



**SEX,
LIES,
AND
CELLULOID**

JODI PAYNE
CHRIS OWEN

Sex, Lies and Celluloid

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher.

Sex, Lies and Celluloid

TOP SHELF

An imprint of Torquere Press Publishers

PO Box 2545

Round Rock, TX 78680

Copyright 2007 Chris Owen and Jodi Payne

Cover illustration by Alessia Brio

Published with permission

ISBN: 978-1-60370-198-3, 1-60370-198-2

www.torquerepress.com

All rights reserved, which includes the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever except as provided by the U.S. Copyright Law. For information address Torquere Press, Inc., PO Box 2545, Round Rock, TX 78680.

First Torquere Press Printing: November 2007

Printed in the USA

For Steph, who had to hold two hands through this one.

With love and thanks,

J and C

Snapshot

I've always loved my job, but some days were better than others.

I could just see them through the half-open curtains that framed the window of the dimly lit front room, nearly naked and crashing together like teenagers in heat.

Swallowing, I adjusted the focus of my binoculars, hoping for a closer view. I'd been following Daniel, and the shorter man with him, since they met up at the Starbucks down the street half an hour ago. I'd watched them walk together, their steps brisk and purposeful; their bodies close enough to touch, but not quite doing it. Their conversation was minimal from what I could tell, but then what was there to talk about, really, aside from determining who had the latex and negotiating which one of them would be on top?

"Nuts," I swore out loud, but just above a whisper, as if there was any way they could hear me. I was disappointed as Daniel fell back on the couch and that full, straining cock was hidden behind over-stuffed upholstery. I wanted to see it again. Needed to.

I could see the other man clearly, though, and a jealousy I shouldn't have felt welled up into my throat as he sank to his knees between Daniel's thighs. He leaned forward, his bare hip and ass lit just well enough to keep my interest as the guy's head, covered in thick, blonde curls, began bobbing up and down in Daniel's lap. The guy, who I knew to be named Michael, gripped his own wood with one hand and stroked it lazily as he swallowed Daniel down his throat. The look on Daniel's face -- oh, God, that look -- piqued more than just my interest and I quickly dropped the binoculars into my lap, trading them for my camera. With the push of a button, I recorded Daniel's face and Michael's perfectly round ass in all of their full-color, high resolution, incriminating glory, though I had no intention of turning these pictures over to anyone.

I started to switch back to my binoculars again, but something stopped me. A twinge of conscience? A nagging sense of moral indignation? I was too far gone for that, now. I made a half-hearted reach for my keys, which were dangling from the ignition, but the little devil on my shoulder was saying, "Come on, Shane, you want him, and they don't even know you're here." I found that devil to be very persuasive and I pulled my hand back again.

I picked up my binoculars just in time to catch Daniel's orgasm, and I watched intently as his eyes squinted closed, his mouth fell open wide, and his hips bucked up off the couch. God, he was beautiful.

Chapter One

I took another look at the picture in my hand and then at the tags on the black Lexus RX 350 and nodded, satisfied. This was the guy, and his car, too. Nice SUV. No wonder the wife didn't want to lose him. Though with looks like his I suspected she wanted him as more than just a meal ticket.

My truck was parked down the block where it wouldn't be seen, and I was hiding myself behind the low fence that lined the dark lot on the west side of the park. I'd staked out this same park on another job a couple of years ago and the vivid memory of standing in the rain for four hours on a chilly October night made me shiver. This time the sky was clear and I could even see some stars through the bounce of light off the city streets. Thank God for that, anyway.

Apparently the drug dealer that my surveillance target was waiting for had decided to be fashionably late. I'd been sitting there watching the SUV for nearly twenty minutes and all was quiet. Inside the SUV there was nothing but stillness, the mark not even twitching or looking around. His radio was off, and there weren't any interesting sounds that I was able to pick up, despite the sensitivity of my electronic scope. For a little handheld thing, the instrument picked up amazing quality.

Usually, anyway. At that moment, all I could hear was breathing and a snatch of humming. Apparently my mark liked Matchbox 20.

I was just about to shift my weight and lean on the fence when a body separated itself from the shadows and approached the SUV, walking in a straight line for the passenger side. Oddly, the target got out of the car before the new man could reach the vehicle and then got in the back. The newcomer did the same, without a word. Just got in the back and the two of them sat there.

"Daniel?"

"Yes," the man I'd been watching said, which fit the information in my file, but it seemed odd to me that he was using his real name. "And you're going by 'Jim'?"

"It's my name," Jim said, laughing. "But I don't care if you believe me."

Daniel snorted and laughed, too. "It hardly matters. So, we're still on for what we talked about earlier?"

"Hell, yes," Jim said emphatically, and I could hear the way he was moving on the leather seat, his jeans sliding and shifting. "Come here."

Daniel didn't say anything, but there were more sliding sounds and then a low moan.

I listened to the sounds they made together and it didn't take me long to determine exactly what was going on.

This was no drug deal. Unless one considered cock a controlled substance.

In moments I had conjured up an image for myself -- Jim leaning back against the passenger side door, Daniel's mouth on him sucking hungrily, if the grunting Daniel was doing was any indication. Jim liked it, handing out orders to get exactly what he wanted: tighter, faster, harder. Daniel's breathing was short and sharp.

"That's it," Jim whispered, his voice crackly in my headset. "Just like that."

There was a moan from one of them and Jim grunted, gasping out a short, "Yes." I could picture him -- his face as yet unseen, but it hardly mattered -- eyes closed, his brows drawn in concentration, Daniel's mouth sucking him in and pulling his orgasm closer.

The sharp sound of a zipper being undone came through, and then Daniel's moan, muffled by the cock in his mouth.

"Jesus," I whispered bitterly. I hadn't gotten laid in months, and I didn't need a mark to remind me how it was done. I felt suddenly jealous, and however irrational and absurd that might seem, the twist in my gut was undeniably real. I shut off the mic in disgust, took a minute to pack it away, then stood up and headed back to my truck. I didn't care that I was in full view of Daniel Brint's car. The SUV was rocking slightly now. Those two weren't seeing anything; they were too busy getting off.

By the time I got back to my office I'd cooled off some. I wasn't jealous, really, so much as just pathetically horny and needing a hook-up of my own. I had to smile, though, at the hot pot of coffee on the counter; once again grateful for Celia and our shared love of convenient gadgets. She always set the timer for me before she left for the day, and consequently, I always had hot coffee at midnight.

I poured myself a mug and added a dash of milk before taking it back to my desk to mull over my next move. Mr. Brint wasn't doing drugs at all; he was a horny homo like myself. And a cheating, lying, closeted homo at that.

I had to wonder whether the lovely Mrs. Brint would be thrilled or disappointed to learn that her up-and-coming political star of a husband wasn't, in fact, snorting their money up his nose. Janet Brint struck me as determined and stubborn, but that was when she was planning on getting her man into treatment in a discreet facility so no one would know his shame. She might fly off the handle when she heard about what he was doing in the back seat of his Lexus.

I pondered that for a few minutes, leaning back and enjoying my coffee. There was Daniel Brint, lawyer and politician, and there was his perfect wife, Janet. Both of them lovely and demure and putting up a strong front, if the news bites were to be believed. Meanwhile, the good councilman was cheating on his wife, probably paying for hookers, and sucking cock like he was a pro himself.

It made me wonder if Mrs. Brint might be hiding something, too. Maybe her front was just as false. Her hair color certainly was, though it was definitely an expensive dye job. Still, she'd seemed almost cold when she hired me to find out who Daniel was getting his drugs from and how much he was spending.

I suspected there were two sides to the story, like any other, and I decided to hold off on giving up Mr. Brint to his wife. After all, Brint wasn't the only closeted man in the city and as a politician he probably needed the trophy wife and the spic-and-span reputation to get elected. I decided I'd look into my client's background and her own habits a bit before I hung anyone out to dry.

I took the last two sips of my coffee and booted my laptop. I needed some basic information: where Janet Brint was from, who her parents were, who her friends were, where she shopped, what her social life was like. I opened up a new e-mail and started typing. Celia was a whiz with the internet, and she was friendly

with a few of my former police connections so she was very handy. And what she couldn't get through legitimate channels, she often was able to get through other means, including a little discreet flirting.

Chapter Two

"Yeah?"

"Since when did we suddenly switch to investigating the clients, Shane?" Celia sounded far too awake and chipper for me. I'd barely woken up to roll over and answer my cell phone. "I mean, really. She's paying us. What do we care where she shops and who her friends are? Not that I can't find out, of course."

"And good morning to you, too, Celia. For pity's sake, at least try to sound as tired as I am." I hauled myself up and swung my legs over the bed, switching my Treo to the other ear. "What time is it?"

"Almost eleven. I took the time to do the invoices from last month before I read your e-mail and now I'm a little puzzled. What happened last night? You sound like hell, by the way. Or did I wake you up. Again."

"Oh, no. No, you didn't wake me up," I lied. "I'm just a little under the weather this morning." I don't know why I bothered lying to Celia, she'd know it. She always knew. "I'm really just interested in where Janet comes from and how she spends her money." I ran a hand through my unruly hair, letting the question about last night go unanswered for the moment, though I knew Celia would get back around to it.

I could hear her move around the office, the clank of the filing cabinet drawer distinct. "Uh-huh," she said, calmly. "I repeat -- why her and not the husband? Or do you mean both?"

"I'm questioning her motives, Celia. Wouldn't want to throw him under a bus, if you know what I mean."

There was a long silence and I could picture Celia standing in the middle of the office with her head tilted to the side and one eyebrow arching up. "I see," she said. I heard her chair squeak as she sat down and then she asked, "What exactly did you see the handsome Mr. Brint doing last night, Boss?"

I had to grin. Celia knew me better than my shrink, my doctor, and my mother put together. And apart from that she was just wickedly smart. "Well, let's just say that unless sex has become the preferred method of payment for crack, Mr. Brint isn't using. After what I saw, or more precisely, heard, his marriage to Janet is likely more one of convenience than love."

"So?" Celia asked bluntly. "Give the goods to the woman paying us and let her kick him to the curb. Won't be the first time some politico had to deal with having a woman on the side."

"Man, baby. Man on the side." I laughed. "Or more likely, men. It was a hook-up; sounded like they made the arrangements on the internet or over the phone."

Celia squeaked in delight. "Oh, nice," she said, as only one who trades in gossip would. "So what you're really asking me is to find out if the missus is after prime dirt for a divorce, if she's the type to drag him out in public, or if she's genuinely clueless, right?"

"Celia my love, this is why I pay you the big bucks. Well, that and because you provide me with hot coffee six hours after you've left for the day." I snorted. "Okay, that, the coffee thing, and the wicked purple dildo you gave me for Christmas. Wow."

And now Celia knew exactly why I was so tired today.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm gold. Give me a raise and next year your gift will vibrate." I could hear her smirking at me and the distant clicking of her keyboard. "Okay, I'm on it. Call me after you shower and eat. Oh, and hey, Bossman?"

"Yes, Ms. DeWolfe?"

"Was it really so hot listening to Daniel Brint getting off that you had to stay up half the night re-enacting it?" The sound of her laughter was cut off as she hung up on me.

"Oh! You little bitch!" I shouted and laughed, knowing she wouldn't hear, but unable to stop the outburst. Oh, she was -- well, she was right, is what she was. Damn her, anyway.

Another day, another dollar, as they say, and so I forced myself out of bed and into the shower. My ass burned a little from the rather forceful use of the purple dildo and I liked it, even if my fantasies had been a little on the perverted side of proper. What the closeted politician didn't know wouldn't hurt him, right? Still, I felt good about checking up on wifey-poo before I snitched on one of my own. If she turned up on the level then I'd hand over the tape and let them hash out their marital issues in private.

It was Wednesday and I knew that Mr. Brint would be at work, so I decided I would head into the office, see what Celia had for me, and then make sure I was in place to tail my mark when he left for the day.

Chapter Three

So, somehow I found the time to jerk off in the shower, and yet guess who didn't take one damn minute to listen to the weather report? Typical.

It was pouring rain by the time I made it downtown. The office is just across the street from the garage, but my shirt still got soaked and I stepped in a puddle deep enough to flood my right shoe before I made it inside. I got there in record time, though, so I was feeling pretty good about myself. I'd even remembered to stop and pick up sweets for Celia. Digging up dirt on wayward women was one of Celia's favorite tasks and I was fairly sure she would have something juicy for me when I arrived. Given who she was investigating, however, I suspected she'd have to call in a favor or two, and so I was hoping that a nice gooey cherry danish would smooth things over.

My foot made disconcerting wet, squishy noises in my shoe as I climbed the flight of stairs to the office door. My hands were full, so I tried to knock on it with my elbow.

Celia didn't exactly rush to let me in, but when the door opened I noticed the wireless headset in her ear and her listening expression on her face. She winked at me, took the danish, and backed away to let me in. She didn't help with the rest of my stuff, though. Also typical, really.

"So, anything else?" Celia said, turning away and taking a bite. "Like, any hostility when she left? Bloody daggers sticking out of the backs of her coworkers?"

"Last I checked, this was a cheating husband thing, not *Psycho*," I said, just loud enough for her to hear. I dumped the files I was carrying on my desk and left the mess there for the moment, heading for the coffee maker.

"Thanks, Tracey. I owe you lunch soon, okay?" Celia said, watching me. "Oh, I know. Maybe we can hit that new place on Third, and then go check out the new shoes. My boss is going to owe me for this, and I happen to know that he loves it when I take long lunches. It gives him more time to be perverted."

I tripped when I turned to glare at her and swore, but managed not to spill my coffee. "You're an amusing little dyke. Oh, yes, you are."

"And he's mean to me, too," Celia said, grinning. "I'll see you soon, Tracey. Thanks again." She disconnected and tossed the headset onto her desk, still smiling as she picked up the remains of her danish. The cherry topping was the same color as today's glasses; that was a complete coincidence because I never knew what color her frames were going to be. She must have had a dozen pairs, from prim gold rims to electric blue.

She took a bite of her danish and said, mouth full, "The lady client is interesting, Boss."

"Oh, was that a business call? I thought you were flirting."

"Please." She waved her hand and rolled her eyes at me. "With Tracey? Been there, done that. All that's left is gossip and shoes."

"Yeah, I know what that's like." I sat down behind my desk and surveyed the damp pile of files in front of me. "Somewhere, I have the pictures from last night," I said, digging. "So? What's interesting?"

"Pictures!" Celia stayed where she was, but that wouldn't last long; she was a fan of photos taken when people didn't know they were being observed.

This from a woman who teased me about peeping for money. Christ.

"Well," she said, pulling something up on her screen. "Janet Brint used to be Janet Applegate. If you know the name it's because her daddy used to sell a lot of real estate before he closed up shop and retired. Um. And then died. She's a lawyer, like her husband, but quit when they got married. Now she plays a lot of tennis, spends a lot of money, and is on the boards of three charities. Not one of the actual fundraisers, mind you, but her name is on the letterhead."

I glanced up at Celia. "On the letterhead. Because of daddy's money." And so Mrs. Brint, once Applegate, wanted to be kept by her husband in the manner to which she had grown accustomed. "We've got a live one, baby... oh! Here." I handed her the paper I'd found while searching for the photos, which I still hadn't located. "Parking ticket."

She reached for it, finally getting up and taking the two steps to grab it from my hand, and snorted. "Another one? You should get a discount."

"Yeah, can you arrange that for me?" I went back to digging. "So what are we thinking here? Mrs. Brint wants evidence for a divorce? That doesn't make sense if she wants to keep her bankroll, so -- ah, here they are, pictures." I flipped through them briefly. "Damn. Um, where was I?"

"About to show me the pretty," Celia said, coming around to lean over me so she could see. "Damn, he *is* pretty." She reached for the pictures and asked, "Where are the naked ones?"

"They got off in the car, sadly; dark windows. He drives a nice RX 350, though." I pointed at it, and then at the two men. "This is Brint, this is the hook-up. He's got a nice voice, too. Kind of deep."

"Did you record the audio?" she asked, looking at the pictures. "You'll need more than this for the wife, no matter which way you go. And to answer your question, I'm still not sure where she stands. Give me today and I can pull more about her, talk to some people. She might be a trophy wife, but she's got brains and she's got connections of her own. She doesn't have to rely on him for everything if she doesn't want to. When's he up for re-election?"

Well, wasn't that an interesting question? I had such a crush on Celia's mind. "City Council elections are in May," I said, mentally counting while I pulled the audio tape from my pocket. It seemed to be dry; a miracle. "About six months."

"Mm." Celia eyed the tape and tapped the stack of photos. "Okay. I'll do what I can today, type up the finer points for you. Do you have a tap on his office phone? Home? There's not much chance of picking up his mobile phone unless you're pretty close; are you doing a full out tail on him today?" She dropped the pictures and tapped away at the keyboard for a moment. "Play me the audio?" she asked, not looking over at me.

I laughed out loud. I couldn't help it. Celia was a woman after my own heart. "You really wanted to ask that question first, didn't you?"

Ethically, I shouldn't play squat for her. But, you know, considering I was tapping phone lines and taking pictures of people without their consent, how ethical was the private investigation business, anyway? I tossed her the tape. "You won't need to hit fast-forward, they get right down to business."

I gave some thought to her other inquiries. "I've got a tap in the office and Mrs. Brint quite kindly allowed me to put one on the home phone. 'The line he uses most,' she told me. Which means she will use another line for the most part, I should think. If this gets interesting, I'll get that one, too."

Celia nodded absently as she put the tape in her player and fished around on her desk for her earpiece. "All right," she said, putting it in her ear. "Are you going to sit here all day and annoy me?" She blinked once and her eyes widened. "Whoa. They really didn't wait long, did they?" Slowly, she started to smile. "Nice."

"Oh, yes," I agreed. "Purple dildo nice." I stood up, grabbing my coffee and my briefcase full of gadgets. "I'm going to catch up with Mr. Brint. I'll leave you to it. You still have that silver lipstick vibe in your purse?" Smirking, I headed for the door.

"How do you know about that?" she demanded, and I chalked one up for me. It wasn't often I got to startle her. She flicked the player off and pointed to herself. "I don't get off on men. You do." It would have gone over better if she hadn't been fighting off a blush.

"Pink is a good color on you," I said. A part of me felt strangely triumphant for getting in the last word. I closed the door behind me.

Chapter Four

Daniel Brint, according to his file, had an undergrad in Political Science and then received his Juris Doctorate from NYU Law. He pursued his legal career for a short while, working mostly for small partnerships until he decided to delve into politics. I had to wonder what would make someone want to be a politician. He was obviously not afraid of the spotlight, had no trouble with speaking in public, and apparently had enough charisma and a strong enough platform to get elected. He was, in other words, the exact opposite of yours truly, the geeky private investigator who couldn't stomach a business partner, and who was hiding quietly on the street in his truck, waiting to trail Brint home from work. Or wherever he went. I hadn't even met the man in person and I could already tell that he had so much that I didn't: money, personality, looks...

A date.

I sat up and looked at my watch. Mr. Brint, according to his wife, generally worked until at least five-thirty, but here it was just a hair past four and the man was headed to his car. Well, well. If I'd thought he would be leaving early I'd have been listening to his office line.

He didn't act like anything other than a busy businessman, but then, why would he? He unlocked his car and climbed in, but the engine didn't turn over right away; that at least gave me the minute or so I needed to get my gear set up. I was pretty sure that the SUV had all the perks, which would include GPS and probably a phone, though I didn't have the number yet. I'd bugged his Lexus when I arrived this afternoon in case of any more meetings in the back seat, but I made a mental note to get the car number from the wife as well if it looked like I'd be following him around for a while.

The lights came on and Brint put the car in reverse. I let him go past me before I even started mine up, and I picked up the sounds of a soft female voice coming from his car.

"Three blocks west, turn right on Dawson Avenue," she said with a soothing British accent.

Global Positioning. He didn't know exactly where he was going, so it certainly wasn't home. That was confirmed a moment later when he suddenly said, "Call. Janet," in a firm voice. That sounded like voice recognition for his phone, and I slipped into traffic behind him, listening and watching as we headed uptown.

When she answered, presumably safe at home, Daniel Brint lied his cheating little heart out. Cheerfully. "Hi, honey," he said, driving toward Dawson.

"Hi," she said back, less cheerfully. "It's just after four, and something tells me you're not calling to tell me you're coming home early."

"Afraid not," he said, with just enough regret in his voice that I wondered if maybe he actually was working and not on his way to another hook-up. "I'm heading to an unexpected meeting with the land use people. I'll be home for supper, but it'll be a bit late. Around seven, I think."

Well.

"Well," Janet said, and I blinked. Hers was a lot more annoyed than mine. "I'll see what I can do, but really, Daniel. One night at home this week would be nice." And then she hung up on him.

"Shit," he muttered, and turned right on Dawson.

He went left on Sixth, then right onto Park. I almost lost him at a traffic light, but as long as the GPS lady kept on talking, I was good to go. I took the last two sips of my cold coffee and tossed the cup into the trash bin, better known as my back seat, reminding myself that Celia had given me two weeks to have the truck detailed or she was going to see to it that I never had a date again.

And that was two weeks ago. Nuts.

As Brint turned up Tenth, I ended up right behind him, a little closer than I wanted to be.

He found street parking and I managed to grab a spot a couple of car lengths ahead of him. He sat in the car again, but this time he didn't seem to be waiting; I could hear him going through his briefcase. Maybe he really was going to a meeting. But then I could hear fabric sliding, his tie coming off, and when he got out of the SUV he was like another creature. Gone were the jacket and tie, and the sleeves of his shirt were rolled up. He locked the car and pocketed his keys, walking along the sidewalk and checking numbers as he went, finally darting across the street and going into what appeared to be the entrance to an apartment building, sandwiched between a dry cleaner and a Chinese restaurant.

I stayed where I was and watched, scanning the windows until I saw a man on the second floor closing blinds. Nuts. But at least I had a good idea which apartment Brint was in now.

Briefcase in hand, I jogged across the street and through the same unremarkable door. It opened into a stairwell, so I climbed the stairs to find only two doors, and I was pretty sure I knew which one my mark had gone into. After some quick fumbling in my case, I snaked my spiffy little fiber optic camera under the door, turned on the monitor, and put on my headset. The built-in microphone was a little tinny, but it was sufficient most of the time.

All I could see at first was a hallway, but a quick jiggle and shift brought more into view; I could see hallway and a bit of living area, but still no people.

"Have any trouble finding the place?" a voice said. A male voice, not Brint's.

"No," Daniel said. He didn't mention the help of GPS, just left it at that. I hoped whatever was going down wouldn't take too long -- or that whoever lived behind the second door wouldn't look out or come home or whatever.

"Good. So."

"So."

I heard a couple of footsteps and saw them, too, bare feet on the thin carpet.

"What's your pleasure?" the man said, his voice thick like honey.

"Exactly what I said it was," Daniel replied, and then the bare feet moved back, Daniel's shoes going toe to toe with him.

I really needed to see more. I twisted, the view shot up the length of their legs, and then I could see them, jeans pressed to trousers. The sounds were even hotter than Daniel and Jim in the truck. I couldn't quite see their faces, but they both had healthy bulges and neither was shy about pressing their hips against the other as they kissed. This was different than the exchange of blowjobs in Daniel's Lexus; it was hotter and more urgent.

I wondered briefly what Daniel had told the guy he wanted. Daniel's hook-up seemed to know, though, and his fingers smoothly lowered Daniel's fly.

"Go slow," Daniel said, his voice already rough and his hands kneading the ass of the trick.

The man nodded, his hand slipping into Daniel's trousers. "I know what I'm doing," he said, looking down at where his fingers were shifting under fabric. "Trust me."

"Yeah," Daniel said with a short laugh that ended with a gasp. "You do."

I'd say he did, too.

He pulled Daniel's cock out, and a fine thing it was, heavy-looking and thick, and he tugged on it a few times before sinking slowly to his knees. I had a better view of him then, and I could see why Daniel had chosen him; dark hair and lovely olive-tone skin. He set about his task, teasing Daniel with his tongue first, circling the head of Daniel's prick with it and flicking it over the head. Daniel made a hungry sound and leaned forward a bit, reaching out to brace a hand on the wall.

Technically, I didn't need to watch. All I needed was a couple of pictures, a few seconds of audio, and then I should have been on my way. Except I felt... drawn to Daniel for some reason, and I couldn't force myself to look away.

"That's it," Daniel said softly, and I kind of had to agree. "Nice and slow." Daniel reached down with his free hand and stroked the man's hair gently before holding the back of his head. "Lick it."

The guy complied, licking Daniel from the base on up and teasing at the head again, his tongue lapping at the slit, which made Daniel groan.

I almost groaned myself as I felt Daniel's arousal take hold of me, too. It was time to pack up my camera and go, but I was positively glued to them, listening to Daniel's breath grow harsh and watching as Daniel's fingers balled into a fist, tangling tighter in the other guy's hair.

Daniel made an encouraging sound and pushed his hips forward as the man took Daniel's cock into his mouth. I froze, feeling my own erection press against the zipper of my jeans. Damn it.

Once he had his cock in a nice wet mouth, Daniel seemed to think that going slow was a bad idea. I could see his fingers flex in the dark hair as Daniel's hips picked up the pace. It took only a couple of thrusts before the guy on his knees stopped even bobbing his head to suck and just let Daniel fuck his mouth.

"God, yes." Daniel hissed through teeth that had to be clenched tight. "That's it. Suck me, yeah."

I wasn't sure if I really needed the running commentary, but Daniel seemed to be a talker when he was getting off. Plus, it wasn't like I could tell him to cut it out.

Daniel's trousers slipped a little on his hips, sliding down as he leaned more heavily on the wall. His prick looked even harder when I could see it, slick with spit and surrounded by swollen lips.

There was a sound in the hall and, thankfully, my brain kicked into gear. Still, I felt more than a pang of regret as I quickly pulled the camera back and slipped it into its case. The woman coming up the stairwell smiled at me as we passed by each other and said hello, and I know I was blushing as I hurried out the front door.

It seemed imperative that I get to the relative cover of my truck and as I slipped into the driver's side I was slightly out of breath. I glared down at my fly.

"Stop that," I said out loud, ordering my prick to behave. "Please?"

I closed my eyes and pictured ice cubes, glaciers, cold showers, and my second grade teacher, Mrs. Shutman, in her underwear. Something finally worked.

I'd only just opened my eyes when Daniel came strolling out of the building. I guessed that in his line of work, he didn't want to stay in one place for too long; someone might spot him.

I watched him head back to his car while I fumbled for my keys. I didn't expect him to go anywhere but back to work or to a real meeting, but I wasn't about to let him go without making sure.

He sat in his shiny Lexus and started it up, but he didn't leave. I grabbed my good old electronic ear and got it picking up his voice in mid-sentence.

"--fell apart," Daniel was saying, no hint in his voice of what he'd been doing not five minutes before. "So I'm on my way home after all. I just have to swing by my office and pick up a couple of files."

"So you'll be at home, but still working. Lovely," Janet said, her voice distorted slightly by my device and not helped by being on speaker phone in a car.

Daniel sighed. "I can work at the office, if you'd prefer."

"No. Come home and at least have dinner with me. God knows what we'll have, though. I've retimed everything."

"I can pick something up, if you'd like," Daniel offered, utterly neutral.

"Italian." Even I could hear the click as she hung up on him.

"Of course," Daniel said bitterly. "Italian. And I better not forget the wine."

Home. Well, home was fairly well bugged, with Mrs. Brint's cooperation, so I figured this was my opportunity to listen in on their domestic dysfunctions. Daniel sat another minute and the car seemed fairly quiet, then he sighed and turned the engine over.

We drove back to his office in silence, neither his radio nor mine breaking up the monotony of the evening rush hour traffic. I pulled into the parking garage behind him and parked close to the entrance, letting him drive farther into the garage. I'd catch him on the way out.

I didn't have to wait very long; he didn't even have time to make a fast phone call while he was in his office before he was cruising past me. He glanced at me as he went by, which gave me a bit of a scare, but then I realized he was probably just making sure I wasn't getting set to pull out and dent his car.

I let him go and followed along, giving him a lot of room and letting a few cars into the traffic between us. After all, I knew where he was going to wind up, even if I lost him on the way to getting his takeout. As an afterthought, I let him go entirely and swung my truck around, getting some takeout for myself. It could get kind of dull sitting there and listening to him and his wife bitch each other out; I figured I didn't need to listen on an empty stomach.

