricks of cool sensation.

But he didn't. He waited, almost whimpering, for the man above him to lower his torso and rub bare skin against his outstretched body, tripping the electric wire of every hair, every pore. Still, Dan didn't reach to hold him.

Dan's denial was sweet torture. Trent glowed with the power, and Dan just watched, biting his lower lip, as Trent took control and sat upright to release the button of his fly.

Trent only hesitated for a split second as he followed the direct course his erection indicated across Dan's upper body. It pointed straight along the dark path of hair from stomach to chest and beyond. But that briefest pause was more than Dan could stand.

Dan released his teeth's grip on his lip, freed his hands, grasped the buttocks before him, and completed the journey of Trent's cock. He held Trent's hips and fed the younger man into his hot mouth. He tasted Trent hungrily, famished from the starvation he had imposed on himself. But he didn't control a thing. He surrendered. He encouraged Trent's thrusts with gentle hands, but he let the boy above set the pace, the rhythm, the depth.

Trent withdrew almost completely to thrust anew, and Dan turned his face slightly. He scraped the tender head against the unshaven hollows of his cheeks before bathing the scrape with his tongue. Trent's stomach clenched into a fist of surprise and suffocated ecstasy.

Trent was dizzy and unbalanced with the position of power and the pangs of shocking pleasure. He watched Dan below him and reeled from his high point of view. This wasn't like anything he had experienced before. He'd never been with such a hulk of a man, and he certainly had never expected someone like that to take such a deliciously subordinate role.

Trent held himself up with one hand against the mattress and brought his freed hand to Dan's head. He let his palm cradle the sharp point of Dan's jaw. He let his thumb drag lightly across the prickle of whiskers. His arm followed the movement of Dan's mouth, guiding the soft, wet kiss.

Trent's hand served as an anchor for the push and pull of his own body as he penetrated that sweet warmth. It was like placing his hand around the waist of a dance partner. But this was some exotic rumba Trent never knew he could perform, and he never thought he'd be the one leading.

His partner shifted below him and broke the rhythm. For a moment Trent was confused, lost in the music and the beat of his own desire. But as Dan shifted and twisted, it became clear that the dance had changed. Trent watched in silent amazement as Dan pulled free from his embrace just long enough to turn onto hands and knees. Now it was Dan who

braced himself with only one hand. He reached the other back behind him, reaching for his partner, inviting him to a more intimate waltz.

Trent let the older man guide him through the steps, and Dan took the time to let him lead. A trickle of lube. The slow unrolling of latex. Trent found the music again and fell into time with the synchronized beat of their pulses. He grasped the tight muscle of buttock that wrapped around Dan's hip and pressed himself against it, into it. Trent let the blind rhythm of their bodies take control.

No one would ever expect this, and that's what made it so much more exciting. The young, thin guy was holding the hips of this big, solid man. Trent rocked gently yet insistently against Dan and watched the muscles of his shoulder arch and tighten. Ripples radiated from the deep depression of his spine.

Leaning forward, Trent ran his hands over that hard, bumpy terrain. He felt every inch of skin and held tight to Dan's shoulders to keep himself from falling down with pleasure.

He was practically lying across the sound foundation of Dan's back. And he pushed eagerly at the warm squeezing that corresponded with every rough breath Dan took. The sensation was almost a tickle, the beginning of a sneeze, that teased and danced somewhere low in his stomach.

He couldn't stop now if he wanted to. He was urged on, faster and more urgently, by the rasp of Dan's breathing and the accepting bend and stretch in the small of his back. Trent put his hand there in that hollow, felt that need and emptiness that he was filling. That's all he could feel. There was nothing else. The pounding of their movement drummed through his veins, beat at his temples and eardrums until the sensation was blurred into sound.

In that final deep move, Trent held his partner close, as the music faded, as the crash of the last cymbal echoed between them and inside them.

They fell together in sweaty exhaustion and quivering release, peeling back blankets and avoiding the spot where their dance of strength and submission had led Dan to reach his own crescendo.

\* \* \* \* \*

Trent awoke to confusion. This was not his house, not his bed, not even the bed he was accustomed to here. The golden sunlight hinted at late afternoon. It was an odd time to awake, especially alone with the heavy musk of sex on the sheets.

His disorientation was emphasized by an even more foreign sound at the other end of the room. Something crashed. Something clanged.

He looked past the crumpled blankets toward the racket. Even as his mind cleared and the memory of the morning's passion washed over him, the sight he found there compounded his confusion.

Dan was only half visible where he stood inside the closet. He was wearing his jeans again. He had found his shirt and time to dress. Trent must have been out cold for hours. But that didn't explain what was going on now.

Trent's duffel bag tumbled onto the carpet. A couple sweatshirts followed its path, tossed over Dan's shoulder to land in the middle of the room. One by one, each piece of Trent's clothing flew out of the closet. Dan threw pants and shirts without a single glance backwards.

Was he throwing Trent out of the house? Trent's mind scoured his memory for some clue. What could have changed within the few hours since they'd unpacked? Baffled fear coursed through him.

A T-shirt hit the opposite wall. Trent felt hurt. Nothing had happened except for some of the most amazing sex he'd ever experienced. And that was the only explanation.

Dan must have come to his senses. The reversal of power and position must have been the wake-up call he needed to change his mind. Dan didn't need some kid, some trashy call boy, taking advantage of him any longer.

Trent felt helpless. He had gambled on this ridiculous hunch that he had naively mistaken for emotion, and he had lost. Now he had no job and no place to go. His few possessions were strewn across this guestroom the first time he had even used it. Trent assumed the invitation had been revoked.

He found his clothes as silently as he could. It wasn't as if Dan would hear him over the commotion in the closet, but Trent didn't need to be caught naked and ashamed. He felt vulnerable enough as it was.

"And where do you think you're going?"

Trent jumped at the sound of the voice.

"I didn't want to...I was just..." Trent stuttered and paused. "Slept too long, is all."

"Get yourself over here."

Trent could hear something unusual in Dan's tone. He couldn't tell if it was a joke or an order, and he couldn't decide what to do. Was this payback time? Was it Dan's turn to be in control, to give the commands? He owned the house, paid the bills, gave Trent a job and a place to stay. Everything was under his reign, and he could take it away at any moment. This is what it meant to be a prostitute, something that someone could buy and own and throw away.

A small, logical part of Trent's mind wanted Dan to throw him out. This drunken experiment had gone too far. He was tired and scared of being a possession. And although he had never accepted payment from Dan, the initial terms of their agreement had set up an awkward business relationship.

Trent's stomach turned, and it felt as if it scraped against the bottom of his heart. It was a sickening pain. Every bit of his emotion screamed out against the logic. It wanted something more, something that seemed impossible.

Trent's legs moved. Despite reason, he approached Dan and the closet. He had to step over his own clothing. He tried not to think about how humiliating this entire scene could become.

Dan's hands were on his hips. He looked smug and proud, and it took every ounce of strength for Trent to hold his head up and meet the other man's eye.

"What's going on?" Trent tried to sound defiant and demanding, not scared and confused.

Dan didn't answer. He just turned his gaze into the closet.

The sight there was so unexpected that, at first, Trent didn't recognize the familiar objects. Trays and jugs and coils of cord. Dan reached into the gutted closet and switched on a red lamp.

The walk-in closet, no longer holding clothes, was nearly twice the size of the darkroom in the photo lab. Equipment and solution sat in piles and cluttered benches.

"I have no idea what any of this is," Dan admitted. "You're going to have to put it all together. The store across town said this was enough to get started, but..."

Trent stopped Dan's nervous rambling with a kiss. This was very different than the passion of their earlier encounter. This was not about lust. It was about something that neither of them would speak yet.

Trent kissed him gently and firmly and directly on the lips for a very long time. He held his gesture of thanks for endless moments. They barely moved, barely breathed. He wanted this security to go on and on. In this still embrace, he could feel Dan's heartbeat. He felt it race against him, against his own heart. He wondered which one would win.

\* \* \* \* \*

Egg had dried hard and stubborn onto the plates, but Dan didn't seem to care. He scrubbed at the yellow specks gently and inattentively, letting soapy water cascade over the memory of breakfast.

His attention was nowhere near the sink. He listened as Trent buzzed around the house. He hadn't stopped for an hour, and Dan just couldn't get tired of the sound his feet made running up and down the stairs.

Dan knew it had been an impulsive, extravagant display. He tried to reprimand himself for buying those darkroom supplies, but the constant smile on Trent's face wouldn't let him feel guilty.



This was the gesture Dan had been seeking when he'd first suggested unpacking. He'd thought it would be the true confirmation of his invitation to Trent. But the guestroom had seemed so sterile and temporary.

They'd fixed that lack of intimacy right away. That kind of passion couldn't be purchased along the river. The shiver that ran through Dan at the mere thought confirmed that. He plunged his hands back into the warm dishwater to melt away the distraction.

But even beyond the sweat and grind of Trent inside him, there was something more. The simple act of tacking a photo to the wall had changed the entire environment of the room. Trent was not a hooker, a guest, a silly young boy. He was an artist and a man, and he had brought the sunshine in his photo into Dan's entire house. He had brought it in with a smile and a kiss. The house didn't seem as empty suddenly.

It was the way Trent ran from room to room with a ball of mounting putty and an armful of frames. Pictures were going up left and right. No blank wall was safe from his artistic vision, and there were a lot of blank walls to attack. Dan was thrilled. He had given his blessing. He had insisted over and over.

He was pleased enough by the sheer sound of Trent settling in, making himself at home. It was an added bonus that, at the same time, he was making a home out of Dan's house. He was filling it with memories and visions, dreams and personality.

Dan dried his hands on a towel and left the encrusted dishes to soak. When he turned from the sink, he saw frames of light and shadow everywhere, bits of black and white, patches of blue sky. All the empty places had been filled.

He could still hear Trent scurrying above him in the bedrooms. Dan wondered what pictures would go above his bed, their bed. He approached a wall of pictures and thought absently how Trent's clothes were going to end up in Dan's closet after all.

The photograph before him looked oddly familiar. A backyard. A woman. A clothesline. And a house practically identical to the one where Dan had wasted his twenties. In fact, it was the house right next door.

Guilt stabbed Dan in the gut. His lie haunted him. No matter how blissful the moment seemed now, things were never that simple.

Dan nearly jumped as Trent's arms wrapped around him from behind. He had been distracted from the sound of Trent's feet. He had allowed the voice of reason and doubt to drown out that happy noise.

"It's a beautiful picture."

But things weren't that simple. The photo's beauty was frightening to Dan. Maybe Ida was right. Maybe complications were what made life interesting, what made it beautiful and scary all at once.

"Thanks. It's the house where I grew up." Trent looked over Dan's shoulder. They saw two very different memories.

They shared a past that Trent didn't know about. And they had a future that neither of them could even imagine. Dan didn't want to think about the possible disasters that lay ahead of them, personal and professional. He had never felt so vulnerable, and he had never felt so happy about it.

## Chapter Eight

“So this is where all the straight boys hang out.”

Nathan announced his arrival in a pair of exaggerated bell-bottom pants. They might as well have been ringing through the garage as he sashayed into the bay.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Trent escorted him outside by the elbow and led him into the empty bay on the other side of the building.

Luckily, business was slow, which meant there was unoccupied space and fewer mechanics bustling around. In fact, only one other person had been within the sound of Nathan’s shrillness, and Trent was fairly certain Adam didn’t have a clue what to make of the scene. Adam was too new and too young to do anything but stare in confusion as the two friends disappeared around the corner.

“Nathan? Was there a reason other than bad taste that brought you here today?”

“Honey, I’ve been worried about you. Can’t a girl check up on you without causing a scene?”

“Apparently not” -- Trent gestured to the flashy ensemble -- “girl.”

“God, this place smells like a dirty old tire in a back alley. It’s just like a porn! I absolutely love it.” Nathan tousled his own hair as he spun around in superficial surveillance. “And look at you, so butch, all covered in grease. Why, Trent, you look good enough to...well, give me a lube job.”

Neither of them could help from laughing. Trent may have even blushed, but their seclusion in the vacant bay gave him freedom to enjoy Nathan’s crude humor. Their roaring echoed around hollow cement and bounced off unused tools. It was obvious they thought they were alone.

Neither of them noticed Dan standing outside. No one saw the way his brow crumpled as Trent slapped a friendly hand against Nathan's back. No one caught that split second of glaring before Dan's face disappeared beyond the door and into the main garage.

Trent felt relaxed and at home suddenly. He let go of the tension that he carried around the garage like a heavy wrench he could lose his grip on at any moment. It was good to see Nathan again, to remember there was something familiar in his life, no matter how outrageous that might be.

"So, what's going on?" Trent asked when the laughter subsided.

"You know very well that girlfriends come before sugar daddies."

"Which chapter in the *Gay Handbook*?"

"I forget, but it's in there," Nathan insisted. "And I happened to be passing through."

"On your way to the suburbs?"

"Listen, just because I look after my girls doesn't mean I can't go shopping for a suburban daddy, too."

They laughed again. But the sound faded faster this time, making way for the real topic of conversation.

"I think I live in an opium den," Nathan gushed in true breakdown fashion. "If I see any more tie-dye, I'll go blind."

"Better from that than the masturbation," Trent joked. "What are you talking about?"

"The new roommate is Rick's friend. And you know what that means. Bad hair, bad fashion, and enough smoke blowing around the place to get me high just walking into the room." Nathan put a flustered hand to his forehead and paused momentarily for effect. "Do you know that the other day I turned on the VCR and there was actually a hetero porn in there? If I wanted to see girls with bad roots and red patent pumps, I'd go to the mall. At least at the mall they'd be wearing something with the pumps."

"Poor Nathan." Trent really did try to feel bad for him. Nathan's version of reality was exaggerated and fabulous. But it was also familiar and comforting to Trent.

He led Nathan to the far end of the garage, where the ancient backseat of a car had been parked for a couple decades. The upholstery was some weave of browns that no one would consider today. But it made a comfortable bench and a convenient dust collector for the garage and its inhabitants.

They settled into the filthy seat, much to Nathan's dismay as he coughed and brushed at the soiled knee of his bell-bottoms. But that was the only protest he gave. He knew why he was really here, and it had very little to do with pot-smoking hippies or girls in red pumps.

"So, Mr. Trent, how the hell are things in your new life?"

The question hung there like the dust, caught in the light and silence of midday. It had been just over a week. And somehow everything had changed. Trent didn't know where to begin.

"Everything's fine," he said simply. The truth was too complicated. "And weird. But good."

"Fine, weird, good, huh?" Nathan quirked an overly plucked eyebrow. "Would you like to elaborate?"

"Well, I'm not a mechanic, for starters."

"You could have fooled me," Nathan said, tugging at the cuff of Trent's navy coveralls. "Love the makeover. Except for this." He patted the camera that was slung low around Trent's waist like a tool belt.

"It's about the only thing I haven't dropped around here," Trent said, trying to laugh. "Nathan, he built me a darkroom."

"Damn, girl! Well, that's almost as good as jewelry. Just a little harder to take with you when you divorce. How is married life? Did you hang up the pictures yet?"

Trent's answer was in his hesitation. Nathan was flamboyant as hell, but he had perception and intuition that you wouldn't find in the index of the *Gay Handbook*. Trent himself had avoided interpreting the significance of those photos on the wall. It was more meaningful than sex or unpacking. Photographs couldn't be forgotten, replaced, borrowed from a friend, or picked up in a late-night bar.

"Nathan, he's great. Amazing." Trent looked out into the empty garage. He couldn't make eye contact with his friend as he searched for the words, for the truth. "I just don't know. I don't know him at all. I mean, it's been...eleven days. And I expect to see him there when I wake up. It's too fast. He's too old. I mean, thirty-five, that's...eight years."

"Eight years. Eleven days." Nathan put his hand on Trent's knee. "This isn't math class. Things don't add up in real life, honey. And remember 'Chapter Ten: The Ten-Year Rule.' It's completely kosher. By the time you're thirty, you won't even notice the difference."

"Thirty?" The landmark birthday seemed horrifying in a whole new way when put in this context. "Nathan, it's been eleven days! I'm not picking out china patterns yet."

"And you think *I'm* dramatic? Your storyline moves a hell of a lot faster than any soap opera. You know, a wedding usually takes an entire season... Where are you two registered, anyway? I want to buy you a matching pair of his-and-his jockstraps." Nathan paused just long enough to let the moment lighten a bit. "That reminds me, how's the sex?"

Trent blushed. And that was the best answer. The sudden rush of blood and heat to his face was a more accurate description of their passion than anything he could have said.

"Does he still think you're a hooker?"

Trent could hear cars passing by outside. He could hear the clink and scrape of tools in other parts of the garage. Silence had fallen so heavily around them, it almost made a sound of its own. The blush drained from Trent's face.

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asked, but it didn't sound like a question.

Nathan answered him anyway. "I really wasn't sure until I saw your face."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan tried not to let it boil up inside him. He swallowed hard and tried to focus on the open hood in front of him. He looked on as Adam tinkered his way toward an elusive rattle somewhere deep in the auto's guts.

The boy was determined to discover the source. He was barely sixteen, but he had a hard streak of tenacity and a mechanical mind. And Adam followed those instincts with a wrench in both hands until he fixed whatever was broken.

It was the strong-willed curiosity Dan sought and shared, the desire to solve and repair. It was exactly the kind of drive that Trent lacked. And, coincidentally, Trent was the one thing Dan couldn't understand. He couldn't take Trent apart and put him back together; he couldn't fix him.

And Dan couldn't stop thinking about him. The sight of Trent tucked away with that stranger infuriated Dan. He couldn't stop his mind from reeling. There were too many possibilities, and none of them was good. Boyfriend? Drug dealer? Coworker? Customer?

Dan felt like a fool. If Trent was doing "business" out of Dan's business, out of his home, if he was doing it at all...Dan didn't know what.

He'd never told Trent to stop. He'd never mentioned it at all. He'd just offered him a chance and a job. The fact that Trent kept showing up in his bed, that they looked at each other and smiled over coffee, those weren't promises. Those could have all been part of the deal. Maybe this was all business to Trent.

Dan clenched his jaw and clasped his hands behind him to restrain his rage. He wanted to pace, knock something over, at least tap his foot, but instead he let his anger tense inside him. He stood there to punish himself for being so stupid. He stood rigid and quiet as he watched Adam's wrench dig deeper.

How could he have imagined that something real was growing between him and Trent? Dan was not one to scribble hearts on his notebook. He didn't allow himself to be swept away by emotion. His world was ruled by logic, facts, the mechanics of business. All the pieces fit together and did their jobs. That's how things worked. That's *why* they worked.

Trent wasn't a mechanic, but maybe he had a better understanding of the nuts and bolts of logic than Dan had assumed. Their arrangement was a pretty good deal. Free room and board. And he didn't even have to work. Trent spent more time taking pictures than working on cars. No one complained. He did less damage that way.

But Dan wondered what other damage was being done. He spent more than his fair share of time thinking about Trent. He spent all of his free time with Trent. Right this minute Dan was ignoring his employee, his job, and his business as it fell down around him. He was gritting his teeth and thinking about someone in the other room. And God only knew what was going on in that room right now.

Dan was thinking about how infuriating this situation was and how, at every moment, all he wanted to do was reach out and hold Trent.

“Shit!” Adam clanged something and quickly moved past it, continuing his search.

The curse was a release of adrenaline for Adam as he hunted for the problem and the solution. But it was the perfect expression of Dan’s unspoken fury.

However, his hunt was much more exotic than Adam’s. His prey was more elusive. Honestly, Dan wasn’t sure exactly who the predator was.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Trent, have I taught you nothing?” Nathan asked desperately. He stood elaborately for his exit, fluffing bangs and dusting the back pockets of his bell-bottoms. “The entire subtext of the *Gay Handbook*, practically its subtitle, is ‘How to Act Like a Flighty Gay Man Without Being One.’ Just play the part of the ditz. Bat your eyes and scream at mice, but know what the hell is really going on.”

“And how am I supposed to figure that out, oh wise one?” Trent asked. “I don’t even know how all this happened.”

Trent stayed on the grimy car seat in his mechanic’s costume and looked blankly up at Nathan in his overly chic gay couture. He was willing to take advice from anyone at this point. And Nathan wasn’t really such a bad choice. Underneath all the glitter and *Gay Handbook* bullshit, he saw things pretty much the way they were. It was only later that he dressed up the facts and gave them a makeover. In Nathan’s opinion, everything deserved to be fabulous.

“Don’t get your panties in a bunch, sister,” Nathan snapped. “Start with the facts. You like him. You’re not a mechanic. You’re not a hooker. So tell him. Try as he might, he’s not going to turn you into either one.”