Fortified and ready, I drove into the posh, quiet area of the city where the Brints lived. The streets were lined with trees and shrubs, everyone had a bit of lawn, and finding a place to park where I wouldn't be noticed for a while wasn't that easy. Lucky for me, the Brints lived close to a private school of some kind, close enough that if I parked at the back of the school's lot and set my stuff up just right, I could pick up the signal from my bugs nice and clear.

Daniel at home wasn't nearly as exciting as Daniel getting a blowjob.

Looking at my watch, I realized I'd be losing Celia for the day soon. I pulled my Treo from my pocket and dialed the office number, then wrestled the ear bud into my ear. The phone rang once, then twice, and I started to worry she might have left early. I took a bite of my sushi and chewed, waiting to see if she'd pick up. I had her cell number, but I really hated to bother her after hours.

She picked up halfway through the next ring. "Mullen Investigative Services, may I help you?" she said in her phone voice. I could barely hear the undercurrent of 'make it fast, it's quittin' time,' too.

"What color panties are you wearing?" I asked, grinning.

"Who says I wear any?" she shot back.

I laughed. "You hussy."

"That's why you love me," she said breezily. "What's up? Find out anything more about either one of them? And where are you, in case I need to provide an alibi."

"I'm parked in the school parking lot across from the Brints' fine estate," I told her. "Mr. Brint had another hook-up this afternoon at someone's apartment. He might have seen this guy before, I didn't catch any introductions. And I found out Mrs. Brint talks to him like he's a five year old, and she apparently likes her wine."

"Hmm." There was a short pause and I could hear Celia typing something on her keyboard. "I did some poking. There's a very nice pre-nup in place, designed to protect Janet Brint's inheritance, which she won't get for another few years. As near as I can tell, they both maintain separate finances, aside from the house. And Daniel Brint isn't worth nearly as much as his wife will be. That car of his is the most expensive thing he has, and it's leased. I suspect he has an allowance."

"So, to keep his career on track, he's paying for his perfect looking life by swallowing his pride for a rich wife? Is that what I'm hearing?"

So the remark about not forgetting the wine was more telling than I had imagined. I felt sorry for him, actually. He seemed completely miserable. Was his career really worth it? He had to be wondering that himself. Maybe that's why his hook-ups had become so frequent lately that, after several years of marriage, she was finally starting to notice. Maybe he was starting not to care.

"Honestly, I'm not sure," Celia said thoughtfully. "To me, it looks like she could walk at any time and he'd be the loser. I want to take a look at that pre-nup; Tracey's going to help with that. What's your plan for now,

Boss?"

"Well, I guess since he's home I should call it a night, but I think I'll hang here a while and finish my takeout." I wasn't ready to head home, though I wasn't sure why. Then I got an idea. "Listen, Celia, this can wait until the morning, but do me a favor and see if you can dig up a screen name or a handle for him somewhere. I want to check out his profile online."

"Sure thing," she said happily. "It might be a bit tricky, though; I'll do what I can. It would help if I could get at his computer, but I have a hacker buddy who might be able to sneak in the back door, so to speak. We've worked with her before, remember? The one who costs a lot and hasn't screwed up once. Are you going to make it in before noon tomorrow?"

"I'll pay for her. And is that a hint?" I snorted. "Yes. You want me in before noon, Boss, I'll be there. I don't think this is going to be a late night anyway, all's quiet here. I'm interested in that pre-nup, too. If she's got control of the finances, why does she need me, you know?"

"Exactly." I could picture the look on Celia's face -- intrigued, curious, and oddly satisfied. She was always happier in the middle of a case than at the tail end. She liked to be busy, it seemed. Or maybe she was just nosy as hell. "Tell me," she said slowly. "Are you going to monitor his online chatter, if you can find out where he's hooking up? I doubt if he'll be talking about his marriage much."

"I want to see if I can figure out what he's looking for, see if I can get into his head, you know? Figure out what's going on." But if I was to be completely honest, I couldn't swear that I didn't have an ulterior motive. I was curious, and I could sense that Celia knew that by the way she'd asked her question. I sighed. "Look, there are lines, Celia. I'm not going to cross them."

Any more than I already had. I hoped.

"Okay," Celia said simply. She didn't push the matter further, and I was pretty sure I'd heard the last of it. Unless I did something stupid, of course, in which case I'd hear about it for the rest of my life. "So, before noon tomorrow, and I'll have his usernames for you if at all possible. Bring danish again." Then she hung up on me.

Typical.

Lights went on and off, no one made any phone calls, and the Brints hardly spoke to each other. After an hour or so I decided to throw in the towel and headed back to my apartment.

I had a beer, watched part of the football game, and called my mother.

"Hey, Mom," I said, trying to sound cheerful.

"Shane. Hello, honey." She sounded happy to hear from me, but then her tone got motherly. "I tried to call you last night. I left you a message."

"I know, Mom, I was out."

"Ooh! A date?" My mother was always looking for gossip.

"Come on, Mom."

"I worry about you, Shane. All those things I read about those bars you boys go to."

I sighed. "I don't go to 'those bars,' Mom."

"Still. I hope you're being safe." She tried to sound worried, but her words were tinged with that 'eat your vegetables' tone.

"Mom, I've been flying solo lately, okay?"

"Don't talk like that to your mother, it's rude."

I snorted. "I called to say 'hello' and see how you were, you know."

"Oh, I'm fine," Mom said, turning on a dime. "Bridge today, and tomorrow I'm going to see a matinee in the city."

"Oh, yeah? Sounds like fun."

"The city is so crowded anymore."

Okay, then. Time for another subject change. "How's Dad?"

"He's fine; he's sitting here watching the game. Are you?"

"I was; it got too depressing."

"Are we going to see you this weekend?"

"Maybe. Maybe Sunday."

"Bring that nice girl with you."

"Celia isn't nice, Mom."

My mother laughed. "Bring her anyway, she was nice to me."

"All right, I'll ask her. See you then. Goodnight."

I waited for Mom to hang up and then headed for bed.

Chapter Five

The next morning, danish in hand, I climbed the steps to the office. It was just a little after ten and the morning light shone in through the glass window in the entry door, making the paint on the walls look even worse than it did by the light of the single hallway bulb. I was rarely at the office during daylight hours and I hadn't realized how run down the place was getting.

I opened the office door and went inside, heading for Celia's desk first. "This place is starting to look like skid row," I joked, setting the danish down on Celia's desk.

"It is," she agreed, reaching for the danish. "Give me a hundred dollars and an afternoon and I'll have it spiffy again." The glasses of the day were deep purple, which didn't really go with the lime green t-shirt until I noticed the violet skirt. Celia was in her color-punk mood, apparently. It was a sure sign not to let her paint the office until her mood changed.

"You're looking very green. I guess you wanted to make sure I was awake?" I teased, dumping my briefcase on my desk and taking a bite of my cranberry muffin. Next stop was coffee, which I could smell was freshly-brewed. "Find anything?"

Celia snorted at me. "Did I find anything, he asks. The real question is how many favors I promised to get what I got. I want a raise. Or a free weekend with lots of fancy umbrella drinks." She grinned at me, though, and beat me to the coffee maker where she poured mine and added just the right amount of sugar.

"How about a free dinner? At my mother's. On Sunday." I picked up my coffee and took several discreet steps away from Celia before I sipped it.

Celia gave me a flat look. "I like your mother. But that's hardly the kind of treat I was hoping for. Did you already tell her I'd be there? I have a date on Saturday night and I was hoping it would be a nice long one."

"I didn't tell her you'd be there, she just told me to bring you. You know how Mom... wait. A date?" I sat down behind my desk and watched her. "I obviously have not been paying close enough attention to you. Who? Where?" I wanted to know about Daniel's online activities, but I wanted to know about this, too. Celia was more important.

"Just a..." Celia waved a hand at me and, as I watched, an honest-to-God blush tinged her cheeks. "Shut up," she snapped, going to her desk. "Tell your mother we'll be there."

"Since when do you blush?" I asked, laughing. She shot me a look and I decided to let it go for the time being, but it wasn't going to rest forever. I briefly considered telling my mother about her date. Mom can make anyone talk. "Okay, so tell me what you sold your soul to get for me, then."

Celia looked intently at her computer, refusing to even glance at me as her color faded to normal. That was even more intriguing, but before I could reconsider pushing the issue, she went into full-on work mode.

"Well," she said, pulling up something on her screen. "The trouble was that we were trying to trace things backwards -- you know, go to the usual sites and see if we could get into their traffic and backtrack to

Daniel Brint's computer. The ISP isn't a specific enough identifier, so it took a while to sort through and eliminate profiles that obviously didn't fit or that were currently online, seeing as how our boy was safe at home. But I got a couple of names for you to check out; can't swear that either one is him, though. Oddly, there wasn't anyone with the username of 'DanielBrint' or 'I_want_to_be_governor.'"

"Oh, haha. And 'my_wife's_a_bitch' didn't come up either?" I got up and moved across the room to look over her shoulder. "Wow. Tell me you're not going to get arrested. I can't afford bail." I squinted at her screen. "Did you get an IM or a handle at one of the hook-up sites?"

"Of course. And no, I won't get arrested; our hacker is *very* good. Okay, here you go. We think his instant messaging username is 'jazzbaby', or possibly 'bluedanny'. Nothing on the two big gay hook-up sites, but on the local pay-to-register-and-we-will-die-before-we-out-you site there's a guy going by 'jazzbaby' again. No sign of 'bluedanny' there." She copied a few lines of code and an internet URL over to her open e-mail and sent it to me, then grinned. "I kind of hope he's jazzbaby. The guy has a nice way with words. And can spell."

"One hopes that someone who aspires to be governor can spell. Not that it's a requirement for the presidency, apparently." I went back to my desk. "Jazzbaby is so... cute, though." Of course, 'bluedanny' wasn't much better and how depressing would that be? I logged into my laptop and clicked on the URL Celia sent me, wondering if the registration fee for an online hook-up site for gay men could be written off as a business expense, or better yet, billed to the client. I snorted as the splash page came up, realizing that this was the one site I was already registered to. Not that I'd ever had the guts to actually hook up more than a handful of times. "Anything more on the pre-nup?" I asked, and clicked on my profile to make sure there wasn't anything that might clue Daniel in on it. I hoped it wasn't me that was blushing this time.

"Not yet. Well, maybe. The gossip is that it's locked them both in, but I won't have details until I talk to Tracey." Celia came around behind me and leaned over my shoulder. "Got your measurements on there, big guy? Did you add an inch?"

I reached up and grabbed the screen of my laptop, ready to slam it closed, but Celia stopped me, putting her hand against the screen.

"Oh, no you don't," she sang in my ear. After a moment of reading over my shoulder she shook her head. "'Java_junkie'? Is that *you*?"

"Shut up."

"Oh, my God. Is that a picture of your... you're not that big." She looked at me doubtfully.

I just grinned.

"No way."

"Way," I said. "I might look like a geek, but I have a few key things going for me."

"Wow. But you know, still not enough to turn me." She winked and looked me up and down as best she could, given that I was sitting. "Nah. Never work. What else do you have on here? Anything you can use to snag yourself a talk with Daniel? I can help you make up lies, if you need me to."

"Well, let's look him up and see what he says about himself, and then we can make up some lies, shall we?" I clicked in the search box and typed in 'jazzbaby'.

I scanned the profile quickly, not going straight for the pictures because Celia was right there, watching my every click. Not that she wasn't going to go and find them for herself later, but still. The woman had enough ammunition without me adding to it on purpose.

"Age is right, thirty-three. Lists job as civil servant, which isn't a lie. I would have thought he'd go for lawyer, though."

"Lawyers are easy to find in the yellow pages," Celia pointed out. "Interests are minimal, he didn't even list movies or books; he's not looking for a relationship. Gay, looking for casual fun, likes oral a lot, prefers men thirty to forty-five." She snorted and backed away. "You don't have to lie, all you have to do is ask. Christ."

That worked for me, but I wasn't going to say that out loud. "Well, let's take a chance. I'll leave him a message, shall I?" I clicked in the message window and typed a quick note. "*Local and interested, check out my profile,*" I typed in, saying the words out loud. "Good enough?" Of course my profile said I was looking for casual fun and romance, hopefully that wasn't going to put him off.

"Sure, good enough," Celia said, walking back to her desk. "Let me know if he thinks you're his type." She cocked an eyebrow at me. "What *is* his type, anyway?"

"I haven't figured that out. And I haven't figured out what he's really into, either." I leaned back in my chair. "The meet-up in his SUV...well, it was dark and I didn't get a good look at the guy, but Daniel wasn't making the demands then, he let the other guy direct. Yesterday was the other way around. Both of his tricks had dark hair and were about his height, and otherwise, I have no idea. So far, I'd say his type is anyone who's available when he can get away."

There I was feeling sorry for him again. Sympathizing with the mark was a mistake and I knew it, but I chose to ignore the rules. "You know, it's got to suck to be him right now."

"Oh, yeah." Celia rolled her eyes and sat down, not looking at me. "Sucks to have a good career, an education, sex on demand." She glanced up at me and winced. "Okay, majorly sucks to be in the closet, married to a woman who thus far is a cold popsicle, and have to pay for sex. And have a career that can be ruined by the truth." She sighed and picked up a pencil. "Don't get sucked in, Shane. You mean more to me than he does, and I don't want to watch you sink."

I glanced up at her. "Yeah." I squinted at her, trying to find the right words, as if they were somewhere behind her eyes. They weren't. "Yeah." I sighed and looked back at the computer screen. I closed my browser and changed the subject. "Can you get Mrs. Brint on the line for me?"

"Sure, Boss." Celia seemed to have a switch sometimes. She could go from office girl to partner to friend in a blink of an eye, and she rarely did the wrong one. At the moment, when I needed her most to back off and be Office Girl, she was.

It only took her a moment to reach Mrs. Brint on her cell, receiving no answer at the house number, and when Celia nodded I picked up my extension.

"Good morning, Mr. Mullen," Janet Brint said, her voice cool and calm.

"Good morning, Mrs. Brint," I answered in my professional tone. Funny how it just happened without my thinking about it. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," she said, then added, "I'm about to arrive at a meeting so I can't talk long. Do you have information for me?"

"Actually, I was just checking in to let you know that I'm on the case, but so far I'm dry," I lied. "How have things been at home?"

"Uncomfortable," she said, which I knew was true. "He was home last night, as I hope you know."

"I followed him to his meeting in the afternoon yesterday and then home, yes. I hung out long enough to be sure he was in for the evening and then left," I told her. It's always nice to keep the client thinking I'm working hard.

"All right," she said. "Tomorrow night he has a council meeting which he can't get out of, so I expect he'll find something tonight. I happen to have a meeting tonight, and will be out late, so if he's going to get himself higher than a kite, it would be a good night for it."

"Thanks for the heads-up about tonight, I'll be sure to tail him." I cleared my throat. "Mrs. Brint, when was the last time he came home high?"

There was an obvious and oppressive silence on the line and then she said, "I'm not sure, exactly. We tend to go to bed at different times, me earlier than him, and his increase in spending started at the same time as his lame excuses for being gone so much. Where else could the money be going? There was one party we had at the house in the summer -- he spent almost all of it avoiding looking at anyone or wearing dark glasses when he was outside by the pool, saying things in a voice that... well, he didn't stutter, but he did stumble over words, and he seemed nervous and worked up. I think that's when I started to suspect the drug use."

Oh, no. Heaven forbid anyone wear sunglasses out by the pool.

But the nervousness was interesting. "All right. Thank you, Mrs. Brint, you've been very helpful. Don't worry, I'll figure all of this out for you." And for myself. "I'll check in again in a few days, but please feel free to call me any time if you have concerns or leads."

"All right," she said. "Look, I have to go. If you need anything, just call. I want to know what's going on so... So I can help Daniel, of course."

Of course. So much that she didn't even wait for a reply before hanging up on me.

Celia was watching me, her face carefully neutral. "Anything?"

I hung up the receiver. "Yes. She noticed an increase in Mr. Brint's spending around the same time that his hours became erratic." I looked at Celia. "Which could mean that he paid his tricks at first. I haven't actually seen him paying anyone, but I suppose he could be, still. If he ever did." God, this was confusing. "Or it could mean something else." I drummed my fingers on my desk.

"It means she's watching the money and has him on a tight leash," Celia pointed out. "Unless he's spending it on *very* expensive whores. With their income and lifestyle, do you think she'd really notice a fifty here or there? I mean, unless she has him on a budget." She turned to her computer and started banging on the keys aggressively. "You got his card numbers and stuff for me, right? I can try to find out what he actually spends his money on. Items, rather than services."

"Uh, yeah. I've got them right here," I said, standing up and crossing to Celia's desk. I picked up the file. "I think I put it... yeah, here it is."

Celia made a sound that out of any other woman's mouth I would have called a giggle. "Bossman, you really

do need those extra hours of sleep in the morning, don't you?" She took the file and started running searches, smiling to herself and humming.

Humming.

"Shut up," I said, and crossed to my desk to get my mug. I needed more coffee just to keep up with her. "Filing is your job."

I was starting to think that I should get ears on Daniel's office line, especially if it was a potentially big night. "Mrs. Brint mentioned she had a meeting tonight and would be home late. I think I'd better get a tail on the husband, pronto." I filled up my travel mug and retrieved my briefcase. "I've got my Treo. Let me know what you dig up, and anything you hear about that pre-nup." I headed for the door.

"Keep an eye on your e-mail," she said, not looking up from her screen. "Me, him, whatever. He might reply to the message you left him when he's on his lunch hour. Oh, and be good! I really don't have time to bail you out today."

"I won't do anything you wouldn't do." I winked and left the office.

Chapter Six

It proved to be a long day. From the parking garage, I monitored Daniel's phones, his work and his cell, all through the morning and into the afternoon. His secretary put through phone call after phone call in which Daniel set up meetings, cancelled meetings, placated some people and schmoozed others. God help me, I have never been so glad not to be in politics.

On a personal level, Mrs. Brint checked in on him after lunch and reminded him he was on his own for dinner. A friend called to set up a squash game. His dry cleaner called to let him know they would be dropping his things off at four. He skipped lunch, but had mentioned something to Mrs. Brint about Chinese for dinner.

Meanwhile, my phone remained quiet. Celia hadn't called yet, so she must have still been compiling shopping records and gossiping about the pre-nup with her sources. I decided about two o'clock that I ought to get some chow, so I left the truck and ventured into the lobby of Daniel's building to buy a quick sandwich at the little café there. Turkey, dill, havarti, and green apples; one of my favorites. I ordered it once when I was with Celia and she spent our entire lunch hour teasing me. Now, I order roast beef and horseradish around her. She doesn't tease me for that.

I was paying for my lunch when my Treo vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out, expecting to see the office number, but it wasn't a phone call. It was a text message. I don't get many of those and it took me forever to figure out why the screen was different. It was from my in-box on the hook-up site, forwarded to my phone. It was pretty easy to tell who it was from, as all the message said was: "*Nice pictures, do you have more? jazzbaby.*"

I did, as a matter of fact, but not ones I was ready to share with Mr. Brint. Not yet, anyway. I took my sandwich and headed back to my truck, trying to type out a quick reply. Probably would have been a good idea to read the instruction manual on the Treo after Celia gave it to me, but I figured these things had to be user-friendly. "*Can't get at them right now,*" I typed. "*Will send later.*" And as an afterthought, I added, "*What are you into?*" I hit send and felt an absurd amount of glee as my message went off into cyberspace without having to resort to the manual after all.

I ate my lunch and eyed the phone, wishing it was my computer. At least then I could surf around and look busy while I waited for a reply. I'd almost finished my sandwich when it occurred to me that I could do that on the phone. All those bells and whistles were kind of worth it in the face of boredom. Of course, when I grabbed the phone and started scrolling through the menus to find the web browser, I got distracted and wound up playing Solitaire.

I was about to win the third game when I got a reply. "*Into discreet and oral, open to more.*"

I read his reply a few times over, deciding how to answer him. I wasn't going to hook up with him for a blowjob, that much was certain, but maybe I could get him talking, keep him on a string for a while. "*Cool,*" I replied. "*Into talking? Not my business, but... why discreet?*" It occurred to me as I sent the message off that Mr. Brint has a computer and he was still a man of very few words.

It took less time for the reply to come through after that one. "*Not much for talking, discreet because of*

closet. Yes or no or maybe some other time?"

Wouldn't I have loved to say yes? "*Maybe some other time,*" I typed. My fingers hesitated just a moment over the backspace key. Who would know? Except that I wasn't willing to risk my cover. Plus, if Celia found out she'd kill me. "*Prefer to talk some first. I'm good with discreet, but like a connection.....*" I hesitated again before sending it. I was putting more of myself out there than I'd intended. Then again, maybe Mr. Brint might appreciate a little honesty. In any case, I wasn't a very good actor and found it more sincere just to be me. I hit send and waited for the sent confirmation, then set the Treo down on the dashboard. I wasn't expecting a response.

I kept an ear on the connections to his phones and listened to his secretary set up yet another meeting. Nothing of Daniel came through for a while, either for work or for me, and when my phone actually rang I almost jumped a foot. The office number came up.

"Hey, lady. Heading home?" I asked, trying to sound like my turkey sandwich hadn't risen back up into my esophagus.

"You're kidding, right? Friday night?" Celia sounded unimpressed. "Some of us have lives."

Touché. Guess I should have gone for the blowjob. I sighed. "I thought your date was tomorrow night? You need your beauty sleep."

There was a pause, so brief I almost missed it. "Two dates. Shut up. Want to know about the pre-nup?"

"No, I want to know about your dates!"

"It's work-related. Sort of. I know about your dildo, what with the buying of it, but you don't really want to know about... Okay. Her name is Susan."

"Susan from...?" I nudged.

"Um, Delaware? Miami? I don't know where she's from. God."

Celia flustered was a rare thing, a treat to be savored. I wondered if my Treo could record calls.

"Celia, baby, you're acting like I'm your mother or something. I don't care if you have a date, I just want the gossip. Who am I going to tell?" Well, there was always Mom, but I wasn't going there.

"Your mother. Who really doesn't need to know about what exactly I'm going to do in three hours."

Jesus Christ. Celia knew me too damn well. You'd think we were married. "Shut up," I snorted. "Tell me about the pre-nup."

"Finally," she said, sounding completely relieved.

I reminded myself that she got a loose tongue after about three cocktails and that she would not only kill me but quit if I bugged her apartment. Drinks were the way to go to get the details.

"It looks on the surface that everything is in her favor, like I thought. But there's this one little clause that means she's as stuck as Daniel. Her father had a thing about marriage; she has to have one, and only one. She's got to be married to inherit, and she's only allowed the one husband. She'll get the money in about three years -- all bets are off after that. On Daniel's side, he signed off on everything in exchange for having

his education debts paid. When they got married they were both practicing lawyers -- you'd think they'd have had a better document written up."

I sighed. "What an idiot. A desperate, broke idiot, maybe. But still, an idiot." I still had to wonder if a career was worth all of this. Though I guess if I could have married someone influential to keep my patrol job with the city's finest a few years ago, I might have considered doing the same.

"I suppose," Celia said slowly. "I'm having lunch with Tracey soon, she works in the office where Janet Brint used to practice. I'll see what she's got for me. Hey, did you hear from him yet?"

"Yeah. He admitted in a couple of short messages that he was in the closet and didn't want to talk after that. I turned him down and haven't heard from him since. Man wants to get laid, I guess."

"So you get to spend Friday night tailing him and watching." Oddly, she sounded more sympathetic than amused, which for some reason made me feel utterly pathetic. I hadn't had a date on a Friday night, or any other night of the week, in months.

"Work never ends for a private dick," I joked, not wanting to sound maudlin. "You have a good date. And get laid, will you? One of us needs to."

"I'll certainly try," Celia promised. "Oh, hey. Call me on Sunday morning and tell me what time you're picking me up. We wouldn't want to keep your mom waiting. Am I supposed to bring anything? Wine, food? Viable proof that you and I are never going to get married?"

"I think Mom has finally figured out we're not getting married, but she still thinks you take care of me." She might have been right on that point. "If you bring anything my mother will be insulted. You're family, remember? Just be ready to talk a lot about the woman you went out with Saturday night. Or tonight, if this one goes better."

"Same woman, two dates," Celia muttered. "Not one word, Shane. And I hope your night doesn't suck."

I couldn't help it. My jaw actually dropped. And I could almost hear her blush as my jaw hung open, slack and unhinged. "Well," I said finally, still almost too surprised to speak. In all the time I'd known her, Celia had never made weekend plans with anyone. At least no one she'd admitted to. "I hope you have a very, very successful weekend, lady. Think of me as I languish in envy and jerk off in the shower."

"Sadly, I probably will. Later, Bossman. Don't get caught peeping." She disconnected and left me sitting in my truck with nothing to do but play solitaire and listen on the phone lines.

Peeping. I don't "peep," I "spy." Of course the spying had never involved being interested once the sex started, so maybe it was peeping after all. Bitch. God, I love her.

Daniel's phones remained quiet once the five o'clock hour came and went, and Solitaire was going well. I'd been playing the casino version and I was up a couple hundred dollars. My sandwich sat like lead in my stomach, though, and my mind kept trying to stray back to the idea that I was alone on a Friday night. I was starting to think I should browse that hook-up site myself, find someone willing and anonymous to sleep with, just to make myself feel better.

Funny thing was, I'd been feeling fine until Mrs. Brint came on board as a client.

I was keeping an eye on the door and an ear on the phones when Daniel Brint came out, briefcase in one hand and his cell phone in the other. He walked slowly, eyes on the phone as he keyed something in, then he

put the phone away, looking around as he walked into the parking structure.

In my hand, my phone chirped at me. "*Really like the pictures, maybe some other time.*"

Well.

He liked my pictures. I'd been careful not to put my face on the web, but every other part of my body was there to be perused. I was flattered. What was a man to say to that? Something, to be sure, but not right now.

I started up my truck and waited for his Lexus to pass me, then pulled out of my parking space and followed him out of the garage. He didn't turn on his GPS this time and he hadn't said anything over the phone to indicate where he was going, so all I could do was follow and try not to lose him. He wasn't heading home, I could tell that much; he was going farther downtown.

I kept him in sight and let a few cars get between us, but he didn't seem to be trying to shake a tail, if he suspected he had one. We went right down to the theater district where he managed to find street parking. I found a lot close by, thank God, and got to the sidewalk in time to see him cross the street and go into a bar.

It was a nice joint, one of those trendy places where you buy a drink for ten bucks and a plate of food for more; I hoped he didn't stay long.

I ducked inside and had a look around, then walked past the bar where he was sitting and took a seat at a table. When the waitress came by I told her I was waiting for someone. I didn't want to know what a cup of coffee would cost me.

My Treo vibrated and I pulled it out of my pocket. It was my mother calling. I cursed Celia once again for giving her the number and pointedly did not answer it. But, while it was in my hand, I decided to answer Daniel's message.

"*I look forward to it,*" I typed, my fingers getting faster with the microscopic keyboard. I hit send and then watched him again, perversely wanting to see the look on his face when he received it.

Over at the bar, it was a couple of seconds before Daniel took out his cell and looked at it. I watched him smile, a quick, knowing grin that was half laugh, and then he nodded. I was pretty sure his mouth formed the words "Me, too" before he put the phone away, not keying in a reply.

A drink was in front of him, but he hardly paid any attention to it, only taking a couple of sips while he looked around the place, clearly searching for someone or something. In a moment his gaze fixed on a table on the other wall and he picked up his drink, taking it with him as he approached the lone man there. I was too far away to hear, so I contented myself with watching and trying to figure out if they knew each other.

I kind of assumed not, as Daniel bent slightly and spoke a few words before sitting down. But then they both leaned over the table, talking intently for a short time, looking serious. The other man looked to be in his late twenties, attractive without being too pretty, with his dark blond hair cut really short. Well, there went the dark hair preference. If they were hooking up, anyway.

Suddenly, they stood up and started for the door, leaving their unfinished drinks behind.

I stayed put while they passed me and then stood and followed. If they were headed to his car I might very well lose them since I'd had to leave my truck in the garage, but they walked right past Daniel's SUV and turned the corner, heading away from the main drag.