“Then what am I?”

“You’re the guy he’s fallen head over heels in love with,” Nathan said. “Trent, you are not a project. Reforming crack whores and turning them into blue-collar studs is not a constructive hobby. Wouldn’t you rather fall in love with a nice, sweet photographer who’s free of all venereal diseases?”

The look of Trent’s face said he wasn’t so sure. He had absolutely no idea what Dan would choose.

"It's false advertising," Trent argued. "Take away all the drama, the flashy packaging, and bad-boy reformation, and he's not getting what he paid for."

"Trent, he didn't pay for you, remember?" Nathan put his hands on his hips. That meant the clincher was coming. "Listen, don't you think Richard Gere would have been thrilled to death if it turned out his *Pretty Woman* was really a middle-class virgin straight out of grad school?"

"It would have made for a really boring movie."

Nathan wouldn't be swayed. He'd reached deep into the gay canon for the perfect analogy, and he wasn't going to budge now. He left his hands right on his hips, where they belonged.

"Keep the drama on the screen. And right here with Miss Nathan," he said with a flourish of his hands and a hitch of his hips, putting himself on display and making final preparations for his dramatic exit. "Restaurant opens at five. Club opens at eleven. A woman's work is never done."

A kiss on each cheek, and he was gone. He left Trent with his best advice and not a single clue as to what to do.

So on his way out, Trent turned and snapped a picture of the backseat where it sat crooked and deserted between the wall and a pile of tires. It might not have been the most interesting shot he'd ever taken, but it was a memory, a reminder. It wasn't art. He took that picture the same way a poet would write his shopping list. The blunt stanzas of peas and milk served a purpose, not a muse.

Trent rounded the corner to return to the active part of the garage and whatever it was Adam was tinkering with. But as he made that turn, the sight there struck him square in the face. It stopped him dead in his tracks.

Adam was still up to his elbows in the engine. But Trent hadn't known that Dan had returned. From the look of things, Dan wasn't aware of Trent's arrival either. Dan leaned over Adam's bent body. One hand propped him against the car. The other clasped behind his back as he peered over the boy's shoulder. His foot tapped; his jaw clenched. He looked as if he could barely restrain himself.

As far as Trent was concerned, Dan was restraining himself much too close to that young kid. And if Trent had learned anything after a week in this garage, it was that nothing under the hood of a car was interesting enough to leer at so intently.

He forced himself into the garage bay. He walked beyond the car and the pair of mechanics hunched together and wrapped up in their own world. Adam didn't even seem to notice Trent. Dan straightened a little, tensed. But he looked away. He seemed to be turning from Trent more than he was separating himself from Adam.

Trent grabbed a broom. He squeezed his fist around the handle angrily. He took slow, hard strokes at the floor. Sweeping was one of his few real jobs in the garage. By default, he'd



been delegated to the same menial, unskilled tasks he had performed at the Photo Lab. He could be a janitor anywhere. At least at the lab he'd been surrounded by the sharp, clean scent of developing solution and glossy photos. Here the dirt mixed with grease and smeared the floors and broom bristles.

It was useless. Even staring at the floor, Trent couldn't get the image out of his head. The sight of Dan crouching over Adam was such a surprising pain. It stabbed, deep and unexpected, into a hollow place above his gut.

It shouldn't have hurt him this much. And it shouldn't have surprised him at all. Dan picked up younger guys along the river. He paid for sex. He invited a hooker -- or at least a person pretending to be one -- into his home. What in the world made Trent think he'd quit all his nasty habits?

If Dan liked them eight years younger, wouldn't twenty be even better? And if he was in the habit of paying for his pleasure, Adam was already on the payroll.

The thought made Trent sick. The smell of grease and grime and oily dust from the floor wasn't helping the matter any. At least this glimpse of reality had given Trent some perspective. It had cleared up some of his confusion. Dan certainly wouldn't be impressed to hear that Trent was not a prostitute. He liked it dirty. He liked the convenience and the ownership. He'd got what he bargained for. Or so he thought.

Nathan was wrong. Dan was no Richard Gere. Trent wouldn't gain a thing from disclosing the truth. Except maybe his freedom.

He wasn't a hooker. He wasn't a mechanic. He wasn't going to settle to this level, settle for this existence. He would take the high road right out of Dan's life.

But for some reason, Trent kept sweeping. He held on to that broom tighter than he held on to his morals and convictions. He knew what was right. He knew what he should do. But sweeping the same dirty spot over and over was the only thing he could think of to try and wipe away the gritty ache under his ribs.

## Chapter Nine

The entire afternoon was silent except for the swish of the broom and the angry scrape of metal against metal. There was less than an hour before quitting time. But it seemed like an eternity.

When Adam finally shut the hood of the car and wiped his hands on the front of his coveralls, when the floor was as clean as it could get, Dan and Trent made their way slowly to Dan's truck. Still, they didn't speak. They used their good-byes to Adam as their sole communication.

"See you in the morning," Adam replied as he waved and walked away.

The truck doors slammed one after another like gunshot. Dan paused with his hand on the ignition, like a trigger. If he had something to say, he definitely didn't *want* to say it. So he brought the engine to life with a click and a roar.

Trent stared through the window, leaning his head against the cool glass. He wasn't looking at anything; he was simply looking away from Dan.

The tension was as solid as the silence. It was as if their two clenched jaws were holding the moment in their teeth. As they pulled onto the highway, they both felt trapped. This was how that first night had been. It was less than two weeks ago, but this uncomfortable air was the same. Breathing was just as hard. It was the awkwardness of being shoved into personal space with a stranger. Neither knew the person sitting next to him. They just knew it was a bad idea.

The afternoon had seemed long, but Trent suddenly realized the commute home would take years. He almost laughed out loud at the thought of the word *home*. But it wasn't funny. Dan's house was not his home. It was more like his place of business. He did more "work" there than at the garage. Except Dan didn't make him sweep the house.

He wanted to turn on the radio to break the silence and give himself commercials and pop tunes to gauge the creeping seconds. But he was afraid to shatter the frozen moment with such an abrupt movement. He didn't want to reach out toward Dan and have it mistaken for forgiveness. So Trent didn't break the spell of silence.

Traffic did. Dan slammed the brakes and the horn simultaneously. There was no real reason to do either. Traffic stretched for miles along the highway. They could see it snaked ahead of them in double lanes. There was only a mile to go before the first exit that would lead them onto the convoluted back roads Dan preferred. But just reaching that point would take forever. Trent knew this was Dan's least favorite part of the trip, and today it was more than he could stand.

"What the hell is going on?" Dan blurted into the cab of the truck. When he didn't get a response, he added, "Trent?"

"It's traffic, Dan." Trent didn't look up. "Same as every night."

"You know that's not what I mean. What's going on with...you?" Dan asked. He had almost said "us," but lumping them together in such a short word seemed vulnerable and simplistic.

"Me?" It was more outrage than question. Trent still didn't look up, but he considered his options as he peered out into the breakdown lane. Truth was the best policy, Nathan said. But which truth to start with? Trent decided attack was safer than surrender. "What the hell was going on back at the garage?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

"Hey, I wasn't the one pressed up against Adam."

"Adam?" Dan dismissed the accusation with a snort. "Adam is sixteen years old. He could be my son. Hell, Trent, he could almost be your son."

"Well, it didn't look like the age difference made any difference to you at all."

Dan pulled into the breakdown lane and forced his way the last quarter-mile to the exit. He pushed the truck into the open spaces between suburban blocks and the cover of trees. Free of the gridlock, he revved the engine triumphantly.

"Trent, believe it or not, I actually like cars and engines and all those intricate parts," Dan tried to explain. "We all do. That's why we cram together to look at the smallest detail. It's about the car, not each other. Wait until you see them drag in some smoking junker; you'll see mechanics packed a lot closer than that."

Trent remembered the way Adam had kept working right along as if nothing unusual was happening. He thought about Dan's hand pinned behind his own back as he looked on. Trent had never seen anything interesting in all that grease, but he acknowledged it was a possibility.

"Haven't you ever stood right next to someone looking at a photo exhibit or crowded in a darkroom?" Dan asked.

Trent thought of countless classes and friends, coworkers, and mentors, all practically standing on top of each other as they stared down into a tray of developing solution at a blank sheet, waiting for it to darken and reveal its secret. Dan's example made things a lot clearer.

Immediately, Trent felt foolish. He blushed against the cool glass. He couldn't believe his overly emotional response to such a simple situation. It made him feel guilty and worried at the same time. What in the world made him feel so hurt and protective? Why had he flown off the handle at the slightest hint of trouble? Trent had never known his jealous streak ran so deep. He'd also had no idea they had reached a level where jealousy was even an issue.

He waited for the hot flush of embarrassment to leave his cheeks before he turned to look at Dan. "Sorry. I guess I overreacted a little. But when I saw you..."

"I was just doing my job, Trent," Dan said flatly. He didn't sound very apologetic at all. "You were the one cuddled up on the couch."

"What?" It was Trent's turn to be surprised.

"I saw you in there with that little blond thing."

"Who, Nathan?"

"I didn't catch his name, just the two of you snuggling." Dan didn't seem to see the humor in the situation, or the similarity in his own overreaction.

"First of all, it was a backseat, not a couch." Trent couldn't help making light of Dan's misunderstanding. "Second of all, Nathan is definitely not a real blond."

Dan drove. He watched the road ahead and fumed like an overheated engine. Obviously, he wasn't satisfied with Trent's joke as an answer. But the thought of Nathan as a threat or a potential romantic interest was absolutely hilarious to Trent.

Trent had to remind himself that Dan still thought he was a hooker. If that were true, most anything could be. Even something as ridiculous as this. It made the entire situation less funny.

It also made everything more complicated. Trent much preferred explaining this simple misconception. Nathan's true identity would make Trent look like a good guy, a hero who was just consulting with his sidekick. Admitting his true identity as a liar, albeit a non-hooker liar, wouldn't be quite as flattering to Trent's image. For the time being, Trent decided to keep wearing his hooker disguise.

"Nathan is my best friend, Dan," Trent said, quieter, with no laughter in his voice. "He's my roommate...was my roommate. Nothing happened in all those years, and it's certainly not going to happen on your couch, or backseat, or ever."

Dan still looked straight ahead. Trent might have been imagining it, but he thought Dan's face had softened a bit. What Trent really wanted to see was a blush rise into Dan's cheeks and betray his chiseled façade with romantic embarrassment. But he gathered Dan wasn't much of a blusher.

Dan was a thinker. And the thoughts that ran through his head rarely revealed themselves in his expressions. But the thoughts stumbling around his head right now were anything but logical. Reason and emotion bumped into each other around every corner of his mind.

Trent's explanation made perfect sense. Why would anyone other than a friend show up at the garage? Why would Trent take such an unnecessary risk? And what would a bleach-blond club boy be doing on that end of town anyway?

But Dan couldn't explain the immediate reaction he'd had to the sight of them on that couch. That's the part that didn't make sense. He wasn't used to wearing his emotions on his sleeve. And it took several moments for him to try his newfound jealousy on for size.

"Nathan was the first gay person I ever met," Trent added. "And the last one I would ever be interested in."

"I believe you, Trent. I guess I just got" -- Dan swallowed to clear his throat, and he wondered if that was his pride getting in the way -- "a little jealous."

"Join the club," Trent said. He half laughed and glanced back out the window. He wasn't going to blush again, he told himself.

"I mean, that whole time with Adam, he never even crossed my mind," Dan explained. "I never even thought of it. All I could think of was...you."

"And what do you think we were talking about in there?" Trent asked. "Nathan gives pretty good advice." Trent slid across the bench seat toward Dan. "He's just not my type. That should be pretty obvious."

He reached into the open collar of Dan's shirt and slid his fingers through the soft hair of his chest. He felt the hardening response of muscle and nipple as he ran his thumb over the warm skin. Trent would show Dan what it looked like when something indecent was really happening on the seat of a car.

Trent saw the pulse of desire race and jump in the tight bulge of Dan's jeans. He looked up and saw color rise into Dan's stubbled cheeks. There was that blush he'd been searching for.

Trent placed a single kiss on the line of Dan's jaw, right under that rosy color, as he reached to release the strained button of his jeans. His fingers found the dark trail of hair along Dan's rigid stomach, and he followed its path to something even harder.

When he grasped Dan's growing erection, Trent felt it surge, and he saw Dan shudder. Dan was doing an admirable job of keeping his eyes on the road, but his quickened breath betrayed his focus.

Trent worked his hand slowly and softly under the stiff denim. He felt every inch of Dan grow steadily hotter and fuller. He traced the length from its solid foundation in the wiry thicket of hair to its jutting ridge. He ran his thumb slowly around its swollen circumference and rubbed teasingly at the taut head.

Trent felt Dan's abdomen tighten reflexively, and the man lurched forward in response to the sensation, nearly falling against the steering wheel.

It was a good thing Dan was pulling into the driveway at that moment. Neither of them was going to make it much farther.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was bedtime, but Trent and Dan had already been in bed for hours. They just hadn't been sleeping. Now they were groggy, with smiles on their faces and each other in their arms. There was just one problem that kept them from taking that final plunge into slumber. They were starving.

They'd skipped dinner to satisfy other hungers. And making up had been delicious. But right now, a ham sandwich and a beer sounded almost as good as sex. The grumble of Trent's stomach was the alarm that finally roused them.

"All right, mister, it's time for dinner," Dan said as he hopped naked from bed.

Trent rolled over and groaned in exhausted disagreement. But it was more laziness than a real protest. And it was very different from the way he had groaned and rolled over just a short while ago. But the grind of his gut and the sight of Dan's muscular ass cheeks twitching out of the bedroom were all the convincing he needed to follow.

Halfway down the stairs, Trent remembered he was still a hooker. At least in Dan's mind. It must have been the rush of air against his naked skin or the slightly erotic way he bounced and jiggled with each stair that made him feel naughty and on display. It was nice to feel sexy. But that wasn't the same thing as feeling cheap. It was one thing to be on display for Dan, here in the house they now shared. But it was something altogether different to be thought of as an item on public display.

This was as good a time as any to spill the beans. They had already made up, made out, and made love. The only thing left to do was have a snack and bask in the afterglow of their shared contentment.

And Nathan was probably right. Dan should be thrilled that Trent wasn't some used-up trick. The revelation might come as a surprise, but it could actually end up making the night even better.

Trent took a determined breath and stepped into the kitchen. Dan had pulled out jars of condiments and piles of ham. He leaned naked against the cool granite counter almost modestly. Trent smiled at the way his clenched butt dimpled at the sides.

Dan turned and returned the smile, watching every move of Trent's provocative approach. He cracked a beer and handed it to him, letting their hands meet around the dewy aluminum and hang momentarily together in the air.

"Who would have thought you'd end up walking naked across my kitchen?" Dan asked rhetorically. "You're a long way from the river, that's for sure."

Trent's smile dropped. But he turned toward the counter to hide its disappearance.

"You're kinda like my own Cinderella," Dan continued. "Except without the glass slippers...or the dress, for that matter. And then there's this." Dan reached down and gave Trent's penis a playful squeeze. "I guess maybe the Frog Prince is a better comparison. Anyway, I like the makeover." He kissed the back of Trent's shoulder and turned back to the ham sandwiches.

Trent took a long swallow of beer. He felt the sweet froth slosh into his empty stomach. He wished it would hit his head as quickly. Dan seemed delighted by Trent's "transformation." It made Dan a hero. It made him more of a man -- *the* man who had lured Trent from the evils of street life. Practically Prince Charming.

This metamorphosis seemed to be important to Dan. In fact, it seemed to be the most important part of their relationship. Trent could ruin it all by admitting he had been just as wholesome before they met along the river.

It's no fun to make over a pretty girl. Any daytime talk show is evidence of that. Dan wouldn't be happy if he ended up with the same thing he started out with. The glamour and mystery and magic of change made a nice little story. Almost a fairy tale.

And what difference did once upon a time make, anyway? It was history. He wasn't a hooker anymore. He was a reformed hooker. And that was better, right? It was best to focus on happily ever after.

Trent bit into his ham sandwich. The sugary tang of mustard and mayo complemented the beer perfectly. As far as tonight was concerned, this was the peak of gourmet cuisine.

The entire evening had been amazing. Trent wasn't going to let Dan's fantasy taint it. It didn't matter if it wasn't the truth. The truth was, Dan preferred the idea of Trent's imaginary past, and that's all that really mattered. It wasn't as if Dan would go around telling everyone his boyfriend was a prostitute. Anyway, who knew what Dan's past had been like? Trent reached for the second half of his sandwich and another beer.

Weeknight beers were not a common occurrence in Dan's life. But then, none of his life had seemed common since Trent came into it. So he decided to join him for another drink.

He enjoyed a long sip and the moment. It was a luxury, and he deserved it. He and Trent leaned together, naked against the counter. It would have been too cold to sit down and too much trouble to put on pants. It was just the kind of silly, intimate moment that would stick in Dan's mind for years.

Dan reached over and wiped a smear of mayo from the corner of Trent's mouth. He let his hand trail down over the white shoulders and back. He lingered in the valley that formed above the mounds of Trent's buttocks.

He couldn't get enough of this, of Trent. He wanted his hands on Trent at all times, reminding himself this was real. He wanted to be near him and immersed in this crazy

feeling. No matter how crazy it was, it was real. And by admitting his jealousy, Dan had tested his own emotion and Trent's intention. They had passed both tests with flying colors.

It seemed ridiculous to test fate, to question this raw instinct. But Dan was a cautious businessman. And Trent was a hooker.

Was. Past tense. Trent had showed no signs of returning to his night job. Even his secret moments had been spent talking about Dan and their relationship. He couldn't hold his past against Trent, no matter how hard it was to accept. Dan hoped Trent would return the favor if unpleasant details were ever revealed about his history. Their history.

"Sorry about today," Dan said again.

"Me too," Trent responded.

"I guess I've just been under a lot of stress."

"Sorry." Trent hadn't realized he'd complicated Dan's life so much.

"No. It's not your fault." Dan rubbed his hand in the small of Trent's back. He held the smooth body against him. "It's the garage. Business has dropped a bit. A pretty big bit," Dan admitted. "But that's business."

On this perfect night, Dan didn't want to explain Rodney and the overworked rumor mill that was churning out gossip at quite a productive pace. If Trent could share Dan's bed and his body and still believe there was remaining lust to be spent on employees, opinionated strangers would have no problem swallowing Rodney's theories.

And he was proving them all right. Here Dan stood, naked in his kitchen with a young guy who was at least pretending to be a mechanic. Things couldn't have been much more complicated.

Dan popped another beer for dessert and handed one to Trent. Might as well polish off the six pack while they were at it, he decided. Dan knew he shouldn't be having three beers on a work night. He also knew he shouldn't be starting a relationship with a young hooker who now worked for him. But he wasn't doing anything to be cautious at the moment.

Dan was discovering there were some things that just weren't logical. They might not be wise business decisions. They might not be smart at all. But they were worth it.

He gave Trent a yeasty beer kiss, and their tongues met at the same time their bodies pressed fully against each other. The smooth rub of skin and the ache of their exhausted erections felt sleepy and delicious. It was the perfect nightcap.



## Chapter Ten

Morning came a lot sooner than usual.

Dan rolled over at first light and wrapped an arm around Trent. He pulled the smooth nakedness closer and fit Trent's form into the bend of his own body. The curve of their legs and waists cupped one another perfectly. Dan could have stayed like that until the sun set on the other side of the house.

Trent wriggled against the comfort of Dan's flesh. He felt the strong reassurance of his arm and the solid seat of Dan's furry thighs behind him.

He felt Dan's renewed desire growing between the tight seal of their flesh. The warmth pressed insistently at his buttocks. Dan moved back and forth slightly, and the width of his erection found the natural cradle between those mounds.

Trent echoed his movement, and Dan could feel the soft squeeze of Trent's buttocks along each side of his aching shaft. Dan kissed the white shoulder. Rubbed his open lips lightly along the delicate bone.

Despite his tenderness, his need had grown as heated and solid as his dick, which he rubbed firmly against the silky flesh between Trent's cheeks. He could feel the knot of that hole tracing the length of his hardness, and it drove him crazy.

No matter how many times they had repeated their coupling last night, it hadn't weakened Dan's incredible want. No matter how many times he had kissed Trent, sucked him, rolled over and submitted to him, Dan craved more and more of this man and this body.

Without a word, Dan reached behind him for the necessary items, never breaking the adherence of their skin.

Trent felt Dan's slick finger circling his hole. Wet coolness replaced the warm friction for just a few seconds. Then the press of Dan's hardness returned. Trent felt the push of his cock's tip. Then Trent felt himself open readily, warm and relaxed from a night of passion.