They walked for a block, then turned another corner; by the time I'd sped up enough to reach the corner I'd almost missed them. They were about three buildings down the street, just going down the stairs of a four story converted brownstone, into the lowest level. The building wasn't big and I was pretty sure that the apartment -- if that's what it was -- took up the entire floor. There might have been another at the back, but the important thing was that the building had a narrow driveway running along the side, and it was dark.

I waited for two minutes and then casually walked to the building and ducked down the drive in what I hoped was a natural move. I walked as softly as I could, glancing down into the lower windows that were only a foot or so off the ground.

The first window was a galley kitchen, empty of people. The second seemed to be a hallway, which was odd. But then, given how many times these buildings got redone, it wasn't terribly surprising either. Also not much of a surprise was the third window, framing Daniel and his new friend making out on a couch. At least they were still dressed; Daniel was slowing down. Maybe it was because he didn't have to rush home to Janet.

It was getting dark, thankfully, and there was a sheer curtain on the window, so I didn't think anyone inside could see me. Still, I hung back few steps to watch, just in case.

Part of me was glad to see Daniel actually taking the time to kiss someone before the blowjobs started. I was impressed with how easily he unbuttoned the other guy's shirt with one hand and licked across the man's bottom lip at the same time. Me, I'd have to look down at the shirt or the sex would be over before I'd found all the buttons.

Daniel had chosen well; his trick's chest was nicely muscled, if a bit hairy for my taste, and the guy's tongue was hungry, tasting Daniel's throat and earlobe before pushing back into his mouth.

I was glad I couldn't hear them. Sound would have been a bit much, and technically, I was doing my job by seeing. *If* I was still doing my job, as I was already holding out on the client. I pushed that thought away and watched; it was easier than thinking.

Daniel and the man kissed for a while, hands still busy with the not-small matter of shedding clothes. Daniel finished with the shirt about the same time that his hook-up started on Daniel's, and I got a nice glimpse of flat abs before the kiss ended, the blond moving his head down to Daniel's chest. Then I was really glad I couldn't hear, the way Daniel's eyes closed and he started talking. The man *really* liked to talk when he was getting off.

I watched the other guy for a moment, but really, I found Daniel's face more interesting. His lips looked swollen from the kissing, his brow kept furrowing and relaxing, and he'd roll his head from one side to the other every so often. Suddenly, his mouth opened wide, presumably a gasp, and I glanced down to see the trick's head in Daniel's lap. Daniel's fingers pushed into the man's hair and he started talking again, maybe begging, maybe issuing orders, it was hard to tell.

Secretly, I decided to go with begging.

Whatever Daniel said got the guy moving. He lifted up a bit and I shifted myself slightly to the right so I could see him open up Daniel's pants and tug them down. I might have had to remind myself to breathe as Daniel's cock strained up. Oddly for Daniel, though, the guy didn't just get to work sucking him off; instead, Daniel hauled the man up so he could return the favor, and with a bit of wriggling they were kissing again, groping and stroking and I was having serious worries about the couch withstanding the action.

I was having serious worries whether I could, as well.

I saw a flash of foil and then the guy said something to Daniel and they got up off the couch, still groping each other as they disappeared from view. I turned to follow them farther toward the back of the building and tripped over my own damn feet. There was no saving this one and I thrust both hands out in front of me, scraping the skin of both palms and one elbow as I hit the pavement.

I managed not to swear out loud and it was a damn good thing because I turned my head to find the bedroom window maybe a foot from my face and it was open.

Daniel and his buddy tumbled onto the bed, parting only long enough to get rid of the rest of their clothes, and then they were back at it, all hands and mouths and fast breathing.

"Jesus, yeah," Daniel said, his voice taking on a tone that was becoming far too familiar to me. He rolled a little on the bed, onto his side, and threw his leg up over the guy's hip. "Come on."

The blond laughed breathlessly, the foil packet sounding obscenely loud as he tore it open. "Lube's in the drawer," he said, pointing.

Daniel reached, moving up the bed, and stretched out his body like a hot buffet while he fumbled for the lube. The other man didn't waste time making a feast of Daniel, either, licking and biting and going for Daniel's cock with his mouth, while his hands got the rubber out and on.

Daniel's face looked almost pained, he was so impatient. He squirted the lube into his own hand and wrapped his fingers around the other guy's prick, tugging hard and winning a groan from him. The guy finally shoved Daniel's hand away and lubed up two fingers. He slipped them into Daniel's ass and I swear at that moment Daniel looked about ten years younger. His eyes went wide and he gasped loudly, and although it didn't last more than a second, it was an image I wasn't soon to forget.

"Yes!" Daniel managed to say with a choked sound, and then the trick crawled over him, lined up, and replaced his fingers with a thick, solid cock.

"Jesus Christ," the man grunted. "You sure you're ready?"

Daniel nodded frantically then reached above his head and braced his hands on the wall. "Trust me. You're doing just fine."

"Good." The guy grinned and dipped his head to take another kiss, his hips rolling slowly. Even with the kiss, I could hear the whimpering sound Daniel made with each thrust.

I bit my lip to keep from whimpering with him. The guy had a great body and even better rhythm. He didn't rush, but he didn't waste anyone's time, either, alternating long strokes with short snaps of his hips. Daniel arched and writhed under him, his locked elbows affording him enough leverage to move his hips as well, grinding against the invasion when he could.

I shifted to save myself the humiliation of trying to hump the pavement and sat up enough to palm my aching erection through my pants. There wasn't much hope for me. It wasn't going to take much for me to completely lose my cool. I watched a few more minutes, taking in the blissed-out look on Daniel's face, and then I had to move. I scrambled up as quietly as I could and hurried to the wall beside the bedroom window.

I pressed my forehead against the chilly bricks and pulled my cock out through my fly, hoping my coat would hide things well enough should anyone happen by. Jesus Christ, I was going to get my sorry, pathetic, perverted ass arrested.

In the room below me, Daniel upped the stakes from whimpering to chanting. It was soft, but getting louder, his constant litany of "yes, yes, yes," perfectly synchronized and even with the way he was being fucked. Without meaning to, I timed my hand to his voice, both of us getting there together, whether he knew it or not.

The blond guy's voice chimed in, grunting and panting, and Daniel got loud. "There!" he yelled, and another word that could have been "yes," but it got buried under the trick's curse, and I was harder than I could remember being in ages, listening to them fuck faster.

I came so suddenly that my knees nearly buckled and I gasped out loud. My spunk splashed against the bricks, the scent filling my nostrils and my body going rigid as I tried not to make any more noise. Daniel and his hook-up were still going, their voices thick and their breathing hard.

"Fuck!" one of them yelled, and the other one gasped, but my ears were kind of ringing too much to figure out which was which.

I tuned in again when Daniel's cry rose, though, and I shoved away from the wall enough to look down at them. Daniel's eyes were closed, his head thrown back, and he had a hand between them, holding his own cock as he came in white streaks across his chest. He was flushed and sweaty and utterly beautiful.

Oh, I was in so much trouble.

I got my breath back in time to hear Daniel say that he had to leave in a few minutes to meet someone. The other guy didn't seem too happy about it, but Daniel made it up to him with a shared shower, and I took off for my truck, wanting to be in place to follow him. I doubted he'd be off to meet up with someone new for more sex -- hell, I hoped not -- but as Janet was out of town I kind of thought I didn't want to miss what he was doing.

It was about twenty minutes before Daniel showed up and I was running out of time on the meter. Getting street parking where I could see his SUV hadn't been easy, but I'd managed it; I just didn't want to keep feeding the meter.

He got into his car and pulled out in only a moment or so, heading back toward his office, or maybe the suburbs. I followed along, letting the flow of traffic come between us now and again; I wasn't picking anything up on the listening equipment, so he knew where he was going. I kind of missed that British lady giving us both directions.

We wound up at a small café in the strange area between city and suburbs, and Daniel went in while I debated staying and trying to listen, which could have been difficult, or going in and watching to see who he was meeting.

I didn't debate long. I parked the truck about a block away and headed for the café. It was a small place, and it would be difficult to get in and seated unnoticed, but once I saw Daniel sit down, I had to find out what he was doing there. I hadn't heard anything about this meeting on his phones and he hadn't made any indication he had plans for the evening. I admit that my curiosity got the better of me and that I was taking a risk I probably shouldn't take, but I'd already crossed the line at a hundred miles an hour; I was captive on a runaway train.

The café proved to be more of a casual neighborhood restaurant and bar. It was nice inside, warm and inviting, with café tables up front and booths lining the walls. I glanced around quickly and found Daniel sitting in a booth alone. Careful not to meet his eyes, I walked toward him and sat in the booth at his back. A

friendly-looking waitress came over quickly and handed me a menu.

I didn't have any idea how long we were going to be there, but lunch and my sandwich had been a long time ago. The place had a nice selection of light meals, and she left me to look over the menu, taking only a couple of steps before she checked on Daniel.

"I'll have the club sandwich," he said politely, which let me know that at least I had time to eat. "And a Rolling Rock, thanks."

"Sure," the waitress said cheerfully. "Be right back."

"Oh, and I'm meeting someone in a minute, bring him a beer, too, please."

"Same?"

"Yeah, thanks."

I was immediately glad that I'd risked my cover for this. If Daniel was buying his companion a beer, then he knew him well enough that I might learn something. I waited for the waitress to come back with his two bottles of beer and ordered myself a chef salad. I caught the waitress as she turned to walk away and added, "And a Sam Adams. Thanks."

She nodded and went on her way.

"Hey," a deep voice said behind me. It wasn't Daniel's, so I turned my head to get a quick look and caught a glimpse of blond hair, green eyes, and a wide forehead as the man sank into the booth across from Daniel.

"Hey," Daniel replied. "I ordered you a Rolling Rock."

"Excellent." There was a pause and then the man said, "Nice and cold."

"That's why I like it here; I swear they keep the beer two degrees colder than anywhere else," Daniel said. "So, how're you doing? That deal you were working on come together all right?"

"You mean the Bickner thing? God, has it been that long since we've gotten together? It closed a couple of weeks ago. Pushed it all the way to the drop-dead date, but it turned out to be pretty sweet. I'm looking forward to my bonus this year."

The Bickner merger had been all over the papers. I imagine his bonus was several times what I would be making this year.

The waitress appeared with my beer and set it down on the table. She had Daniel's sandwich in her other hand and left my table for his.

"Hey, what'd you get?" Daniel's companion asked.

"Club," Daniel answered.

"Yeah, that sounds good. I'll have the club, too, please. And we'll split some of those curly fries."

"You got it," the waitress answered and headed for the kitchen.

"So," Daniel said. "What's new, then? Oh, man, this is good. I swear to God, I'm sick of take-out. This is like real food."

"It's not like real food, it is real food. And you work too much."

"Elections aren't far off." Daniel sounded tired, suddenly.

"Oh, right! Just tell me how to stuff the ballot box."

I heard a snort that I took to be Daniel's response.

"So... Liz is pregnant," the friend said calmly.

"Christ, why didn't you call me? Congratulations!" Daniel sounded genuinely pleased. "When? Is she feeling okay? Are you?"

"It's early, like a month. Nobody knows yet, you know? She seems okay, she's really happy. I'm fucking terrified." He laughed, but it was cut off by what sounded like a sip of his beer. "It was kind of an accident, but it's all good."

"Accidents happen." Daniel said. It sounded like he was talking with his mouth full, which wasn't what I expected from him, but I guess he really let his guard down around this guy. "Good for you, Jason. I'm really happy for you guys."

"Accidents happen, but forgetting to refill your birth control isn't an accident." He sighed. "It's okay now, we'd kind of talked about it, I just... well, it's cool. I'm happy."

Jason, as I now knew he was called, paused while his food was delivered. "Have some fries," he told Daniel, and then went on. "So. How are things with Cruella?"

The waitress set my plate down with a friendly smile and I hoped I wasn't listening in too obviously. She didn't seem to notice, in any case.

"Let's just say that I don't care if she forgets to refill her birth control," Daniel said with a snort. "Accidents don't happen at our house. Well, unless there's a hell of a lot of wine involved."

"Last I checked, you liked wine." Jason's tone was sarcastic.

"I love wine. I just don't tend to drink entire bottles of it in one go. And that's about what it would take at this point." Daniel didn't seem overly concerned about telling his friend this; either they were really close, or Daniel was really needing to vent.

"And you can't get away from her yet." Sounded like Jason knew about the prenuptial agreement.

"Yeah, well." There was a pause and then I could hear a glass being set back down on the table. "Sold my soul for the greater good, I guess. At least, that's what I keep telling myself."

"You're in a rough spot, man. But I'm thinking it's not worth it. No wonder you work so much."

"I work so much because it's my job. I was elected to do a job for the people, and I do it the best I can. It's all about spin and how I present things; the better I spin to the council, the better I can make things work out. Okay, it keeps me at the office, yeah, but that's incidental. Mostly."

Jason waited a moment before he replied. "Right. Sorry. You're a damn good politician, Dan." I couldn't see Jason's face, but I was pretty sure there was more behind those words than an apology.

Daniel sighed, loud enough that I could hear him. "Sorry. I'm just. Well, I guess I'm frustrated. I made a mistake, I know. Right now, I'm just trying to deal with it and make the most of it."

"Look, I'm serious. You're damn good at what you do. It's just a shame you've got this cloud over it. I'm just trying to be a friend, Daniel. What can I do? You got anyone on the side?"

The pause this time was really long. So long I started to wonder if I should check and see if Daniel had either frozen in place or walked out.

"That would be political suicide," Daniel finally said. Hardly a flat-out denial.

"It would, if anyone found out. Which they wouldn't, because," Jason slowed his speech down, obviously adding meaning to his words, "as your attorney, this conversation is privileged."

"Which only means that I can talk to you, not that the general public won't find out," Daniel pointed out. "Shit. Okay, look. As my attorney, and as my friend, I'll fill you in. But up front, I don't want to hear a lecture. I know all there is to say, okay?"

"You don't have to tell me, Daniel. But if you want to, there won't be a lecture. I'm only an asshole in court." I almost laughed and stuffed salad in my mouth to keep from making any sound.

"So you think," Daniel teased. Then he cleared his throat and said, "Hang on, we need more beer for this."

"Like that, is it?" Jason asked, but then the waitress came by and took orders from all three of us for another round, so if Daniel said anything, I missed it.

"Okay, I don't have a girlfriend," Daniel said to Jason, his voice dropping almost too low for me to hear. "That would just be a huge mess. The last thing I want in my situation is an emotional entanglement, someone who'd want more of my time than I give. Anyone I'd *want* to spend a lot of time with. I'm stretched thin as it is."

I suppose I had no business being disappointed by that, but I was. I was starting to think what I really needed was therapy.

"You're not paying for it, are you? That's worse than a girlfriend."

"Nah. Well." Was it possible to hear a blush? Between Celia on the phone and the way Daniel was radiating shame and embarrassment, I was thinking it was. "I did before. About a year ago. But only a couple of times, and I covered my tracks as best I could. I was just so... God. So fucking stupid."

Jason seemed to agree. "That's a tough rap to beat, man, don't do that again."

"I won't," Daniel said, sounding miserable. "I haven't since. I found another way. But it's still not good, and it's like the more stressed I get, the more miserable Janet gets, the worse it is. I mean, the more often."

I nodded. That made perfect sense to me. But I couldn't help but notice that Daniel was choosing his words very carefully. Jason clearly didn't know everything.

"Yeah, I get that. I won't ask for details, okay? But aren't you worried someone is going to recognize you?"

"Of course I am. Insanely worried about it, actually. I mean, I even assume it's going to happen at some point; it kind of has to. But I do what I can to minimize the chances, and weigh the risks. It's still stupid, but I can't seem to stop. God, this sucks so much."

I suddenly felt guilty for tailing him, for prying into his private life, for taking on "Cruella" as a client. Thing was, even if I let her go, I'd still want to get to know Daniel. Keeping Janet on as a client could prove to be professional suicide of a kind for me, too, but at least it kept her out of Daniel's real business for a while longer.

And with enough information, maybe I could help him find a way out of that pre-nup.

"Yeah," Jason said sympathetically. "But you better take it easy. If you get caught you're going to be broke and out of a job. And probably humiliated. Seriously, Daniel."

I took out my phone and looked at it, and then my fingers starting typing. "*Lonely, will be up late.*" I typed, and sent it off to him.

In the booth behind me, Daniel said, "You don't know the half of it. Humiliated is a bit of an understatement. I'll be broke, trapped in a horrible marriage, voted out, and likely have a hard time getting back into legal practice."

I heard his phone chime at him at the same time Jason took an audible breath.

"Do you want me to know, Daniel?"

"Hang on a moment," Daniel said. In the brief pause I could picture him checking his message. "Crap. Um. Do me a favor and chase down our beer? I want to reply to this."

"Sure." Jason passed me on his way toward the bar. He was tall and lean, dressed casually in jeans and a sweater. I watched him chat with our waitress, who looked embarrassed to have forgotten the beer.

I waited impatiently for Daniel's reply. I also checked twice to make sure my phone was on vibrate, just in case.

Jason picked up two bottles from the bar and glanced back at the booth just as the waitress came around to bring me my beer. In my hand, my phone started to vibrate so I smiled wide and thanked the waitress to cover up any incidental noise. Hiding in plain sight wasn't easy.

Jason apparently got the nod from Daniel that he could come back, and I waited until he'd passed me before looking at the display. "*Lonely enough for talking? My itch got scratched, sorry.*"

"*Yes. Interested?*" I replied. I started to send my message off and then changed my mind. "*IM. Or call. 555-1234.*" I took a deep breath and then hit send, digging my hole even deeper.

"Thanks," Daniel said to Jason. "And to answer your question, no. I don't want you to know. I don't want to deal with the fallout. You're my friend and I want you to have a certain amount of distance."

His phone chimed again and I held my breath, for him to reply and for Jason to blow holes in Daniel's excuses.

"Oh, God. You're fucking Republicans." Jason joked.

"That's disgusting," Daniel shot back, which I had to give him points for.

"Look," Jason continued. "Don't worry about me. I'm your friend, but unless you're firing me, I'm also your lawyer. If something goes down, I'm going to be right there. But maybe I can save you a speech and just ask. Are you fucking men, Daniel?"

I didn't hear a gasp, but the silence suddenly felt uncomfortable. I wanted to look, but I couldn't, of course.

Daniel's voice, when it came, was low and resigned. "When they're not fucking me."

To his credit, Jason didn't miss a beat. "I'm sorry that you felt like you couldn't just tell me."

"Oh, don't," Daniel said. "I don't need the guilt, all right? How the hell am I supposed to know how people will react? I'm barely keeping myself on level right now, having you go off on me wouldn't help any. I couldn't take the risk. Mind you, if that's the first thing that comes to mind for you I might have more issues than I thought."

"Sorry, you're right. And no, I don't think it's obvious. I just had this feeling a while ago, and then the way you've been talking tonight... I just guessed."

"Okay," Daniel said, apparently accepting that. "Hold on." I could hear a series of beeps, like he was playing with his phone. I hoped so, anyway. Then he said, "So, that's what's going on. I'm married, I'm an elected official, and I meet strange men for relief. I hope that your life, complete with surprise pregnancy, is a lot smoother."

"It is, no question. And this sucks worse than I had expected. I'm really sorry."

"Yeah, well. I did it to myself."

"Still. I'm around if you need anything, okay? And please, be careful."

My phone vibrated and I looked down at it. "*Online. Give me an hour to get home. Find those pictures.*" There was a smiley face at the end.

Now I felt like an ass for giving out my phone number. Oh, well. "*Will do,*" I replied, and sent it off. At that point, as I wasn't close to home, I decided I'd better do the safe thing and leave. I put some cash on the table and stood, heading for the door.

"I'm always careful," Daniel said as I passed the table. "Just hate that I have to sneak at all. It feels smarmy."

That was the last thing I heard Daniel say, and I wanted to tell him not to be so hard on himself. I hoped Jason would.

Chapter Seven

I got home in about half an hour and the first thing I did was turn on my laptop, log in, and find my pictures. I had plenty that included my face, but I wasn't sending those unless he asked me directly, and even then I might find an excuse not to.

I sent three more off to him, and then went to get comfortable. When I got back to the computer it was about eleven o'clock. I wasn't worried anymore about where the lines were. I'd done so many things wrong; I figured the hole I'd dug was inescapable. Eventually, I knew, someone would bury me in it. I was lying to Daniel, lying to Janet, lying to Celia... the only person I was being honest with was myself. I think.

It was then I realized what I had in common with Daniel. I couldn't stop.

I was just turning that over in my mind when the laptop pinged at me and a small window opened with an invite to chat privately with jazzbaby. The invite read only 'talk?', so I clicked okay and a new chat window opened.

jazzbaby: Hey.

java_junkie: Hey. Glad you made it. Have a good night?

jazzbaby: Yeah, not bad. You?

java_junkie: It was okay. Get the pics?

jazzbaby: Yeah. :-) Nice, thanks. Really nice. Wish you'd been up for more, earlier. ;-)

java_junkie: I've got my hand on that rain check. ;-)

jazzbaby: Heh, good. It's nice to know where your hands are.

java_junkie: LOL perv.

jazzbaby: Nah, just very focused. ;-) Anyway. Tell me... about yourself, I guess. If you want.

java_junkie: Uh... sure. Not much to tell. Retired cop, live alone, have a healthy relationship with my mother. ;-)

jazzbaby: lol Moms can be cool, I guess. Why did you retire?

java_junkie: I didn't, actually, I was *retired*. Took a bullet to my right knee, spent a long time recovering, and wasn't cut out for a desk job. Captain kind of politely said hey, look, we like you but here's your pension. Couple of years shy of that gold watch, damn them.

jazzbaby: Jesus. You don't look old enough for that kind of action. Er,

from what I can tell of your abs and cock, anyway. ;-) So what do you do now? Some kind of security?

java_junkie: You could say that. Private security. I'm not a security guard, that's for the guys that actually retire when they're old. ;-) This was just a few years ago, so... I can still get around. lol

jazzbaby: As long as you're getting some action and not behind a desk. :-)

java_junkie: I do pretty well. You?

jazzbaby: Stuck at a desk! ;-) But I do all right. Thank God for the internet.

A desk. Okay, so I wasn't the only one lying, he wasn't about to share with me either. Somehow that made me feel better.

java_junkie: Indeed. But it looks like you get out a lot, if the comments on your profile are to be believed.

jazzbaby: Like I said, thank God for the internet. :-| I should probably clean out some of that, I guess. Kind of makes me look... bad. oops.

java_junkie: Kind of makes you look hot, too. Which totally works for me. But I gotta ask, looking that good and being that popular... why the closet? Family?

I knew the answer to that, of course, but if I was ever going to get to the tougher questions, I needed him to give me the information he didn't know I already knew. Talk about a tangled web.

jazzbaby: Well, to get to the point and cut out several levels of bullshit, I'm married. So the closet is kind of vital, as is being anonymous. :(And now I'll just sit here and wait to see if you vanish.

java_junkie: *doesn't vanish* So there. :P Who am I to judge?

jazzbaby: Well, you could be anybody to judge, I suppose. But that's it, right there. My deal. Married and stuck and looking for what I can't have at home. So, what are you doing here? Online, I mean, instead of out there finding that someone special?

If he only knew.

java_junkie: Eh. Been there, done that, have a dozen barely worn t-shirts, some of which you've probably tried on, too. LOL. Never found the right guys in the bars.

jazzbaby: Have you managed to find any of the right ones online? Or at the least the ones that can exhaust you into a good night's sleep? ;-)

java_junkie: I have found a few of those exhausting ones. Even a few I've seen more than once. And here is where I watch you vanish... none of them were the kind of guys I'd want to introduce to my mother. And I

don't mean that as criteria, just that those are the kind of guys I like. Sweet, friendly, more than just a one night thing.

jazzbaby: In theory I don't have trouble with seeing a guy a few times. It's the connection part that causes me problems. Most guys don't want to feel something for a married man, and I'm pretty upfront about not having any plans to become single. I don't want to hurt anyone, if I can help it.

I wasn't about to ponder that for very long, so I changed the subject. Sort of.

java_junkie: You love her?

jazzbaby: I did when I married her. I loved her a lot. Now it's trickier. She's not happy either, I know that. And that really sucks, too. She's as stuck as I am.

Interesting. I actually chose to believe him. He must have loved her at least a little to sign away everything.

java_junkie: Did you know you were... that you wanted men when you married her?

There was a longer pause than I had expected and I started feeling insecure.

java_junkie: You don't have to tell me that. I'm asking a lot of personal stuff. Sorry.

jazzbaby: No, no, it's okay. I'm bi. Or, well, I was. I went to boarding school. We messed around. I pledged a frat. There was messing around. I thought I could ignore it. I did love her, and she's beautiful. I was wrong. :-| And now here I am. Looking at pictures of you and *really* wishing you'd been interested earlier.

I wished I could have been, also.

java_junkie: I was interested, *am* interested, I was just already committed. I hope I'm available the next time you ask. And that sucks about her, I'm sorry.

The more I found out about Daniel, the more I liked him. The story about the frat house seemed too genuine not to be true, and I really felt for him, in a way that someone that barely knew him shouldn't.

java_junkie: You were bi... now you're only into men?

jazzbaby: Yeah. Well. I can do my married duty, given enough wine and a good fantasy. Which is horribly pathetic, I know, but I really don't want her to know I like cock more than what she's got, even if what she has is lovely.

Something wasn't adding up for me, but in this context, knowing what Daniel needed to hide from me, it was hard to decipher where the truth ended and the cover-up began. I didn't spend too much time on it.

java_junkie: I had sex with a girl once. Once. So that when I lied to my friends about liking them, I would know what I was talking about. ;-)

jazzbaby: lol! Well, there's something to be said for knowing what you're talking about, I guess. Did you like it? ;-)

java_junkie: For as long as I was able to imagine she was Keith Devlin, yes.

jazzbaby: LOL Oh, well, at least you know what you like. So. What do you like? Inquiring minds want to know. At least I do.

java_junkie: Eyes. I mean, you know, having them is a bonus. ;-)
Seriously, I'm a sucker for really great eyes. And a good personality. Appearance ranges.

I sent that line and then winced.

java_junkie: But I bet you meant sex. Damn. I'm such a geek.

jazzbaby: I did, yeah. LOL But, lucky for you, I happen to have eyes. ;-)
They're blue, if that matters. My personality is flawed, my appearance is consistent. Now tell me what you *like*.

I felt myself blush. Well, that little exchange was no lie, at least. That was the real me. Sadly. Even sadder was the fact that I really didn't want to get into a cyber sex situation with Daniel right now. Sex he could have with anyone, I wanted to keep him talking and get to know him. And for some reason, I wanted him to get to know me. Maybe he'd think of me the next time he needed to vent.

java_junkie: Would you think I was a total tease if I said I'd rather talk about that another time? I was serious when I said I just wanted to talk. I really don't like to jump right into... I mean, I can't stop you if you want to stroke off at the keyboard but I'm enjoying getting to know you some. Does that totally turn you off?

jazzbaby: Not... turn off, exactly. It's a little out of the norm for me, though. Kind of weird actually talking to someone instead of just talking dirty and getting off. I'm not precisely sure what to talk about at all. Movies? Books? Summer vacations?