The familiar shape and sensation of Dan returned easily with a long, gentle, slippery movement.

Dan held Trent's waist as he entered Trent fully, restoring the proximity of their bodies, stomach to back, hips to ass. He exhaled a silent breath, hot and moist as morning, against the base of Trent's skull. He kissed him softly along the nape of his neck as he moved deeper inside him.

Dan's rough hands ran along Trent's torso. He traced the curve of his shoulder and ribs. He grasped the younger man's thighs and squeezed his body closer. He arched into him and felt the willing acceptance in Trent's shuddering breath.

Trent reached behind him for the thick muscle of Dan's thighs. He held him close, all the way inside him, reassuring Dan with pulling hands that he would have him nearer, deeper, completely.

The pleasure and presence of Dan burrowed into Trent, and his own erection pointed straight and tense in front of him. Suddenly Dan's hand grasped it tightly. He squeezed Trent in his fist, using his hold to pull them closer, to brace his movement into Trent.

They were a solid form undulating together. Dan's thrusting was not a matter of entry and exit. He held himself as deep as possible, rocking their hips together, never losing an inch of that delicious depth. He held the base of Trent's shaft steadily and let the movement of their rocking slide its length through the circle of his fingers.

Trent could feel the bone of Dan's pelvis pressed tight against his ass. He felt the rub of pubic hair where they ground their bodies together. He felt the full size of Dan in him, and he felt Dan's breath come faster against his back.

When Trent felt the long, hard pulse of Dan's orgasm deep inside, he added his own hand to the grip Dan had on his cock. He held Dan's fingers and guided him roughly along his shaft. Together, they pumped harder as Dan softened slightly inside him. And Trent's sphincter throbbed around Dan's receding orgasm as he shot long strands of semen onto the sheets and collapsed against Dan's sweaty torso.

\* \* \* \* \*

Trent's head hummed along with the truck's engine as they sped along late for work. It wasn't really a hangover or a headache. He was groggy from sex and beer, from lack of sleep and lack of restraint.

But after last night's revelation about the ailing business, there was no way Trent could suggest playing hooky. It would have to be business as usual, no matter how unusual and unwelcome that seemed. So he closed his eyes and tried to take solace in the warmth of this morning's memory.

Dan wouldn't admit it, but he felt just about the same. His rhythm had been thrown off by unexpected happiness. He pushed the truck a little harder and forced himself to focus on the day ahead. It was the first time he felt a little thankful for the slump in business.

Immediately, he caught himself. That was no way to be thinking. Dan couldn't allow everything to be swept away by romance. Last night had been wonderful. And this morning had seemed like the previous night simmered and stewed into a richer, more powerful brew. It roused him better than coffee.

But for now, Dan swilled the cold dregs from the bottom of his paper cup and returned it to its holder. It would have to do. They couldn't live on passion alone. He couldn't put work on hold just because Trent was so much more fun. Dan had spent his entire life building his business. Although it seemed he had also spent his entire life waiting for someone like Trent to come along -- or maybe just Trent himself.

But Dan didn't have time to weigh his priorities and destiny this early in the morning. All he knew for certain was that there was a business to run -- to save. They pulled into the garage, and Trent slowly lifted his head from the window's glass. There was a smooth red circle where he'd pressed his forehead against its coolness. Dan took one last moment to admire that sleepy look and tuft of bangs. He gave Trent a wink as he hopped out of the cab.

The garage looked as busy as a beehive, as hectic as an ant farm. To Trent, it could have been any mass of creeping, crawling insects devoted to a life of servitude. And he didn't understand a word of their buzzing or their frantic dance of activity.

Most of all, he didn't understand why everything was so busy all of a sudden. If business was suffering, why did he have to suffer, too? Why did everyone need an oil change and an alignment today of all days?

Dan was lost in the mass of customers and confusion before Trent was even out of the truck. Mechanics crisscrossed the lot, moved cars, shouted to one another. Customers jangled keys, double-parked, and tapped their feet.

Trent squeezed into the garage along the side, trying to avoid the bustle and customers. The last thing he needed was a question about the size of tires or the timing of timing belt replacement. Trent knew he couldn't be good for business. He found Adam in the back corner, hunched into the cavernous mouth of a van's open hood.

"Hey, Adam, what's going on?" He felt a little apologetic. He couldn't be sure whether Adam had noticed his cold shoulder yesterday.

"I'll be damned if I know," Adam said without looking back.

Trent could tell Adam was talking about the engine or some other piece of metal inside the van's guts, completely oblivious to the world outside. He was focused intently on the riddle of machinery like a secret agent breaking enemy code, listening for blips and clicks, ignoring everything else.

They always gave Adam the mysteries. He was their special agent, and he wasn't going to be distracted from deciphering the message by the sounds of war around him. But as far as Trent could tell, things were crashing and exploding everywhere with frightening frequency.

"Some guy called from another garage first thing this morning," Mark said. Suddenly he was beside Trent, carrying a toolbox so he could set up shop in the parking lot. "I guess their electricity is out or something. Anyway, he sent all his customers over here. It's a madhouse."

Trent couldn't disagree with that. He had never seen the garage like this before. There was hardly room to move in the cramped bay. It was absolutely packed. And it made the place seem smaller, claustrophobic, just a little too familiar.

He had no idea what kind of maneuvers the mechanics had pulled to wedge all these automobiles in here. But it was more like a parking garage at some grand event than an auto shop in the middle of the week. And as far as Trent could tell, every mechanic he had met over the past weeks had been called in as reinforcements. The only person he couldn't see was Dan; he was nowhere to be found.

Trent surveyed the crowd and found dozens of faces twisted into expressions of concentration and stress. One face in the crowd stood out. One single countenance didn't appear hurried or overworked. A man with ruddy cheeks and a glistening scalp stood amid all the commotion.

"Who's that?" Trent asked, nodding toward the middle-aged man in the center of the garage with a look of satisfaction on his face and his hands resting on his hips right under his belly.

"That's him," Mark answered. "He's been here all morning. Asking questions about everything and everyone. Like we have time to chit-chat after what he dumped on us. We still haven't figured out which garage he came from."

Dan stepped from the office into more confusion. He'd been stopped and delayed half a dozen times already by old customers and new complaints. Employees wanted to know what was going on and where to begin. Everyone had questions, and Dan had no idea what was happening.

So he entered the garage wearing a scowl across his brow, determined to take charge and find an explanation. But what he discovered there was not an answer. It was an even bigger problem.

It was Rodney. He was standing at the center of the crowded garage as if all the confusion radiated directly from him. As if it was all his doing.

It had been years since Dan had looked directly at Rodney. He still thought of him as that young man who had started out a friend. In Dan's mind, Rodney was an image from the past. Before he had lost hair and his innocence. Before he had gained weight and an attitude. Years ago, when he had been an entirely different person. But the years had not been as kind as Dan's memory.

“Dan,” Rodney announced loudly. The garage hushed to make way for his voice. “We were all wondering when you were finally gonna show up.”

“Rodney, what are you doing in my garage?” Dan didn’t have the tolerance for small talk. These were the first words that had passed between the two in years. And they were passing the words across a garage full of onlookers. They hurled them like grenades. “And what have you done *to* my garage?”

“Calm down, buddy.” Rodney held out his hand as if he were being attacked. “I was just trying to help. Send a little business your way to remind you what it’s like. But I guess this just proves your service is as bad as your morals.”

“Rodney, you can leave my garage,” Dan said plainly. “Now.”

The silence was incredible. No one moved. The entire building seemed be holding its breath. In that stillness, it was almost possible to hear Rodney smile.

“I don’t think me or any of these folks will have a problem with that,” Rodney replied. “Come on, everyone. I think the power should be back on at a *real* garage by now. Sorry for wasting your time.”

There was no reply that could have saved the moment. Anything Dan could have said would have seemed defensive and desperate. He knew when to keep his mouth shut. So he stood there defiantly with his arms crossed and watched customers trickle out. People had respect for the strong, silent type. At least, that’s what Dan hoped.

These customers didn’t know they’d been forced into a personal grudge match. They didn’t have the time or patience to figure out what was going on. But Dan was sure after work was done and dinner was on the table, they would be ripe for rumors. When people whispered about Dan and his failed business, his young employees, his battle with Rodney, these people would be able to confirm the hearsay. They had been there.

But right now, no one wanted to stick around and tell tales. From the looks of discomfort on faces, leaving seemed to be the easiest way out. But that was easier said than done. The garage was a minefield of cars. There was no clear escape route. Some people were going to get caught in the crossfire whether they liked it or not.

People on the outskirts moved out as soon as they could. Others were forced to stand on the edges and look in at their cars, waving at them like relatives across battle lines. As if the cars would recognize them and rush out to meet them.

These straggling victims were the ones who got to hear the worst of Rodney’s attack. They were getting a sneak preview of all the dramatic battles to come. And the reports they gave to their friends and neighbors would be the prediction of the victor.

Everyone loves a good war, juicy news coverage, a scandal, a sex scene, and a mystery all rolled into one. They couldn’t wait to see the carnage, to see what happened next.

"All these young boys. It's a shame," Rodney said. "Can't really expect them to handle a man's job." He paused, waited to drop the bombshell. "Well, at least not anything that has to do with mechanics."

As he moved to leave, Rodney turned at the garage door and launched a final, blasting onslaught across the bay.

"Hey, Trent," he called out to the stranger in back. "If you ever need a job, just come by my garage. You never know when he's going to pick a new favorite apprentice." He let the offer hang in the air. "Anytime, Trent. No 'overtime' required at my place. If you know what I mean."

"Get out of here, Rodney," Dan commanded. But it was too late. Rodney had already retreated.

Trent was confused and embarrassed. From the moment he had stepped into the garage, he'd had no idea what was going on. But after Rodney had singled him out, he felt exposed and vulnerable. He had no way of defending himself or Dan, because he didn't know the terms of the battle.

He looked across the garage at Dan, but his stare wasn't being returned. Dan busied himself with papers and keys and whatever measure of organization it took to get things moving, whatever it took to look like the owner of a business instead of a casualty of Rodney's attack.

Trent had never seen Dan so upset. Yesterday's fit of jealousy was nothing compared to this. Under Dan's forced professionalism, the clenched rage was obvious. Every move Dan made was wrought with tension.

Trent assumed camouflage was the best choice for the occasion. He didn't need to draw attention to himself anymore, now that Rodney had singled him out. Trent knew he didn't belong here. He wasn't a mechanic. But everyone else didn't have to know that.

So he put on his best mechanic's expression of contemplation and leaned over Adam's shoulder. He even grabbed a screwdriver. He figured a prop would make things appear more authentic.

Slowly, people emptied from the parking lot and customer waiting area. They drove their cars away or took cabs and buses if Dan could convince them to trust their vehicles with him for the day. After an embarrassing scene like that, no one was quite sure what to expect from this mechanic. It was certainly not business as usual.

Trent thought he was putting on a splendid disguise. He watched Adam dig his way through layers of oily parts. But he spent most of his time simply hiding behind the propped hood, peeking out now and then to see if Dan had reemerged.

"Damn, there it is," Adam declared.

Trent leaned in to witness the revelation. He gazed down into several shades of grime. But there was nothing there, as far as Trent could see. Everything was gray or black, metal or grease.

Then Adam's hand slipped. Trent was surprised it didn't happen more often. He was constantly dropping things, and he didn't get nearly as slathered in grease as the rest of the guys. Hoses and wires slid from Adam's hand and obscured whatever discovery he had made.

"Shit."

Trent reached in for the rescue. Perhaps he was taking his mechanic charade a bit too far, but he was doing his best to play the part. He thrust his screwdriver into the engine's belly and prodded at the intestines of wire, attempting to lift them out of Adam's way. But this time when the innards slid back into the van's abdomen, they also swallowed Trent's screwdriver.

"Shit." It was Trent's turn to curse.

He felt eyes on his from every corner of the garage. There was only so much swearing that could go on before they drew the attention of the remaining audience.

"What the hell are you doing in there?" Dan made him jump in surprise as he shouted over Trent's shoulder.

"I was just trying to..." Trent didn't know where to begin. He didn't know when Dan had appeared or why he was yelling at him. "To use the screwdriver to poke --"

"What were you doing with a screwdriver in there anyway?" Dan asked angrily. "We don't poke at things, Trent."

Dan's hands were on his hips. He squeezed his fingers tightly into his own skin and felt them dig into tendon and muscle. He was so full of pressure, it had to be released somewhere. Unfortunately, his firm grip on himself wasn't going to be enough.

"Sorry," Trent said meekly.

Dan didn't want to make a scene, but it was already too late for that. Rodney had made sure of it. The last thing Dan needed was Trent's incompetence to draw more attention to the impropriety of his presence. No one in his right mind would believe Trent really worked here.

But what people would have no problem believing was exactly what Rodney had told them -- Trent was just a talentless pretty boy that Dan kept around for thrills. Worst of all, it was true. But Dan would be damned if he was going to let this exception be seen as the rule throughout his entire business. And Dan didn't even want to consider what could happen if Trent's previous place of employment were revealed.

"I think you should go home now, Trent," Dan said. "There's nothing else for you to do here."

It was the only thing he could say. The look of shock and hurt on Trent's face stabbed Dan in the gut. But the pain passed. He bit down hard into logic and ignored the ache.

“Hey, Dan, everything’s fine,” Adam said, trying to fix things as usual. “I’ve got the screwdriver right here. Nothing’s damaged.”

But Dan didn’t even look at the kid. He kept his hands on his hips and his jaw clenched. Trent just walked away.

He had no idea what had possessed Dan to treat him that way. Trent kicked at the cracked pavement on his way through the lot. He was doing his best, playing along. There was no reason for Dan to take his anger out on him.

He didn’t know what was bothering Dan, or what Rodney had to do with any of this. All he knew was that he didn’t deserve this kind of treatment. He did not appreciate being scolded and dismissed like a pet. Like a piece of property.

Dan wanted the convenience of ordering Trent around and sending him on his way when the task was done. This was why he couldn’t let Dan continue thinking he was a hooker. Even though that’s obviously what he wanted. Dan could act sweet when he wanted and be a complete ass the rest of the time. Trent kicked at the gravel again.

“Hey, handsome, you’re going to ruin your shoes that way.” Trent looked up. Ida sat inside her fancy sedan, behind an enormous pair of sunglasses. “Need a ride?”

Trent hadn’t actually thought about it. He could have taken Dan’s truck and stranded him. It would have served him right. He could have taken a bus to his old apartment and left Dan wondering. That might have been better. But the truth was, Trent had no idea where he was headed. So he crawled into Ida’s parked car at the edge of the lot.

“Thanks.”

“Anytime,” she replied. “I was just sitting here wondering if I should bother waiting in line to get my tires rotated. Looks like you guys are pretty busy.”

“We were.”

“Well, I guess the tires can wait until next week,” she said, but Ida made no move to start her car. She actually seemed to settle back into her fur coat and leather seat as if she were getting comfortable for a long session. “Trent, honey, what’s going on?”

“I’m not exactly sure. Rodney showed up this morning.”

“Really?”

Two syllables had never sounded so long and curious to Trent before. Ida folded her hands in her lap and readjusted gold rings on her fingers. Trent could tell they weren’t going anywhere for a while. So he gave her a brief synopsis of Rodney’s speech and Dan’s reaction. She seemed more interested than he had imagined.

“So do you have any idea what that means?” Trent asked. “Or why it would make Dan act like such a jerk?”

“Honey, we all have old enemies for one reason or another,” Ida said. She gazed out over the top of her smoky lenses. “None of those reasons seem terribly important down the



road. But somehow the past always comes back to haunt you. Battle scars have a way of reopening, and that ain't pretty."

Trent tried to think about his past. About where he had come from and where he was going. There was no clear path. The only thing that kept coming to mind was the direction he was headed before he met Dan. That path along the river sure wasn't going to lead anywhere good. He knew that now. Where would he have ended up if Dan hadn't steered him clear?

Of course, that same night seemed to repeat itself over and over. Even though he had never followed through with his initial intentions, the cheap smell of prostitution was on him. He couldn't wash it off. No matter how hard he tried, something was keeping him from coming clean to Dan.

He shifted in his seat and made embarrassing noises against the leather. It was better than the silence. Ida reached over and patted his leg. It surprised him how comforting all that heavy gold and red nail gloss felt.

"Look, Trent, I like you. And I'll tell you something, just in case he hasn't. Dan likes you, too. A lot. I've never seen him act like this before, and I've known him forever." She took off her glasses and took her own glimpse into the past. "He sure was a cantankerous little shit. But he grew into a great guy, and he's growing up more every day. It's worth waiting around for. Promise."

"Yeah, well, I haven't known him that long at all," Trent said. "And I'm not so sure...about anything."

"And how do you think Dan feels?" Ida obviously couldn't suppress her maternal instincts of protection completely. "He's got a business and all this Rodney bullshit to deal with on top of you." She took a breath to compose herself and smooth her fur. The entire situation had raised her hackles. "Dan took a long time to accept himself, sweetheart. And apparently some people are having an even harder time with it. It's none of their damn business, of course, but that never stopped anyone from being an asshole."

"Well, that's true," Trent agreed. He'd been focusing so intently on the changes in his world that he hadn't given much thought to the stress he was putting on Dan's business and day-to-day life. "But he doesn't have to take it out on me."

"No. He doesn't. But people don't change overnight." She paused to consider her own proclamation. "Listen, I used to smoke. Knew I shouldn't, but it looked so damn good with the wardrobe. The husband's a doctor and hated it. So I cut back for him. Then one day I dropped a cigarette on the sleeve of my fur, and that was it. Quit right then and there."

Ida stopped and looked briefly guilty for indulging in her memory. "Honey, I know it's not an exciting story, but there's a moral in there somewhere, I'm sure." She thought about it for a minute. "Live long and prosper? Do unto others? No. It's this: Everything you do for him, you do for yourself, too. It's not black and white. It's not love-honor-obey bullshit. That

would be too easy. You don't change for someone. You change with them. And if you do it right, honey, it's wonderful."

Ida started the car as she finished her speech. Even if Trent had managed to think of a single thing to say, she didn't give him a chance to respond. Her engine roared and purred simultaneously in perfect harmony. It was evident she brought it to the best mechanic in town whenever she had an excuse.

Without asking, Ida pulled onto the highway and headed north toward Dan's house. She was making assumptions, and she was also approaching a hundred miles an hour. So Trent just buckled up and kept his mouth shut.

In Dan's driveway, Ida looked over at Trent for approval as she patted her hair into place. She didn't own a convertible, but Trent wouldn't have been surprised if her driving had created some g-force that was capable of more than messing up hair. In fact, he thought he might have whiplash. He readjusted the omnipresent camera strap around his sore neck.

Ida gave the camera a casual glance as she checked her nails and reached out to pick something up from the bench seat. It was a pile of pictures, which had slipped from Trent's pocket during their rocket flight of a trip.

The other night, Trent had used his new darkroom for the first time. And it worked like a charm. The sheer thrill of being back in familiar territory had been amazing, but the feeling of having his own darkroom was unbelievable. In his excitement, he had shoved the pile of black-and-white proofs in his pocket this morning. The anti-gravitational forces Ida's lead foot had created inside her little sports sedan must have set them loose.

Before he could retrieve them, Ida had already flipped through the pile. Suddenly she let out a shriek. Trent could see that she was staring down at the photo of herself in the garage, arms outstretched, fur dangling around her. Trent worried she was horrified, as so many people were when they saw themselves in pictures.

"I absolutely love it!" she cried with schoolgirl joy. "I look fabulous."

Then she continued through the pile much more slowly. She paused and squinted several times. She held the tip of her tongue between her teeth thoughtfully.

"I'm keeping these. I've got a little something in mind. And I owe you, honey, after making you listen to me jabber away like that." She looked back down at the photos she'd spread across her lap. "And you deserve it."

"Okay." It really wasn't a big deal. He could make more proofs from the negatives anytime. "Thanks, Ida." But he didn't know if it was for the ride, the advice, or something else.

Ida stopped him as he was climbing out of her car.

"If I were you, I'd spend the rest of my day off making bigger prints of some of these."

She winked, put her sunglasses back on, and peeled out of the drive.

## Chapter Eleven

Ida was right. Trent knew it. Everything was changing all at once, and he couldn't expect it all to work out perfectly right away. It had only been two weeks. Not even. Hell, milk took longer to go bad. He couldn't expect a relationship to go sour so quickly.

Of course, it didn't excuse Dan's behavior. And Trent wasn't quite ready to forgive him. Dan's temper seemed to run hot and cold. Warm and loving one minute, chilly and uncaring the next. Trent wasn't comfortable with someone who turned his emotions on and off constantly.