To be truthful, I wasn't sure where to go next either. I found myself wanting to know strange things. His favorite color, what side of the bed he sleeps on, how he takes his coffee. And just as I was thinking those things were absurd, I decided they were as good a jumping off point as any.

java_junkie: What kind of music do you listen to?

jazzbaby: I'm a little eclectic. For example, the CDs I can see from here include Matchbox 20, ABBA and Ella Fitzgerald. I had no idea I was such a tool... ;-)

java_junkie: Heh. Well, I expected the Ella with your screen name and all. From here I see... Dixie Chicks, Carmina Burana, and Neil Young. Oh and The Who. And some Madonna and Billy Joel. Wow. I actually didn't think I had diverse tastes, but I guess I do.

jazzbaby: Diversity is good. I get annoyed with top twenty stuff, and

the endless rotation of it on the radio. I much prefer finding a song or two I like and just making up my own play list.

java_junkie: I'd totally do Rob Thomas, incidentally.

jazzbaby: Hell, yes. And then there's Chad Kroeger from Nickelback. His voice is sex.

java_junkie: and so angtsy. Uhn. He kind of oozes 'fuck me.'

jazzbaby: Absolutely. :D *puts it on* Right, talking. No Nickelback.

java_junkie: LOL. Have you seen them live?

jazzbaby: Nope, you? That would be fantastic. Though I'd probably spend the entire concert with a hard on, which could get embarrassing and uncomfortable.

java_junkie: Nope. I work a lot of nights so I don't see a lot of concerts. I was hoping to live vicariously through you. ;-) How about um... food? What's your dine-out of choice?

jazzbaby: You work nights? Are you at work now? And my dining out lately has either been fast take out at my desk or whatever lukewarm chicken plate I get served at business dinners. My *choice* is usually something with a bit of spice. Thai, some of the nicer Chinese dishes. Oh, and Greek. I love Greek. Your turn.
:-)

java_junkie: Not always nights, just... well, overtime, sort of. I'm not working tonight, no. I actually scored a Friday night off. Huh. I've never had Greek. I'm kind of a boring sandwich guy these days but if I go out, which I haven't in like... weeks... I love Thai, and sushi, and pizza. :D

jazzbaby: Pizza has its place. Usually right next to the beer, and in front of a football game. :D I have my share of sandwiches at my desk, so I feel your... heh, I feel your pain. I don't mind sushi, but you really should try Greek. There's a place downtown, Dimitri's. Try there, if you get a chance.

java_junkie: Dimitri's is greek? Oh, duh. Yeah, of course it would be. I don't know too many Asians named "Dimitri". I'm rolling my eyes at myself so you don't have to. *blush*

jazzbaby: LOL! I'm not rolling my eyes, I swear. :D Do you get downtown often? You should aim for a lunch there on a Tuesday, it's less rushed and you can take your time. I have the menu memorized, so I tend to just zoom in and eat fast.

java_junkie: You should eat slowly. It's better for you. Less heartburn and you get to actually taste your food. :D

I figured we'd had enough small talk that I could start asking the personal questions. I never know where to begin with these things, so I just started at the beginning.

java_junkie: So, where are you from? Like, where were you raised and all?

jazzbaby: Just north of here, actually. I went to New York for school, came back to work. I'm pretty much local and homegrown. Another reason for the closet and privacy, really. It's hard to be something other than what people think you are.

java_junkie: Yeah, me too. Mom lives about twenty minutes farther south than I do. Are your parents nearby then?

Suddenly I found myself praying we hadn't gone to high school together. I was a total geek in high school.

jazzbaby: They're... Well, depending on traffic they're either forty-five minutes or three hours away. LOL You know what it's like trying to get anywhere on a Friday evening around here.

java_junkie: God, I know. I was working over on Trumball last week, and I swear it took me almost an hour to get home, even after dinner. Anything going into or out of town is killer. I go out to Mom's on Sundays now because Adams Lane headed west is so backed up during the week.

jazzbaby: You really do have a good relationship with your mom, don't you? :D Sunday dinner sounds nice. Does she know you're gay?

Ah. Well that was a telling question. Daniel's mom was apparently as clueless as Mrs. Brint.

java_junkie: Yeah, she's known as long as I have. Maybe even longer. She's pretty good with it. She still makes the occasional noise about settling down and laments her lack of grandchildren, but basically she wants me to be careful and otherwise she just wants me to be happy. Dad, he's another issue, but he mostly keeps his mouth shut.

jazzbaby: Well, that's good. I'm assuming you don't mention the guys you hook up with online, then. ;-) Have they ever met anyone you were with longer term than a few days? I'm sorry if that's really forward, I'm just wondering how something like that would go. I can't even begin to imagine it.

java_junkie: Heh. Well... mom's a PFLAG member. She doesn't know anything for sure, but I figure she knows I hook up sometimes. I brought a guy home once... God... maybe six or seven years ago. We'd been dating for about six months at that point. Dad was unpleasant, but we made it through dinner without any real trauma. I haven't brought anyone home since. Not because of that, just because... well I haven't met the right guys, you know?

jazzbaby: That part I know very well. I'm pretty sure my parents are unaware that men can actually have sex with each other, and we won't even discuss the chances of men having relationships. Or women, for that

matter. Really, being raised that way I'm lucky I'm only married and not suicidal. Wow, that was a downer, sorry.

Part of me was quietly cheering. Finally, something heartfelt. Something real. I latched onto it and tried to keep him talking.

java_junkie: Not a downer at all. I was starting to think you maybe didn't have feelings over there. I don't mean to sound like an ass, but you're pretty guarded. I can understand from someone in your position, believe me, but it's nice to know there's a human in there. ;-)
Catholic?

jazzbaby: Heh, so lapsed they don't know me. But you do -- takes one to know one?

java_junkie: Yep. Also so lapsed they don't know me. Except through mom, who is on the altar guild or some damn thing. :D

jazzbaby: And like I said, I'm not **used** to talking, I'm used to hiding, sucking and fucking. I have no intention of saying anything that will indicate who I am, so I'm really feeling my way with what's okay to say and not. Makes me a weasel, I know, but at least I'm upfront about my being a jerk? Maybe?

java_junkie: You've been open with me about that, so yeah, I respect your boundaries. Just tell me to back off if I'm crossing them. Seriously.

Although I really hoped he wouldn't.

java_junkie: I'm not trying to find out who you are, man. Honest. Not in name anyway. Just... inside.

I hit send on that one too soon and swore as I kicked the foot of my chair. The idea was to reel him in, not scare him off. Damn it.

jazzbaby: I offered you inside. ;-) We're talking instead. LOL The thing is, I don't **know** what's too close. I'm trying here. And you got a good restaurant rec out of it, at least. And a raincheck, because no matter what we're doing right now, I still like your pictures.

java_junkie: I know you're trying. It's awesome. This is what I was talking about you know? A connection. Something emotional? Someone to talk to. You'll know what's too close when you get there. I'm just saying you're not a weasel, and I'm not gonna disappear because you need me to step off, you know? And the sex, pardon the really bad pun, it's coming. :-) Because, man, I really like your pictures, too.

Something in the back of my mind was nudging me to quit while I was ahead. To end this conversation while it was still a conversation and nothing more. However unethical, I knew there would be more in our future, maybe even the near future. But before either of us wiggled out, it felt like it was time to politely bow out. Leave on a high note. Soon.

jazzbaby: I have more. :-) Er, but not on this computer. So. I'm trying

and you're not running away, so that's good. Odd for me, but good.

java_junkie: SEND THEM. *cough* I mean, gee, I'd like to see more, please. ;-)

jazzbaby: LOL I will, tomorrow. :-) Just open 'em when you're alone, okay? Spare us both the embarrassment of co-workers. ;-)

java_junkie: Oh, God. Well, fortunately, the only real co-worker I have is a lesbian and she probably wouldn't care.

I snorted as I hit send. Like hell she wouldn't.

jazzbaby: Oh, well that's okay, then. :D I'll send the ones of me jerking off.

java_junkie: Good. And then think of what I'll be doing when I open them, and next time we chat, maybe I'll let my hands drift from the keyboard for you. ;-) But for now, I have to run I'm afraid. Long week, you know? I'm going to start typing gibberish in a minute.

jazzbaby: Oh. Well, okay. I suppose I should go anyway, clean out the temporary files and such. *eyeroll* Um. You know how to reach me. Maybe we can get together soon.

Yeah. Like how about I follow you home from work on Monday? I sighed, feeling like a jerk. Or a pervert. Or worse.

java_junkie: You know how to reach me too, okay? I don't want to push, or contact you at the wrong moment or anything, you know? If you want to blow off some steam or whatever, just call me. I'd love to get together.

jazzbaby: I'm counting on it. ;-) Oh, and hey -- thanks for your number. I can't swear to use it, but I might text you direct, if that's okay.

java_junkie: I wouldn't have sent it if it wasn't. You have a good weekend. Try to relax if you can.

jazzbaby: I got to relax earlier. That'll have to do for a few days, I think. Have a good night, and think of me later. ;-) I can pretty much promise to be thinking about these pictures almost constantly.

java_junkie: LOL whatever helps you sleep, man. Goodnight.

I closed instant messenger before I dragged the good bye out any further. Alone in the shower just a few minutes later I spent some time thinking of his pictures, too. And I thought about the sounds Daniel made with his cock in someone's mouth. And his smooth voice. I thought about all of it.

Chapter Eight

Saturday was a wash, as Daniel was tied up in meetings of one kind or another, and then he and the good wife had a political function that night. I contented myself with movies, pizza, and beer, and only thought about him during the hours I was awake.

On Sunday I picked up Celia and carted her off to my parents' house where she did her usual thing. Why my mother can't see the real girl under all that nice, I'll never know.

Okay, I know. But Celia doesn't need to be aware of that.

After dinner Celia and I forced my mother into the living room while we did the washing up. I was up to my elbows in soapsuds when my own personal Girl Friday fixed me with a knowing look and asked, "So, how was Friday night? Daniel get up to anything exciting?"

"He got up all right, found a guy in a local bar and went home with him. Same old, same old."

"Mm." Celia dried the plate in her hand and nodded. "And you got video?"

Crap.

"Uh, no, not this time." I picked up a butter plate.

"What? What the hell were you doing, then?"

"What? I figured it was overkill," I lied. Why in the hell hadn't I rehearsed this question?

"Overkill." Celia stared at me. "Doing your job is overkill? Just tell me you followed him home after and that you didn't go home and relive it all. Wait. I don't want to know."

I agreed. "No, you don't." I put the plate away and didn't push the conversation any further. "How was *your* weekend?"

Celia grabbed the next plate and started drying. "Fine. Thank you. You know, you really should go out once in a while. Life is not made of silicone."

I steered the conversation away from me again. "Hey. 'Fine' isn't the answer I was looking for."

Celia grinned at me. "It's the answer you're getting. So, Daniel. He just works and hooks up? No friends, no nothing?"

Celia and I do this. We badger each other about what we each want to know and avoid answering anything directly until one of us gives. Then, usually, we both cave.

"Oh! Sorry, yeah. After his hook-up, he went to a really nice little neighborhood bar on the east side to meet a friend named Jason. Jason is straight and married and he also happens to be Daniel's attorney. Daniel

outed himself with a little prompting. Seems like they're pretty close, all things considered. The bar had great food. I had a chef's salad. Yum." Mom's lasagna platter was heavy and I set it on the table to dry it.

"Whoa, back up." Celia waved her tea towel at me. "You had a chef's salad?"

"Yeah, with crusty bread." I snorted.

She tilted her head and nodded at me. "A friend. That's good. What did this Jason say? And did you get a last name?"

"No, I didn't get a last name, but he was counsel on that big merger... the uh, the Bickner merger. I figure we can get it that way. He knew about the pre-nup, he calls Janet 'Cruella.'" Laughing, I added, "I like it. I just pray it doesn't come out when I'm on the phone with her."

"It better not. Christ." Celia looked around frantically, her eyes wide.

"Tsk." I pointed at the crucifix next to the kitchen door and winked.

She really hated cursing in my mother's house. She's smart that way. "I'll get his last name. So after that, you went home?"

"Yep. I went home. Long day. Saturday he was out of pocket, so I basically did nothing."

"Let me guess. Pizza, beer, and movies?"

"No. Filet mignon, champagne, and a cabana boy." I sat on the floor so I could stuff the huge dish back into the cabinet next to the dishwasher, where it had lived, crammed in beside the bundt pan, for most of my life.

"Ohhh, touchy." Celia started in on the glasses, then hit me with the big one. "Hey, did he ever respond to your message on the website?"

Celia, clearly, was on God's naughty-list for the moment for taking his name in vain, because my mother chose that moment to walk into the kitchen, and I didn't have to answer that question.

"You're meeting men on websites now, sweetheart?"

Or, you know, maybe not.

"Mom..."

"Celia, can't you just turn him straight? You're such a pretty girl."

Okay, maybe he didn't like either of us much. I grinned at Celia and stood up, closing the cabinet doors.

"I tried," Celia sighed. "I thought about trying harder after I saw something online last week, but it really wouldn't work out. Sorry."

Bitch. I found a reason to lean in front of her and mouthed "evil" at her. Fortunately, despite my blush, it went right over Mom's head.

"Well, if you've tried, then I guess it's hopeless."

"Mom..."

"Oh, Shane, you know I love you. Even if God doesn't."

"Mom!"

"That was a joke, honey. You're so sensitive anymore. Celia appreciated it, didn't you, dear?" Mom grinned and kissed me on the cheek.

Celia beamed at her. "I did, actually. I'm going to use that one at the office."

"Haha. And you wonder why I prefer men?" I kissed Mom back and handed her Dad's meds, which I knew was what she'd come into the kitchen for. An hour after dinner, every night.

"Thank you, honey. You all come on in and watch TV with us if you want."

"Thanks, Mom. I have to drive Celia home. Work tomorrow."

"You're the boss, let her go in late." Mom left the kitchen as abruptly as she'd come in.

"Yes, let her go in late! And let her take a long lunch so she can get all the gossip from Tracey. And buy shoes." Celia laughed and headed back to the sink. "So, did he?"

And as a sign that maybe God does love me after all, that was when my phone chimed in my pocket.

"Hang on," I said and pulled my Treo out. On second thought, Mom might have been right after all. The text was from jazzbaby. "*Can you talk?*"

Oh, crap. I so didn't want to talk to him from my mother's kitchen with Celia watching. I turned my back and typed fast. "*Not at the moment, give me an hour to get home?*"

"Shane?" Celia said, trying to lean on my arm to see what I was doing. "Who's it from?"

"Uh..." Most of the people I knew in town were in the house at the moment and Celia knew that. I tried, but I knew the lie wouldn't fly. "A friend. Nobody important."

"Was that Daniel Brint?" she demanded. "You know, the guy you're not supposed to be crossing lines for?"

"No," I lied, as if she'd believe that. But I needed some space and it bought me a few seconds to step backward and panic more.

Her eyes narrowed. "Boss. This is me. I can't do my job if you're holding out on me. Well, I can, but that's because I'm awesome. But you shouldn't keep secrets. It makes me worry, and worry gives me wrinkles, and if I get wrinkles, I get cranky."

I looked at Celia for a long moment, searching her eyes, as I often did, for the right thing to do. I hoped I didn't look as close to tears as I felt. "Oh, God. Celia, I'm so..."

"Fucked?" The little lift in her eyebrow was the only barometer she gave me by which to read her reaction and it wasn't enough.

"That. Oh, yes, that."

"Yeah. I think you just might be." Her look turned suddenly sympathetic. "Look. This might not be so bad. I mean, you're at least getting to know him and that way you can figure out how to deal with his wife. On the other hand, he has a *wife*. Are you going to sleep with him?"

"I can't have this conversation in my mother's kitchen," I whined.

She rolled her eyes. "God, you're such a baby. Fine, let's hit the road. We can get half smashed and talk a fair amount. I want to know exactly what's going on."

I grabbed her hand and my keys and led her through the family room. "Night, Mom. I'll call," I said as I dragged her out the door. "Celia, I swear to God I didn't mean to end up in this position. I've never even been tempted to do this before. It's just... he's so... and now I've lied to him, too. Damn it." I opened her door for her and then got in on my side, and we headed back to her place.

"I kind of think lying to him is the least of your worries. How about lying to the woman paying us, for a start? Even if I do agree with that. And keeping the good stuff from me, that's pretty big."

"I didn't hear about your date. We're even."

"I got laid a lot. Your turn. Friday night?"

"I jerked off outside a... " I glanced at Celia. "I'm a perv, Celia, okay? And a cheap one. Let's get that out in the open first." I sighed. "Daniel and his trick were screwing in the guy's bedroom and the window was open. I... totally soaked a brick wall." There was more, of course, but I could only handle one horrid admission at a time.

She didn't even blink. "So, you like watching him. Okay. But that's not the same as doing him." She winced, a curious expression on her face. "Okay, so actual sex will probably be better, but what will it do to *you*, aside from the obvious?"

"It'll be a big fat mess, of course. He's married. He has every intention of staying married, or so he told me when... we... chatted online on Friday night."

Celia went the other way and blinked rapidly this time. "You what?"

"You heard me. And I just told him I'd be online in an hour."

She looked out her window for a moment before turning to face me. "Shane. Be careful. Please."

I nodded. "Yeah, I should probably consider doing that, huh? Though it kinda seems too late now." I pulled into her driveway. "I've totally gone off the deep end. I should cut it off, shouldn't I?"

"Yes, I think so. But you won't." She opened her door and got out. "Call me later. I don't care what time. All right?"

"You're serious?"

"Of course I am. I care about you. I want to know that you're okay."

"You don't have to dig me out of this one, Celia. I know exactly how wrong all of this is..." I told her, letting my voice trail off.

"And you're falling anyway." She leaned into the truck and shook her head. "It's not about digging you out, Bossman. It's about being a friend. Call me." She almost fell into the truck doing it, but she leaned way over and kissed my cheek. "And for fuck's sake, play safe." Then she was gone, walking up the drive to her building.

I nodded after her. "Thank you," I said out loud as I watched her go into her building, and then I headed home. When I sat down at the computer this time, I was more prepared. I was comfy in boxers and a t-shirt and I had a beer. For fortitude. Or to lower inhibition. Or something. I logged on and a message popped up right away.

jazzbaby: Hey.

java_junkie: Hey. Everything okay?

jazzbaby: Yeah, fine. Sorry, I didn't mean to freak you out, or catch you at a bad time. Did I interrupt something? I just found myself with some unexpected free time and thought of you. Pretty much like I have since Friday, though I probably shouldn't tell you that.

java_junkie: I'm not freaked out, I just hated having to put you off when I didn't know why you were buzzing my phone. Glad you're okay. You didn't interrupt anything, I was just wrapping up dinner with mom. You just made me smile, by the way. I probably shouldn't tell you that either. You've been on my mind, too.

jazzbaby: Yeah? Good, I like that. :D What have you been thinking about?

java_junkie: Why you haven't sent me those other pictures yet. ;-) No, I'm kidding. I guess I've been thinking about our chat, and how easy it is to talk to you. And some about your situation and how difficult that has to be. It's just so different than my life, and I don't know if I could do what you're doing.

jazzbaby: You didn't get the pictures?? Oh shit. Hold on.
Oh man. I'm an idiot, sorry. I saved the e-mail as draft and didn't send. They're on their way. And seriously -- don't think too hard about my situation. One of us living it is enough. I envy your freedom.

java_junkie: Eh. My life isn't really worth envy, trust me. So, what have you been thinking about me? *flirts*

jazzbaby: Well, it started with me smiling when I thought about talking to you, and how it was... nice. Then it moved on to me looking at your pictures again. You really do have a nice cock, by the way. I like it a lot. :D

Nice. Yeah. Though why I thought we could ever be anything normal I don't know. If he ever found out what I was doing, the deceit and how was leading him... well. I know how I would feel.

java_junkie: I'm told that pictures don't really do it justice. ;-) Speaking of pictures, yours just arrived...

I clicked away from the window to look at them. They were different. He was clothed in some of them, for

one thing, but he was smiling in one, and one was kind of a portrait with a close up on his face. He was jerking off in the last one, or, maybe about to come, and I recognized that look. I felt my cock leap in response and press tightly to the fabric of my boxers.

java_junkie: Oh, my God. Uhn. And you are... mmm. Yummy. Beautiful.

jazzbaby: I don't usually send pictures of my face. But thank you. Did you get the one just before I shoot? I actually kind of like that one, it doesn't make me look stupid. Ever have sex in front of a mirror? Everyone has a stupid sex face, that picture is just the least stupid of them ;-)

java_junkie: Not stupid at all. Hot. Pure sex. God, I love it.

I was feeling braver tonight. Thank God for the beer.

jazzbaby: Oh, good. I was hoping to get your attention and see where we could go. With me? Tell me what you like. And this time, just for clarity, tell me what turns you on.

I couldn't be sure, but I think that mild-mannered Mr. Brint just seduced me. And very effectively. Almost as effectively as if he'd just shoved his hand into my pants.

java_junkie: Kissing, with tongue, and teeth, and as wet and messy as possible. My nipples are so sensitive they can sometimes be painful, which... well, it's a kink. I love to suck cock, rimming makes me babble like a two year old, and I switch quite happily, so whatever as far as that goes. As long as it's safe.

I stared at my response for a long time. Was it too much information? Not enough? Was he going to think I was a freak? Finally, I gave up second guessing and just hit enter.

jazzbaby: Ohhhh, my. We read out of the same book, I think. Nice. I'm pretty sure I'd like to make you babble. >:-) In the sense that I'd really like to. Are you vocal? Do you talk when you fuck? Or are you more the silent, intense kind?

java_junkie: Very vocal, can't promise it's intelligible, however. The silent, intense thing is okay I guess, but why not make sure half the city knows you're having fun? :D

That was also true. I don't always remember what the hell I say, but I say a lot.

jazzbaby: :D Yeah, really. I tend to talk a lot. *blush* I kind of like making sure the guy I'm with knows what I'm feeling. :-) So, nipples, huh? Sucking and biting and licking and teasing... I can do that. ;-)

java_junkie: Oh, I wish you would. *groan* ;-)

jazzbaby: I will. One hand on your cock, mouth on your chest... Christ. These pictures are *really* nice. :D

Oh, damn. I was going to do this, wasn't I?

java_junkie: *looks at your pics again* Hey, is that a birthmark or a scar on your hip?

Yeah, I said that. Celia would have shot me.

java_junkie: Whichever, I rather like the view.

jazzbaby: It's a scar. I like having it licked. Seriously. Just before my dick gets sucked. ;-)

java_junkie: I will enjoy doing both. A lot. With enthusiasm. >;-)

jazzbaby: Just tell me when and where. Well, reality is a bit more complex than that, but you get my point, I'm sure. I want to play with the body I'm looking at right now. At least once.

java_junkie: You know how to reach me.

jazzbaby: I do. I will. Anything before Thursday would have to be a quickie though, and at the moment I think I want more than a fast blowjob. Is it okay if I use the phone number you sent?

java_junkie: I want a lot more than a fast blowjob. Does that sound needy and horrible? I don't mean it to be, I just... prefer something longer. And yeah, use the phone, that's cool, it's my Treo.

jazzbaby: Oh, a nice toy. Oh! Toys. >:-) Do you like toys? God, this is going to be an entire evening, if we're not careful. Thursday. Plus a fast jerk off now.

java_junkie: Yeah, totally like toys. Own a few. Maybe we should do this at my place. *licks across that really hot scar*

I was going to hell. Which was okay. I eased my boxers to the floor.

jazzbaby: Yeah, like that. *licks a nipple and strokes your cock* We could do that. Make a little noise. Roll on the bed a while. You can lick and suck all you want, then I'll make you babble. Rimming, right? I'm a little oral. *lick*

java_junkie: Rimming. Fuck, yes. My nipples just got hard. They ache. What's your name, man?

Figured I better ask before it came out by mistake. My cock was growing stiff, too. For someone who married a woman, Daniel sure knew how to talk to a man. I wrapped my fingers around the shaft and stroked it a couple of times before letting go to type again.

java_junkie: Can't type one-handed, will be here all night. Oral is good. Really, really good. Imagine my mouth around your cock right now. *sucking hard*

jazzbaby: Call me Daniel. You? And yeah, suck me. Nice and slow to start. And I'll tug on your nipples, one at a time, give them a twist. Are you really typing with one hand? Tell me you're hard. Like me. I've

got one hand in my pants.

java_junkie: Really hard. In, like, seconds flat. Fuck. It burns when you twist them like that, I love it. I'm Shane. I'm not even wearing pants, but my hand is around my prick which is why this is taking so long to type. Your body is beautiful, Daniel. *sucking slow* I love blue eyes, too. Mine are green. See, I told you I babble.

jazzbaby: I love babble. I love driving you crazy. Roll over for me and let me lick your ass. God, yeah. So hard. I'm working my cock, thinking about your mouth. Hey, grab your Treo. I want a picture. When you're coming for me. Think about my tongue in you, that should help. ;-)

It was a kinky request but I loved it anyway, and as it happened, my Treo was sitting on the desk. I tugged off my t-shirt so he'd get a good body shot in the picture.

java_junkie: ok. thursday seems like forever away now. getting close. you want my ass in the air for you? i'll put it right up there, high up in the fucking air. oh fuck, leaking all over the place. gonna grab the phone.

I reached for it, setting it up for a picture and holding it so he'd be able to see most of my body. Hopefully it wouldn't catch my face, but just in case, I'd keep my head down. I leaned back in my chair and stared at the screen, waiting for Daniel's response... I didn't want to come until I saw it.

jazzbaby: shit, yeah. high up, let me in there. i'm licking and biting and jacking you at the same time. can you feel it? tongue fucking you, stroking your cock. god, you're huge, want you to fuck me, shane. but right now i want to see a picture of you coming for me. god, i'm so close. balls are tight, gonna come all over the place.

Oh, yeah. I felt it. I felt it so real my toes curled. I felt it so strong my hips left the chair. I snapped Daniel's picture as I came, shooting so hard I felt lightheaded.

java_junkie: sent. jesus, daniel. haven't come so hard in ages. can't wait for the real thing.

I was panting heavily and my eyes were glued to the screen. Out of curiosity, I took a look at the picture I'd sent him. It was pretty hot; I mean, considering it was me. The picture was a little bit blurred, which was a good thing, because I'd forgotten to keep my damn head down.

There was a long pause, almost a full minute and I was beginning to wonder if I'd lost him or been booted or something horrible like that. But then the window coughed up a new message and I relaxed as much as I could, given the circumstances.

jazzbaby: God. So pretty. Damn it, Shane, I came on my keyboard. Oops. :-D Thursday is going to be something fantastic.

java_junkie: Like that? Awesome. Sorry about the keyboard. LOL

jazzbaby: I liked it a lot. The keyboard will survive, I expect. Your picture sent me over. I looked and stared and licked my lips and jerked off like a man possessed. And now you're going to think I'm a freak. I should delete that. But I won't. ;-)

java_junkie: You're my kind of freak, Daniel. I'm looking forward to meeting you. You can keep the picture, but do me a favor and don't email it to 400 of your best friends. LOL

jazzbaby: Hey, I'm the one who demands discretion, remember? :-) I'm hardly going to do that. Besides, it's fuzzy but there's part of your face and there's no way in hell I'd share that. And that's on top of the fact that you were coming for *me*. This is too... mine.

His. Holy Mother of God. I was so screwed.

java_junkie: Yours, huh? Possessive. I like it. But be careful there, Mr. "I don't see the same guy twice." I might think you're starting to like me. ;-)

jazzbaby: *turns an attractive shade of purple* I'll give you a maybe. ;-) And I hate to be the kind of guy who gets you off and then runs away, but my wife is going to be home soon. I really should go. Shower and stuff. :(

java_junkie: Hey, at least you got me off. ;-) I totally understand. Go on, hot stuff. This was great.

jazzbaby: It was. In person will be better. I'll call you on Wednesday to make plans, okay?

java_junkie: Looking forward to it. We'll work out the details when you call. Goodnight.

jazzbaby: Later, Shane. And thanks.

Within seconds his username blinked offline, and I was left sitting naked and sticky at my kitchen table in front of my laptop. What was fun five minutes ago now seemed pathetic. Was I so lonely as all of that? Was it Daniel that did this to me, or was I really just that bad off? I deserved whatever fate decided to throw at me; I just prayed it held off until after Thursday.

My shower was long, but only because I was going over things in my mind. Too many things. The what ifs, the uncertainty, my own emotions; I might as well have been betting on the spin of a roulette wheel. Red or black? Evens or odds? Who the hell could tell.

As I got out I remembered Celia had asked, no, *ordered* me to call. Just as well, really, she was the best sounding board in town. Still in my robe I padded barefoot into the kitchen, which I'd thankfully cleaned up before my shower, and got another beer before dialing her number.

Celia answered the phone halfway through the first ring. "Shane?" she said, not even pretending to be casual about the whole thing. Damn her.

"Jesus Christ. Sit down, woman, I'm fine."

"I am sitting. I'm quite cozy on my couch, if you must know. So. Tell me all. What did you talk about?"

"Sex." I sighed. "We talked about sex. And then had some. Cyber-wise, I mean."

There was a long pause, but not as long as I'd been expecting. "Well, at least it's safe."

"You're disappointed in me, Celia. It's okay to say so; I am, too. Why aren't you reading me the riot act? Telling me what an ass I am?"

"Because I love you and it wouldn't make any difference. I know you, Shane, and you're beating yourself up about it more than I ever could." Her voice was sympathetic and warm and I swallowed back a strange and sudden lump in my throat. She knew me so well. "I'm not disappointed in you, either. I'm worried for you, that's different. Was it at least... well, did it seem like he cared about you? About what you were doing, I mean. Was he selfish?"

"Celia," I said as I grinned into the phone. "I've told you before, men don't do the whole selfish in bed thing. We get off, usually in a mutual fashion. You're either fucking or being fucked. There is no selfish."

"Huh," she said skeptically. "And which were you?"

"I was the one who came first." I sounded smug and I decided that was okay.

"And that's... good?" she asked. "So, I assume you didn't say thanks and log off right then. What did you do, aside from get that silly grin?" I could hear her smiling, and I wasn't sure it was a good thing.

"What do you mean, what did I do? He'd done a damn good job of virtually rimming me, so I figured one good turn deserved another." I was teasing her now because she was fishing, the pervy little dyke.

She choked, I heard it clearly. "Rimming? Jesus, Shane, warn me." She laughed, sounding utterly delighted. "How did you top that?"

I didn't answer her question, letting the suspense build up. "Celia, I've learned that it's no fun to warn you. You enjoy being shocked and appalled much better."

"Tell me," she whined. "Come on. I'll tell you a secret if you do."

Damn her, plying me with promises of secrets. I caved. "He asked, and so I sent him a picture of me coming. He went totally nuts, said he jerked off like a man possessed and came all over his keyboard. No lie."

The pause was really long after that. I was just about to say her name and check that she was still there when Celia finally drew an audible breath and said, "Jesus, that's really hot. I hate you."

I laughed until my sides hurt. "Oh, oh God. I think I might have burst something."

"Shut up. I'm busy hating your hotness. Damn, Shane." She actually sounded a little put out that I'd had good sex. I laughed harder.

"I'm going to put this day on my calendar as the day that you actually called this geek 'hot.'"

"I called the sex hot," she corrected. "Or. Okay. Something. Damn it. I hate you." She started to laugh in my ear, and that was even funnier. "God, I can't believe you sent him a picture of you coming. Are you going to put it on your profile?"

"No," I said flatly. "No fucking way. And I'm not showing it to you either, so don't ask."

"Aw, and here I am giving you my love! And going to your mom's! I want to see the pretty picture."

"Come over, we'll fuck, and then you can see it in person."

"Oh, my God," Celia shrieked. "You did not just say that!" She was laughing so hard I thought she might get the hiccups. "You wouldn't even be able to get it up for me, so don't tease. Not that I'd play along."

I might have been giggling like a girl. I do that sometimes when I start laughing so hard that I have trouble getting sound out. "You're so right. I guess you're never going to see me come, lady."

"You don't have to sound so happy about it," she said, finally getting control over herself again. "Ah, crap, Shane," she said, one last hiccup of laughter getting by. "So. What's next?"

I shook my head for a moment before I remembered she couldn't see it. "I don't know. He's still married, his wife is still my client, and I'm still a lying bastard."

"There is the client part," Celia agreed, sidestepping the lying part. "What should we do about her? Anything? We can block her for a bit, if you want."

"I thought some about that. I need to check in with her, and when I do, I'm going to tell her that I had a close call and think I should lay low for a week or so while you look into where he's spending the money some more. Thoughts?"

"Sure," Celia said easily. "Uh, do you actually want me to do that? I'm good with money trails."

"I guess we should, huh?" I snorted. "So I have something to tell her when she starts demanding to know why I don't know anything yet." I took the phone into the living room and sank into my recliner with a sigh. "Celia? How much more screwed up can this get before I have to start fixing it?"

"Well," Celia said softly, "at least you haven't actually fucked him yet. He doesn't know who you are. I suppose it depends on your heart, Bossman. How deep can you get before it'll hurt even more to pull away?"

Pull away? I had no intention of pulling away, but apparently Celia thought I would. Or she was hoping I would. I couldn't have this conversation all of a sudden. My throat got tight and I felt like I was going to puke.

"I don't know. Well, I guess I better hit the hay, I'll see you at the office in the morning."

"Okay," she said, sounding a little startled. "If you're coming in early will you bring me danish again?"

I figured I better lighten the mood a bit. "For you, lover, anything."

She snorted, a very unlady-like sound. "Just the danish will do, Bossman. Lemon, if there is such a thing. I want to wear my gold rims tomorrow and it'll look good."

"I think coordinating your breakfast with your glasses might be taking it just a tad too far, Celia."

"Clearly, you're insane. See you tomorrow, Shane."

"Night." I hung up the phone and hurried to the bathroom. I didn't actually puke, but the nausea lasted for an hour or more and I finally just dragged myself to bed without letting myself analyze my emotions at all. Not that I needed to analyze anything to realize how fast and how hard I was falling.

Chapter Nine

Celia did wear her gold rim glasses, but had to be content with cherry danish, as that's all they had. Never one to be foiled by food, she promptly pulled a red scarf from her bag and tied it around her neck while she ate. By the time I left the office, she was happily tracing money, or at least trying to.

Daniel was at work, and judging by the chatter on his phones, he was hard at work, too. I sat and listened and played solitaire for a while, then switched to my web browser and started learning to use my Treo to its fullest.

Late Monday afternoon, Daniel agreed to speak at some seminar on Tuesday afternoon as a stand-in, and then found out he had to press the flesh and campaign a bit at a women's conference Tuesday evening. He'd already reluctantly agreed to be home for dinner Monday night, so my job became both very easy and very boring until Wednesday morning, by which point I was a pro at browsing, checking my e-mail, and taking short videos of people walking past my truck.

After two days of essentially sitting on my ass, I found myself checking my phone every five minutes to see if I'd missed Daniel's call, or hadn't heard it chime when a text message came in. I felt like I'd been waiting for the call for days, which I suppose I had been. No such luck, however, at least not until after lunch. I picked it up quickly when it rang, dismayed to find Mrs. Brint on the other end.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Mullen. I was wondering if you have anything to report yet? It's been a few days, so I thought checking in would be a good idea." Her voice was cool and businesslike, and I had to remind myself not to call her 'Cruella.'

"Hello, Mrs. Brint, thank you for calling. I was actually going to call you this afternoon, so you've got great timing. I have some good news and some bad." I forced myself to breathe and speak slowly so I wouldn't sound like I was trying to hide that I'd had cyber sex with her husband, but of course as soon as I thought about Daniel, I'm sure I missed the mark by a mile. "The good news is that Celia thinks she's close to tracking the money you're concerned about."

"Celia? Oh, your office girl, right. Well, that'll be good to know for sure, although how she can track money to a dealer, I don't know." She said the word 'dealer' with great distaste.

"Celia is, in fact, my partner, Mrs. Brint, and I assure you she is very skilled at what she does." It was true. One of her ex-girlfriends told me so.

"Oh. I didn't mean offense, I'm sure. So while your partner is following the money, what have you been doing?" She sounded far from apologetic. I began to hate her a little more.

"I've been following your husband, and without a great deal of success. And that's where the bad news comes in. Last Friday night I followed him to a meeting with a friend at a neighborhood bar in the suburbs, and I'm afraid I might have tipped my hand a bit." God, lying was becoming far too easy for me. I was going to hell for sure.

"How so?" she asked slowly. "Do you know who this friend was?"

"Someone named Jason. An attorney, from what I could gather. Definitely not into drugs. They both saw me coming out of the café, and I feel like I need to lay low for a week or so."

"Oh, Jason. Of course, Daniel said he saw him." She made a thoughtful sound and then added, "Did they actually pay attention to you? Although I suppose if he saw you again so soon the coincidence would pique his interest. Are you going to stay on his phones, even if you don't follow him?"

I grinned, feeling smug at having earned some cred with Janet. I'd dropped a name she knew, as I assumed she would, and Daniel had been honest about seeing Jason so she knew I was on the job. Chalk one up for the geek.

"I'll do that, and of course if anything vital seems to be under way I won't let the opportunity pass."

"All right," she said grudgingly. "Please call me if you find anything out. I'd like to get some answers and move ahead with taking care of this issue."

"I will. I apologize for the delay, but it's never a good idea to push too hard, Mrs. Brint. Hopefully Celia will have some information in the next few days. I'll be in touch."

"I look forward to it," she said, and then she hung up. Rude bitch. God, no matter what Daniel said she was like, she sure didn't treat the hired help very well.

My next call was to Celia to let her know I'd handled Janet for the time being. I also wanted to pass on Janet's feelings about her, not so much to tease her about it, but because I knew how Celia would react. Once I told her Janet called her my "office girl," there would be no secret Janet had that Celia wouldn't sell her soul to procure. I grinned as I dialed the office.

"Hey, Bossman," Celia said cheerfully as she answered the phone. "I got the invoices out for the Robertson thing last week, and we got paid for that skip trace, finally."

"Oh, good, that means we get paid next week. It's about time." I grinned. "And Robertson was more than appreciative, so with any luck we'll be good until the new year." Celia was great about getting paid as the invoices came in. "I just spoke with Mrs. Brint, she's under control for a week or so, I'd say. I assured her that you were looking into Daniel's finances. She called you my 'office girl.' How about that?"

"She what?" Celia said flatly. "How charming of her. Well. I suppose I should just Little Miss Efficient all over her ass. Twat."

"Oh, no, you di'in't!" I said in possibly the worst attempt at sounding urban, ever. I followed it with a laugh, lest Celia get the impression I actually was trying to sound hip. "I knew you'd feel that way. I told her you were my partner to put her in her place. Dig deep, Celia, I despise her more now than ever."

"Partner is good," Celia said. I could almost hear her grin. "I'll paint it on the door if you tell three clients, though." I heard the tap of her keyboard and then she said, "Okay, money watch is... well, not doing much yet, I'm still getting my ducks in a row. But I should have something in a couple of days. It'll be harder to trace if he's spending cash, as you know, but spending on the internet would be a good thing. What are you up to?"

"I'm waiting outside Daniel's building. So far today he's taken two boring phone calls and ordered in Chinese for lunch." I sighed. "But it's Wednesday, so..."

"So you're waiting for him to call?" she asked softly. "Well, at least you know he's at work and not seeing his wife on the sly."

"Ha ha. Yes, I'm waiting for him to call." I sighed. "We set it up when we talked the other night. But he didn't say what time and with his schedule it could be a long day. It already has been."

"So... are you going to talk more or are you going to--" Celia broke off, then sighed. "Never mind, I'm sorry. It's not really my business. Just... be careful, Shane, okay?"

"You keep saying that," I teased, "as if I didn't know exactly what a fuck-up I am."

"You're not a fuck-up!" Celia protested with flattering promptness. "You're just... um. Well, your dick really likes him."

"More than my dick, I'm afraid. My brain really likes him, too. Don't worry, you'll get the scoop if there is one." And there was my opening. "Oh! Speaking of scoop, you promised me a secret the other night and I didn't get it."

"Oh, I totally made that up," she said breezily. "But I owe you one. I get a secret, you'll be the first to know. Unless, of course, it's about you."

My jaw dropped. "You... what?" I wanted to be mad, but there's no being mad at Celia. I laughed all the way through my supposedly angry reply. "You bitch. I'm never telling you anything about my sex life *ever* again."

"You say that *now*, but I know you better than that, Bossman," Celia said with a laugh. "Now, go do your thing so I can do mine. I'm a much better office girl when I'm not chatting on the phone with my sugar daddy. God, slap her for me, will you? No, wait. Let me do it. I won't wind up in jail. Maybe on *Girls Gone Wild*, though, which would be worse. Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm here. You scare me, but I love you anyway. I'll call you later," I promised, and then I hung up before she went from slapping Janet to pre-meditated murder.

With a sigh, I adjusted my ear piece and turned my attention back to Daniel's office line. It had been dead for the last hour so I wasn't expecting much.

There was continued silence on the phones, both his and mine, and I was starting to get really fidgety when he suddenly appeared, coming out of the main doors. It was just after five, so it was conceivable that he was heading home, but I had my doubts. I started my truck so I'd be ready to go wherever he went, and when he pulled out of the parking garage there was that charming English lady giving him directions again. Definitely not heading home.

He didn't drive far, but as we made a tour of the city's one way streets, I understood the need for the GPS. I almost lost him twice due to traffic, but I managed to be only about three cars behind him when he pulled into a parking lot. I found parking myself, almost entirely in a legal spot, and followed him on foot into the Starbucks.

Unfortunately, it wasn't a big enough place for me to hide my face very well, so I grabbed a free paper from a stand by the door to busy myself with and took a seat. I watched him scan the room, run his fingers through his hair, and it was all I could do not to hop out of my seat and introduce myself. When he raised his hand as if waving to someone, I tried to follow his gaze and spotted a young man, maybe twenty-five, sitting at a table with an open laptop in front of him. He smiled and closed it as Daniel approached.

I was closer to them than I liked, but I was close enough to hear, too, which was a mixed blessing. No, it was a curse.

"Hey," Daniel said, smiling as he approached the young man. "Matthew?"

"Yeah, Matt. Daniel, right?"

Daniel nodded and they shook hands, then Matt promptly packed up his laptop, looking Daniel up and down and grinning the way I probably would if I knew I was about ten minutes from seeing him naked. "My place is just around the corner. Thanks for meeting me here, though -- that busted door buzzer is a bitch."

"Not a problem," Daniel said, eyeing him back. "Really. If nothing else, I know where to get a decent cup of coffee in the neighborhood now."

"Not from around here?" Matt asked as they walked past me toward the door.

"The city, yes, but not this area. Parking is cheaper down here."

They left and I ditched the paper, waiting for a few minutes before following. This part was tricky -- leave too soon, get caught. Wait too long, lose the trail.

Matt had a quick step and, as the two hurried up the sidewalk, I jogged a little to close the gap. As it turned out, they entered an apartment building directly across the street from where I'd parked my truck. I could have followed them in, but I wasn't comfortable with it. Something in my stomach churned at the idea that Daniel would find himself a random guy when he could have had me with a phone call.

Not that he knew that, I supposed. But he should. And he would, I decided, the next time we spoke. If we spoke. I swallowed as I headed back to my car, shaking off the idea that he might not actually call after all. Maybe I'd gotten too close, or maybe he really didn't want anyone to know him as more than a hook-up.

As I climbed into my truck I caught a glimpse of Daniel, framed in the first floor window. He made a half-hearted attempt to close the curtains, but Matthew slipped his arms around Daniel's waist and the curtains fell open again, apparently forgotten as they started making out. It seemed to start slowly, but it wasn't long before their hands were moving with more purpose, pushing and tugging at each other.

Matthew shoved his jeans down and Daniel tossed his shirt aside and I watched them as they crashed together like teenagers...

When it was over all I had to show for it was a few stolen photographs and an unsettling ache in the pit of my stomach. Celia's cautionary words were useless to me now; I'd let this go much too far.

I put my binoculars and my camera away and, just as I started my truck, Daniel appeared on the street. It seemed to take him a moment to get his bearings, but then he headed in the direction of his car. I followed him reflexively.

Sitting in the garage outside Daniel's office, I had to wonder what I was doing there. He'd gotten laid, he'd picked up dinner, so the rest of the night was going to be radio silence while he wrote a speech or surfed for his next hungry dick, or whatever it was he did at night in his office. I felt a little bitter, as if any of it was my business. I decided that an energetic date with some lube and Celia's dildo, followed by a good night's sleep, was in order and so I headed home, but I wasn't a block from the garage when my cell phone rang.

I glanced at the display and then blinked. It didn't actually say "Daniel Brint", but it was the municipal government. I was pretty sure someone wasn't calling me about the parking tickets.

"Hello?" I said, as calmly and evenly as I could manage.

"Shane?"

Oh, yeah. That voice I knew.

"...Yes?" I tried to sound hesitant, like I wasn't sure who it was, as if I hadn't been waiting all day for that smooth voice to come over the line.

"It's Daniel. Um, from the other night. Did I get you at a bad time?"

"Oh, Daniel. Hi. Great to hear from you. No, not a bad time at all, just driving so I fumbled the phone." The fact that I nearly dropped it had nothing to do with realizing it had to be him calling. Not at all. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks," he said, his words a little fast. "I'm still at work, but about to go home. I was hoping that maybe... Um. Well, to tell the truth, I've been thinking about you a lot, and I was hoping that you're still interested in getting together tomorrow night."

"Yeah, totally interested." I cleared my throat and pulled over onto the shoulder. I had a plan for this moment, I'd thought long and hard about it, I just needed the courage to actually go through with it. I took a deep breath and did my best to sound casual even though my hands were trembling. "Uh, listen... I know we talked about hooking up online, but, uh... well, I was wondering if you might be up for meeting at that Greek place you were talking about."

There was a short pause, just long enough for me to actually hear my heart thud twice, then Daniel said, "I'd like that." It was all he said, but there was a ring of genuine pleasure in his voice that made up for the pause.

I sighed and he probably heard it, probably knew I'd been holding my breath. "Yeah? Great." I laughed nervously. "Great. Good."

"You'll like it," he said, sounding amused. "Well, I think you will. It's not like we really know each other, but I think there'll be something on the menu that will tempt you. Let me just check my planner." If he did more than a flip a page I'd be damned, because almost immediately he said, "How's six-thirty for you?"

"Six-thirty is perfect." Anything would have been perfect. I waited through a bit of a pause when neither of us seemed to know what to say, but neither of us seemed in a hurry to hang up, either. I eased my truck back onto the road. "So, you're headed home, huh? Me, too."

"Yeah? Long day at work?"

"Yeah. Long day." Details of any kind were not only not required, but weren't a good idea either. "Plus, you know, I'm feeling kind of... well, I'm looking forward to seeing you tomorrow night, that's for sure." I laughed softly.

"Well," Daniel said slowly. "I just blocked out several hours. I'm pretty sure that we can't fill all that time with just eating."

I laughed and shook my head. "I'll be sure to change my sheets."

"That would be..." Daniel paused and then laughed, a completely unexpected sound. "That would be great. I was going to say something utterly ridiculous, like 'that would be fine' like you'd be doing me some kind of favor by being a good host, but I think we're kind of past the negotiation stages here. I don't know exactly what we're doing, but it sure as hell isn't business."

I wasn't sure what we were doing, either. Well, I knew what he was doing, but I wasn't sure I knew what I was up to. "This is called foreplay. Because you're about to go home to your wife and I'm about to go home to an empty apartment so we need something to tide us over. What was it you wanted to negotiate? I kind of figured we jumped right past that when you accepted the dinner invitation."

"Well, there's not much left, is there?" Daniel asked, and I could hear him grinning. "Dinner, your place -- all that's left is to figure out who's going to do what, and I think we can figure that out as we go along. It will involve a lot of licking, though, I think."

I swallowed. "Mmm yeah. Of a certain someone's scar."

"Oh," Daniel breathed in my ear. "That, too. I was thinking more about your ass."

"Oh, I know what you were thinking about." I cleared my throat. "I was trying not to. I am driving, after all."

"Oops." He didn't sound all that repentant, really. "Well, maybe you can think about it when you get home?"

"Oh, you are a devil, Daniel. I just might do that. Think long and hard about your tongue and my ass and my mouth and your cock, and that look that you think is goofy, but I think is hothothot." I probably ought to have pulled over, but it was only a few more blocks to my place and I'd been hard since I first heard Daniel say my name, so what was a few more minutes?

Daniel drew a sharp breath, the sound like crystal in my ear. "And you call me a devil?" he said. "You're the one who's taking it up a notch. Not that I mind. I could tell you what I'm doing right now, sitting at my desk. I could tell you that I'm hard for you, one hand in my lap while you're talking to me."

"Jesus, at the office? Seriously?" It was all I could do not to drive off the road. Steady on, I told myself. I turned into the entrance to my apartment complex.

"Uh-huh. At my desk. No one here, just you on the phone and I've got one hand where I want your mouth." He probably wasn't lying either, the way his breathing had picked up.

Hadn't he just...? Ah, well, it hardly mattered. I had my hand where I wanted his ass to be, so I figured it was all good. I pulled into my lot and parked one-handed. "Okay, Daniel, I'm parked now, so if you really want to do this, I am so game. Tell me how hard you are."

Honest, I wasn't usually so... kinky. Maybe I was braver with Daniel because I'd been watching him long enough that I already knew he'd go for it. There was hardly any risk of him backing out now.

"Hard enough that I have to make some room," he told me, his voice not exactly covering the sound of a zipper. "Now you. In your car. Touch yourself and listen to me, okay? God, do it. Please."

"Whatever you want," I told him, shifting to get my cock free of my khakis. I groaned softly as I closed my fingers around my shaft, my breath getting a little short already. "I'm listening, Daniel."

"Want you," he whispered immediately. "So many ways, all at once. Like this. Hands and words and wet

kisses. At my desk, my cock in your mouth. Over it, while you fuck me. I want to suck you off, have that gorgeous dick of yours in my mouth. I want to taste your skin and hear your voice and watch you come for me." He was panting toward the end, the words starting to fracture. "I had to get up in the middle of the night and jerk off because of you."

"Fuck. Oh, fuck." Daniel's words were as hot as my hand on my cock and just as surely they urged me on, pushing me right to the edge. "Daniel, God. Want you. Want you more than... oh, fuck." I couldn't sit still, shifting in my seat and curling around my cock as I felt myself start to come. "Want to smell you, taste you, sink right into you and make you scream."

"Shane." It was a gasp, not a scream, but it was my name. It was Daniel coming, saying my name, and it made me twitch and come all the harder. He was panting in my ear, moaning softly. "Shane," he said again. "Fuck."

I nodded, forgetting for a moment that Daniel was on the other end of a cell-phone line. "Yeah. Fuck." Not eloquent, but I wanted him to know I felt the same way.

"I made a mess," Daniel told me, sounding kind of happy about it.

That sent me into an aftershock of giggles. "Uh, yeah, me, too. Good thing my truck is too old for leather seats. Damn, man. You're good at that talking thing. Jesus." I felt around for some tissues and came up with napkins left over from lunch.

"I'm better live and in person. And I swear to God, I meant it. I want at you so fucking much. It's... Well. I don't know what it is. But I'm going to find out."

"It feels impossibly strong, right? That's not just me?" I was breathing a little better now and the steering wheel was clean.

The pause was back, long and oddly thoughtful. "It's not just you, no. I've made a point of never contacting the same man twice, and here we are. I'm not sure if it's a good thing, to be honest. But it is strong, that's for sure."

"Don't think too hard tonight, Daniel. We'll talk tomorrow. Maybe this will sort itself out in person, you know? When we're... live and in person, like you said." I smiled.

"Yeah, maybe." Daniel made a sound that could have been a sigh or could have just been a deep breath. "I have to go," he said. "Not to fuck and run, but I'm late. Tomorrow night can't come fast enough, though."

"No worries, man, I get it. See you at six-thirty."

"I'll be there. Goodnight, Shane."

"Night, Daniel." I pulled my Treo from my ear and hung up, watching as the caller ID disappeared from the display.

Chapter Ten

I decided not to tail Daniel on Thursday. I figured he wouldn't be hooking up with anyone knowing he was getting laid that night, and quite frankly, if he decided to, I didn't want to know about it. In fact, I wasn't sure I wanted to know about it anymore at all.

I showed up at the office about ten and told Celia as much, though not in as many words.

"I think we've expended enough resources on the surveillance of Mr. Brint," I said casually, pouring myself a cup of Celia's coffee.

She stared at me for a moment and then blinked rapidly. "Oh. Um. Huh?" she said, carefully putting her pen down on her desk.

"I don't think there is anything new to be learned from that particular activity," I said by way of clarifying... and yet, not. I cleared my throat. "I've been thinking over how to handle our client. Have you got anything new for me?"

"Maybe," she said, her eyes narrowing. "I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours. What did Daniel do last night?"

"Oh, no, I'm not falling for that again." I sat down at my desk. "You first."

She grinned at me and nodded. "Better. I'll train you to be a bitch in no time." Then she leaned forward and picked her pencil back up, waving it at me like it was a pointer. "He's keeping money somewhere," she said with conviction. "There's no large purchases, nothing to indicate investments he doesn't want Janet to know about -- or if there are, he's doing it under another name and divorce is going to be the least of his worries. I can't find any other credit cards, and without actually fucking his accountant all I've got is the general impression that he's got an account somewhere under the radar. Maybe a Credit Union? I'm on it. Your turn."

"Who is his accountant? I'll do him. It's not like I'm in a relationship or anything. I can have anyone I want." I sat back in my chair and put my feet up on my desk, feeling more than just a little snarky. "Make me an appointment. No, wait, don't. I'll just find him online and meet him in a coffee shop, screw him in his apartment in front of a wide open window, and then when I'm done, I'll go call the man I really wanted to screw in the first place and see if he remembers my name. Because it's not like he's been waiting around all day for me to call, right? Yeah. That makes perfect sense, doesn't it?"

Celia, bless her, has a sense of self-preservation so she didn't laugh. "I see," she said, staring hard at her computer screen. "I take it Daniel called. Eventually."

"Yeah. He did, when he got back to his office. And he'd been damn well laid from what I saw. And then he, not for the first time, mind you, seduced me over the phone and I ended up shooting spunk across the dashboard. Can you explain that, please?"

It wasn't like Daniel owed me anything. Any issue I was having with him was entirely my own fault. Still, it

felt good to blow off some steam.

"Um. Sure," she said, apparently finding her monitor fascinating. "He has a high sex drive, is married to an evil ho-bag of a shrew, and he didn't so much seduce you as you seduced him. Maybe. Can I have a raise?"

"No," I said, chucking my Treo on the desk and sitting up. "Smart-asses don't get raises." I put down my coffee cup and stared at it. "I couldn't seduce a mouse with cheese."

Celia turned her head and stared at me. "You really don't know, do you?" she asked, looking incredulous. "Shane, you're charming, attractive, and sincere. Hell, I'd be all over you, if you had nice tits."

"Thank goodness I don't, this office would be too small for the two of us." I grinned at her, not really believing the compliments, but appreciating the sentiment all the same.

Celia rolled her eyes. "My point is, I don't think it matters who's seducing who at this point, even if you don't give yourself enough credit. He's married. He intends to stay that way, and you're getting involved with more than your intellect. I'm worried, and I hate his wife. Did I mention that she's a ho-bag? Also, *she's* hiding money, too. I'm going to need help finding it."

"We have a date tonight," I confessed, as if I hadn't heard her at all. "A real date. Dinner. And I invited him back to my place after. I swear to God, Celia, if it isn't a perfect evening I'll let him go, okay? I'll get over him. I'll enjoy tonight for the food and the sex and then tomorrow I'll get clear somehow. I'm starting to think I should anyway, you know? Tell Janet I can't help her and just drop the whole thing."

Celia's jaw dropped open. Literally and completely. I'd never seen her so utterly thrown for a loop before. "I have no idea what to say, or where to start not saying it. God, Shane."

"Good," I said, picking up my Treo. "I see we both agree I've gone mad. At least I'm still sane enough to see that." I searched through my pictures and found the one that Daniel made me swear I'd never show anyone. The one he said he looked goofy in. "Catch," I sang, tossing the phone to Celia. "Tell me, Celia. If that were a woman, could you turn that down?"

"Hell, no." Celia looked at the phone for a lot longer than I would have thought she needed to. "Wow." She turned it off and set it carefully on her desk. "So. A real date. And you think you can just... turn it off after tomorrow?"

I looked at Celia for a long moment, searching her eyes as I often did when she asked me questions I didn't want to answer. "No," I shook my head, feeling defeated. "Not if he's what I think he's going to be. What I already know he is. No." I pushed my mug away. "You can't fix this one for me, sweetheart. I wish you could, but I think I've dug myself into this one." When I looked at her again I was trying to smile. "Look, if I'm doing this, I want to have a good time. What should I wear?"

Celia smirked a little. "Does it matter? The goal is naked, right?" Then her face cleared and she looked more thoughtful. "Where's dinner? A nice place? Stay away from jeans, just in case. Wear those dark green slacks of yours and a shirt with buttons, but not a dress shirt. Do you have anything in a pale gray?"