Dan was dealing with a lot more than Trent. It may have seemed like a whirlwind romance from Trent's point of view, but Dan's life was a virtual tornado.

Trent didn't know exactly what was going on between Dan and Rodney. But he knew business was suffering, and so was Dan. And he also knew his own presence in the garage wasn't making any of it easier.

Trent stepped into the darkroom. *His* darkroom. Suddenly, the entire mood changed. It was a lot more than red lighting and that old familiar smell of chemical creation. It was a sense of belonging that he couldn't articulate.

There was no reason for him to even be in there yet. He hadn't taken out any photograph paper or film, nothing light-sensitive. He just wanted the warm glow of inspiration around him, the seclusion of his art.

He looked at strip of negatives in the dim light. He projected them larger through machinery, bright patches of black-and-white light in the redness. He didn't have a clue what Ida was scheming, or why she'd insisted on taking his photos. But it gave him the perfect excuse to play.

He pulled out larger sheets of photograph paper. He scanned through miles of negative strips, picking out his favorites and imagining what size would best suit each one. He was

amazed at how many shots he'd taken in the past two weeks. Cars and mechanics from every angle. Tools and bits of engines strewn in corners of countless photographs.

No wonder Dan had been on edge with Trent in the garage. He was not a mechanic, and he spent nearly every moment there snapping and winding away. The rapid clicking sound alone must have been a distraction.

But the results...they weren't half bad. Trent could be hard on himself, but even he admitted that the past couple weeks had been a pretty good shoot.

Developing was practically automatic. Flashes of light. Dripping developing solution. He blew images up, focused them carefully, then watched them reappear slowly, rising in the rejuvenating waters of the magical solution. When the images reached the perfect shade, the perfect contrast, he washed each in its final bath to stop the darkening. Then he hung it to dry, like his mother doing laundry in that picture from years ago, and he admired the captured memory for a short moment before turning to the next.

\* \* \* \* \*

Things had finally quieted down at the garage. The customers had gone. The cars had been rearranged and parked in neat rows out in the lot. Dan sat at his desk, exhausted, with organized piles of paperwork in front of him.

It was quiet now. But Dan could almost hear the rumors, the whispering from every direction.

Even his own mechanics looked down into engines when Dan passed by. They probably could have put up with Rodney. After working on his customers' cars, they knew what a hack he was. And they certainly knew Dan never expressed anything but mechanical interest in them. But Dan's temper tantrum with Trent had been more than the employees were prepared for.

Dan looked down at his book and realized Ida had missed her scheduled appointment. That wasn't like her at all. Her car was her baby. A tire rotation wasn't really a big deal, especially not as often as Ida had it done. But whether or not he wanted to admit it, Dan could have used some good advice. And no one offered that up as freely or as bluntly as Ida Strauss.

Dan could kick himself for the scene he had caused, for the way he had treated Trent. But his head was so tied up in knots. He didn't know what to deal with first. Rodney. Trent. His employees. Himself. Every thought that ran through his mind seemed to stumble. He couldn't take a right step. He kept tripping up and falling down flat on his face.

He'd decided long ago there was nothing he could do about Rodney. But the silent treatment wasn't making much progress with so much noise surrounding it. His logic was being drowned out by deafening gossip and circumstances. Rodney had gone from whispering rumors to shouting out loud in Dan's place of business.

Dan had to respond somehow. But he didn't have a thing to say in his own defense. His voice was stuck in his throat, in his chest. There was an ache there, under his headache, under the pain in the neck that was Rodney. It was somewhere beneath his ribs, in a hollow, foreign place.

It was the place that Trent had carved out, the new spot in Dan's life, where only Trent belonged. And right now that vacancy engulfed all Dan's thoughts and worries. Until he filled it, there was no way he could resolve anything else. Was his relationship with Trent standing in the way of his business, or was it the other way around?

"Dan, I finished that van," Adam said, poking his head into the office cautiously. "Should I put it out front or out back?"

Normally, arranging all the cars wasn't such a jigsaw puzzle. But the sudden flood of business this morning had made the parking strategy impossible.

"Great," Dan replied, snapping back to the moment. "That was quick. He wasn't expecting it for days. Better put it out back, I guess."

Even Dan hadn't expected a solution to the van's mystery today. Adam was one hell of a mechanic. And that was one lucky customer. If he'd left it up to Rodney, his van would have been in a hundred pieces by now, and ten more things would've gotten broken putting it all back together.

If people would only judge garages by skill and honesty, there would be no contest. Dan and his crew would win every single time. Unfortunately, people focused on irrelevant parts that didn't fit in cars.

"Hold on, Adam," Dan said. "On second thought, put that van right out front, where Rodney and everyone else can see it. Good job."

Adam grinned all the way through the garage and pulled the big van directly in front, as if it were for sale. He deserved to be proud, Dan thought. He was more of a mechanic at sixteen than Rodney was at thirty-five. Twenty years of bitterness and crooked business had probably made him even worse than when he began. Dan wouldn't let that happen to Adam or any of his mechanics. He wanted Adam to display his talent and take pride in his work. Put it right out there for the whole world to see.

Suddenly, Dan stopped when he heard his own thoughts. He knit his brows together in revelation. He was sitting here worrying, torturing himself, but he wasn't even listening to his own logic. He expected employees and customers to trust him and follow his guidance. But he wasn't following his own advice.

If Trent was so wonderful. If he could make Dan feel this crazy, this confused, better than anything rational he could wrap his mind around. If Dan liked him enough to bring him into his home and his life. If maybe Dan was beginning to feel something a lot stronger than liking.

Then why the hell wasn't he shouting Trent's name to every stranger on the street?

Why was he keeping Trent a secret? He should be proud of his accomplishment. It should be the first thing he mentioned when he shook someone's hand. He should put Trent front and center in his life, right out there where everyone could see him.

So what Trent was young? So what he wasn't a mechanic? So what they were from different worlds with the exact same beginning? They had just ended up worlds apart. But now, they were together again. Maybe they had found their way back to each other.

Dan didn't even care that Trent had been a hooker. It wasn't the best thing to have on his resume. But everyone has a past. And it was probably better than the asshole Dan had been in his twenties. He had been no angel either.

Rodney and his rumors could go to hell. Maybe the whole truth was the answer to that problem as well. People might not like the fact that Dan was gay, but those people could follow Rodney right into the fire and brimstone, for all Dan cared. They'd just have to take the bus, because their cars wouldn't run for shit.

It was time that Dan broke his silence and told the truth. He was gay. And Trent was younger. But it was a real relationship, not a harem of exploited employees as Rodney would have the world believe.

Trent was the reality in Dan's life. He was the truth. And Dan suddenly realized he could very well be falling in love with him.

Dan grabbed his coat and keys and tried to remember where the closest florist was on the way home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Trent had saved the best for last. And in this case, bigger was better. He had printed the fabulous Mrs. Ida Strauss on an enormous, poster-sized sheet of paper.

He hung the dripping portrait up and delighted in the extravagance he had captured. There were greasy tools and dirty tires piled high on both sides of her, but Ida glittered and posed for all she was worth. A diamond in the rough.

The phone rang.

"What are you doing out of the darkroom?"

"Well, Ida, the phone just rang," Trent half-laughed into the receiver. "Anyway, I'm finished. Guess whose close-up I just developed."

"Well, you sound in better spirits. Maybe I should save the good news for your next bad mood." She couldn't even take the dramatic pause she intended. She sounded as if she was jumping for joy on her end of the line. "Oh, it can't wait anyway. You're having a show."

"What?"

"A gallery." She emphasized each syllable. "A showing of your photographs, Trent."

"Ida, you're crazy." He couldn't think of any good reason for her to lie to him, but it just wasn't possible.

"I never said I wasn't crazy, sweetheart. I said you're having a show, an opening, whatever the hell you want to call it."

"How in the world...?"

"Honey, I have the misfortune of knowing everyone in town. Social obligations are a pain in my ass, but every once in a while they come in handy," Ida explained. "This stuck-up little art bitch throws the worst cocktail parties. But every gallery in town thinks her instincts are better than her martinis. So I pulled some strings, but not very hard. Once she saw your pictures, she realized it wasn't just my trashy taste."

"I can't believe it," Trent mumbled. He held the phone numbly to his ear. Luckily, no one else was around, so he didn't have to shut his hanging jaw.

"You don't have to believe it," she quipped immediately. "You just have to be your charming self and be ready by Saturday."

"Saturday?" All Trent could think was: *three days*.

"Well, you should probably have the prints there by Friday night for hanging," she said, taking a deep breath. "Look, I'm not a miracle worker, for Chrissakes. They had an opening, a cancellation, some strung-out art fiend overdosed or something. The point is, they need somebody, and they want you."

*Two days.*

"Don't worry about a thing, honey," Ida assured him. "All I have to do is whisper the phrase 'open bar,' and every socialite in town will be there."

"Does Dan know?" Trent asked. For some reason that was his most immediate concern.

"I'll let you tell him," she answered. "It's a nice way to make up and let him know he can stop trying to turn you into a mechanic."

"Yeah," Trent agreed. He was stunned.

"Well, I've phone calls to make, and you've got to get cracking." Ida smacked kissing noises into her end of the line. "Later, honey."

The phone clicked. Trent didn't manage to hang up for a solid twenty seconds. That's when panic set in.

Two days! He would never be ready. He ran into the darkroom and flipped on the white light. There were dozens of developed prints hanging dry. And there were at least a hundred more with black skies and white pavement, negatives just begging to be printed.

Suddenly none of them was good enough. There were gaping holes in this collection when he started thinking of them as a "collection." The garage theme seemed hokey and clichéd. It was too much like porn or overdone Americana.

Deep breath. Trent took a moment to be absolutely thrilled. He smiled at his collection before he returned to panic mode. He heard the roar of a truck outside. Was Dan home early?

Trent ran to the bedroom window and gazed down into the drive. His heart sank a bit when he saw the mail truck there instead. But his pulse picked right back up at the terrifying thought of the approaching weekend. He decided to get the mail. It would be a slight distraction from the fluttering excitement of terror that kept rising inside him.

A show! He couldn't believe it. It would probably only be Ida and a few of her friends who owed her favors or could be blackmailed. She was a sweet woman. But Trent didn't want to get his hopes up. What gallery had last-minute cancellations? It was probably a windowless closet in a basement somewhere. But try as he might, his pessimism couldn't dampen his excitement.

Trent stomped down the stairs after the mail. Dan always leaned out the window of the truck and reached into the mailbox on the way into the drive. It seemed kind of lazy and silly to Trent, but he'd never really given the habit much thought. He'd just never gotten the mail.

Trent didn't receive much mail anyway. He'd changed his address a week ago, but forwarded letters and bills were just starting to show up with the telltale yellow labels pasted across them.

He grabbed the bundle of letters and headed back inside. There were a couple bills with his new address stuck to the front. Trent considered the distinct possibility that they were overdue after the lag they'd spent in the postal route. Then there were a few pieces of junk mail addressed to Resident and Postal Patron.

Trent stepped inside and tossed the pile onto the small table by the door. He started back up the stairs hurriedly, but stopped short. He realized he probably shouldn't put off those bills any longer. So he plucked them from the top of the pile.

The letter underneath was addressed to Dan. Dan Bartlett.

In that moment, everything became so clear it was dizzying, blinding. The truth burned into him and spun his world around. Dan Bartlett. Glen Mills. Mr. Bartlett.

Trent subtracted a decade from Dan's face, added a baseball hat and a six-pack of cheap beer. The most memorable feature of his cruel neighbor had been his boots. Trent hadn't looked up from them very often. But they were always smeared with grease.

Suddenly, there was no doubt in Trent's mind and no logical explanation. There was no excuse. Trent threw the entire pile of mail across the room and flew up the stairs.

There, in the bottom of a dusty shoebox, Trent found the confirmation. The photo was bent and old, and a swatch of lace curtain had crept into the corner of the shot. But the outline of Dan's jaw was unmistakable as he pulled shattered glass from a window frame nearly fifteen years before.



Trent's heart seized at the memory and the impossibility that it had come back to haunt him after all this time.

There were rationalizations and justifications for every time Dan had hurt him over the past two weeks. Dan could apologize and cry jealousy. Ida could talk till she was blue in the face about change and sacrifice and Dan's personal struggles.

But there was no explaining this betrayal. There was no excuse for the past. No excuse for lies. That had been the worst time in Trent's life, his most painful memories. Poor and struggling with his own identity and sexuality, the last thing he could stand was constant torment living right next door. Dan had poked fun and thrown jabs when Trent was at his most vulnerable, his most tender age.

Trent had spent years tiptoeing in and out of his own house to avoid Mr. Bartlett's wrath. And he'd never even known his first name.

Dan had stuffed all Trent's empty luggage under the spare bed, and it was almost impossible to reach. So Trent didn't try. He needed to escape with his pride, not his clothes.

He ran to the darkroom with his heart in his throat and started pulling the prints from the line. They were barely dry enough, but he laid them between sheets of cardboard and taped the edges together carefully.

He took his time, no matter how many moments it cost him. This was the only thing that mattered now. He should have realized that before. Trying to ignore photography for mechanics had been torture. But ignoring photography for some illusion of romance was his most painful mistake. It was one he was never going to make again.

Dan was as cruel as he'd ever been! He had plucked Trent from his life and plopped him down inside this new identity. He had given him a pair of coveralls and thrust him into the exhaust-stink of the garage. He'd done it all under the guise of opportunity. But what he was really doing was stealing Trent's happiness. He was taking away what Trent loved and replacing it with a false idol of desire, maybe even love.

Now that was stripped away, too. And Trent was left with nothing but pain and lies. Was this an elaborate scheme, some twisted fantasy of Dan's? Had he gone to all this trouble just to finish what he'd started a decade ago? Had Dan stalked him, sought Trent out to finish ruining his life?

Whatever he was trying to do, Dan wasn't going to win this time. Trent wasn't a kid anymore. Dan was overlooking one thing. He'd overestimated himself, like all liars and villains. He wasn't going to leave Trent with nothing. Trent still had his greatest strength. He still had his photographs.

He left the soiled coveralls on the floor of the darkroom and stuffed his pockets with film. He must have looked ridiculous walking down the street carrying stacks of cardboard and paper, his camera swinging against his bulging pockets. But he didn't care what he looked like.

It wasn't the first time Dan had made a fool out of him. But it was going to be the last.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Trent," Dan called out as he rushed into the house with the biggest bouquet of flowers he could find. They were a little gaudy and a little yellow for his taste, and that made him feel even more desperate and cheesy, but it was the best he could do on the way home. "Trent?"

He wasn't sure where Trent had gone after the scene in the garage, but he was determined to find him and find a way to make up for his stupidity. He ran upstairs and found the lights on in the darkroom. He smelled the sharp scent of fresh chemicals and saw Trent's coveralls crumpled on the floor. At least there was evidence that Trent had come home.

He was probably tucked away in a corner of the house brooding silently, waiting for Dan to come begging for forgiveness. And Dan was more than willing to do it. It was the least he owed him. He owed Trent apologies and honesty and a thousand kisses. Dan planned on giving him a lot more if Trent would have him.

Dan trotted downstairs quickly and nearly fell when he hit the last step. He glanced down and saw that he had slipped on an envelope. Looking around, he realized mail was strewn all across the front hall.

He lifted his foot and peered at the letter under his shoe. His own name stared back at him. His full name. His real name. Realization hit him hard.

And then he saw the photograph. Dan dropped the bouquet. He stared down at his own face -- angry, young, and stupid. He hadn't even remembered that broken window. He certainly never knew how much it had hurt Trent. How much Dan had hurt him.

Dan reached for the nearest piece of mail with a yellow label across it. He peeled back his own address and looked at Trent's old street and apartment number underneath. He shoved the bill in his pocket and sprinted for his truck.

## Chapter Twelve

Trent found his old apartment choked with smoke and his old room filled with someone else's belongings. The smoke was acrid and thick where it spouted out of the bong and the mouths of the two guys on the couch.

Trent didn't recognize the blob with the beard and matching ponytail slumped next to Rick, but he figured those black-light posters in his old room were this guy's decorating choices. They didn't have room for Trent here. And he didn't have time to fight for sleeping space on that couch.

He had a lot of things to figure out and a lot of pictures to take in the next two days. He'd worry about where he was going to sleep when he had time for it. Which would be sometime after the opening.

For now he settled for a few of his shirts he found under Nathan's bed and a fistful of borrowed drug money. Rick was a criminal and high as a kite, but he was a decent friend.

Trent was running down the crooked flight of stairs only minutes after he'd climbed them. There was no time to waste, and the two guys up there were too distracted by their favorite infomercial for conversation anyway.

He was in and out of the building within ten minutes. But impossibly, Dan was parked at the curb. How in the world had Dan managed to show up during that narrow window of time?

Trent cursed the cab and the train schedule and every stoplight and crosswalk from here to the suburbs. If he'd been one minute faster, he wouldn't have been faced with Dan's double-parked pickup on his way out.

"Trent!" Dan hollered from the street as he rounded the front of his truck.

Trent didn't answer. He saw the hazard lights flashing out of the corner of his eye and kept walking. But his arms were full of photos and clothes, and he didn't really know where he was going.

Dan's hand was on his shoulder in seconds. So Trent did the only thing he could. He turned and faced Dan with as much hate in his face as he could muster.

"Yes, Mr. Bartlett?"

"Trent, I can explain," Dan pleaded. He tried to calm himself, but Trent could see the vein pulsing at his temple. The desperate wideness of his eyes was almost convincing.

"You don't have to explain a thing," Trent spat venomously. "I already figured it out for myself."

"Trent, you don't understand how things were back then."

"Actually I do, Dan. I was right there. And I can only hope it was as painful for you as it was for me." He saw the hurt in Dan's face, and he was glad. He wanted Dan's pain to match his own.

But Trent didn't know why Dan should be upset now. Wasn't this what he wanted? Hadn't he lied to Trent as a cruel joke? This should have been the punch line he'd been waiting for.

"Trent, all I want is to be completely honest with you," Dan said as he reached out toward the younger man's bundle-filled arms.

Trent pulled away as if that touch would burn. Burn worse than a lie. Burn like the truth.

"Well, you haven't done a very good job of that," Trent shot back. "So why don't I give you some honesty?" he asked in a way that sounded more like an attack than a question. "You were the worst part of my childhood. You made every day torture. The sight of you frightened me so much that I couldn't even recognize you when I met you again."

Trent took a breath that was more like gasping, like reloading. "I'm not a kid anymore, Dan. And I'll be damned if I'm going to let you continue your sick little game with more lies." But he did feel like a kid. He felt as if he was right back there, scared and humiliated. He was yelling back this time, but for reasons he wouldn't admit, it hurt even more.

"I'm not lying anymore, Trent." And it was true. That was Dan's only strength. He stood there with his heart on his sleeve, his hands reached out toward nothing, empty and honest. But the truth of his feelings didn't stand up to the truth of his past. It cowered in the shadow of Trent's memory and anger.

And Trent had never heard a more obvious and desperate contradiction. How could Dan stand there and deny the facts? He clutched his few belongings tighter to his chest. He listened to traffic roar by on the street, and he realized that Dan had finally lost the upper hand.

Lies and cruelty were all Dan had in his bag of tricks. Now that they had been exposed, he stood there naked and pitiful. He had nothing left to throw at Trent. He was shooting blanks. But Trent had more than enough ammunition to return fire. He may have been wounded and in pain, but that was no reason he couldn't take a few shots. Trent had a few lies left in his own artillery.

"Whatever you say, Mr. Santom," Trent said, steeling himself against the injury he saw in Dan's gaze. "At least on the street, they're all 'Johns.' And I don't give a shit what their last names are."

He turned and left Dan shell-shocked. Trent was down an alley and around a corner before he heard Dan calling after him.

But he didn't listen. He let the fading voice remind him that it was in the past, all of it. Only one thing mattered now. He clutched his cargo in his arms, protecting his photos more than cardboard and tape ever could.

Now Trent knew what he had to do. He knew where he was going. He was going to the one place he could finish his photo series. Trent wouldn't throw away his last chance. He was going to take it no matter what he had to do. If this didn't work, he really would be working the streets to support himself.

He hailed a cab and headed back to the suburbs. He headed straight for Rodney's garage. He remembered he had an open invitation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan hadn't managed a single sensible word during his short exchange with Trent. Truth was his only weapon. It was the one thing he had decided could save everything that he cared about -- his business, his life, their future together. But today's truths had been defeated by yesterday's lies. He hadn't even gotten the chance to speak the most important truth -- he loved Trent.

Dan ran toward the alley to scream that truth after him, to tell him and anyone who would listen that this incredible feeling was the only thing that mattered. Not the past or Rodney or anything else.

"Trent! I --" Dan skidded into the alley, and it was empty. It was filled with nothing but the echo of his voice, his love's name.

He stood, hoping that Trent would reappear. But he didn't. And Dan had no idea which direction he had gone or how to follow after him. So he turned back toward his truck hopelessly and wondered where he would drive from there.

He almost ran right into Nathan.

"You must be Auntie Dan," Nathan hissed. He pursed his lips for all they were worth.

Dan recognized him from the garage. He recognized the gelled, brassy hair and black roots. He recognized the tight black clothes and heavy jewelry and pasty skin. Dan hated

him. This was the kind of trash Trent was hanging out with -- street kids who could pop out of an alley at any moment with a smartass comment or a knife or a hand job.

This was what Trent was going to become. No wonder he had disappeared so quickly. He was back in his element. He knew everything there was to know about back alleys. Maybe there was nothing Dan could ever do to keep Trent from returning to it.

"Who the hell are you, one of Trent's business partners? Or his pimp?" Dan glared, covering his pain with anger. Just the way Trent had.

But maybe Trent had never felt this ache that was eating at Dan's chest. Maybe Trent's anger was real, not put on like a bandage to cover his heartache. Trent may have liked Dan, but that didn't mean he liked him more than free rent and his own darkroom. Maybe the meal ticket didn't seem as attractive when Trent found out who was really signing the bill.

"What's up your ass, sister?" Nathan barked. His hands shot to his hips as if he had holsters or a double barrel of attitude. "And fuck off while you're at it."

"Where's Trent?"

Traffic poured by and clogged up for rush hour. A few impatient commuters honked their horns at Dan's sloppy double-parking. But the racket could not begin to compete with Nathan. He was already geared up and racing full speed ahead.

"I have no idea, girlfriend," Nathan snapped. "I must have missed an episode of your drama. All I saw was you screaming down the alley like an idiot. Then turning around, calling my ass a pimp." Nathan put his hand to his throat delicately and shook his head at the obvious misjudgment. "So I guess he never told you. And I don't really blame him if you can't figure it out for yourself."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, rich *and* dumb," Nathan jabbed. "Any crack whore with a pulse could have made a killing off you. And you'd never even know the difference. If you can't tell the champagne from the malt liquor, you don't deserve anything better -- the *Gay Handbook's* guide to cheap dates and cocktails." Nathan congratulated himself for that line and the look of confusion it had put on Dan's face. "I don't know what else you did to him, but that's reason enough to leave."

Dan took a deep breath and tried to keep from strangling this trashy little bitch. He didn't have the patience for Nathan's flamboyant show, but he needed all the information he could get if he was going to find Trent. And, unfortunately, it seemed Nathan was his only source.

"Look, I'm sorry for attacking you," Dan said. "But I don't know what you're talking about. And I really need to find Trent. Please, tell me whatever you know."

"Well," Nathan said. He had no intention of making this easy for Dan. "First of all, Trent is not really a mechanic. I bet he never even told you that."

"I figured that one out for myself," Dan replied, a little more caustically than he'd intended.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch, missy," Nathan reprimanded. "The point is, he never told you. He can't even admit the obvious if he thinks it's going to hurt someone's feelings. He's too goodhearted to do the smart thing, too tough to take the easy way out. His sweet little ass could have made a fortune if he wasn't so proud. Why would he waste his time with you?"

Everything Nathan said was either a gay cliché or a cryptic message. Dan wasn't so sure any of it was worth decoding. But if he was interpreting this little bit of attitude correctly, then he'd misunderstood a lot more than Nathan's slang.

"You mean he's not..." Dan couldn't even say it. Realization and confusion were written across his furrowed brow. "But he was down by the river that night."

"And so were you," Nathan had to point out the obvious. "Maybe he thought that's what you really wanted."

Dan thought of money on his nightstand. He thought of the offer he'd made along the river, the offer he'd made the next morning. Suddenly, generosity looked a lot like greed. It looked like a thrifty purchase.

"That's not what I wanted."

"Right. You just needed some fresh air," Nathan scoffed. "Save it. I don't need your explanations. I'm not the moral one."

"But where does he have to go if he's not...?"

Dan still couldn't say the word. The mistake. The stupidest oversight and assumption he'd ever made. So Nathan did it for him.

"If you really think Trent's a whore, it must be because you treated him like one." Nathan turned to leave. Then he paused and looked back at the wounded honesty in Dan's eyes. "I don't know where he went. But you're gonna have to be a lot smarter if you want to find him."

Dan watched Nathan sashay toward the apartment building. The truth had turned out to be a lot more complicated than Dan had imagined. Maybe it was still the answer. But it wasn't simple. And finding that truth and making them both understand was going to be even harder than tracking down Trent.

"Good luck, Dan," Nathan said at the door.

It was the nicest thing that had slipped by his attitude for weeks. But Dan was going to need it.

## Chapter Thirteen

Thursday morning was a pain in the neck. And the back. And most every other region of Trent's body.

Rodney's couch was not made for sleeping. Trent wondered if that was because Rodney never even got anyone in his bed, so there was never a need for an angry partner to occupy the couch for the night. Regardless, Trent felt like one tight, six-foot knot.

But the show was on Saturday. And he needed to get final prints to the gallery Friday. Tomorrow. He reminded himself of that impending fact and stretched as well as he could.

Then he brushed the dust from his dirty clothes and hopped into Rodney's filthy truck. There were cans and wrappers everywhere. The cab of his truck was as grimy as his couch. And when they arrived at the garage, Trent realized the untidy trend wasn't going to stop.

They hardly spoke. Or rather, Trent hardly spoke. Rodney couldn't seem to get enough of his own voice.

"Come to your senses, I see," he said.

Rodney had said this and many similar phrases again and again since Trent had shown up last night. Trent didn't care. He didn't care if Rodney had won some personal battle over Dan. Trent didn't care about Dan at all.

Rodney could gloat and suck his teeth as much as he liked. Trent knew what mattered. This was about photography. He had one day -- today -- to finish his series. Somehow he felt there was something missing from his most recent rolls of film. And he needed another garage to complete it. Just a few more shots to round it out. Maybe he was being a perfectionist. But he didn't think he should squander his first opportunity. It might be his last chance.

They pulled into the garage, and Rodney started his workday with a box of doughnuts and a large coffee with so much cream it was cold.



"You know, it was just a matter of time," Rodney said through a puff of powdered doughnut. "I was practically looking for you to turn up here every day. Dan Bartlett never knew a good thing when it hit him in the head."

Trent winced at the mention of Dan's last name. He stood and listened to Rodney obediently with a look of reluctant acceptance on his face. He wound a new roll of film into his camera.

"He screws everything up sooner or later," Rodney continued. "Can't make a good thing last."

Trent knew where this was headed already. Rodney had mentioned his failed venture into mechanics with Dan half a dozen times since last night. Obviously Rodney thought there were still life lessons to be learned from the experience.

"Now, when we started this garage, Dan was just too scared to do what it took. You gotta take risks if you want to succeed." Rodney gestured instructively with the remaining butt of his doughnut and washed it down with a slurp of creamy coffee. "But he just gave up. Sold everything he had to pay his debts and left me here with a business to run."

It also seemed that Dan had left Rodney debt-free, bailed-out, and a garage owner. But Rodney seemed more obsessed with the leaving itself than how it was done or what he'd been given.

The ex-friends had certainly taken different approaches to operating a garage. Trent watched Rodney shove today's doughnut box to the back of the counter, next to the one from yesterday and, presumably, the day before as well. Everything was cluttered. And although Dan's garage had its fair share of grease and grime, suddenly those seemed to be the efficient byproducts of a working machine.

Rodney's garage was a mess. Piles of parts and tools rusted unused in corners. A few old men puttered around the outskirts of the building. Trent couldn't tell if they were mechanics or janitors. They weren't productive enough to display skills in either direction. They certainly didn't clean anything.

"No wonder he lied to you," Rodney continued as he made his way into the main part of the garage. "I probably would've too, if I had been such a loser back then. 'Course, don't look like he's gonna do much better now, does it?"

Trent had barely given Rodney an explanation when he showed up at the garage last night. Dan had lied. Rodney just shook his head. He understood. Dan wasn't any better than he'd always been. Rodney didn't seem interested in the specifics of their falling out. All he knew was that he'd won. That was more than enough for him. He also didn't seem interested in Trent's mechanical skills. And that was a good thing. Rodney was content with revenge and having Trent stand by to listen to his wisdom.

"Don't know a good thing and can't get out of a bad one," Rodney said. He leaned under the hood of a car, but he spoke back over his shoulder without paying much attention

to what his hands were doing. Explaining Dan's faults was more important to Rodney than fixing whatever faults existed in the engine.

"For example, he dumped me with the garage, but he couldn't get rid of the dumbest girl in town. She seemed nice enough at first, but don't they all?" Rodney looked back and guffawed before he realized Trent probably didn't know. "Anyway, soon's the fancy car and the cash disappeared, her mood changed. She wanted somebody'd support her and put up with her. Hell, every time Dan tried to dump the bitch, she swore she was pregnant. I wonder how many times that one worked on ol' Danny boy?"

Trent wasn't exactly sure why the memory deserved so much bitter laughter. He just clicked through as much film as he could. He had work to do, and he planned on paying more attention to it than Rodney paid to his.

He shot piles of junk and a silent old man struggling with the coffee pot. He shot Rodney from every angle, his gut resting on the front of the car, straining at his stained undershirt.

"Take all the pictures you want. We'll show 'em what a real mechanic looks like." Rodney loved the attention.

*Click.* Trent snapped a half-eaten doughnut lying beside a greasy wrench.

"Then his parents up and died within a year of each other," Rodney continued. "Bad luck sticks to Dan like brown to shit. And what did he inherit? More debt and double funeral bills."

*Click.* A car door where it hung precariously from a hook on the wall.

"Then he went and got all tangled up in this new garage," Rodney continued. "That old man Santom worked him like a dog. Up at dawn, slave all day, then back home to that nagging woman. Ha! Then what'd the old man do? He up and died on Dan, too."

*Click.* Rodney's laughing profile. *Click.* Rodney's grimy fingers. A hammer in his hand.

"Then Dan knew what it was like to be left with a garage." Rodney sniggered at the irony. "It was a curse in disguise. That's for sure. Might've looked like a good idea to buy all those garages back when he was making money. But now he's stuck with 'em. And look where he is now."

*Click.* A dog poking its nose into a bag of trash near the garage door.

"No business. No family. No girlfriend." Rodney was leaning deep under the car's hood with hammer in hand, but he managed to pivot his head all the way around to display his beaming grin to Trent. "No boyfriend either." *Click.*

"Least you had the good sense to get outta there. He could've spent years making you miserable, too." Rodney sounded as if he was winding up. "Now he can go back to making himself miserable again."

Trent wound another roll into his camera. He was just getting started. But he wondered who had really been miserable all those years. Rodney seemed to be enjoying

newfound happiness in the face of Dan's disgrace. His giddiness was out of place. It seemed too new to fit in this environment. His ridiculously good mood and goofy smile didn't match the darkness of the filthy surroundings or the darkness of Trent's own mood. The contrast would look even more distinct and interesting in black and white. *Click*. Trent tried to focus on his work.

He shot the building, the street, the parking lot. It was about half full. Rodney was busy, especially for an inefficient garage with one chatty mechanic and a handful of seemingly useless old men tinkering here and there. But Rodney was not too busy. He certainly hadn't absorbed the work of six garages. People may have been stupid enough to leave a good mechanic for a bunch of lies, but most of them were smart enough not to go to the lying mechanic instead.

Trent wondered what was going on at Santom's Garage right now. No matter what he did, no matter how he tried, his thoughts kept returning to Dan. The desperate look on Dan's face and the nearly inarticulate pleading in his voice yesterday had almost been enough to break Trent's resolve. But there were more important things than irrational feelings and pitiful liars, he reminded himself.

Trent took more pictures of the outside of the building. He had no desire to return to Rodney's banter and bragging. He had already heard enough about Dan and his past. He'd had no idea what Dan's life had been like back then. Maybe the harsh cruelty of the real world had been as hurtful as the misdirected anger of a downtrodden next-door neighbor. Maybe Trent's memory had overemphasized the melodrama of his teenage years.

But that was no excuse for lying. For deception. For using fake names and wads of cash to trick Trent into his bed and his home and his life. Dan had made Trent feel cheaper and more degraded than if he really had become a prostitute. The belated revelation of the truth had been a bigger blow to his pride than anything else.

Of course, if he had known Dan's real name from the beginning, Trent never would have found out anything beyond that. He never would have gone home with him that night, no matter how drunk he had been. He never would have had the chance to know Dan's present life, or even the perspective of his past that Rodney was providing now.

Who was the real Dan? Was he that miserable man from years ago? Was he the failed businessman and immoral employer that Rodney made him out to be? Was he that man who held Trent while he slept and made him breakfast in bed?

*Click*. Trent turned the camera on himself and snapped a memory of his own confusion.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thursday afternoon was much too quiet at Dan's garage. There weren't many customers. There weren't many mechanics. There wasn't that sound of Trent's camera

clicking away. Unfortunately, Dan could hear himself think. And the sound was deafening. It set his teeth on edge.

He stared down at the pile of bills on his desk. He wanted to keep ignoring them as he had for weeks, but he knew he'd overlooked them for long enough. Some of them were even overdue.

He tried to tell himself that people paid their bills late all the time. He tried to tell himself that he had enough money to pay them all. And he did, but it would mean dipping into savings. Cash flow wasn't keeping up with expenses anymore. Without a profit, without some business, Dan didn't want to think what would happen to his employees.

And that thought was the only worry that could even compete with the stabbing pain of Trent's absence.

Dan couldn't stand the thought of Trent's anger or the look of hurt on his face. He couldn't think about the past -- what he had done to Trent back then or how he had lied to him for the past weeks. He couldn't dwell on these things because he could never make up for them.

If Trent wasn't a hooker, then Dan had wronged him even more. Trent was completely innocent. They couldn't compromise and make concessions or forgive each other for their mutual faults and pasts. Trent had done nothing wrong but play along with the situation Dan had created.

Dan had thought his acceptance of Trent's false past had been a gracious and mature decision of logic. But now he saw that he had used it as an excuse for his own deceitful behavior. Now that Trent had no black marks on his record, Dan alone was the bad guy.

He figured that maybe he had even treated Trent like a hooker. It wasn't for any of the deviant reasons Trent and Nathan probably assumed, but it wasn't really any better. Dan had wanted Trent's crimes to outweigh his own. He had wanted to be the good guy who could rescue him.

Trent would never be able to forgive Dan for what he'd done. And Dan wasn't so sure he should. Dan wasn't sure he could forgive himself.

He had drifted off into thought again, thoughts of Trent. He looked out across the still garage bay and back down at his desk. He reminded himself for the hundredth time that these thoughts would never get the bills paid or the business back on its feet.

He shuffled through the envelopes and receipts. It was time for things to get back to normal and for Dan to get used to being back on his own. He had always been content -- happy, even -- to focus on the success of his business and his employees. Why should that change now?

Maybe this new truth Dan thought he had uncovered was too much to take. It was too much too fast. How could his life really change in such a short period of time? And the real truth was, he had no choice. He had tried and failed. Trent had made the choice for him.

So now it was back to business as usual, the way Dan liked it. Or the way he used to like it. He looked down at the paperwork and let out an audible growl of frustration.

It wasn't business as usual! Business was failing, and Dan couldn't even keep his mind on it. He was right about one thing, though -- thinking about it wasn't going to get him anywhere.

He shoved the pile of bills to the edge of his desk, and half of them tumbled onto the floor. He didn't even give them a second glance. He just grabbed his keys and headed for the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan had been driving aimlessly for hours by the time he found the courage to coast slowly along the river road.

He had been back by the apartment and circled all the blocks around it. He had taken his best guesses at where twenty-somethings worked and played and shopped and ate. He had covered the city in a vain attempt to stumble across Trent.

But now that the sun had set and the gas was almost empty again, Dan approached his worst fear. The quiet road wound along the bends of the river. It was supposed to be a scenic drive. Perhaps on a Sunday morning after church, that's exactly what it looked like to children and senior citizens. But after dark on a Thursday night, Dan couldn't see anything scenic or innocent about it.

He watched men step from the bushes just long enough to let themselves be seen. He tapped his brakes to survey the shadowed faces, and the red glow of his brake lights attracted the attention of the braver ones, who started to approach the truck.

Even from inside the safety of his locked doors, Dan felt danger and disgust. He couldn't believe this was where he and Trent had met. He couldn't even imagine this kind of tainted beginning to what he now felt. And he couldn't believe that he'd ever thought Trent actually belonged here.

But now he had to consider the possibility that Trent might actually return to this desperate scene. Even if he hadn't been a hooker when they met, what had Dan driven him to? What would he do for revenge? Where had he really been heading that first night? And where did he have left to go now? Wherever Trent ended up, it would be because Dan had failed him.

The thought brought a sick discomfort to his gut and tears to his eyes. He stepped on the gas and drove away from the river as fast as he dared.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was late, and the house was empty. Emptyer than it ever had been. Trent's photo collection was still hanging on his walls. All of Trent's memories seemed to float there in the dark halls to remind Dan of the memories they had made together.

Not many. Not enough. Two weeks may have been too short a time for their relationship to grow strong and sure enough to withstand this test. But their short time apart was more than enough for the emptiness to grow and reach inside Dan's chest.

He crawled into his cold bed alone, emphasizing the expanse of his solitude. All he felt was the empty space beside him where Trent should be.

There was no way Dan was getting much sleep. He couldn't rest without knowing where Trent was, where he was going to be sleeping. Dan was in for a long night.

## Chapter Fourteen

Friday morning, the sun rose reluctantly, burning Dan's open eyes until it was high enough for him to rise as well.

When he stepped into the kitchen, his eyes burned even more. Anger flared as he stared down at the red flashing light of the answering machine. Four messages.

No one ever called. Dan never checked. He had been too caught up in the heat of the moment and his own irrational thoughts last night to follow a simple, logical routine that millions of people perform every day. He pressed play.

"Honey, it's Ida. Call me back when you get in so we can work out the details."

*Beep.*

"Ida again. Where are you? Give me a jingle."

*Beep.*

"Okay, this tortured artist thing is starting to torture me. Honey, you really need to call me as soon as you get this."

*Beep.*

"Does this frigging thing even work? Trent, where the hell are you?"

*Beep.*

Dan had the receiver in his hand and Ida's number dialed before her final message finished playing. She picked up on the first ring.

"Hello?" She sounded less jovial and more anxious than her usual self.

"Ida, is Trent there with you?" Dan's voice was pure desperation.

"Dan? What the hell are you talking about? Why isn't he there with you where he belongs?"

Dan didn't want to explain, but he did. No matter what damage the truth could do, no matter what problems it could solve or create, there was no way to keep it from Ida Strauss.

"Daniel Bartlett, I cannot believe what you've done to that boy," Ida scolded. "And to me."

"What in the world does this have to do with you?" Dan asked defensively.

"The gallery opening is tomorrow, Dan. Has that escaped your attention? I've really stuck my neck out on the chopping block for this one."

"Gallery opening?"

"My God, Dan, you don't know who you've been living with either," Ida pointed out in disbelief. "Was the camera a clue for you? How about that darkroom you built? Trent is a good little photographer, and this is a really big chance."

"I had no idea."

"Yeah, well, Trent has no idea which gallery or where or what time." Ida was really getting flustered now. "And if you ruin this for him, he's never going to get another chance in this city. I'm certainly not going to be able to pull any more favors after I've been shunned for this disaster. Don't screw this up, Danny."

"I didn't know anything about the opening."

"Not the opening, Dan." Ida's voice dropped momentarily from its hysterical pitch. "Don't screw up his life and yours. Don't let a stupid fib destroy this thing you took years to discover. Honey, miracles and catastrophes only take a second. So get out there and find Trent! I need a fucking miracle right now!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Trent was waiting at the Photo Lab before it opened. The metal grating was still pulled down over the windows, and a thick gray padlock lay on the sidewalk, glinting in the sun.

The clarity and brightness of the morning only emphasized Trent's anxiety. He wanted to kick himself for turning in his keys. His boss never would have noticed, and Trent could have opened the shop, swept the floor, and been in the darkroom before his boss even had the opportunity to refuse.

Rodney hadn't seemed too upset about Trent's resignation after a single day. He figured that's all the time it took for Rodney to claim victory. As long as Trent wasn't returning to Dan, Rodney was agreeable with most anything. He was even willing to play chauffeur into the city, if Trent was willing to listen to him for the entire drive.