"Oh, the green pants. Okay. Gray? Um, I don't know. I have white. Or, um... white?"

"White will do," Celia said with a roll of her eyes. "But only because I don't trust you to pick out a light green that's the same tone as the pants. Honestly, don't you think fashion might be one stereotype you could try for?"

"You mean promiscuity isn't enough? Oh. Except that I'm not promiscuous. Daniel is, though. What should we talk about? He won't give up the personal stuff and I'm as boring as a stick of wood. Is it lunch time yet? I'm hungry."

Celia had work to do, but I didn't care. I was paying her and if I wanted her to listen to me lament on my dime then that was my business, right?

"You are not boring," she said firmly. "Stop that. I don't know what you can talk about, but I insist you don't put yourself down in front of him. Also, you can't talk about work. Have you read a book lately?"

I was about to answer, but we both froze in place as my Treo rang. Celia made a show of leaning way over and peering at it. "Hmm," she said, as I stood up. "City government. Should I take it and tell him you're busy?"

I knocked my chair over in my haste to get the Treo away from her and it hit the hardwood floor with a loud bang. I also managed what I hoped was an indignant glare, but she laughed at me so it probably came out more like a deer-in-headlights thing.

"Hello?" I said, forcing myself to smile. I was told once that if you smiled when you spoke on the phone you sounded more friendly. Personally, I was going for less manic.

"Shane, it's Daniel." Like that was a shock. "I'm sorry to call like this, but I have to change our plans, I'm afraid. I'm unexpectedly on my way out of town." At least he managed to sound regretful and frustrated.

"Oh. Oh, well, that's a bummer." To say I was disappointed would have been a gross understatement. I was sure he'd changed his mind or gotten cold feet. I hauled my chair up off the floor and sank into it heavily. "It happens, no problem." I ran my fingers through my hair and pointedly did not look up at Celia. I could almost feel her stare burning a hole in the top of my head.

"I had a meeting this morning and some new issues came up; I have to go upstate for the night, leaving right now." He sighed heavily. "This isn't how I wanted to spend my night, believe me. I'm sorry, Shane. Can I see you soon? Please?"

"Yeah. Why don't you call me when you get back in town. If you want to."

There was a long pause. "Shane?" Daniel said, sounding confused. "I'm not bullshitting you. Look, I have to go. Can you manage tomorrow night? Sunday?"

Suddenly I felt like an asshole. For a PI, I could draw some pretty screwed up conclusions. "I'm sorry. Reflex, I guess. Yes. Tomorrow or Sunday, whatever is best for you. Tomorrow would be better if you can swing it because... well, I'm just not a patient guy. Have a safe trip."

"Thanks. I'll text you tomorrow or call or something. I'm not overly patient, either." Daniel laughed softly, sounding relieved. "Thanks. Talk to you as soon as I can." Then he was gone.

"So," Celia said, before I could even set the phone down. "Wardrobe discussion is moot?"

"Not moot." I sighed. "I just have some time to go buy a gray shirt." I tossed the phone on my desk. "He had to go out of town, sounds like business. It happens."

Celia nodded. "It does. So, we're going shopping? Or did you want to sit and vent a while longer? Or, you know. I could work."

"I am quite capable of shopping for myself, thank you. I'll work on an attitude adjustment while I'm gone. Or maybe step out in front of a bus. If I don't make it back, you can have that little figurine in my kitchen that my mother gave me. You know, the one with the cleavage." I stood up, scooping up my Treo and putting it in my pocket. "Nail Janet to the wall, Celia. I want my man," I muttered as I grabbed my coat.

"You got it, Bossman," Celia said quietly as I left. "I'll do my best."

Chapter Eleven

I reread Daniel's text message more than once while standing in the waiting area at Dimitri's. It seemed like a nice place, and I was glad that Celia told me no jeans. I was wearing my brand new shirt, and I'd even taken the time to shine my shoes, but I wouldn't have called myself high fashion.

Daniel wasn't late, I was early. I took yet another look at his message. "*6:30pm. I'll be there.*" It was meant to be reassuring, I think, and I appreciated it. It gave me a warm feeling that he actually cared, and not just about whether he was coming back to my place.

I stuck the phone back in my pocket when I was seated and then picked up a menu. Thankfully, it wasn't actually in Greek, though that would have given me something else to keep my mind busy.

"The Avgolemono soup is fantastic," a voice said, and I looked up, expecting to see a waiter. But it was Daniel, smiling down at me uncertainly. "If you like eggs and lemon, anyway," he said.

I smiled back, probably too broadly. "Hi," I said, for lack of anything more intelligent. I met his eyes; their blue seemed to twinkle at me a bit as his smile grew. I badly wanted to kiss him. "Avgol-a-what?"

"Avgolemono," he said, his smile growing more relaxed. "It translates as egg and lemon. May I?" he gestured to the chair across from me.

"Please do. I was waiting on this hot guy I've seen a picture of, but you're much better looking." It was a cheesy line, but something in the back of my mind told me that Celia would have been proud of me for it all the same.

Daniel laughed and pulled out the chair. "Funny, I was just thinking the same thing. Although the guy I was looking for has a certain look about him in some photos that I really hope to see."

"I think that can be arranged." If he was really better in person then, yeah, it would definitely happen. "How was your trip?" I grinned. "I'm not being an ass, I'm actually interested."

"Boring as hell," Daniel said, still smiling. "Meeting with dull people about important things. It was a long night, actually. I barely had time to get off thinking about you before I fell asleep."

Celia was so wrong. Daniel was definitely doing the seducing. It's true that I might have been a bit overly receptive, but Daniel was the one making the hits, one after another. This time, I realized with some embarrassment, he made me blush, and I found a reason to study my menu critically. "Well, I'm glad that despite your busy schedule you still manage to find time for the important things."

"Very important," Daniel said softly before he picked up his own menu. "If you care for lamb, any of the dishes are good. How was your night? I hope I didn't ruin it completely."

I glanced up over my menu and then set it down on the table. I'd meant that as a joke, but he clearly took it personally, which only proved his sincerity. Let him see me blush, I decided. Not thinking, I reached out and took his hand, hoping it would help smooth things over. "You didn't ruin it at all. I was disappointed, but I

know you were, too. In any case, my assistant insisted that I dress appropriately and so I went shopping. This is a brand new shirt bought just for this evening, and I'm looking forward to having it rumpled beyond recognition."

Daniel's eyes lit up like a switch had been thrown and his shoulders relaxed, tension I hadn't even really noticed leeching out of him. "It's a very nice shirt," he said with an appreciative look. "I'm sure we can salvage it, if we try really hard."

"It's okay if we can't." I winked. "I don't know why I even bothered with the menu. You do know you're ordering for both of us, right?"

Laughing, Daniel nodded. "I can do that," he told me with a warm smile. "Do you have any favorite meats? Anything you don't like? Allergies?" He laughed again and leaned forward. "I didn't realize that ordering food would be such an intimate thing."

I grinned and gave his hand a squeeze. "Me either, but how nice that it is. I like lamb, which I'm told is a good thing in a Greek restaurant. Otherwise, I don't have allergies, I'd just like whatever it is to be dead before it lands in front of me."

"The Greeks are very big on eating only dead things," Daniel said solemnly. "And booze. Booze is good, too. Oh! Calamari. Yes, that, and maybe souvlaki. They make their own tzatziki sauce here."

"Glad to hear it. Not that I know what that is." I laughed "Celia sent me a website with some information about Greek food, I didn't read it. I tried, really, but it felt like homework."

"It's good, you'll like it," Daniel assured me, waving a waiter over. "Who's Celia?" he asked casually, flipping rapidly through the menu as the waiter arrived with a pitcher of water.

There really isn't any way to answer the question "Who is Celia?" succinctly. In my head, she is so many things and people all wrapped up in one. So I just sifted through the possible answers and picked the ones that I thought were most appropriate, given our circumstances. "Celia is my best friend. And she's also a really cute lesbian who wears funky glasses." I chuckled. "We're close."

Daniel grinned and ordered quickly, rattling off a list of dishes to the waiter, who merely nodded and filled our water glasses before wandering off, presumably to get our dinner. Then Daniel winked at me. "So do you collect lesbians or is she the one you work with as well? Not that I have anything against a collection of lesbians, you understand."

"Oh, no, she's the one I work with. But if you count the handful of her friends that know everything about me, including what I had for breakfast this morning, then I kind of have a collection."

He gave me a searching look and asked, "What's it like, working with your best friend? Doesn't it get tense, spending all that time together?"

"No, I just recognize that she is Queen Bee and I am but a mere servant who pays her salary and we get along great." I smiled at him. "She's an extraordinary person and we have a good time, mostly."

The smile came back, bright and happy. "Cool," he said, his head dipping so he looked at me through his eyelashes. "The woman I work with is about ninety and rules my office, too. We pretend I leave filing for her, but mostly she hovers and takes things away as soon as I've signed them. Frankly, she scares me."

"A woman that's been doing her job for fifty years would scare me, too." I laughed. "Does she, like, scold

you for what you eat and stuff, too?"

"God, does she. When I walked in on my first day she handed me a folder full of acceptable take out menus. I never use them. But once a year she shows up with a plate of the most incredible chocolate fudge. I live for those days, I really do."

"Ooh. You know, fudge is the next best thing to sex. In fact, fudge is best eaten in bed, in my opinion. Call me when the holidays roll around." A tall, lanky man set a glass of something in front of each of us. "What is this?"

"That booze I mentioned." Daniel grinned and picked up his glass. "Ouzo. Go ahead. And just the one, I don't want you to think I'm getting you drunk so I can take advantage."

I'd heard of ouzo. I'd heard it was like drinking lighter fluid. "Thing is, you don't need to get me drunk, I'm more than willing." I held up my glass. "A toast to... well, us, for what it's worth. To tonight."

"Tonight," Daniel agreed with a nod and a slight smile. "That's worth something." Then he tipped back his head and swallowed, drinking almost all of what was in his glass without even blinking. He certainly didn't look like he had to force it down. Maybe the stories were exaggerated.

"That's how it's done, eh?" I asked.

"Just open up and pour it down. You know. Like other things."

"Other things are smoother and not considered flammable," I said, and tossed my head and the drink back at the same time.

I thought I was going to die.

It felt like my eyes were going to pop out of my head, and I guess they looked that way, too, because Daniel laughed so hard at me I thought he was going to fall off his chair. I licked my lips and swallowed again as the stuff burned its way down my esophagus. It was pleasantly warm in my stomach, though, and the burning subsided quickly. "Jesus Christ," I swore, but the look on Daniel's face set me laughing, too.

"I guess it's an acquired taste," Daniel finally managed, still laughing. "Are you all right?"

"I'll live. It'll be a good story to tell my grandchildren."

Daniel looked amused. "Is Celia going to help you out with that one?"

"Oh, hell, no. That was a figure of speech. Celia will probably have a nice brood of her own one day, though." I took a sip of my ice water. "Did you know lesbians invented ouzo, by the way? I'd say that's reason enough to stay away from it."

"They did?" Daniel asked, blinking. "Who were they trying to punish?"

"Greek men?" I laughed, feeling more than a little buzzed already. "No, really, there was something on the site Celia sent me about how production of ouzo started on the Isle of Lesbos. Now you know what I mean by too much like homework. Man, does that stuff go right to your head, or what? You drink it often?"

"Hell, no," Daniel said, leaning back as the food started to arrive. "I just really, really try not to taste it. I do like the way it warms one up, though. Try the calamari first," he said, pointing to a dish of breaded and

fried... something. "With this sauce to dip it in."

"Yeah. Warm," I agreed, looking over the calamari. All that was left of the ouzo was a really nice toasty feeling. Even the little buzz was wearing off fast. I reached for a piece and dipped it in the sauce, then popped the thing in my mouth. "A little chewy," I said, mulling it over. "But really good."

Daniel nodded, helping himself to some as well. "Yeah, it is. I suspect it's because it's pure muscle, but I honestly know nothing about squid. I just eat it."

Squid. Oh, God. The ouzo buzz pushed me a long way toward not caring, though, because I tried another piece. Well, at least it was dead squid. "Yeah, me neither," I said, pretending that I knew that calamari was squid. I pushed the images of tentacles out of my mind as I chewed. It was pretty darn good, actually. "Squid. Huh."

"Yep." Daniel's eyes sparkled at me. "There's nothing fancy in the sauce. Just cucumber, yogurt, and a few other things."

"It's really good." It was. It was squid, but it was good. I couldn't wait to tell Celia that I ate squid. It was a far cry from my usual turkey sandwich. "So, what's this other stuff?"

"Well," Daniel said, pointing. "That's lamb with more of the same sauce and some veggies. Wrap it in the pita, like a sandwich. And the green thing is rice wrapped in grape leaves. And the Moussaka is like Shepherd's pie, with eggplant." Daniel beamed at me. "There is no way in hell we'll eat all this."

"You can ask for a doggie bag and feed me leftovers for breakfast." I glanced up at Daniel as I picked up a grape leaf thing. "Well, not for breakfast because, well, you know what I mean."

"Yeah, that whole... turning into a pumpkin thing," Daniel said smoothly. "I really don't look great in orange. Trust me."

"I don't look that great in red, but I seem to wear it a lot," I answered smiling. It was sweet of him to let my blunder go. The more I knew about Daniel, the more I liked. I took a bite of the grape leaf. It was delicious. "Mmm. Yummy. I just might be a Greek food convert."

"I told you," he said, beaming at me. "It's good stuff. And you'll be ordering Greek salads all the time now. But if you want the best in town, come here. I think they're magic in the kitchen. Even their olives are better than anyone else's."

"So noted." I reached for the lamb, which I knew I was going to like, and I was right. I was starting to run out of small talk, however, and since I wasn't supposed to know Daniel as well as I did, all I could do really was chew and smile at him. I suddenly wished I watched sports or played the stock market or something, just to have something non-personal to discuss. "Olives are good."

Daniel nodded and ate, washing his lamb down with water. "So," he said, reaching for the moussaka, "How did you get into law enforcement, originally? Did you always want to be with the police when you were growing up? I wanted to be a rock star."

"You would have been a fabulous rock star." I smiled, thankful for the question. "Well, I originally wanted to be a fireman like my dad was, but when I found out that firemen actually had to do things like walk into burning buildings I decided that wasn't for me."

"Seriously, the actual fighting fire part always threw me off, too. Although I do like the trucks." Daniel

smiled and nodded, then winked as well. "The uniforms are good, too."

"Hey! Cop uniforms are pretty hot also, you know. Not that I wear one anymore, but I was hot in mine. The fire trucks are cooler than the squad cars." I sighed. "Oh, well. But I got to play with guns, which at first I thought was pretty cool."

"But not later?" Daniel asked curiously.

I was about to tell him that getting shot kind of takes the fun out of guns when his phone rang.

"Sorry about that," he said, pulling it from his pocket. "I thought I'd turned it off." He glanced at the display and his eyes widened. "Shit," he breathed. Then he smiled tensely at me and stood up. "Sorry, I have to take this. I'll be right back."

"No problem," I told him. I didn't need him to tell me who was on the phone. His eyes practically had "Janet" written in neon in them. I watched the tension creep back into his shoulders as he walked toward the lobby. I picked a little at the calamari while he was gone and sipped my water, waiting for him to return.

He was gone for a while, long enough that I glanced back toward the lobby to see if he'd left. Which was silly, given that he'd left his jacket over his chair, and I didn't actually think he was the kind of man to just leave in the middle of a dinner date, clandestine or otherwise. I couldn't see him, however, so I contented myself with finishing off the squid, reasonably certain that the mood had been seriously damaged, if not killed completely.

When Daniel came back his face was carefully neutral. "I'm afraid I have to leave," he said, standing next to the table. "I'm sorry, Shane. That pumpkin thing." To give him credit, he did look miserable, one hand reaching for his jacket. "Dinner has been taken care of. I apologize. This isn't how I wanted the night to end."

I stood as well, disappointed, but not really surprised. "It's okay, Daniel. I understand," I said. I offered my hand, lame as that was. "Thank you for dinner, I loved it."

Daniel took my hand, but didn't shake it; he merely held it, a single point of contact that I needed. Maybe he needed it, too. "Will I get another chance?" he asked softly. "Or have I yet again blown it out of the water?"

He looked so tired in that moment; tired of hiding or tired of Janet, I'm not sure it mattered. Just tired.

"You have yet to blow anything, unfortunately," I said, giving him as wicked a grin as I could manage. "So I'd better give you another chance." I squeezed his hand and then covered it with my free one. "Don't sweat it, okay? Call me."

He smiled back, seeming both grateful and willing to make an attempt to match my efforts to end on a better note. "I will," he promised. "Call and blow. Good night, Shane." He leaned forward and quickly kissed me, just the merest flash of his mouth on mine, then he was gone, leaving quickly and not looking back.

I stood there for a moment, blinking like a school boy who'd just been smooched by a girl for the first time. That was kind of how it felt, too. I licked my lips to see if I could get a taste of him and grinned like a fool, feeling far less disappointed for the quick but earnest kiss he'd given me, despite the public atmosphere.

This time, I knew he would call. This time, I knew without a doubt that this was about more than just sex for him. I pulled on my jacket and left the restaurant far more slowly, strolling to my car in a good mood despite the abrupt end to our evening.

Chapter Twelve

I spent Saturday cleaning my apartment. It was a good distraction, and also hadn't been done in, well, a long time, and I figured since I'd decided I wasn't going to tail Daniel anymore, I didn't have anything better to do.

He didn't call, so by dinner time my kitchen was sparkly, my bathroom was shiny, and my floors were spotless. I'd taken out the garbage, re-organized my hall closet, and I'd started to clean out my sock drawer when I ran out of steam. Just as well, because the rest of it I could justify as necessary, but the sock drawer thing was just lame.

I had dinner, went to a movie, and came home to jerk off in the shower. Daniel was beautiful in my mind; smiling, wet, moaning softly along with me. Yeah, that was good.

I slept most of Sunday morning, not getting up until after noon. I didn't recognize the place at first, it was so clean. Smiling, I decided to tell my mother that night at our regular Sunday dinner to get a pat on the back.

"So, I cleaned my apartment, Mom."

"It's about time," she said with a snort, setting my plate in front of me.

Well, that took the wind out of my sails. It also set the tone for the remainder of dinner. I think the day my mother stops finding reasons that I should just find a nice girl and settle down will be so jarring as to be almost traumatic.

"A nice girl, she could take care of your house. You men don't know the first thing about cleaning."

I explained, again, that it wasn't going to happen.

In an attempt to appease my mother, I spent some time with my dad after dinner. We watched Jeopardy, and he knew about the same number of answers that I did. We watched Wheel of Fortune, and he did far better than I did. Figures. After that he spent some time channel surfing and I was starting to look for an excuse to leave.

Which is when my phone rang. "Excuse me, Dad," I said, knowing he wouldn't even hear me, and hopped up out of my chair. I read the display as I headed out to the front hall, but the number didn't look familiar.

"Hello?" I said, putting the phone to my ear.

"Shane?" That was a voice I'd know anywhere. "It's Daniel. Did I get you at a bad time?"

Really, there was no such thing as a bad time for Daniel to call. I smiled and sat on the cushioned bench in my mother's foyer and leaned back against the wall. "Not at all. You saved me from watching endless reruns on TV Land with my dad. How are you? Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," he said, and I could have sworn he was smiling. "Sunday dinner with your parents?"

"You guessed it. Did you know that isopterpophobic is the fear of termites? I've been treated to an evening of game shows. The food was good, though, as usual."

"And free, that's always a bonus. Speaking of free..." Daniel's voice trailed off, and he cleared his throat. "Are you settled in for the night?"

I answered a bit too enthusiastically. "I am not. Not settled at all. Very unsettled. You?"

Daniel chuckled darkly in my ear. "Unsettled. Free. Can you get away soon?"

"Yes, I can. Um..." I looked around, then stood up and peered down toward the kitchen where my mother was washing dishes. "My place work for you? Or..." I cleared my throat. "That is, what did you have in mind?"

"Your cock in my mouth, to start," Daniel said immediately. "Then your mouth around mine. After that, I figure we'll go with the flow."

My prick leapt to life hearing those words and I felt my face pink up. "That sounds perfect." I rattled off my address. "I need to make a graceful exit here, so, let's say... an hour?" I didn't want to wait five minutes, but I did have to drive home.

"An hour," Daniel agreed. "See you then." He hung up without a goodbye, which I was mostly okay with, given the circumstances I guess. I was okay with being a booty call; I just wasn't sure I liked feeling like one.

"Hey, Mom," I called, heading up the hall to the kitchen. "I gotta run." I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek but she gave me her lemon face.

"Meeting someone?" she asked, as if she hadn't overhead.

I rolled my eyes and hugged her shoulder. "Goodnight, Mom. I'll see you next week."

"But, Shane, it's Sunday!" she called after me as I left the house.

God forgive me, but I was going to get laid by Daniel Brint tonight if it meant an eternity in hell.

I drove home quickly, taking back roads to avoid traffic and pushing the speed limit in places where I knew I could get away with it. My apartment was clean, but I was going to need a few minutes to get things together. I hadn't had anyone over for anything, let alone sex, in a very long time.

I made sure that anything pertaining to Daniel and Janet's case was out of sight, changed the sheets, and took a shower. I made sure there were lube and condoms in the nightstand. I got out a good bottle of wine and a couple of glasses. And then I stressed about what to wear.

I was going for both casual and easy access, if I was totally honest with myself. The honesty thing seemed pretty unavoidable at that point, really. When there was a knock at the door, I wound up answering in sweatpants and a t-shirt.

At least they were clean.

Daniel stood there in jeans and a long sleeved shirt, looking oddly nervous. He took a step in and moved so I

could close the door. "Hi. This is... strange," he said softly, looking around. "I don't think I've ever shown up at a guy's home and not just jumped right in. But then, I've never called a guy again after getting off with him, let alone gone to dinner with him. I'm not sure what that means."

Well, that was direct. I wasn't sure what all of that really meant either, but I liked the sentiment, which made me feel nervous all over again and I figured I shouldn't overanalyze just then. What we needed, well, okay, what *I* needed was a drink. "I, uh, I opened a bottle of wine if you..."

Daniel choked out a laugh. "Wine. I don't really need it for you." He gave me a long look, up and down and smiled. "You've got my attention. But sure, a glass of wine would be nice."

I let him look, laughing with him. "Yeah, well, after that entrance, I think maybe I do. Come on." I led him to the kitchen. "So, everything okay?"

Daniel nodded. "Getting better by the moment. This week was completely messed up. Sadly, my schedule does that to me pretty often. At least I made it to dinner. Finally."

I handed him a glass of wine. "Dinner was great," I said, pouring myself a glass. I took a sip and caught his eye. "If I told you how much I've been looking forward to this, would it help matters any?"

Daniel held the wine glass up and peered at, apparently by reflex. "Honestly, if nothing else, it's nice to be... appreciated. Desired." He looked at me and met my eyes, his gaze intense. "You do want me, don't you? As opposed to the next guy on the list?"

I took a quick sip of my wine and set it down on the counter. "There is no next guy on the list." I needed to touch him. I reached out and slid my hand along Daniel's jaw. "I want you," I said plainly and truthfully. I'd never wanted anyone so much in my life.

Daniel's hand came up to hold mine, the other putting down the glass in his hand. A quick step forward and he was pinning me to the counter, his hips lined up with mine and his hand twisting my wrist. He kissed the palm of my hand, his gaze never leaving mine, then dragged my hand between us. "This is how much I want you," he said, leaning forward. "Two days of being like this."

"That... can't have been comfortable," I said stupidly, but I cupped my hand around the knot in his jeans and he gasped so I guessed that it was all right. "How long do we have?" I asked softly, leaning up to kiss him.

"Hour. Hour and a half, maybe." He kissed me, his tongue plunging into my mouth in a wet kiss that was almost as indecent as it was forceful. He groaned softly and did it again, his hands slipping under my t-shirt and tracing up my abdomen to my chest.

I knew where he was headed so I figured I'd better get his jeans open before I lost control of my fingers. An hour wasn't enough time to do everything I wanted to do, so I would have to make it just long enough to be sure he wanted to come back. I pushed my hand into his jeans and gently tugged his erection free. It was hot and solid in my fingers and as soon as one of us decided we needed air, I wanted a taste.

His fingers found my nipples and teased, rolling them both a tiny bit before he gave the left one a quick pinch. "Like that?" he asked into the kiss, his hips already rocking.

I pulled away and took a deep breath, then leaned forward again and brushed his lips with mine as I exhaled. "Yeah, like that." Just like that. Jesus. "I can't wait to get my mouth around this." I gave his cock a sharp tug.

"Yes," he hissed, pushing into my hand. One hand twisted a nipple again and he pulled back a tiny bit.

"Where's your bed?"

"I keep it in the bedroom, usually." I grinned against his lips and then stepped back long enough to get a good look at him. "Funny, that." I started down the hall backwards, my hand still firmly around his prick.

"I was going to follow you, you know," he said, sounding amused. His arms looped around me and he managed to brush one nipple as we staggered toward the bedroom, feeling each other up.

His body was so close and his hands felt so good that I half-moaned and half-laughed when I answered him. "I didn't want to take any chances." After we squeezed through the bedroom door I let go of him and pulled my shirt off over my head, then reached forward to shove him onto my bed.

He sprawled, laughing, and one hand reached up to snag my waistband. "Come here," he said, managing to make it sound like an invitation. "I want to touch you." This, from a man whose cock was out of his pants and leaving damp marks on his shirt hem.

Still, the invitation was not one I was going to refuse. I crawled up over him and straddled his hips, looking down into eyes as blue as the ocean, and almost as deep. "Anything you want," I told him quite sincerely as I pushed up his shirt. My voice was rougher than I'd expected.

"I want--" Daniel suddenly looked a little confused, like he wasn't exactly sure what he wanted. Then he grinned up at me and tugged my waistband down so my cock fell free. "I want you." He pushed himself up and kissed the center of my chest, his hand curling around my erection.

I kissed him so my gasp and moan were muffled against his lips. In my fantasy life, men said they wanted me and they meant it. In my real life, men would say it and mean it, but only in the moment. I wanted to believe that he was real, which left me worrying over what he really meant. But I didn't worry for long. The man had big hands; big, strong, warm hands and I pushed my cock through his fingers, wanting more. Suddenly his declaration of desire seemed too damn vague. "My mouth? My cock? My ass? What do you want, Daniel? Right now. What do you want?"

I gave him a few seconds to answer, and if he didn't I was going to do whatever I damn well pleased.

He licked his way to one nipple and scraped his teeth over it, his hand tugging slowly. "Want to hear you talk."

That was a little vague, I thought.

"Bite. Bite, please," I ordered politely, wanting it more than anything, and Daniel did. His teeth closed tightly around my nipple and tugged on it, and he did something with his tongue, flicking at it or something, that almost made me come in his fist. "Fuck! Yes!" I gasped and finally got a breath, and then another, and then the dam broke and I started babbling. "Fuck, that feels good. Wanted you as soon as I saw you, Daniel. Oh, God, don't stop." I arched my body and managed to get my fingers around his cock, too.

Daniel didn't stop, his teeth tugging and his tongue lapping at me, his free hand holding onto my hip. He was making noise, panting against my chest and arching with every gasp. In my hand, his cock swelled even harder and got slippery.

"Let me suck you," I said, panting, and it sounded like begging, even to my ears. "Want to taste you, want you to come in my mouth."

"Fuck." Daniel fell back, nodding. "Please. Want that, want your mouth on me. Suck me, do what you

want." His cock was so stiff it was standing right up, shiny at the head and blushing darkly.

I pulled away from his hands reluctantly, but the closer I got to his prick, the more I wanted it. I licked the slick head and down the shaft, breathing in musk and sweat and then I took him into my mouth. I kept it shallow at first, trying to gauge his need, sucking and scrubbing with my tongue. I could hardly believe it was me this time, on the inside, tasting Daniel like I'd seen those other men do. Me, making his body writhe and his hips lift off the bed.

"God," he said, his voice rough and thready. "Shane. Yes. Like that. Just like that." His hips rocked and he dragged out of my mouth and pushed back in, his fingers carding through my hair. "I want this. Want you. Want to make you feel good." He gasped as I tongued the head of his cock and the words vanished, becoming something else that didn't make sense but sounded fine.