"Don't blame you, really," Rodney had continued as they drove through the neighborhood of Trent's old apartment. "Dan ruined mechanics for you. After that place, you'll never get a taste for it again. It's like a circus with all those young kids running around. No one knows who's coming or going or what the hell they're doing."



Trent didn't correct him. He'd never had a taste for mechanics at all, so the theory behind it was irrelevant. He certainly wasn't going to stick up for Dan and challenge Rodney's only joy in life.

Finally, Trent interrupted Rodney's tirade by pointing to the Photo Lab.

"You're a good kid," Rodney declared as he pulled up to the curb. "Quiet. But a good kid."

Trent didn't want to point out that he was nearly twenty-eight. He didn't want to point out that Rodney never took a breath between words, even if someone else wanted to speak. There were too many other personality flaws on the list to start going through them now. And there wasn't time.

So he'd just said, "Thanks," and walked away quickly, clutching his bundle of photographs.

Now Trent just hoped his old boss would be as accommodating and agreeable as Rodney, although hopefully less annoying and a little quieter.

It wasn't every day Trent had to ask the biggest favor of his life of someone he had quit on without notice. He wasn't looking forward to the begging he was going to have to perform, but on the other hand, he couldn't wait to get into the darkroom.

Ten minutes later, that's exactly where he was. There hadn't been the slightest resistance. The jovial, balding man practically skipped around the store, repeating over and over, "A show, a show, a show," and alternately, "A gallery, a gallery, a gallery." It was as if his own dreams were being fulfilled through Trent, as if Trent were his protégé or his son.

The red light was therapeutic. It was definitely an improvement over the cluttered chaos of Rodney's garage. Everything in the darkroom was clean and still. It was probably some Freudian symbol for the womb with darkness and warmth and liquid creation.

But the tranquility was not perfect. The silence was disturbed by Trent's furious thoughts and the nearly audible ticking of his time running out. Tomorrow night. And final prints were supposed to be at the gallery today.

The problem was, Trent didn't know exactly where. Tracking down Ida was number two on his list, right after he finished the first round of proofs.

He walked into the bright light of the store, shuffling the stack of photos like a dealer. He wasn't sure what he was going to turn up or if it would be a winning hand.

"Are any of these worth the paper they're printed on?" Trent asked as he rubbed his strained eyes.

They squinted at the prints where he had spread them across the glare of the glass counter for easier viewing. Trent had always been hard on himself, overly critical of his own work. But there was some truth to his disappointment today.

There were a lot of similar shots of Rodney's uninspiring workplace. Too dark. Too dingy. Cluttered with junk and devoid of people and emotion. There was also an entire roll's

worth of pictures of the garage from the outside and the parking lot. They weren't shots Trent had even wanted, and it showed. He was just trying to keep his mind off Dan and his ringing ears away from Rodney. And he had ended up with pictures that looked like a real estate survey.

Trent's ex-boss reached down and rearranged the photos into a pattern that made more sense to him, as if he were playing solitaire or reading tarot cards.

"These are pretty good," he said.

He set aside a couple shadowy still-lives. A coffee pot, a doughnut, a wrench, a plastic bucket of plaster.

Then he singled out another series of photos, lining them up for inspection. "Here you go," he concluded. "These are great."

The photos were all of Rodney, and they were pretty good. Rodney grinning widely from under a hood, with a hammer in his hand. Rodney crouched down awkwardly, peering at an exhaust pipe. Rodney resting his enormous gut on the hood of a car.

"They're not bad," Trent agreed.

He grabbed a phonebook from under the counter and turned his attention to the next problem. He flipped to S. Strauss. Strauss. Strauss. There were about a hundred of them, paired with unfamiliar first names or initials. No I's in the bunch. And Trent had no idea what Ida's husband's name was. It could have been any of them.

"You don't happen to know an Ida Strauss, do you?" Trent asked.

"Your benefactress? Sorry, she must be outside my social circle."

Trent flipped to the listing of art galleries. There were more of them than Strausses.

So he gave up the search for now and headed back to the darkroom. There was plenty more work to do. Trent figured out sizes and contrast and every minute detail that he insisted on taking the time to obsess over. Even if time and direction and love were against him, these photos could be perfect, he decided.

Time was flying by. Inside the dark room's confinement, Trent felt the seconds clicking by faster and faster as the sun outside slipped deeper into afternoon.

"Finished so soon?" his boss joked when Trent emerged. It was dark, and he was sweeping the floor in preparation for closing, which wasn't far off.

"Too tired to do any more, that's for sure," Trent answered as he slumped into an uncomfortable chair that dissuaded customers from waiting around for their photos.

"Oh, before I forget," the owner said, pausing again in his sweeping. "Someone stopped by to see you while you were in there."

"Ida?" Trent asked anxiously.

"No. It was a man."

Trent's heart skipped.

"Some guy in a pickup. Good-looking fella, seemed like he was in an awful rush."

"Dan?"

"I didn't catch his name," he continued. "Never seen him before. So I figured I shouldn't interrupt you. Not worth opening the door and ruining prints, especially not today. I just told him you didn't work here anymore."

"Thanks," was all Trent could say.

Trent was mad at himself for the sudden rush of excitement that poured through his gut at the thought of Dan. Trent wished he had seen him, but he was glad he hadn't. The conflicting elements of desire and logic made him dizzy in his exhaustion.

He stood up and tried to gain some solid footing in the situation. He had left Dan for a reason. A good reason. And even though they had been standing only a few feet from each other without knowing it, the darkroom and Trent's old boss had kept them apart. They weren't meant to see each other. Trent had enough complications to worry about right now, even without Dan.

"I guess I should get going," he declared as he gathered up his pile of pictures.

"See you tomorrow at the gallery."

"Yeah, I'll let you know if I figure out which one it is."

"What?" His confusion was understandable, but Trent didn't have time to explain the complication. "Is that why you were looking in the phone book?"

"Yeah, if I don't track Ida down, there isn't going to be a show."

"Trent," the man said, pointing to a flyer in the window. "Some fancy lady dropped it off yesterday. The gallery's about three blocks from here."

Trent laughed. Tension bubbled out of him. His relief was audible.

He gazed at his name printed in capital letters above a photocopy of a mechanic literally crawling under the hood of a truck. The gallery's address was along the bottom.

Now there were only about a million things left for him to worry about.

"Thanks," Trent called behind him as he trotted away down the sidewalk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dan threw his keys onto the counter and listened to the long, clanking scrape they made as they came to a sliding halt. It only made the silence more obvious.

He had wasted hours with a phonebook and a ballpoint pen, driving and systematically scratching off the names of a dozen photo stores. In the end, he had found what he already knew: Trent didn't work there anymore.

He had been everywhere and discovered nothing. On top of everything he had done to Trent, now he had failed Ida as well. He had thrown away Trent's big chance. Without even knowing about it, he had destroyed Trent's future as well as his past.

Dan walked through the dark halls of his empty house. He didn't need to turn on the lights to find his way around, and he didn't want to. He didn't want to be confronted with the memories that hung on every wall.

But the darkness didn't help. There were still memories around every corner. There was the darkroom and Trent's T-shirt on the floor. There were the memories lodged in Dan's own mind.

He stepped into the bathroom and forced himself to face the fluorescent glare and the exhausted desperation in his reflection. He stared back at himself, tired and lost. His eyes were red-rimmed, and his shirt was wrinkled, and he couldn't even remember if he had showered today.

He saw the reflection of the shower over his shoulder in the mirror. The opaque curtain was drawn, hiding the vacant stall. He couldn't see inside. There could have been someone in there. This was the scene from horror movies when the paranoid hero rips open the shower curtain in search of the killer. But Dan was much more frightened by the fact that no one was there.

He remembered one early morning. The night birds were handing over their lullaby songs to the upbeat dayshift outside the window. Dan had crept from bed early and climbed into that shower.

He'd stood for long moments with his eyes closed, letting the warm water wash over him and rinse away the remnants of sleep. He'd listened to the birdsong and tried to create a mental to-do list for the day.

He hadn't even heard Trent slip into the shower stall.

Dan had jumped slightly inside his skin when he felt hands on his thighs. But when he snapped open his eyes, he'd smiled at the sight of Trent's wet head as it approached his crotch.

Trent nuzzled his nose and face into the wet mass of hair, kissing the crease of Dan's thigh. Water cascaded over Trent's crouched shoulders. It poured down his forearms and balled biceps as he clutched at Dan's buttocks. Sheets of warm rain slid down his torso, rolled off Dan's own body to find a path along smooth, pale skin, to trickle over perfect round nipples.

Dan could see Trent's eager erection where it bobbed to attention. And Dan's own body was already reflecting that response as Trent licked and kissed and hinted at the pleasure to come.

They didn't even look at each other. There was no need. Trent took Dan's erection boldly in his hand, made a fist around the shaft. Then he fed the engorged head into his mouth.

The warmth of the shower was nothing next to the heat of Trent's kiss. Dan had to brace himself with one hand against the shower stall. His knees wanted to give way to the tickle of ecstasy that pumped from Trent's tongue and lips straight to center of Dan's body.

Trent worked a rhythm of pleasure. He pressed his nose against Dan's stomach, buried it in soaked hair, swallowed him completely. He pressed his tongue along the underside of that hardness and drew a line of fire as he retraced his motion all the way to the tip. He twisted his fingers, made a tight circle with his thumb, and followed the path of his lips with a squeezing stroke.

Every movement of his head and hand was perfect pleasure, desire that poured between the two like water.

Dan took the hand that wasn't holding him up and placed it softly on the back of Trent's wet head. He ran his thumb along the line of Trent's open jaw. He followed the slow, anxious motion of Trent's head.

And Trent followed the pulse of Dan's yearning, faster and fervent, rocking back on his heels. Digging his fingertips into the muscle of Dan's ass to keep his balance. Tightening his grasp, fingers and lips. Working harder and quicker until Dan clutched the back of his head, falling forward into long, deep shudders.

Trent just looked up and smiled. Water splashed into his face, and he blinked his long, wet lashes reflexively.

Dan exhaled a slow, staccato sigh. He knelt to meet Trent. He kissed his hot, moist lips. He grabbed Trent's hips and helped him stand in the slippery tub.

Then Dan had returned the favor -- you wash my back, I'll wash yours.

Dan opened his eyes and snapped back to reality. He saw himself staring back in the mirror -- back in the present -- dark circles and all. He saw the drawn shower curtain behind him, and he didn't bother pulling it back. He knew there was no one there. And he was running out of places to look.

He flipped off the glaring light and stepped back into the darkness. Within seconds, he was face to face with yet another memory. There, framed in moonlight, was a photograph on the wall. It was the one he could never seem to avoid. It was the one memory he didn't want to relive.

Dan looked up at that picture of the woman and the clothesline. He knew the house he used to rent was just beyond the edge of that lawn. He stood there facing their past, and he realized that's exactly what he had to do.

Did he dare? He asked himself that very question as he started his truck.

The drive was short, but he never visited that end of Glen Mills anymore. The streets felt familiar and deserted, as if no one else had used them since Dan had left. It took about ten minutes to reach the old neighborhood. But to Dan it felt like ten years. He was driving straight into the past.

What would he say to his old neighbor? What if Trent was there? What if he wasn't?

Dan had spoken just a few words to Trent's mother over the years as he had to her son. And he couldn't be sure the conversations were any more pleasant. He seemed to remember her delivering homemade breads during the holidays. She had smiled, and he had nodded a grumbled reply. But that was the extent of his memory.

What did she know about the past? Or the present? What had Trent told her back then? Or within the past weeks?

Dan couldn't even be sure she still lived there. She could have moved or remarried or disowned her son. But if she still lived in Glen Mills, there was a good chance she'd heard about Dan. He wondered what she thought of the rumors, what she would think of the age difference, what she would think of him and Trent and the way Dan had hurt him.

He stopped wondering. He pulled into the driveway just ten feet before his old house. Someone had planted flowers and painted his door yellow. He looked back to Trent's childhood home just as the light above the front door flicked on.

There was no more hiding. He approached the door and knocked without further procrastination. The door opened immediately, and the woman who stood there was undoubtedly Trent's mother.

"I don't know if you remember me," he began.

"Dan Bartlett, of course," the woman interrupted.

She was thin and delicate, beautiful for a woman nearing fifty. She stood in the doorway with a thick robe draped around the same dramatic bone structure that was reflected in her son's more masculine form. She stared out at Dan with Trent's blue eyes. However, hers were dulled with years. Not muted or diluted. Their flash and shine were burnished to something deeper, like silver rubbed richer by the hands of experience and knowledge. Dan hoped that the wisdom he saw in those eyes would help her understand.

"I'm looking for Trent." Dan took the plunge. "Is he here?"

"Trent? No. Why are *you* looking for Trent?" Her blue eyes squinted in confusion. "I think you'd better come inside."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ida, this isn't some suburban show in someone's garage." The small, tight-lipped woman put her bony hands on her bony hips. "People are going to show up just because of the gallery's name. And the sadists will come because they heard some unknown kid is opening here. This isn't a high school talent show, Ida. This is my career. My name."

"Take a breath, darling," Ida growled as calmly as she could. "Hell, have a drink. You saw the pictures. You loved them. Trent's just a perfectionist. He'll be here any minute, I'm sure. There's nothing you can do about it now, regardless."

The frantic woman turned and stomped down the empty halls. She didn't have enough weight to stomp properly. But her small steps echoed ominously off the bare walls where Trent's photographs were supposed to be hanging.

Ida ran a hand through her hair, tugged at her gold earrings, readjusted her rings. At the very least, she didn't have to *look* frazzled and nervous.

From the darkened sidewalk, Trent could only hear a low rumble of voices and the sharp click of heels retreating. He wasn't even sure if he had the right address. As he poked his head into the brightly lit building, he wished he'd taken the flyer from the Photo Lab.

The place seemed deserted. The white walls and glossy hardwood floors were intimidating. Trent didn't want to believe it was his responsibility to fill this place with life and emotion. In that silence, it looked as blank as his expressionless face.

"Where the hell have you been?!"

Trent nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard Ida's guttural screech behind him. Worse, he almost dropped his load of photographs on the floor.

He turned and confronted the desperation in her wide eyes. Trent tried his best to regain composure and maintain some dignity in the situation. The last thing he needed after the exhaustion and torture of the last few days was someone scolding him like a teenager who had missed curfew.

"So is this thing happening?" he asked defiantly. "Or is it just another lie in the plan to ruin my life?"

Ida softened a bit. Relief washed over her, and the desperation in her eyes turned to something much more like compassion. Trent looked worn out, and she could only imagine what the past days had been like for him.

"I am not part of that drama, honey," she said a little more quietly. "You've caused enough battles in my life for one day. And I know they say a picture's worth a thousand words, sweetheart. But I really would have appreciated at least one or two words to let me know you were alive...and to get that bitch off my back."

She gestured down the hall. Despite her recently lowered voice, someone was coming in response to her yelling. Not a bitch, but a dapper man with silver hair and a navy suit who looked remarkably calm or remarkably accustomed to Ida's booming voice.

"Is this the great artist who is trying to destroy your good name in this town?" he asked.

"Ha. That's my job, darling." She wrapped her arm instinctively around the man's tailored waist. "Martin, this is Trent. He's just a pain in the ass because he's falling in love."

Ida took charge of Trent's stack as the men shook hands.

"Now get your ass down the hall with these before you have to make an obscene donation to that old crow's favorite charity or something." She handed the bundle to Martin

before Trent could protest. As soon as his hands were full, she gave him a friendly and frisky pat on the butt.

Immediately, Martin turned back and gave her a quick, playful peck on the cheek. Then he hustled down the hall.

"I'm not in love," Trent said as soon as Martin had disappeared. But he was still caught off guard by the automatic and genuine display of intimacy the two had shared. A simple moment. But so real. Like the blink of the eye or the beat of the heart. Like the tiny sparkle of a smile that passed across Ida's face and outshined all of her jewels.

How long had they been together? How did you find passion that survives years and shows itself in everything you do? How do you know when you find it? And how do you make sure you don't let it get away?

"I never said you were in love," Ida insisted when they were alone again. "I said you were falling. It's a long way down. I just hope when you hit bottom, it knocks some sense into you."

Trent looked down at the thick varnish on the hardwood. It was easier than staring at the blank walls or at Ida. His entire body was numb with exhaustion and raw nerves and a thousand other feelings he couldn't identify.

The past few days really had been like falling. But Trent doubted it was love. He felt as if he had been falling out of control, watching opportunity and circumstances and his whole life speed by. He felt lost and helpless, and he did hope his feet found solid ground again soon. But when he finally stood up, he was determined that it would not be next to Dan.

"Is that what this whole thing is about?" Trent asked. "Is this all one big scheme to make sure Dan Bartlett wins again?"

Their red-rimmed eyes stared back at each other. For two normally attractive people, they weren't faring so well. They'd both been in battle mode for so long that they were just going through the motions. Trent knew Ida wasn't really his enemy. He knew that she could never have anything to do with Dan's deceit.

"Tell me, Trent, did you like the man you spent the last two weeks with?" Ida asked. "Who cares what his last name is? In this day and age, you're lucky you got his first name."

She looked at his exhausted face and knew that he would have to make this decision on his own. The best thing she could give him wasn't advice; it was a good night's sleep.

"That's all I have to say about it," she finished. "That, and if I could show you my ass ten years ago, you'd know how much time can really change a person. Now let's get some sleep before tomorrow."

Trent would have laughed if he'd had the energy. Instead, he just closed his eyes and smiled. He wasn't sure he'd be able to sleep with the nervous uncertainty of tomorrow looming on the horizon. But he had no strength to worry about it. The mystery and tension sat together in a bundle beneath his chest like held breath.



But as soon as Martin brought the sedan to a steady purr on the highway, Trent's eyelids started dragging down. When they led him into the guestroom, Trent tumbled into the soft feather mattress as if it were a dream.

## Chapter Fifteen

Saturday morning came in a moment. Trent had slept a deep, sudden sleep, and his exhaustion had receded like the details of his dreams. Like a lingering embrace. Like the memory of someone there next to him.

Trent feared that his subconscious had betrayed the solid intentions of his logical mind while he slept. He worried that the warm ache of comfort he felt and his persistent morning erection had something to do with Dan. He denied his feelings and suspicions as he tossed back the covers. Today had nothing to do with Dan. Today was his day.

Ida was up, coifed, and bejeweled before Trent even realized the sun had risen. He leapt from bed and rushed into the enormous kitchen in yesterday's crumpled clothes, with tufts of bed-tousled hair sprouting from his head like a halo or horns.

"Sit and eat, young man," Ida instructed. "You've got a lot of work to do, so don't waste all your energy spazzing out on me."

She directed his hyperactivity toward a waiting tray of eggs and bacon in the sunlit breakfast nook. Morning light bounced off potted plants and warmed the brick floor beneath his bare feet.

"I am not spazzing out," Trent insisted through a mouthful of egg. "I just want to get started."

"Well, it's not the first day of school, Trent," Ida said. "You've already done the hard part. So save it for tonight."

Trent did actually look the part of the schoolboy. Anxious and hurried, he was like a disheveled child shoveling breakfast in as fast as he could. But at the same time, he was a young man finally coming into his own. His face was stubbled with two days' neglect. The finely toned muscles of his forearm and biceps stretched the wrinkled fabric with every flick of his fork and turn of his spoon.

Trent slurped down the last of the dark, sweet coffee and looked up at Ida in the bright spot of the skylight. She gazed down at him quietly. Silence wasn't something that Ida did often, and Trent recognized the look immediately. It was the look of the knowing mother.

Somehow Trent had flipped on her maternal instinct by making her worry and letting her take care of him. He'd know that protective, proud stare anywhere. A guilty moment shot through him suddenly when he realized how long it had been since he'd spoken to his own mother. He was just too preoccupied with his own drama, he told himself. But to think, he'd been living just a couple miles away when he was with Dan...

Trent broke the silence and his train of thought that kept leading back to the same forbidden place.

"What, Ida?"

"Nothing," she said, snapping out of her trance. "I was just thinking."

"About what?" he asked. Trent had the sudden suspicion that there was something more than motherhood running through her mind. He may have not called his mother in a couple weeks, but he didn't look nearly as guilty as Ida did right this second. "Did you talk to Dan?"

"Trent, you can't blame him for worrying," she insisted. "He's been running around this city like a chicken with its head cut off, looking for you. And you can't blame me for letting him know you're still alive."

"Ida, you --" Trent began to protest.

"I didn't promise a thing." She held up a scolding finger wrapped in rubies. Now she really looked the part of the mother. "But I did make Dan promise. He's not going to ruin this. So forget about it."