That was next, I thought, provided I didn't come just from hearing my name roll off his tongue. I moaned around him and took him deeper, with longer strokes, letting the head of his cock brush the back of my throat. But the more heated he got, the less control I had, or wanted, and finally I ended up letting him fuck my mouth. Jesus, it was hot listening to him moan and beg and feeling his hands tug my hair.

"God, yes," he chanted, his hips lifting and his fingers digging in. "Shane. Yes. Yes. Yes." He was lost, his head tossing and his thighs flexing, and when he froze, I knew it was there, right there. One flick of my tongue under the head of his cock and a long suck and he was coming for me, filling my mouth and moaning my name again.

I swallowed and licked him clean, listening to him gasp and pant, practically soaring on his climax with him. But it made me ache. "Fuck, Daniel," I managed to say without whimpering. I groaned instead and shoved my hand down, wrapping my fingers around my cock and tugging. "So hard. Christ!"

"Come here. Let me," he said between panted breaths. He was still shaking, trembling, and reaching for me. "Please."

I nodded and let go, then crawled up his body again. His lips were swollen looking and pink, and I kissed him hard. "Please," I whispered, and then pushed my tongue past his lips.

His hand held me again, stroking as he sucked on my tongue. "Tell me what you like," he said softly. His thumb rubbed the head of my cock and he asked again. "What do you want?"

I wanted to fuck him, but I wasn't going to last that long. "Harder," I told him. "Like, tighter and... oh, fuck, like that!" I forced my hips to stay still and let Daniel stroke me off. "Good, good. Daniel..." He was so intense about it, watching the space between our bodies, biting his lip, brow furrowed. "Yeah, yes." I was panting harder than he was. "Close."

"Pictures didn't lie," he murmured. His hand got a little tighter and his wrist flexed. "I want this in me. Sometime soon, okay?"

I nodded. "Could have been now, but... no way. Oh, fuck. Daniel!" I tensed up as I came, from my ass to my shoulders. My thighs trembled, I slicked Daniel's chest, and I gulped air. "Fuck. Daniel," I moaned. "Thank you."

He kissed me again, slow and lazy and wet, arms sliding around me. "Thank you," he whispered. "Seems like we fit okay."

"Just okay?" I teased.

"Okay enough that I'm pretty sure I'm going to break my unwritten rules about going back for more." He kissed me gently and looked at me again, his face serious. "This could be a mistake. I won't promise you anything. I can't. I don't even know you, and I'm all mixed up. I have this friend, see? He asked me if I had someone on the side. I said no, and I meant it. I may be cheating on my wife, but I don't want to hurt anyone. Can you get out of the crossfire if you have to, Shane?"

No. I couldn't. At this point, any direction I ran put me in harm's way. But I couldn't tell Daniel that yet. I would have to eventually, but not right now. "You've been honest with me, Daniel. I understand you can't make promises. But I want this. Anything I get caught up in is my own responsibility at this point."

Daniel sighed. "I can't get emotionally involved. I've already crossed one of my lines by talking and not just fucking. Look, this is sounding worse the more I talk -- I can't even tell you that I won't be hooking up with someone else next week. I should go. I'm sorry, Shane."

To his credit, he was telling the truth and he sounded sincere. He also sounded tired and sad and probably a little scared.

I was helpless to stop him if he wanted to go. I couldn't promise him I'd keep his secrets because I wasn't supposed to know what they were. I couldn't ask him to stay, he had to get home to Janet, who I resented more and more with each passing minute. And this was obviously tearing him up inside. That was my fault.

I cleared my throat and sat back, trying to look like it was okay, trying to sound like I understood. "Sure. You want a shower?"

He looked down at himself and made a face. "Yeah, I guess I do. So much for just leaving you in peace. I'm sorry."

I couldn't look at him. "Bathroom is through there. I'll get you a towel." I got up and did just that.

Daniel didn't take very long in the shower and he dressed quickly, too. I sat and listened to the water and then the sounds of him getting presentable, and hated every minute of it. He came out and stood there, looking at me, his hair damp and unruly.

"Shane," he said, then stopped. The polish had worn off the politician and he looked vulnerable.

I felt horrible for him and sorry for myself. "You probably won't believe me when I tell you this, but I understand why you feel like you need to go. I respect that you have a relationship and a life you want to protect, Daniel. I don't have any business asking anything from you that you can't give, emotionally or otherwise. It would be nice, but I get that this can't happen."

"I." Daniel stared at me for a long moment and then crossed to me with three long strides. "I'm sorry it can't. Believe me." Then he kissed me, hard and raw with one hand tangled in my hair, holding me close enough that I could feel his heart pounding in his chest.

I wanted that kiss at first and met it with equal longing. But after a few moments I realized it was just going to make this so much harder. I put my hands on his chest and shoved him away. "I know you're sorry. But you can't have it both ways, Daniel."

He pulled back, letting me push him, and nodded. His breath was short and ragged, and he kept nodding. "You're right. I'm sorry. God." He looked at me and backed away, toward the door. "Good bye, Shane. Thank you." He opened the door, still looking at me, and finally left, the door quiet as he pulled it closed.

"Bye, Daniel," I whispered to the closing door.

I felt like I'd had the wind knocked out of me. I shouldn't have wanted him, I shouldn't have had him, but I did and now that he'd slipped from my fingers I felt stunned, dizzy, and more alone in that moment than I had in years.

I didn't bother fighting the emotions this time. That bottle of wine in the kitchen was just the beginning of the mess I proceeded to make of myself in the next few hours.

I wasn't sure exactly when the phone started ringing, but it did and it didn't stop. At all. It just rang and rang and rang and finally I had to pick up just to stop the racket.

"What?"

There was a long pause. "Do you need booze or an ambulance? I'm on my way and can make a stop."

"Celia, don't. No. I'm fine." I sighed and hung up the phone. When I drink like this it's ugly. I do unmanly things like cry and snivel and feel sorry for myself. I throw things. I have a tendency to repeat myself, or babble. And I don't stop until I pass out. I didn't want her to see it.

Of course, she'd seen it before and I knew she'd show up anyway. Pushy dyke. It was just a matter of when and what she'd find when she got to my place. I just hoped she stopped at the liquor store first.

It didn't matter to me what time it was. It didn't matter to me that the bedroom still smelled like sex, and like him. And so did I. And when Celia did finally arrive, I didn't care that I was only in my boxers and I didn't feel like getting up to get the door.

She let herself in, either with a key I didn't give her or by picking the lock, and closed the door with her foot. Her arms were full of Chinese takeout and a bag that rattled. "Got Jim, Jack, and tequila. What do you want?" she said, walking through to the kitchen.

"Jim. Neat. And I told you to stay home." I couldn't tell if I was slurring yet.

"Yeah, yeah, and one of these days I'll listen." I heard her pouring and getting out ice, then rummaging for cutlery. Celia had never figured out chopsticks. She brought me food and drink and made herself at home on my living room floor, just like I knew she would. "Drink up, Boss," she said, giving me a glass.

What can I say? I did.

"You'll be happy to know that it's over," I said. The last vestiges of sobriety pointed out that I sounded pathetic, but Jim and I told those brain cells to shut up. "Over, over."

"Is it?" she asked mildly, diving into her chow mien. "Says you or him?"

"How did you get in here, anyway?"

"I opened the door," she said, far too easily. "So? What happened after the sex?"

"I could bring you up on charges. Breaking and entering, serving alcohol to a complete moron..." I sat up in my chair. "I don't need him anyway. I deserve someone who is emotionally available to me. Right? That's what this book says. So, open and shut case. Done. Over." I chucked the book, which up to this point I had

been sitting on, to the floor.

"What the hell are you reading?" Celia set down her food and went after the book. "God, Shane. Relationships aren't out of books. They're out of life."

"I found stuff out for you. You got your pen handy? Check this out." I shifted in my chair. "He loved Janet when he married her. He used to be bi. He actually feels bad about not loving her anymore. Or... he still loves her, sorta, but he feels bad that their marriage is a sham. Wow, right? So he says he can't make promises, he can't get emotionally involved and he's sorry. He's really, really sorry. Wow. So sorry." I swallowed down the rest of my drink. "Did you buy a bottle or just a glass?"

"Bottle. So, he's sorry. About hurting her, about hurting you. Sounds like he's a good guy in a bad place." Celia left the book and went back to her food. "What are you going to do?"

"I have to respect him. I'd rather get pissed off and throw something, but hey, whadayaknow? This is my own damn fault. Shane did this to himself. Good job, Shane. I don't know what I am going to do. Maybe Jim will tell me." I got up to go get the bottle, staggered a few steps, and then got it together.

"Jim is a short term thing," she pointed out. "Long term, we have a client and you have a... situation."

Yeah, I had a situation. I went into the kitchen and came back with the bottle, but not the glass. "I could call Janet, tell her I'm off the case and waive the fee on the pretense that no findings means she doesn't have to pay me anything. But you know what she'll do, she'll hire someone else. And that someone will be smarter and greedier than me and turn Daniel's cheating, homosexual ass in."

"Right. And that would be bad. We could falsify a report and get her off his case." Celia shrugged and move on to egg rolls. "Or. You know. The other option."

"Is the other option an option? And which other option are you talking about? There's the tell Daniel about the wife and risk him thinking I'm a lying sack of shit, which I am, option; there's the hang onto the case and put the wife off as long as I can and hope he changes his mind option; and there's the send the pictures off to him anonymously to snitch on Janet and hope he never finds out I was the one that took them option. Which one would you be referring to?" I shook my head. "Ow. That hurt. Remind me not to think so hard when I'm drunk."

"Leave the thinking to me, Shane," she said, not unkindly. "I was referring to the one where you tell him that Janet's got a PI on his tail, that it's you, and that you're in love with him."

"Oh. The total honesty option." I took a huge swig from the bottle. So huge that I choked on it and coughed for ages. Somewhere in the middle of my coughing fit, I choked out, "No."

"Shane." Celia took the bottle from me and sat really close, close enough that I could smell jasmine and gardenias. "Why not?"

"You smell pretty," I said while I caught my breath.

"Thank you. Now, why won't you tell him the truth? He might be pleased that someone cared enough to look out for him."

"Two reasons." I shifted so I could look at her. "One, um... where was I? Oh, yeah. One. One, I just sucked him off in there under the guise of someone that actually wanted him, and if I tell him about Janet he'll think that was all a lie. And two, and two is really, like, way more important than one, two... two... how does that

make Daniel's life better?"

"He'll do some damage control, maybe. Stop hooking up all the time. Maybe..." She took a deep breath. "Maybe get his needs fulfilled by one person. Which might be easier."

"Maybe. Or maybe he'll be hurt by her, by me... and never trust anyone again. Maybe he'll get even more self-destructive and hook up with the wrong people. Maybe... maybe... maybe he won't want me anymore, Celia. Maybe I'll take that risk and you and I will end up right back here with Jack instead of Jim." I hated lies. I had never told so many of them as I had to around and about Daniel. And one conversation could -- would -- unravel the whole thing. It could ruin me and Daniel, leave Celia humiliated, leave Janet vindicated. It was hard to know which plug to pull.

"You're not thinking clearly," Celia said, apparently thinking that stating the obvious was the best course of action. "All right then. Let's both get drunk and talk it all out and then in the morning we can discuss it like rational people. You need to vent, Shane. All of it. This is the part where you get down and dirty with your psyche. Plus, if I'm drunk, too, I might fill you in on my own love life."

"Jeeze, a guy gets drunk and you tell him he's not thinking clearly. What is this world coming to?" I bumped shoulders with Celia.

"The world is running its course. Gay guy, lesbian, Jack, and Jim. Sounds right to me. Okay, you first. Talk to me about Daniel and how you feel." She peered at me over her glasses and then cracked up. "Feel free to demonstrate. Or get some pants on."

"Oh, damn." I stood up again and staggered into the bedroom. When I returned I had washed my face and hands and put a clean pair of sweats and a t-shirt on. "You have now seen my cock more than most of my former lovers have. Including Daniel. Congratulations." I sat down on the floor this time and picked at Celia's Chinese food, but I changed my mind when I imagined it coming back up a few hours later.

"So Daniel and I had dinner on Friday night like we'd planned, right? And it was great. We connected, we had things to talk about, we even held hands for a little while. I let him order for me, and he seemed to really like telling me about what I was eating and everything. It was just... relaxing. Easy. Until his damn phone rang." I sighed, remembering how I felt in that moment. "It was Cruella, and he disappeared for a while to talk to her. When he came back he was in a hurry and full of apologies, and he paid the tab and took off."

"What?"

I looked at Celia. She looked as disappointed as I'd felt. "Yeah. So no sex, sorry."

"Damn."

"He kissed me goodnight, though. It was quick, but it was his idea and it was in a public place." I smiled. I couldn't help it. "It was the most amazing, romantic, beautiful thing."

Celia stared at me. "You are such a dork," she told me, as if she'd only just realized it then, which I found impossible to believe. She continued to stare at me, apparently waiting for me to go on. "So...?"

"Oh. So, yeah. So I knew he would get in touch as soon as he could and that was tonight, after dinner at Mom's. He called after Wheel of Fortune and gave me an excuse to come home." I moved back into my chair. "I couldn't believe he was actually standing on my doorstep. He asked me if I really wanted him, or if he was just the next guy in line. He wanted me to want him, Celia."

"Hmm. So, he's lonely. And sad and reaching out. But he knows it's a dead end if he stays married and he has to stay married if he's going to keep his career on track. And his career will be shot to shit if he comes out while married. Possibly even just because he's gay." Celia looked thoughtful for a long moment. "You know, I feel sorry for him."

"I feel terrible for him. I meant it when I told him that I respect his needs, but it's not the way he wants to live. Not at all. He's just empty right now. And tired, God, he looked... weary."

"How was he in bed? I mean... did you connect?"

"We were awesome in bed together. Nothing was awkward, neither of us was timid, we both were vocal enough to get what we needed." I sighed. I was sobering up, that wasn't good. "He needs someone that will make him feel wanted, needed, someone that loves him. I was ready to be that, do that, I was right there, Celia."

"Oh, Shane." She looked at me with big, sad eyes. "You really do love him, don't you?"

Oooh. The million dollar question. This called for sarcasm. "You see, I've turned you into a decent investigator after all. Your powers of deduction are astounding."

"Don't be a bastard," she said mildly. "Okay, you can't give him up. I won't let you. Thus, we have to get him away from his wife and keep him in his position. I'll get on it in the morning while you're getting cleaned up and buying new clothes."

"New clothes?" I raised an eyebrow. Or at least I tried.

"I'm hardly going to let you court him with your current wardrobe."

"Celia, are you forgetting the part about how I've been lying to him? And the bit about how we have a client to satisfy? Oh, and let's not forget there's an election coming up." I groaned. "How did this get so complicated?"

"That's what I'm saying. You need every advantage, and we'll start with you looking good. Leave the wife to me." She had a gleam in her eye that made me distinctly nervous.

"Okay, so we're going shopping. And then what should I do? Tell him? Tell him everything?" That idea tied a knot in my stomach.

"Perhaps not tomorrow. First, he has to fall in love with you." She tilted her head. "Well, let's just leave it at 'let Celia work on the wife first, then tell him.'"

"You're scaring me, you know."

"You don't need to be scared." She smiled brightly at me and went to the kitchen. When she came back she had a fifth of tequila in her hand and a bowl with lime wedges.

"Where's the salt?"

"I'll tell you, but only if you tell me about your weekend. It will cheer me up."

"Salt first. Then details."

I got up and retrieved the saltshaker. "You drive a hard bargain, sister." I sat down next to her. "Lick," I said,

indicating the back of her hand.

Celia dutifully licked and held her hand out to me. "Her name is Susan and she's our hacker."

I salted her hand and took a lime wedge out of the bowl for her. "You're screwing our hacker? Can't you get us a discount? She should come cheap."

"But she's not. She's a lady." Celia licked the salt off, threw back a mouthful of tequila, and bit into the lime. "Damn!"

"Keep talking." I took her hand and salted it again.

"Well, after our little foray into Daniel's logs on that site, we talked for a couple of hours. Decided to go dancing last Saturday." She licked the salt again and reached for the bottle. "Which is a polite way of saying we made out at the office and decided to go dancing."

"You made out at the office? Wait, you made a date to go dancing on Saturday, so what was your date last Friday night?" I was almost afraid to ask.

"Well." Celia drank and bit again, shaking her head when she was done. "She called me to find out if we'd got the right guy. I said yes; she asked me out to dinner. I said yes. Then I suggested I make breakfast on Saturday."

I laughed. "You are so cool I'm gonna need a parka in a minute." Grinning, I reached over and picked up my bottle again. "So how was the time between dinner and breakfast? When are you seeing her again?"

Celia, bless her, flopped on the couch next to me with her bottle in hand. "Friday night was... not a lot of sleeping. Saturday there was sleeping, in that we took a lot of naps." The pink on her cheeks could have been from the booze, but I didn't think so.

I kicked back and put my feet up on the hassock. "So. It's been a week. How do you feel about her?"

"She's hot. Smart. Dances like she has sex." Celia punctuated her affections with a swig from her bottle.

"All hips and grind and panting?" I teased. It was obvious she really liked this woman.

"Uh-huh. Ohhh, yeah." Celia swallowed again, her eyes starting to glaze over. "Like that. She has the most perfect breasts I've ever seen."

"Cool. Daniel's cock hooks a little to the left when it's hard." I sighed and swallowed from my own bottle.

"Penises are funny." She leaned into me. "Susan says my name when she comes. She twitches and flexes, and she's so warm. Her hair smells like sunshine."

"Daniel said mine, too," I whispered in her ear. "And he has huge hands, oh, my God. He looks twenty when he smiles."

Celia nodded slowly. "He's pretty. Did you kiss him?"

"Oh, yes. Wow. The fireworks thing is a myth, did you know that? It was more like a symphony. And his lips were soft and he sucked on my tongue. God. I better stop. I'll get hard." I laughed and swigged from Jimmy-boy again. "Oh, maybe I'm too drunk to get hard?"

"I dunno, are you?" She reached down and cupped me. "You never get it up for me. Penises. Funny things."

I looked down at her hand. "Don't take it personally, you're missing some key plumbing."

"Yeah, that's what I told your mom." She drank again and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "You, too, you know. I mean, your ass is all right, but you're so... not a girl. Susan's a girl. Susan's... hot."

"I can't wait to meet her. And Mom will be thrilled." I poked her. "I gotta pee."

"Your mother will be thrilled, and you may possibly meet her, but there is no way your mom will. And if you have to pee, then pee. I'm not stopping you." She leaned a bit more, though, almost in my lap.

"Yeah, you kind of are." I swallowed. "You kind of really are."

"So go later. What was the best part?"

"The best part was... oh, I had his dick in my hand and he bit my nipple and he did this thing with his tongue... Jesus, I thought I was going to come and my dick was still in my pants, no lie." I was going to get hard. Suddenly I didn't have to pee anymore. I took another swig of my bottle, hoping to hold it off.

"Wow." Celia sounded suitably impressed. "That's hot."

"It was. Is. And also? He talks a lot. Well, babbles. I barely understood him after a while." I adjusted myself, not really realizing my prick was two inches from Celia's head. But I don't think she even noticed.

"You talk," Celia informed me. "Did you, like, have a conversation going on, or was it a lot of sex words? I like sex words. Susan whispers. It's really sexy."

"It started as a conversation about sex and then it dissolved into sex words. Lots of sex words. 'Fuck,' and 'oh, God,' and 'yes' and 'please.' In various combinations." I stood up and let her head fall into the couch cushions. I was getting stiff despite the liquor and needed a few moments alone to cool off. "And one of these days you're going to tell me how you know what I'm like in bed."

"Ha, that's what you think," she said, sprawling on my couch. "I will never tell, not even full of booze. Don't take too long in there, and if you jerk off remember to use the spray thingy, okay?"

"It's my bathroom. If I want it to stink like come from a bitter, lonely, horny old man, it will." I turned and sulked off to the master bathroom. Impulsively, on my way past my dresser, I scooped up my Treo and took it with me. I guess I wanted to see if he'd sent me anything. He hadn't, of course. I don't know why I thought he might.

But I was a sorry drunk and I had managed to lose enough inhibition that I did send one to him. "*Need you,*" it said. "*Tell me we can talk. Just talk. Soon. Public place, private place, your car, mine? Anywhere. Moment's notice. Call me. Please.*"

And then I closed my eyes, imagined Daniel's smile and the sounds he made when he came and treated myself to a moment of blissful fantasy.

Followed by cleaning up, using the "spray stuff," and going back out to find Celia.

She was still sprawled on the couch, looking pretty wrecked. "Shane," she said looking at the ceiling. "I

think I'm drunk. I'm staying over."

As if I would have let her drive anywhere. I smiled at her and reached down to slip a piece of her hair out of her eyes. She really was a beautiful woman, even wrecked and lovesick. "My bed alone, or my bed with me. Those are your options." I wasn't going to make the poor girl sleep on my couch.

"Bed. Help me up. One good thing about being best friends with a gay guy is the middle of the night no-pressure snuggles."

I laughed and scooped her up and we giggled at her threats about not dropping her all the way to the bedroom, which is when I remembered what state it was in. "Oh, nuts. Hang on," I stammered and dove for the dirty sheets while she snickered and smirked and leaned on the wall. I cracked a window next, and in a few minutes had the bed made up fresh. "Sorry about that."

"Boys are messy," she said with her nose in the air. "Girls smell better, too. Got a t-shirt I can borrow?"

"Yep, it might even be clean." I shooed her over to the bed and pulled one out, along with a pair of jersey-knit boxers. "Will that do?" I asked.

"Perfectly," she said, holding onto the wall with one hand. "Turn around." Without waiting, she let go of the wall and lifted off her top, showing off damn near perfect breasts of her own in a rather nice black bra.

I decided she'd seen enough of my cock that I got this look for free, and didn't turn around. "Love the bra," I said smoothly, making my way around to the other side of the bed.

"Thanks, it's new." The pants followed and, not surprisingly, I was looking at a matched set of undies.

"Oh, nice ass," I commented, as I was just drunk enough to check that out, too.

"You know, that's what Susan said." She grinned at me and pulled on the t-shirt and did a weird girl thing that ended with the bra coming off and out the bottom of the shirt.

I got into bed. "Susan has good taste," I grinned at her. "Seriously, if this is a Thing, I need to meet her. At least long enough to tell her that if she breaks your heart I'll break her face." I laughed to soften the words so that Celia knew that I was joking, but to some extent, I wasn't, and I hoped she knew that, too. I never had a sister or a girl friend until I met Celia, and in very little time I found that I had both. "Get in, you lush. You're going to have a headache tomorrow. Maybe your boss will give you the day off. Maybe he'll take the day off himself."

"I have work to do. My boss' boyfriend needs freeing from his evil wife." She crawled into bed and molded herself to me. "Goodnight, Shane. You owe me coffee."

"Night, sweetheart. You owe me Daniel." I chuckled and shut off the light.

"Not a problem," she assured me, just before she started to snore softly in my ear.

Chapter Thirteen

As it turned out, neither of us went into the office until after lunch. I woke up spooned around Celia and slipped into the shower. Then I made her coffee and spiked it for her.

"Hair of the dog," I said as I handed her the mug. She was blinking slowly and muttered something, but took the cup and drank it while I dressed. I'm lucky in that I don't get much of a hangover, even when I've gone to bed completely sodden. A couple of cups of coffee and I'm good to go.

One spiked cup seemed to do the trick for Celia and she said, "Good morning," as she got out of bed and shuffled into my bathroom. She came out a new woman; showered and smiling. "Gotta run. Lunch date, remember?"

"It's that late?"

"Almost noon. I need to run home and change."

Damn. I'd had no idea. I thanked Celia for her company and kissed her as she was heading out the door, then went into the kitchen and poured myself another cup of coffee.

I hadn't been tailing Daniel all that long. How had I fallen so hard? Was there really a way out of this mess I'd gotten myself into? Did I deserve a way out? I wasn't proud of the things I'd done; watching Daniel with other men, tailing him more to satisfy my own curiosity than my client's. How was he ever going to be okay with that?

I was counting on Celia more than I really wanted to.

I was putting the bottles away and throwing out the remains of Celia's Chinese feast when my Treo chimed at me from the living room. I went out and picked it up, my stomach in a knot. I'd forgotten I'd sent a message. A drunken one. To Daniel.

The words were short, and there weren't many of them. *"I think I need you, too. So no. I'm sorry."*

I felt worse for Daniel than myself as I read his message for the fourth time. I was trying to be optimistic and hanging onto the idea that we might at least be able to see each other on the QT despite his marriage. Daniel wasn't even letting himself entertain the possibility. Or maybe he had and decided he couldn't handle it, or handle the responsibility, or handle the spin if it came to that. Whatever it was, I could read between those very short lines.

He was alone, and in pain.

Quickly, I forwarded the message to Celia with a note that read, *"Sent him a drunken 'I need you' last night. This was his reply. Help?"* Then I replied to Daniel. *"Door is always open,"* I said simply, and sent it off.

Then it was time to get my act together and figure out where to go from here. I thought for a moment about going to the office, but what would I do there? I assumed Daniel was at work today, but I didn't know if I

ought to earn my keep and tail him despite my assertion that nothing new would come of invading his privacy further, or just leave the poor guy alone. The answer in the end was simple. Client be damned, I wanted to know what Daniel was doing.

I grabbed my keys and headed for my truck. I'd just unlocked the door and wasn't even in it when my phone rang. According to the display, it was Celia's cell. "That was fast," I said to her as I got in the truck.

"Yeah, well. I owe you for not being fast enough to stop you from sending that message last night. Listen, I'm with Tracey -- the noodles here are amazing, by the way -- and I wanted to give you the heads up. There's a fair bit of background on what a good lawyer Janet was and how she schmoozed with the best of them, which is all a big pile of blah blah blah. But there are also some rumors about her being really intense about wanting her husband in the governor's office and how she's set her life up to be the woman behind the power. Also, there's this guy she spends a lot of time with. They're on three committees together and have lunch about twice a week. I want to look at that, too."

"Oh, Celia, you're a peach. You're a woman after my own snooping, nosy, conspiratorial little heart. I love you," I told her, grinning. "And I will now hope and pray that this other guy is some seriously heavy blackmail material."

"Yeah, really," Celia said with a snort. "Hey, can I watch you nail her with it? Er, after I finish gathering it all and making it look pretty?"

I laughed. "Yes, yes you may. In fact, you can do it and I'll watch if it makes your heart happy, 'partner.'"

Celia squealed so loudly I had to hold the phone away from my ear until she was done. "I love you!" she said happily. "Okay, Boss. I'm on it. Call me later. I'll be at the office. I might call Susan in to take a look and see if we can access anything Janet has on the internet, too."

"Thank you so much, Celia. I know you know what this means to me. No percentages this time, if we make a fee off Mrs. Brint, half of it is yours. Plus a vacation with Susan somewhere warm with umbrella drinks."

There was a long pause and then Celia said, "Aw, Shane. I'd do this one for free. But I'll take you up on the umbrella drinks. And Susan. Can she be naked?"

"Yep. And horny, too." I grinned even though she couldn't see it.

"Okay, great, I have work to do, bye!" she rattled off and then disconnected. She sounded highly motivated, really.

Despite the nagging voice that was telling me I should back off, I was feeling rather motivated myself as I pulled into my usual hiding spot in the parking garage of Daniel's building. I got out my equipment and set myself up to listen in on his phones. I found out he had a meeting that night, something official and business-related. And he had a couple of appointments in the afternoon. But when Janet called to see about dinner in between, he blew her off. Nicely, of course, but he didn't budge when she complained that they hadn't eaten a meal together in too long.

Part of me wanted to tail Janet that night while he was in his meeting, and maybe even tomorrow while Daniel was out of town. I didn't need a reason, I could be my own client. I wasn't making any moves, though, without Celia's permission and so I resolved to call her later for an update and to see what she thought.

Daniel left his office at dinner, but only walked a block away to have a quick meal. He went alone and

stayed that way, writing notes on a pad while he ate. He had a soup and salad combo, and aside from liking seeing him, I was bored to tears.