But Trent couldn't forget about it. No matter how he tried, no matter how much excitement and confusion and hysteria had been crammed into the past days, Trent could not forget Dan.

He wondered if Ida had called him last night before bed. He wondered if Dan had left messages or called first thing this morning. Was a ringing phone what had woken Ida at such an early hour? Dan was always up at dawn. The image of Dan's tan body rolling over on sunny sheets was stuck in Trent's mind. He wondered if that had been part of his dream.

Trent tried to shake the thoughts from his head. But he knew that even if he could, he was headed to a gallery where he would have to hang the memories of his life with Dan in neat rows.

"I am not part of your relationship," Ida said. "But I am very much a part of this show. It matters to me almost as much as it should to you. So get yourself in the shower and make yourself presentable. And wash that sourpuss off your face while you're in there."

\* \* \* \* \*

“Oh, my, my, my, my. You must be the art-eest.” The small, angular woman scurried up to Trent as quickly as humanly possible. Trent was fairly certain she wasn’t French, but she insisted on some hint of artistic Europeanism. “I am Maddy. And I think your works are astounding.”

She kissed him on both cheeks before he had the chance to get oriented in the gallery. It almost made him dizzy. But the whirlwind of pretense didn’t make her continental attempt any more genuine.

“Thanks,” was all he managed. He figured this was the “bitch” Ida had referred to.

The gallery was a bit different than it had been last night. It was still bright and hollow and intimidating. But now, people swarmed about in a great hurry to do nothing at all, as far as Trent could see.

They walked up to walls and examined the blankness. They ran to doorways and turned back to stare at white space. They jotted down notes thoughtfully. Trent wasn’t sure this display had anything to do with him or his show. The self-important performance seemed to be their own artistic vision of themselves.

Trent wondered if this was all some abstract performance art and Maddy’s accents and kisses were just another part of it. Trent was always amazed at the lengths people would go to to be “artistic.” In school, he had always joked that people worked harder on being artists than they did on their actual art.

He never gave himself the “artist” label. It seemed pretentious and pointless. If people liked his pictures -- or his “works,” as Maddy insisted -- he was happy enough. If someone actually called him a photographer, he got downright giddy. He’d never heard anyone pronounce “artist” with a hard “e” as Maddy had just done, especially not in reference to him.

“All right, Madeline,” Ida said. Fortunately, she knew exactly when to ruin an artistic moment. “He’s here. He’s alive. Are you really so happy that you’re going to start being nice?”

Maddy pursed her lips. Trent couldn’t believe these two actually attended cocktail parties together. There wasn’t enough liquor in the world to make this combination mix.

Most of all, Trent couldn’t believe that Ida had managed to make this happen when the women obviously detested one another. That mutual dislike was apparently the only thing she and Maddy shared. That and, apparently, a fondness for Trent’s photography.

“Well, what do you say we just get to work, hmm?” Maddy asked with a little extra French-or-something tacked onto the end for emphasis.

Within moments, Trent had a clearer understanding of the performance that surrounded him. All of the extras in black turtlenecks and matching attitudes brought out armloads of frames, eager to fill the empty space they’d been interpreting earlier. Trent was

surprised when the frames turned out to be his photographs. He felt embarrassed that all this pomp was about him.

Somehow, as he'd slept the night before, each and every one of his photos had been mounted and framed. Despite the overly artistic flamboyance and accents and costumes, these people knew what they were doing. Everything looked amazing, perfect, professional. Trent reminded himself that he was the amateur here.

They dealt with real artists every day. There was no reason for these people to screw up. The only mistake they could possibly be making was choosing Trent as the undeserving substitute for the evening.

Trent felt small and completely insignificant. He didn't deserve this. The closer he looked, the more he realized that his photos didn't even deserve such a professional framing job. He glanced back at Ida, his brows knit into a panicked weave of worry above his electric-blue eyes.

"Honey, just tell them where to put everything. Or I'll tell them where to stick it." Ida winked. "Your work is over. Now make them hustle."

She actually managed some kind of cracking-whip sound between her tongue and teeth. Trent was impressed enough to relax for a minute. And after that, the day didn't stop.

It was a whirlwind of photos and hanging. By the time the sun set, Trent was exhausted again. But the fumes of adrenaline kept him going.

No matter what these people looked like in their mismatched black and over-gelled hair, they truly seemed to have respect for what Trent had delivered to the gallery last night in a haze of exhaustion, confusion, and a broken heart.

They held frames high and low. They rearranged and switched positions. They offered opinions on theme and compatibility. And no matter what they thought, they did exactly what Trent said.

Trent didn't know what he was doing. He found his new authority more frightening than anything else. It just gave him more room to fail. But there was a part of him that loved the attention that came from playing artist.

It was just one more lie. Hell, if Dan thought he was a hooker and Rodney thought he was a mechanic and the whole state thought Dan Bartlett was a molesting boss, Trent could let these people think he was some kind of pretentious art-eest.

He looked up at all these photos, glinting in crisp track lighting. Beneath the pain and insecurity, he felt a shiver of amazement. He looked at the memories and smiles and grease and grime. The black-and-white contrast stood out sharply against the stark walls and golden floors.

Suddenly, the reality of the day hit him hard. The weight of this event, this opportunity, rested itself heavily on his shoulders. He felt inadequate and overwhelmed. And

he had the creeping feeling of suspicion that something obvious was missing from this array of photography.

He knew what that was -- who it was. The evidence hung around him on every wall. But he stood there alone. And he stood strong. He could be in love, in pain, in complete denial. He could be destroyed and then rebuild his life like a burnt-out engine. He could be standing in a foul garage one day and be hanging a picture of it on the wall of a gallery the next.

Everything could change in a moment, he thought. He could be standing by the river one night and wake up the next morning standing on the top of the world.

## Chapter Sixteen

Trent smiled at himself in the mirror.

The show hadn't even started yet, and he was already tired and overworked. But he was still smiling. The sun had set hours ago, and Ida had tried on fourteen pounds of jewelry. Finally it was time to go.

"You look so handsome," Ida said from the door.

"Oh, as if I stand a chance next to you," he answered, looking back at her in the mirror with those blue, blue eyes.

"This is why I love gay men," she said admiringly. "Who could outdo a compliment like that?"

Trent did manage to cut quite an impressive figure in Martin's oversized suit. It didn't even begin to fit his lean frame. But, somehow, Trent pulled off a perfectly artistic look with the thousand-dollar royal-blue fabric hanging around his wide shoulders just so. It draped into perfect pools around his thin waist and wrists. The rich color made his eyes look like ice.

Ida took his arm and supported his insecurities as they walked to the car, where Martin had it humming softly in the drive. They pulled onto the highway and into the most important night of Trent's life.

As Trent approached the gallery, he could hear the steady murmur of voices through the closed doors. It was a quiet, constant sound, like a distant river. And like a river, he couldn't tell if that sound was the call of a slowly bubbling brook or the dampened roar of rapids.

He suddenly realized that he hadn't invited a single person. In fact, his old boss was the only one who'd even mentioned attending. He was also the only familiar person Trent had seen recently.

Trent had spent weeks wrapped in the ignorant bliss of his make-believe life with Dan. And he'd spent days now avoiding everyone he knew in an attempt to avoid that life, that man. He had been so focused on finishing rolls of film and denying his destructive feelings that he hadn't mentioned this night to anyone.

But when Martin held the doors wide for the grand entrance, Trent was astounded by the crowd. It was more than a river. It was a sea of people.

Despite his neglect of social graces and invitations, all the characters were present. Rick had actually combed his hair into a ponytail. And it was obvious from across the room that Nathan was wearing glitter. He and Ida discovered one another immediately, and they began gesturing compliments at one another's jewelry selection.

Packs of mechanics stood around with wineglasses balanced awkwardly in their big hands. They looked uncomfortable in their collars and even more uncomfortable gazing up at the images of themselves on every wall.

Grease and metal glinted black and white around the entire gallery. It outshined the diamonds and sparkling wine twinkling and hobnobbing in the middle of the room.

Trent turned in a slow circle, looking at his memories of the last two weeks on display.

Laughing mechanics. Scowling contemplation just inches from an engine. Feet sticking out from under a car on blocks. Biceps bulging at a tire iron. Men in coveralls huddled around a coffeepot, an open hood, a good joke.

There was Ida before Trent knew her name, glittering and grinning in the middle of exhaust fumes, wrapped in fur and sweet gardenia. He could almost smell the moment.

There were Adam and Mark, lifting tires, kicking back, washing their hands.

There was a silhouette of a man from behind, his arms raised above his head to hold the hood open. His white shirt was stained with grease and stretched tight across the muscles of his back. His arms strained against his short sleeves. His head hung to inspect the hidden parts.

It was Dan. Trent wondered if anyone else here recognized the man in that picture, the way his jeans fit or the casual way he shifted his weight onto one boot. No one knew that body better than Trent.

In fact, all the characters were not present, he realized. Trent looked out across the waves of people, and he knew he wouldn't find Dan's face there. Dan had promised Ida. And Trent had made himself very clear that day on the street.

Despite these logical facts, Trent still managed to feel disappointment and hope twist into a knot inside his chest. In this overwhelming environment, on this one night, there was no way Trent could deny those feelings. He secretly wished Dan would defy his promise and rush into the gallery.

Learning the truth about Dan didn't erase the truth of how Trent felt.



“God, I think the country club sprang a leak!” Ida burst in again to save the day. “We’re practically drowning in blue blood.”

She was right. The room was packed and seemed to fill more as time went by, like the bottom half of an hourglass. There were some familiar faces floating out there. Trent could even see his old boss hanging on the fringe, staring at a photo, and mouthing, “A gallery, a gallery, a gallery.”

But aside from the friends who waved at him from across the crowd, there were scores of cocktail dresses and gray hair that Trent had never seen before. He didn’t know if they were here for Ida or the gallery or whatever artist he had replaced. But they weren’t people he knew. And they weren’t leaving.

They looked around slowly, walking from one picture to the next, joining elite little circles of aristocratic elbows in need of rubbing. Trent couldn’t tell if they were just passing time or passing judgment. They could have just been waiting to refill their glasses.

Pretty soon they started including Trent in their tour around the room. Strangers would eye him from a distance and make their way toward him with determined casualness, adding in passing:

“Very powerful work.”

“You’re the artist? Well done.”

“The thematic approach is quite intriguing.”

“The lighting is absolutely haunting.”

He didn’t know what to say. Often, he didn’t know what they were saying either. But he wasn’t so sure they knew exactly what they meant themselves.

As soon as the first few compliments and bits of commentary started coming in, Ida made for the other side of the room. She couldn’t contain her grunts of laughter in her wineglass all night. Eventually she was going to shoot Chardonnay out her nose.

Of course she wanted Trent to receive all the praise he was due. The humor was in the pretense of the fluffed-up comments. “I really like it” would have come across so much more honestly. A solid “Damn, that’s good” would have been much more flattering.

So Trent just smiled and nodded his way through the crowd. He had no idea whether to believe any of the things he heard. Didn’t people always throw around compliments? Didn’t they always tell the fat girl how nice she looked in that dress?

When he noticed the first discreet yellow *Sold* sticker over a price tag, he had to look twice and squint to believe it. He was in utter disbelief when his squinting revealed the price beneath it.

Maddy had been insistent that her pricing was both “aggressively accessible” and “introductorily prominent.” Trent had assumed at least one of those phrases meant “too expensive.” He’d tried to tell her that the prices were outrageous, but she wouldn’t hear it.

So Trent let her have her way. It was flattering. The thought of money had never even crossed his mind. He considered it a miracle that people actually wanted to look at his work. He didn't care if the prices were so out of whack that no one considered buying anything.

But now, looking at yellow spots appearing around the room, he couldn't help wondering what it would be like to make a living doing the only thing he loved.

Well, perhaps not the only thing. Trent scanned the room again.

Suddenly he didn't see a single person he knew, let alone that one person he secretly hoped to find there. He just saw strangers gesturing and smiling and stringing long syllables together. He was practically drowning in the crowd of compliments.

He smiled. He nodded. He searched for a genuinely friendly face to latch on to.

"Girl, you look all Park Avenue in that frock," Nathan said, ambushing him from behind. "Are you going for pimp or stockbroker? I always have the hardest time telling those looks apart."

"That's probably because neither of them has ever given you a look at all."

He gave Nathan a hug even with the high risk of glitter transfer. It seemed like ages since he'd seen his friend. And Trent was in need of some serious attitude and unprofessional therapy.

Nathan must have been able to tell Trent was ready for a session, from the way he held his breath seriously during their quick embrace.

"Stop right there," he said. "Don't even go there. I know all about it."

"What do you mean?" Trent asked, confused.

"Honey, I've seen your pictures. They're lovely," Nathan explained. "But I came for the other show. The drama."

"There won't be any drama," Trent insisted. "So don't try to make any."

"*Moi?*" Nathan batted his eyes. "Of course not. The *Gay Handbook* says there's no need to bring your own drama when you're visiting the queen. I'm just an innocent bystander."

"You're about as innocent as you are straight." At least Trent could laugh again when he was around Nathan.

"I practically am." Nathan put on his most serious face under all the glitter. "I've met the most wonderful woman. I'm thinking about going hetero for her. You must meet her."

Trent couldn't wait to see what Nathan had up his fluttering sleeve. His good-humored flamboyance had already lightened Trent's mood considerably. The babble of the crowd and the random accolades and pats on the back weren't so disorienting now. He was almost enjoying his moment.

He watched Nathan walk over to a woman in a red dress. Trent hadn't noticed her there, gazing at a close-up self-portrait Trent had taken of himself almost two weeks ago.

When Nathan tapped her on the shoulder and turned her around, Trent's surprise and guilt nearly choked him. It was his mother.

"If this night had gone by without me, young man," she started in true motherly form, but the tears hanging at the corners of her eyes were for a very different reason. "Oh, Trent, it's beautiful. I can't believe this is all happening."

Trent rushed to hold his mother, to support her and thank her for being there for him. She looked beautiful, still young, still thin. She felt small in his arms, but her sheer presence was enormous and meant more to Trent than he could express.

He couldn't believe it had been weeks since he'd even heard her voice. He glanced at Nathan in gratitude as he patted his mother's back softly. Leave it up to good ol' Nate.

Trent saw Nathan slip away quietly out of the corner of his eye. He was giving them some time alone and bringing a little more life to another part of the party. He was probably tracking Ida down at this very moment to plan a shopping trip or cause a scene of some sort.

Now Trent couldn't imagine this evening without his mother. He looked around and realized how lucky he was to have people who cared about him. Somehow, everyone was there, and he hadn't done a thing to make it happen. He was lucky to have Nathan and Ida making calls and covering his ass.

He couldn't believe he'd left it up to his roommate to tell his mother about tonight. But he wondered exactly how much explaining Nathan had done when he called her. What about all the other nights over the past weeks that Trent hadn't told her about?

"Mom, I'm so sorry I didn't call," Trent tried to explain without too much explanation. "It's just been so crazy."

"Yes, I know," she said. "Same old story."

But there was something in her voice that said she knew more than she was letting on. This time, it was quite a different story.

Mother and son looked back up at the set of photographs hanging there in the rear corner. Trent had insisted on putting these two way back where they would get less attention. It was one thing to put his life on display for hundreds of people. But it was entirely another to hang up larger-than-life images of his own face.

In the first picture, Trent had been two weeks younger, and it showed. He was sitting in Santom's Garage, before he knew what that name meant or who really owned it. He was wearing his blue coveralls like all the other mechanics. His hair was even more tousled than usual, poking at his forehead and the edges of the frame. There was a smudge of grease on his face, right under his eye, like a football player, and there was a goofy smile spread across his mouth. He looked happy and playful and slightly self-conscious of the fact that he was grinning into his own camera.

The second picture was very different.

It was just two days old. He was standing in the parking lot of Rodney's garage. He could see the sign rising into the sky in the background -- Glen Mills Mechanics -- hanging over his shoulder like an omen. This time, there was no smile. He wasn't even looking into the camera. He didn't seem to notice the presence of the lens. He was staring at something or nothing just over the camera and just out of reach. He looked confused and tired, more unkempt than tousled. The circles under his blue eyes stood out in black and white, and the expression on his face pulled the viewer's own eye to the bottom of the photo, like the corners of his mouth.

"I definitely prefer the first one," his mother stated.

It was a better photograph, but Trent knew that's not what his mother meant.

"I just hate pictures of myself," Trent said absently. "I guess photographers just aren't used to being subjects. They hate looking at themselves."

"Well, some people don't seem to mind looking at you." She gestured to the first picture, pointing out an element that Trent had failed to notice.

He had been too preoccupied with the unfamiliar subject of his own face to see what was going on behind him. He had tried to look at the photo with an artistic eye instead of being so self-critical, and he had mistaken the figure in the background for a simple component of composition.

It was Dan. From the upper corner of the photo, he was staring at Trent's antics in the foreground admiringly. He hadn't known that his stolen glance would be captured on film. The look on his face was honest and secretive at the same time. His smile was in his eyes more than on his lips, and his arms hung limply at his side. He looked proud and happy and content.

Trent was having trouble identifying the blurred expression, or having trouble admitting to himself what that expression truly was. In the background, Dan was slightly out of focus but clearly in love.

"You're lucky to have someone who looks at you like that," his mother said. If she was pulling out the single-mother trump card again, Trent knew he would lose.

"It's not that simple," he interrupted. "Nothing with Dan ever is."

"Danny Bartlett?" Her question didn't sound that surprised. "Good-looking boy, almost as handsome as you, but he had an awfully rough time of things."

"I wouldn't exactly call him a boy," Trent said, trying to sound malicious. "And he didn't exactly make things easy on anyone else either."

"Trent, he was younger than you are right now when I knew him," she asserted. "And he went to a funeral every week. The only reason he wasn't living at home with his parents was because they passed away. He had more responsibility and struggle than most men twice his age."

"That's not how I remember things."

"Of course not!" She laughed sweetly at Trent's bitterness. "You were a teenager. You thought the world revolved around you. And he was just a few years older."

"Eight," Trent insisted.

"And that's a lot?" she asked. "He was expected to be an adult already, while you got to be a little brat with your camera and your baseball bat in the backyard next to him."

"That doesn't make up for the way he treated me," Trent said stubbornly.

"Maybe not," she conceded. "But your teenage misery was not the center of the universe. All teenagers think they're miserable. But Dan knew real misery. And everyone makes mistakes. If I held everything you said back then against you, I wouldn't be speaking to you either."

Trent had to admit that much was true. Being a single mother also meant she'd been the lone recipient of all Trent's youthful angst.

He looked up at the photograph again so he didn't have to meet the wisdom in her eyes. For the first time, he noticed the yellow tag pasted beside his smiling portrait.

"You bought it?" he asked in disbelief, and to change the subject.

"Lord, no!" she exclaimed. "I love it, but my taste is a little rich for my wallet when it comes to your art. You can't buy love anyway, can you?"

So much for a subject change.

"I can't believe Nathan told you all this."

"Trent" -- she paused -- "it wasn't Nathan."

Trent snapped his head toward her and confirmed the tone of her voice with her knowing look. Dan had been to the house.

Of course Dan knew where it was, but Trent had never considered that he would go that far. How could it be worth this much effort? If this was part of some sick trick to hurt Trent again, why would he go to all this trouble? If this was just Dan fulfilling his own greedy desire for some younger man, some boy to possess, why would he look outside his own business? Why wouldn't he just do what Rodney had accused him of, what everyone already believed?

Trent felt foolish and childish. He still felt bruised and hurt, but now he couldn't tell how much of that was his own doing. How much more hurt had he caused himself by denying what he felt?

He had held a grudge for more than ten years. And now all the facts were being called into question and placed in a different light. He wasn't sure what had been true back then, but it was becoming clear that he was ignoring the present reality for some tainted memory.

It was like looking at a familiar picture and finding something there that he'd overlooked too long. It was like looking inside himself and discovering his own truth.

“Honey, you were just the kid next door who broke his windows.” His mother spoke softly and slowly. “He had a lot of other things to worry about. He didn’t even think about you. But that doesn’t seem to be the case anymore.”

Trent looked back at the photo for confirmation, to see the expression on Dan’s face trapped in the recent past. A moment and a memory that Trent hadn’t even known he’d captured.

But his mother wasn’t looking at the photograph. She was gazing across the tight crowd of people, toward the front of the room.

There, standing on the stairs that led down into the masses, was Dan.

Dan saw him from across the room. The intensity of Trent’s blue eyes shot out at him and cut through the crowd. They seemed to light up. That shine was more than mere recognition and something much softer than rage. It gave Dan hope. In fact, that look in Trent’s eyes may have been hope itself.

Dan gazed down at that face, perfectly reflected by the portrait above it. The expressions were different, but they were both beautiful. Dan wanted to see every possible combination of grins and surprise and happiness that could spread across Trent’s face. He wanted to remember each one and wake to a new interpretation of that smile every morning.

That’s why he had asked Ida to save that photograph for him. He knew he would love it before she described it, before he even saw it. After all, it was Trent’s face. So he’d purchased it by phone as soon as the gallery opened. Dan couldn’t imagine that smile hanging on anyone else’s wall.

And after he hung up that phone, he’d grabbed his keys and headed straight for the truck. He didn’t even hesitate before breaking his promise to Ida. He had spent the entire day telling himself to wait, to listen to her advice. He knew he should let Trent have his moment. He tried to separate his feelings from the excitement of this night. They were two different things that didn’t need the added confusion of each other.

But when he had called, he could hear the crowd sounds in the background. He could almost hear glasses tinkle and bracelets jangle. He could picture the commotion and importance, and he could imagine Trent there in the middle of it all. He couldn’t imagine not being there with him.

Dan looked for the best path through the crowd, and the journey appeared nearly impossible. From Dan’s vantage point, Trent was miles away. From here, he could see countless familiar faces. There were his mechanics. But there were other faces he hadn’t seen for quite a while. There were friends, neighbors, and associates of Martin and Ida’s. People who had been steered his way with engine trouble and body work. People who no longer called to drop off their cars since the situation and rumors had gotten too complicated. Word of mouth had made them customers, and it had taken them away again.

They had heard the stories and the scandal. Whether they believed the rumors or not, they obviously didn’t want to be confronted with the awkward embarrassment of it all.

Liking a mechanic was not the same as going to battle for his good name. They simply didn't know what was true. And they certainly didn't know how to deal with Dan now.

When they recognized their old mechanic where he stood above them, it was amazing how quiet the crowd became. Within moments of Dan's arrival, the turbulent roar of the group hushed to a trickle of chatter. People gazed up at him and turned their eyes away quickly when he tried to meet their embarrassed stares.

Dan wondered if they'd turn away as quickly when he approached. He didn't care. Perhaps their turned backs would open up a path through the sea for him. If his social banishment helped him reach Trent faster, he was happy to embrace it.

Then one booming sound echoed out over the calmed waves of patrons. One voice plunged into the depths of silence and created quite a splash.

Rodney's voice was too crass and too loud. He spoke to himself for all to hear. "I don't know about anyone else," he said. "But I like this one best."

The people receded from one wall of the room slightly. They created space for Rodney and his voice where he stood under one huge photograph of himself.

Everyone looked up at the black-and-white image of his smiling, gloating face. He was bent under the hood of a car, with a hammer in hand, a bucket of plaster balanced on the front bumper.

"I think I'll buy it, hang it in the garage," he stated. "Business is so good, I can afford a few luxuries. I deserve it."

He waited. Let the comment sink in. Rocked back on the heels of his boots.

"What do you think, Dan?" Rodney turned from the photo and shot his gaze across the room.

Dan looked at the picture, and for the first time, he realized where Trent had been for the past days. It was the last place on earth he would have looked. The realization stabbed painfully at him. He knew that Trent had been forced to listen to all the most evil details of Dan's past. There was no way Rodney could have uttered a single supportive fact.

Dan looked at Rodney's smug grin, in the photo and right there in full color and real life. Then Dan saw more truth than he had expected tonight.

"I think it's a great idea, Rodney," Dan answered. "It's better if you own the incriminating evidence against yourself. Get rid of the proof."

Everyone looked back to the photo. But there were only a handful of mechanics present who saw anything condemning there.

However, everyone in the room saw the smile slide from Rodney's face. The self-satisfied look in the photo was no longer reflected in his present expression. His greed and spite had blinded him to the clear facts.

"It's right there in black and white, Rodney," Dan said. "A hammer under the hood? Tell me again how you do that trick, Rod. I forget. You hammer down the busted piston casing and then level it off with plaster, right?"

Rodney didn't answer.

"Now, is that before or after you charged the customer for a brand-new one?" Dan asked sarcastically. "That's the part that always confuses me."

The crowd mumbled exclamations and took sharp little breaths of surprise.

"I mean, it looks almost like new," Dan added. "The car will just keep dragging to the right forever."

"It does!" a demure older woman exclaimed not-so-demurely from the center of the crowd. "It still does!"

"Hi there, Mrs. Thompson," Dan called down to his old customer. "I bet you if you put a magnet on top of that 'new' piston, it'll fall right off. It looks the same after you paint it, but plaster is a little different than metal."

Rodney stood defiantly with his hands on his hips. He looked as if he was going to plead his innocence right there under the proof and in front of the plaintiff and a dozen expert witnesses. But he must have thought better of it.

Most of these people didn't know the first thing about cars. That's how Rodney stayed in business. But he also knew that they didn't have to call in a judge to condemn someone. They had written Dan off with nothing but rumors. They hadn't even had photographic evidence in that case.

So Rodney decided to give them some.

"Yeah, well, what about that picture of you and one of your favorite employees?" he asked, indicating the self-portrait of Trent with Dan in the background.

Dan looked back to that end of the room and was startled, not by Rodney's accusation, but by Trent's disappearance. He saw Trent's mother there in her red dress, but her son was no longer by her side. He had become lost in the agitated crowd. And that crowd had suddenly become an audience.

Dan couldn't see Trent because, at that moment, he was pushing his way through the captivated mass of people that separated them. They all looked up at Dan, ignoring Trent as he pushed at their shoulders and squeezed between their tight-knit circles.

He needed to reach Dan. He needed to be with him now. He needed to stand there strong beside him while he was being attacked.

Trent had no idea what he had captured on film at Rodney's garage. Trent didn't even know what a piston was. But he was certain of one thing now. And that one thing was standing on the stairs being accused and insulted and judged by a roomful of people. They were being more critical of this man on display than they were of all Trent's pictures hanging on the wall.



Trent wouldn't stand by and let that happen. He pushed and shoved. People barely noticed and barely moved. They all just looked up at Dan.

Dan stood tall. He looked so strong and independent, but Trent knew he should be there with Dan to show everyone the truth. He looked at the way Dan squared his big shoulders and set his jaw. Trent ached to touch him, to wrap his arm around him here in front everyone and support him physically and emotionally.

Dan snapped back to the moment and the challenge that had been put before him. He looked at the picture of Trent's smiling face for courage.

"Well, that's certainly one of my favorite photographs," Dan answered. "That's why I bought it. But I think it's pretty obvious to everyone here that Trent's a photographer, not a mechanic."

There was mumbled affirmation. Everyone seemed to agree except Rodney.

"So I wouldn't call him an employee, Rodney," Dan corrected. "Just the man I've fallen in love with."

The sounds of surprise were louder this time. They couldn't have been surprised by the revelation of Dan's sexuality. It had been whispered for months. They were simply surprised that Dan had put an end to the whispering. He spoke loud and clear. He wasn't ashamed of his love. In fact, he sounded proud.

But Rodney sounded desperate. He had run out of ammunition in this battle. "Go ahead and have your fun, Dan," Rodney spat venomously. "You'll always be nothing but a goddamn faggot."

The sharp intake of breath that rippled through the crowd was not surprise. It was a chorus of disapproval. Rodney had already dropped that bomb and been defeated.

"And you'll just always be nothing," Dan replied with a tone that sounded more like pity than spite.

The laughter was muffled but apparent. The support in the room was almost tangible.

Rodney turned slowly and headed silently for the hall. He left through the back door defiantly, but broken. His retreat was the closest thing to a surrender that anyone would ever see in this old war.

Immediately, the crowd broke into smaller particles, little pockets of summarized conversation and obvious gossip. They leaned close together to confer. The room buzzed with scorn and praise.

"I suspected all along."

"She really should have known better."

"There's only one real mechanic in this town."

"It's so nice to see love and chivalry are alive and well."

Trent rushed through the paths that had suddenly opened throughout the room. He ran up the steps two at a time and nearly knocked Dan over as he dived into his arms.

Their embrace was fast and hard. But they both kept pulling back to stare into each other's faces and reassure themselves that this was really happening.

Dan took Trent's arm and gently led him away from the limelight. He was tired of being on stage, and he had some important things to say. Everyone could know the truth, but there were facts and feelings that he and Trent alone should share.

They slipped into the night air. Its coolness was like a breath of reality. For several moments, they just stared at each other under the streetlight. They were stunned by their dramatic reunion and the simple fact that they were near and alone.

Dan was struck again by Trent's beauty. He looked so mature and handsome in his blue suit, with his eyes piercing and vibrant. The lines of his cheekbones were outlined by the freshly shaved shadow of his beard and framed by his collar. He wore no tie, and the points of his collarbone jutted against his creamy skin.

Dan wanted to rush at him and hold him and kiss all those severe lines of flesh and bone. But there were things to talk about before that could ever happen. He couldn't waste this moment and lose this beauty forever.

Trent's polish and poise dwarfed the mussed figure Dan knew he himself must present at this point. He'd thrown on an old wrinkled blazer on his way out the door and raked his hand through his hair in the rearview mirror.

But Trent loved that Dan could pull together at a moment's notice and be the most handsome man in the room. He looked distraught and disheveled, but somehow it looked amazingly sexy on him. He could have used a shave and a dress shirt. But the stubble clung to his wide jaw and masculine features the way the shirt clung to his flat, hard stomach. The emphasis was subtle, but it hinted at the careless perfection underneath.

Trent felt a thousand things he couldn't express. He wanted to press himself against Dan's perfect body and let the torrent of emotions seep between them. He wanted to communicate with kisses and embraces. He wanted body language to do the work that he knew it could never do. He wondered how else this conversation could begin.

"It's the truth, Trent," Dan began, "what I said in there. The truth is the only thing I have now. It's the only thing I've been able to think about...except you."

He looked straight into Trent's blue eyes. His own eyes were wide, like deep pools of honesty.

Trent almost looked away, but he couldn't. Dan held his gaze and made him see the only thing he had left to offer -- the truth of himself, of love.

"I don't know what the truth is, Dan," Trent said. It wasn't an attack. Trent was trying to expose his own confusion, share the thoughts that ran clumsily through his head. "I've been carrying around these memories for a decade, and they don't even make sense anymore."

Teenage anger and pride and closeted insecurities had nothing to do with you back then. Except that you were dealing with all that, too. All that and so much more than I ever had to.”

Dan bit his lip. He had never expected Trent to understand so much. Standing in that dark parking lot, blue and black and yellow under the streetlight, Trent looked like the perfect picture of a man. Understanding and loving and more mature than Dan had ever been in his twenties.

Trent had come to know Dan so acutely in the past weeks. Trent knew how he felt and thought. Trent was able to hear the ugly truth of the past straight from the ill intentions of Rodney, and he could understand what Dan had gone through, how Dan had reflected his own pain onto everyone around him.

“We were both confused and hurt,” Dan said. “We had more in common than we ever knew.”

“I was so angry with the world and so focused on myself that I couldn’t even see the real you,” Trent continued. “I couldn’t even recognize you when we met again. And how could I forget a face like this?”

Trent took a step forward and laid his hand against the ridge of Dan’s jaw. He framed that rugged face with the softness of his palm. He felt stubble and the hard curve of bone, and he felt an incredible desire to keep touching. But he pulled away. He took a step back. Not yet. There was still more to be said.

“I don’t like lying, Dan,” Trent declared plainly. “But if it hadn’t been for Dan Santom, I never would have had the chance to get to know Dan. I wouldn’t have given Mr. Bartlett the time of day if I’d met him along the river.”

Trent paused. It was his turn to bite his lip. Now it was his turn for disclosures.

“I lied, too, Dan. I don’t know what I was doing by the river that night, but I’d never even been there in the daytime before.”

“I know.” Dan surprised Trent with his knowledge. “But it wouldn’t matter. Nothing in your past could change the way I feel right now. Trent, I had to find out the truth about myself before I could understand the truth about you...about us.”

Trent was amazed. It wasn’t the past that had hurt them. It was the lies they had created to cover up the realities of their lives, obscuring the truth of today and the possibilities of tomorrow.

“No more lies,” Trent declared. “I’ve been lying to myself even more over these past few days.” Trent took another step closer. They were almost touching, but not yet. “No matter how I tried, I couldn’t convince myself that I didn’t want to be with you.”

“It wasn’t just my name, Trent. I hid my emotions behind my business for years. And I tried to hide from you, too. But the truth is, no lie is big enough to keep me from you.” Dan

reached out like an offer. He touched Trent's waist lightly. He held them there together, yet apart. "I can't make up for the past. All I can do is promise you the future."

Their kiss was an acceptance. Of apologies and Dan's offer and each other. It was an acceptance of truth and life just the way it was. No lies. No secrets. No spare parts.

Their arms wrapped around each other in pure honesty. And they were so wrapped up in each other and their slow, sweet kiss that they didn't even notice the open double doors of the gallery. The entryway spilled light and people out into the parking lot.

They all laughed when the couple turned and realized they were the main attraction tonight. The sound was low and admiring. The peeping audience smiled at Trent and Dan, and Trent could have sworn he even heard some applause in there. It was better than a standing ovation.

## Chapter Seventeen

The sun poured into Dan's east-facing bedroom as early as it could and roused the lovers. They hadn't slept much anyway. They were exhausted. Trent and Dan were worn out emotionally and physically.

Trent rolled over and pressed his lips to the warmth of Dan's shoulder. He ran his hand through the short, soft hairs of Dan's chest and felt the hard resilience of muscle beneath.

"Mmmm," Dan responded to Trent's touch, barely awake, eyes half-open in the morning light.

Trent nuzzled and kissed the crook of Dan's neck, and he caught sight of the new photograph out of the corner of his eye. Dan had insisted on hanging Trent's self-portrait last night as soon as they got home. He hammered a nail directly above the bed and hung Trent's face crookedly before grabbing the real thing and peeling off clothes with gentle hands and lips.

Trent wasn't so comfortable with his giant smile above their bed. But when he looked at the upper corner and saw Dan's expression of love, he thought he might be able to get used to it.

Trent was going to have to get used to a lot of new things when it came to his photography. The show had been a success in every way. Right now, all Trent could really focus on was the success that was waking slowly beside him. But last night, he had sold several photographs while he was preoccupied with all the other developments in his life.

Ida and Maddy had been bombarded with praise and requests for commission work. Trent wasn't even sure what it all meant, but they assured him it was "amazing," "fabulous," "uniquely triumphant," and "un-fucking-believable." That last one was from Ida.

People were eagerly awaiting his next show, or so they claimed as they loaded their new frames into luxurious cars. People wanted portraits. And gay men appeared out of nowhere to ask quietly about “intimate couple portraiture.”

Trent used to think he’d be lucky to make a living as a wedding photographer. Now he could specialize in commitment ceremonies instead, if he wanted.

Whatever he decided to do with his newfound success, Trent was certain of one thing. He was not going to become a mechanic. He was never going to have to touch a tool again...well, not that kind of tool.

He let his hand move down Dan’s firm torso and slip under the covers. He stroked the thick shaft of Dan’s penis lightly, waiting for the response. He felt warmth surge through it as Dan groaned and opened his eyes completely.

No matter how many times Trent touched him, Dan was amazed by the sensation that coursed through him. Again and again throughout the night, they had rolled together, finding passion in every touch. They would wake and make love and fall asleep in each other’s arms until they had rested enough to start again.

Dan turned over onto Trent. He pinned him down and felt the soft, white skin beneath him. He planted a deep, open kiss on Trent’s playful smile.

They ground their bodies together. Trent arched upward. Dan pressed down. Their erections were almost painfully hard from use and desire. They rubbed them against one another roughly. They mashed their stubbled faces together in scratchy, starving kissing.

It was as if they had not tasted the sweetness of each other for days rather than hours. They were making up for lost time.

Their need was fast and sudden, and they gorged themselves on one another. Dan bit Trent’s nipple and lapped at his chest. His tongue flicked at the tight navel quickly before he moved to envelop Trent’s entire length in a few greedy swallows.

Without hesitation, Trent pulled Dan’s face away. He was so close, on the brink again. Dan’s mouth, his entire body, filled Trent with powerful longing. He guided Dan onto his back and climbed atop the big man.

Trent kissed Dan’s throat and groped eagerly at strong, furry thighs and broad shoulders. He reached under himself and encircled Dan’s solid shaft again. It was hard and hot now, and Trent could feel blood and pleasure pulsing there in his hand. He squeezed and stroked, harder and insistent. He felt Dan tense and watched his mouth open silently in ecstasy.

Dan groaned. “Oh, Trent, you’re the most amazing man.” He opened his eyes and looked at Trent’s smile.

Trent worked his hand in strong, rhythmic caresses. He pressed his own erection hard against Dan’s thigh. He drove his hips against the huge muscle.

“I love you, Dan.”

Their kiss was deep. Their bodies were fused with need. They broke a sweet sweat between their bodies as their orgasms rocked them back and forth, and they groaned into each other's lips.

Dan was almost ready to fall asleep again. But he kept his eyes open a few minutes longer to gaze at the man in his arms.

He was going to need the vacation he had planned from the garage. He had already given too much of his life to his business. Now that it had been revived, he could step back for a while.

The phone at the garage had been ringing off the hook all morning on a Sunday. The guys had called early to let him know, and Dan had let them deal with it.

Everyone suddenly needed repairs that they'd put off or that Rodney had complicated. Dan could have made a decent living just fixing Rodney's mistakes. There were even customers who were scheduling oil changes after a thousand miles, just to show their support or to apologize.

Suddenly, everyone needed something. But what Dan needed was time. He needed to take time for himself and Trent and their life together. He didn't need to be strong and alone and a hardheaded businessman. He needed Trent, and that was the honest truth.

Dan's eyelids lowered slowly.

Trent watched him doze off again. He was glad to have Dan there with him, even though business had picked up with renewed strength. Everyone needed a good mechanic. As Trent watched Dan fall asleep, he couldn't have agreed with that statement more.

They were so different. Trent couldn't even fill the gas tank without losing the cap. But perhaps they complemented one another. They didn't have to be the same. They didn't have to be perfect. They had to be strong and honest and love each other. Their lives just fit together.

Trent looked over at the nightstand and saw his camera lying there. He wondered what his next photographs would be like. He wondered what the future would bring and how Dan's life and his own would grow together. He wondered what memories they would make.

He reached over carefully and grabbed the camera. He removed the lens cap quietly and wound to the next frame. Then he turned the lens on Dan and focused his naked, sleeping body in that familiar black square.

The image came clear. Dan's sturdy build and tan skin glowed above white sheets. Morning light cast shadows across his body as he breathed.

Trent pushed the button. He made a memory.

The click of the shutter woke Dan from his light sleep. His eyes snapped open.

"What in the world do you think you're doing, young man?" Dan asked.

Trent hopped from the bed playfully, out of Dan's reach. "I think my next show will be a series of nudes," he quipped back at him.

“Oh, no, it will not,” Dan asserted as he climbed quickly out of bed in pursuit. “Give me that camera.”

Trent laughed. He clicked another shot of Dan’s naked form as he approached with outstretched hands. Trent ran around the bed to escape him.

He clicked the shutter again. He made another memory.

They were going to need a lot of film.

 THE END 



## Scott & Scott

**Scott Pomfret** and **Scott Whittier (a.k.a. Scott&Scott)** met, fell in love, and now live together in Boston, Massachusetts. They realized the story of their own romance wasn't the only one out there, so they created Romentics, a line of gay romance novels for all gay men who believe in happily ever after. They are also the co-authors of the *Q-Guide to Wine & Cocktails*.

**Pomfret**, 39, a native of Wellesley, Massachusetts, is a branch chief in the Division of Enforcement of the United States Securities and Exchange Commission. Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly named him one of fifteen "Up-and-Coming" lawyers for 2005. Pomfret's short stories and erotic fiction have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *Post Road*, *New Delta Review*, *Genre Magazine*, *Friction 4, 5, and 7* (Alyson Books), *Best Gay Love Stories 2005 and 2006* (Alyson Books), *Best Gay Erotica 2005* (Cleis Press) and *Fresh Men: Best New Gay Voices* (Carroll & Graf). Pomfret was co-counsel with Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders in a case bringing a constitutional challenge to Massachusetts sodomy laws.

**Whittier**, 32, a native of Poland, Maine, is an advertising copywriter. His commercial work has appeared on radio, billboards, TV, and in print media internationally and has won top honors in the Healthcare Advertising Awards and Admission Advertising Awards. He has published fiction in *Children Churches and Daddies*, *Playguy*, *In Touch*, *Honcho* and Alyson's anthologies *Just the Sex*, *Ultimate Gay Erotica* and *Friction 7*.