He went back to his office after that, and the next I saw of him he was heading off to another municipal building for his meeting. I left him to it and drove away, debating stopping by the office or calling there to talk to Celia.

Then I remembered I was bored and the idea of going home and keeping my own company made me ill. I briefly considered drowning my sorrows with a quick trick from one of the clubs, but to be truthful, I had never enjoyed the whole pick-up thing, even when I was younger and actually doing it regularly.

The office lights were still on when I arrived and I was pleased that I hadn't missed her. It was a bit past her usual hour, but maybe she had dug up something good. I walked up the stairs and down the hall, not bothering to knock as I went in.

Who knocks at their own office door?

Clearly, Celia was going to need reminders about something. Like, how to lock the door, and why it's not a good idea to use her boss' desk for making out. Not that there were naked women on my desk or anything; I probably got there before that.

But it was pretty funny to see a woman jump about three feet back and Celia suddenly turn bright red and try to look casual while sitting on my desk with her blouse untucked.

"Oh, hell. Sorry," I said, and walked right back out again, closing the office door behind me. I wasn't embarrassed, and if it had been Celia in her underwear I might have told her to put clothes on and walked in anyway. But Susan was one of those unknown factors, and she was important enough to Celia that I decided to let her smooth it over. I could hear soft voices, what might have been giggling behind the door, and some shuffling around.

The door opened and Celia beckoned me in, her face still pink. "Come on in. Um. Sorry." She stepped back and let me in, then locked the door behind me. I had a thought about barn doors and horses, but kept it to myself.

The other woman, Susan I assumed, was sitting at Celia's desk, looking at her monitor. There was a lot more equipment there than usual and wires all over the place. She looked up at me and winked. "Hey. You must be Shane. Thanks for signing the checks."

I laughed and let the whole incident go. The less said about it, the better, if Celia was ever going to cool off. "You're welcome. Sorry they're not always on time. Look at all of this stuff..." My geeky little fingers itched to play and touch and figure out how things worked, but they weren't my toys so I stayed out of the sandbox and leaned over Susan's shoulder instead. Still, all the techno-baubles were cool.

"These are my babies," Susan said with a grin. "And you help me pay for 'em." She clicked around a bit and brought up a flowchart that meant nothing to me. "We're trying to find your client in a few places. Lucky for us, she uses one of those online calendar things, so she can share information with other people on her committees. Makes her easy to find."

Celia pulled up a chair and nodded, watching Susan rather than the screen. I nudged her foot gently with mine and when she looked over, I smiled and winked at her, and mouthed the word "hot."

"Stop," she mouthed back at me, but she was grinning. Then she pointed at the equipment and said, "She

doesn't seem to live online like Daniel does, but she does get out a lot. Those lunches I told you about are scheduled in one-hour blocks, same place every time, and pretty public. It's pretty clear that they're legit. But she never has anything on for the hour after them, and that guy I told you about blocks out two hours for them. Interesting, no?"

Let this be a lesson to you: never, *ever* mess with a woman on a mission. And under no circumstances should you get in the way of two. Damn. "Really?" I asked, sounding every bit as shocked and impressed as I actually was. "You know who he is? You have a name? You already hacked into his calendar? Good God, you women work fast. I'd marry both of you but polygamy is illegal."

Susan laughed, but Celia gave me one of her patented looks. "Slow down, Shane. One question at a time, okay? Yes, we have his name. Yes, we have his calendar. Well, the parts of it that he posts online, anyway. And no, you would not marry us, because you have icky boy parts and we'd object."

Susan eyed me up and down and winked. I wasn't sure how to take that.

"Celia never complained about my boy parts before," I said indignantly, and moved over to the coffee pot. I stopped part way there. "But that's not... forget that. What's his name?"

"Derrick Slater," Celia said, grinning. "Your parts aren't icky. I take it back. Impressive is a good word, actually. Just... boy. Sorry."

I poured myself some coffee, trying to think if the name was at all familiar. It wasn't. "'S okay, boobs are cool, but the other stuff doesn't really do it for me, either. Wait. Damn it, Celia. Stop that. When is their next meeting?"

Celia's grin blossomed wider and Susan snickered before clicking away with her mouse. "Lunch tomorrow, actually. But it's with a lot of other people, and she has another meeting at three." Susan shrugged one shoulder and I eyed Celia watching her. Disgraceful, all that drool.

"Celia, get me a time and place. I think I should be watching, don't you?"

"Why, yes. Yes, I think you should," Celia said, leaning across Susan to get to her notepad. "Excuse me," she said insincerely.

"Of course." Susan was just as insincere. It was a good thing I'd shown up when I did, really.

"You know, you two really don't need to be working so late. I mean, you're welcome to get off -- or, I mean, get a room -- that is, go home whenever you like." I grinned and sat behind my desk, putting my feet up and sipping my coffee. I did my best to look completely innocent, which I'm told usually translates into utterly disrespectful.

"I get to leave early!" Celia said brightly, completely ignoring me otherwise. Her eyes seemed stuck on Susan, and more specifically on Susan's mouth. Celia scrawled something on her notepad and almost threw it at me as she grabbed Susan's hand. "See you tomorrow, Boss."

It was all I could do not to laugh out loud. "See you. If you need me, I'll be here for a while, my desk is a mess."

"And uncomfortable," Susan said as Celia dragged her out.

I sighed and looked around the office, which did look a bit like a bomb had hit it. I certainly didn't have any

plans for the evening so I thought for a minute that I'd tidy up, maybe even dust, but I was afraid that made me even more pathetic than I'd feared. I leaned over and punched up Daniel's archive on my laptop, intending to add the meeting to my log, but ended up looking through my pictures.

At some point, and I really couldn't say when, my hand pushed into my lap. Once I realized it was there and fondling a really nice erection, I figured there wasn't any point in fighting it. I maximized the picture I was looking at to full-screen and leaned back in my chair.

Daniel's body was the main focus of the picture, his cock hard, his chest heaving, and his head thrown back as he was about to come. I popped open my pants, pulled my cock out of my boxers, and as I stared at Daniel, perusing every inch of his exposed skin, I stroked myself until my cock was solid and heavy in my fingers.

I've never thought I was particularly good looking, my body is decidedly average, but I've always liked my dick. Yeah, it's bigger than most, especially when it's hard, and in the world of gay sex, that had always worked wonders in my favor. But I liked the feel of it in my own hand, too, the weight, the hot, smooth skin, and the way that it responded to my touch, getting harder and pinker and leaking in response. As the stark fluorescent lighting of the office began to disappear and my world narrowed to just me and Daniel's naked body, it was easy to imagine that was me in his ass, my own hips pumping and sinking deep into his heat.

I groaned, my eyes tracing the line of Daniel's flank. His body was fantastic, every muscle rigid and straining in anticipation of orgasm. I lingered for a while on his cock, which was poking into his belly under the weight of another man, but I found his closed eyes and his wide open mouth to be much more of a turn-on. The longer I studied it, the deeper I was transported into that picture with him. I heard him talking, telling me harder, more, telling me how good it was. "Oh, yeah," he was saying, "Shane, yes!"

My hips started to lift off the chair and I pumped my fist harder, feeling my cock get slippery as it slid through my fingers over and over. Quickly, I tugged my shirt up around my armpits and held it there and my fingers found a nipple to pinch and tug, sending little bolts of need straight to my balls.

"Yeah. Yes. Want to *fuck* you, Daniel," I whispered breathlessly, punctuating each word with an upward thrust of my hips. "Ah!" I stumbled then, pitching headlong and over a cliff before I even knew it was there. By the time I realized I was coming it was utterly unstoppable. "Oh! Oh, God. Fuck!" A few more tight-handed, urgent strokes and I went still, panting hard and tugging my cock toward me to slick my stomach.

Little lights danced behind my closed eyelids as I gulped in air, and I wondered when exactly I'd closed them. I sat there bonelessly for a while, slumped in my desk chair and thinking about Daniel's ass. When I finally forced them open the office was back, too bright and too stark and it quickly killed the mood for me. Still, it took me a bit to catch my breath and clean up with the tissues from Celia's desk. I put myself and the office back together and by the time I decided it was time to go home, it was dark out, the streets busy with people hurrying here and there in the evening rush. I didn't have anywhere to go but home, but I'd brought a disk of Daniel's pictures with me.

And then I decided I was even more pathetic than I'd feared. I picked up Celia's note and read it over. The meeting would be at noon sharp at one of the nicer places in the business district. It was actually on the same street as Daniel's office, but a couple of blocks down. I'd never been inside, but I kind of figured that with a name like Chateau Briande, it was posh.

Chapter Fourteen

It was a brilliant sunny afternoon and I sat in my truck with my sunglasses on, feeling more like the Secret Service than a dime-a-dozen P.I. After all, how often does one spy on one's own client? I couldn't go into the restaurant because Janet would surely have spotted me, so I drove around the block until a parking space opened up from which I'd have a good view of the door. One-thirty went by, one-forty-five, and they were still inside. In my excitement to possibly get damaging evidence on Janet, I had neglected to procure myself a sandwich and my stomach was growling angrily in protest.

I was weighing the merits of making a run for some food or sitting tight when she came out with a group of other people, maybe five of them all told. They stood for a moment and I watched a couple of them actually do that stupid air kiss thing beside each other's cheeks, and the party broke up. Janet headed off alone and I tried to figure out which of the two men was Derrick Slater.

I watched Janet head into the parking garage halfway down the block and decided I'd tail her once she came out. In the meantime, I saw one of the men turn and look back over his shoulder in the direction in which she'd gone and decided I may very well have my answer; mid to late 40's, silver hair, and an impeccable, blue suit. He got into a black Jaguar that was parked on the street just two cars behind me.

It wound up being a parade. Janet's Mercedes, the Jaguar, and then me in my pickup. I felt a little underdressed. We didn't go far, though, and the flow of traffic pretty much kept me from being too obvious, which was a help. It probably meant that they didn't see my gleeful look when I saw them both pull into the underground parking of the Westin Executive Suites hotel, either.

I needed to get into the lobby before they did, so I pulled around to the front entrance and gave my keys to the valet. He looked me over dubiously and my truck even more so, but I just smiled at him, undaunted, then grabbed my briefcase and headed inside. Celia could write it off as a business expense or something, I felt quite sure.

I picked a spot to sit near the check-in counter and tried to look like I belonged there; hiding behind a newspaper never gets old, really. I needed it, too -- if she saw me, I was sunk.

When they came up from the garage, though, I'm pretty sure that I could have been dancing a jig for all the attention she would have paid me. She seemed totally intent on being invisible while Slater picked up a room key, and I'm pretty sure we were both glad for the quick and efficient service. In only a moment he was at Janet's side, guiding her to the elevator.

I let them go and then approached the front desk. "Hi," I said in a casual voice. "I just came from a meeting with Mr. Slater and he left his briefcase." I held mine up. "He said he had a room here, can you tell me what number, please?" I leaned on the counter trying to look innocent. To do that, I skipped my innocent look that isn't and went for clueless, which Celia says makes me look friendly.

The clerk gave me a doubtful look. "We're really not supposed to give out room numbers. May I take it up for you?"

It was a posh hotel. Moreso than I had anticipated. I went on, hoping a little insistence would get me by.

"Honestly, I'd rather not let this out of my sight. Confidential papers, personal effects and all of that. I'll just be a minute. I'm a colleague, I'm sure he won't mind."

I didn't think he was going to tell me, honestly. Or worse, he was going to call up to the room. But luck apparently was on my side and about ten people suddenly arrived, trying to check in. And not one of them spoke English.

"Uh. Seven thirty-four," the clerk stammered at me, his eyes going a little wild.

"Thank you," I said simply, and disappeared toward the elevator banks. The seventh floor was quiet as the doors opened and I stepped out into a long, empty hallway. It was carpeted in a hideous salmon color, the walls were papered to match, and every twenty feet or so was a gaudy chandelier. The rest of the lighting was clever, though, recessed and hidden from view.

I started walking and the numbers went up; 716, 718, 720... until finally I arrived at number 734. I glanced one way and then the other, knowing the hallway wouldn't be empty for long, and stuck my ear to the door, sleuthing the old-fashioned way.

"Cancel it," Slater was saying. "Stay here."

"I can't," Janet insisted. "It's the last one for three weeks. If I cancel with less than an hour's notice they'll want to know why."

I stepped back for a moment and set my briefcase on the floor, setting up my little scope camera as quickly as I could. I snaked it under the door and stepped on it to hold it in place, hit record, and put my ear to the door again.

"...deserve more than an hour here and there, Janet."

An hour here or there was plenty for me, though. I only needed one picture.

"Derrick. I know." Janet sounded contrite. "I'm sorry, you know I am. Maybe we can work out something soon. Maybe a weekend? For right now, though... do you want to waste what time we have?"

Yeah, I thought. Go away with him for a weekend. Soon. So I can drop in on your husband. I winced, knowing that was one more step on the road to hell.

The view wasn't great at the moment, as it was largely of Slater's backside, but then he stepped toward Janet, stooping slightly and sliding his hands up her legs and under her trim, A-line skirt. I'm sure I was grimacing; I hadn't considered that wanting to get dirt might mean seeing Janet in a teal thong. Or worse.

"Okay, baby, I know it's hard for you to get away. I'll drop it for now. But let's check our calendars tonight and see about that weekend." He pulled her close and kissed her hard. I snapped at least four pictures.

Janet was a lot less pretty than Daniel when she hooked up, and she moved a lot faster, too. In fact, it might even have been possible that she could give Daniel lessons on how to get a man's pants undone in under three seconds.

Still. It was nice of her to get my job done for me so fast. One nice shot of her with her hand around Slater's wang and I was out of there. I hoped I didn't get nightmares.

I was careful to skirt by the front desk unobtrusively so the clerk wouldn't notice that I'd come back down

with the briefcase still in my hand. I should have known, however, that nothing ever goes smoothly for me. When I returned my tag to the valet I discovered that I had no cash, and as I wasn't about to go back into the hotel, I was forced to walk down the block to the nearest ATM. The neighborhood seemed more and more familiar to me and I realized finally that Dimitri's was only another block away. I decided that after I got my truck back, I would head over there for lunch.

I was waiting behind a little old lady who was trying to make a deposit when I saw Daniel, dressed for work in a very well-tailored gray suit, heading into the building next door. I had to bite back a laugh at the incredible irony of Daniel and Janet cheating on each other mere blocks away from one another. Then, without thinking, I raised my hand. "Daniel!" I shouted and waved at the same time to get his attention. It wasn't until I'd done it that I realized how incredibly stupid a move it had been.

Daniel spotted me and came over, his politician face firmly in place after an initial widening of his eyes. "Shane," he said far too cheerfully, offering his hand. "How nice to see you. Really."

"Oh, uh." Right, work mode. Straight, married man work mode. I shook his hand, gripping it firmly. "Nice to see you, too." I straightened my shoulders and did my best to keep a respectable distance between us, but I looked him in the eye. "I'm sure you were headed somewhere important, I'm sorry to interrupt."

Daniel winced and something flashed in his eyes. "No," he said, a little bit more naturally. "Nowhere important. What are you doing downtown?"

"I was..." It was tempting, very tempting, to tell him where I'd just come from, but I buried the impulse for now. Soon, I told myself, I'd come clean soon. I smiled despite my attempts to keep up appearances. "I had a craving for some Greek food. Can't imagine why."

Daniel blinked once and then grinned. "Well. It's good food," he said, his smile finally reaching his eyes. "I'm sorry I can't join you." He pointed to the building he'd been about to enter and made a face. "Meeting."

"Oh, no problem. Not everyone can be their own boss." I might have added a bit more weight to that statement than was strictly necessary.

The lady in front of me finally finished her banking and I gestured helplessly at the ATM. "Guess I should... but it was great running into you." I couldn't just let him go like that, so I added quickly, "Another time, okay? Keep in touch."

Daniel stepped closer. "Shane," he said in a low voice. "I want to. Believe me. I really, really do. I just... I don't know if I can." His eyes searched my face for a long moment. "I wish it was easier."

"I know, I believe you. I can see it in your eyes."

I could, too. Confusion and helplessness, but also a hint of something stronger and that's what I was waiting for him to find for himself. I tried to sound sympathetic. "You're going to have to let something go, Daniel. I think it should be the guilt." As if I had any right suggesting that he give up feeling guilty. I had plenty of guilt of my own and it knocked against my ribs as if to remind me what exactly I was doing to the man I wanted most. "But maybe it'll have to be me. I'll respect whatever you decide, but you know what I want. I'm easy to reach, call me."

"I..." Daniel looked at me, his throat working as he swallowed at least twice. "I will," he finally said as he turned away. "Bye, Shane." He walked quickly away from me, back to work, while I stood there and watched.

I couldn't watch for long. "Bye, Daniel," I said softly, and slid my card into the ATM.

Get the truck, go to the office, download the pictures to my computer, and then figure out what to do next. I felt things were starting to unravel for me professionally and I needed to try to dig out of this pit and salvage my own self-respect before I asked anything more of Daniel.

Chapter Fifteen

Celia was waiting for me. I sometimes wondered what kind of woman she would be if she was vindictive. Now I knew.

I was just glad she wasn't gunning for me.

When I opened the door to my office, I was greeted by Celia, standing in front of her desk with her arms crossed. She didn't look happy at all, and when I stopped short, surprised by the way she was obviously ready to pounce and fighting a primal instinct to flee, she leaned forward and hissed, "Tell me you got something good on her. Make me a happy girl."

It was very disconcerting.

"Slow down, Tiger," I teased. "Your evening with Susan didn't do you one bit of good at all, did it?" Grinning, I shut the door behind me and put my briefcase down on my desk. I hung up my coat and then went to make myself a cup of coffee without saying another word.

"It did me a world of good," Celia said, walking with me and hovering. "In fact, I'm tired and thus cranky. Tell me, and don't hold back anything at all. I'll know."

"Mrs. Brint wears a teal thong," I said simply, summing up my answer quite succinctly, I thought. I headed back to my desk without even looking at her. I was, however, grinning as I waited for the squeal.

When the noise died down Celia sat on the edge of my desk, happily shoving things out of her way. "And?" she said, beaming at me. "Tell me you got nice, clear, juicy pictures. Tell me, tell me, tell me!"

Celia was beaming at me. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen her quite so pleased. Oh, except that one time she and that woman... well, I decided not to go there.

"Let's see, shall we?" I asked, opening up my laptop and hooking the camera up to it. When the pictures were finished downloading I opened them up, thumbnail-style, for her to peruse. After glancing at her and finding her to be practically salivating, I just got up, gave her my seat, and handed her my mouse.

"Thanks, Boss!" Celia said brightly, quickly opening up each image. "Oh, you filthy little ho-bag," she muttered, leaning closer to the computer. Then she looked up at me. "What's she doing with this loser when she's got Daniel at home?" she demanded indignantly. "Wait. We don't want him home. Never mind."

"He's actually not home most of the time," I said, suddenly finding I empathized with Janet a little. "I'm not sure I can blame her." Evidently neither of them was satisfied with their home-life. I sighed. "I'm not the homewrecker here, am I? Tell me I'm not."

"Hell, no," Celia said emphatically. "That home was wrecked long before you showed up, Shane." She clicked through the images a little more and finally started closing them. "Thing is, neither of them know what we know. What do we do now?"

I sat across from her in one of the visitor chairs. "That's the million dollar question, isn't it?" I picked up my coffee mug and shrugged. "I mean, I guess I could take these to Daniel and come clean, but I shudder to think what he'd think of me. I could take them to Janet and... wait, no, I know I'm scum of the Earth right now, but I'm not stooping to blackmail."

"Mm." Celia looked a little more inclined to blackmail than I was totally comfortable with. "I'm kind of left wondering what she'll do if she finds out Daniel's stepping out and not using drugs. That pre-nup has them both locked in, remember. She can't leave any more than he can, and I'm beginning to think Daniel isn't going to wait three years or more. Do you think she will?"

"Depends on how badly she wants the money." I sighed. "I saw Daniel today, he had a meeting a couple of blocks from the hotel where Janet was fooling around. We talked, sort of."

"Oh?" Celia asked, suddenly looking at me intently. "How did that go? Did he ask why you were there?"

"Of course, but luck was actually on my side and the Greek place where he took me to dinner was just up the block, so I told him I was headed there for lunch. I was a little too forward, I think; he told me that he wanted me but he didn't know if he could do it emotionally, and I told him he needed to give up the guilt. I'm not sure what got into me. I think I got defensive because I was suspicious about the nature of his 'meeting'. I mean, why fuck around anonymously when I'm a text message away?"

"Because he's not attached to anyone else, and he is to you," Celia said promptly. "Do you think he was there to hook-up?"

"It's not anywhere near his office. I mean, I don't have any proof, but yeah, that's what I was thinking." I sipped my coffee. "I could be wrong, of course. I'm good at being wrong."

"Stop that." Celia glared at me. "Don't put yourself down. You're the boss, and you're a good guy, and he wants you. So there. Got that?"

I smiled at her. "I only say that stuff to make you be nice to me, you know," I lied. "Honestly, I'm afraid to do anything at this point. I feel like Daniel and I are at a crossroads. I have a little hope that he might just decide I'm worth the risk, or that hiding isn't worth his time anymore, or... I don't know, he's waffling. In a good way. It's painful to watch, but I think he just might go for it. Thing is, I don't know whether to come clean before he makes his decision or after, you know? If I do it before, he might think I engineered things, and if I do it after, then he'll be angry that I didn't level with him sooner."

"You have a point," she said, looking thoughtful. She leaned forward and seemed to be about to offer a suggestion when the office phone rang. Celia answered the phone with her automatic phone voice and her gaze went right to me. I didn't really need the frantic hand gestures to know I was supposed to pay attention.

"Hey, Tracey," she said, still flapping at me. "What's up?... Seriously? When?... Know why?... No, no, it's all good. Thanks, honey, you're a peach. I owe you one." Celia hung up, still staring at me, and smiled. It was a little scary. "That was Tracey," she said, like I didn't know.

"Don't tell me you're sleeping with her, too?" I got up to refill my coffee. "I really can't afford to let you leave early two days in a row."

"Will you please keep up? Been there, done that. Now she spies for me. Turns out that when Janet Brint stopped practicing law, she kept her own lawyer at the same firm. And Tracey just made an appointment for her boss, Lillian, to see Janet on Friday." Celia's grin turned to something like I imagine a cat would wear after cornering several rodents who were waving a white flag.

Truth be told, I didn't try to keep up with Celia's girlfriends. It seemed to me that they were all named Tracey and they were all so yesterday until they were today again. Well, except Susan. Susan was interesting. Susan might be something else entirely.

"An appointment with her lawyer on Friday," I repeated, trying to extract the implications of that statement by saying it slowly out loud. I looked at Celia. "She's worried about that pre-nup?"

"Maybe," Celia said, nodding. Her glasses of the day slipped a bit and she shoved them back up. "Tracey didn't know for sure. But that's my bet. Either worried about it or looking for a loophole to get out of it."

"You know, it didn't seem to me that she was in love with this Slater guy, so that doesn't make any sense." I brought my coffee back to the desk again.

Celia looked a little crestfallen. "Really? But it would be so nice if she'd just go off and annoy someone else."

I laughed. "Oh, Celia. You might have to settle for a mundane domestic squabble on this one." Somehow, though, I had a feeling this thing with her lawyer was going to lead to very much more than that. In my experience, and I'd seen this a lot in my line of work, married people didn't see lawyers behind their partners' backs without an inevitable onslaught of fireworks.

"Tracey might find out what it's about," Celia said with no real hope in her voice. "But I don't know if she'd tell me. Gossip is one thing, this is getting fired level of stuff, though."

"Let's not ask her to compromise her professional reputation, shall we?" I grinned. "It doesn't much matter what she tells him about, really, we have pictures." I grinned wider. "I'm thinking I could send them to Daniel anonymously, maybe...?" That was the cowardly way to do it, but it would be effective.

"You could, but then he'd be stuck in a loveless marriage and know exactly how fucked it was. Mind you, he might let go of a lot of guilt." Celia reached for my mouse and I suddenly thought she was going to do it, right then.

"Wait. What are you doing?" I hopped up out of my seat and moved around the desk to see. "I was kidding, I can't do that to him."

"Relax, jeeze." Celia looked up at me and shrugged. "Why not, though? Give me a good reason why you shouldn't tell him what his wife's doing."

"Because it's going to hurt him? Because he's going to ask me how in the hell I know?" I sighed. "I don't know."

"Anonymous, Shane." Celia rolled her eyes, but gave up custody of the mouse. "Really, I think you should at least--" She broke off as the phone rang again. "Your turn," she said, standing up. "I need to pee."

"Wench," I muttered, shooing her out from behind my desk. I reached for the phone. "Mullen Investigative Services, how can I help you?"

"It's Janet Brint, Mr. Mullen. I'm glad I reached you at the office."

"Oh, hello, Mrs. Brint." I didn't need to ask why she was calling, her tone pretty much said it all. It was terse and all business. Panic set in. "What, uh, what can I do for you?"

"You can tell me what you've learned about my husband's habits, what he does when he's not home, and where he's getting his drugs."

Oh, yeah. All business for sure.

"Mrs. Brint, I'm glad you called. I was going to call you this evening, in fact," I said, stalling for a minute. Except that I needed more than a minute. "If you'll just hold on one moment, I'll get your file. Just a minute, please." I punched the hold button and stood up, running my hands through my hair. "Mother of God," I said, pacing away from my desk and then back again. "Okay. No problem. I'll just... um. I'll just tell her... maybe... oh! Yes, okay. Okay I can do this." I babbled to myself, glad that Celia had excused herself to the loo.

I sat in my chair, took a deep breath, and picked up the phone, leaning back in my chair casually. "All right, I've got your file right here, Mrs. Brint," I told her, taking deep, cleansing breaths and trying not to pass out.

"Do you really need your notes? It's not that hard, Mr. Mullen." I could hear her draw a deep breath and then, surprisingly, she apologized. "I'm sorry. That was rude, and I'm sorry. I've been under a great strain through all of this, but there is no need to take it out on you. When you're ready, Mr. Mullen."

"Actually, Mrs. Brint, I did need to get my notes because I wanted to make sure I got the name of some of these places he's been going correct," I lied, feeling a bit more confident now that she had been forced to apologize to me. "First off, your husband is not buying, selling, or doing any drugs as far as I can see, Mrs. Brint."

"But he has to be," she insisted. "The money, the strange hours, the erratic behavior..."

"I can understand why you'd be concerned about it, but the explanation is really much less sinister than that. He eats out a great deal, for one; lunch and dinner, sometimes for business meetings, sometimes socializing with friends or colleagues. A Greek place called... Dimitri's? And a couple of restaurants around the state buildings, um... a Thai place, Chinese, Italian." I flipped the pages of a phone book on my desk. "Um, one poker game, and, oh yes, and he's had several meetings after normal business hours at the office. I haven't found anything that would indicate that he's doing anything but working too hard."

I suddenly felt like I needed to apologize to my mother and chew on a bar of Ivory soap.

There was a long pause and then she said, "I see," in a brittle tone. "You're telling me that my husband has been nothing but respectable and I've imagined all the changes in him. That he's still the man I married and I'm a suspicious, bored housewife."

Uh-huh. Bored, cheating, lying, greedy housewife.

"I can't account for the changes in his personality, Mrs. Brint. The only thing I can suggest is that maybe he's choosing to stay late at work for a reason? Marriages have all kinds of problems, I'm not really qualified to analyze yours." I blinked, wondering why in the world I thought I could get away with saying something like that to her. "Uh, that is... I'm not trying to be insulting, Mrs. Brint, and I apologize if that was how that sounded. I can keep digging if you really feel you need me to, but I haven't come up with anything but what appear to be innocent digressions. If you'd like to terminate my employment I will certainly understand, and if you're dissatisfied or skeptical, I'll waive my fee as well."

The pause was shorter this time. "There is no need to waive your fee," she said stiffly. "I will pay for the time you spent on this, regardless of whether I like the results or not. I suppose I should be glad that he's not

addicted to crack or something horrible like that. Being a workaholic is hardly the worst thing you could have found."

"I understand that elections are coming up in a few months, is it possible that his time is being spent on his campaign?"

"Not unless he's doing it on his own. I know his campaign staff." She sighed and added, "Look, you're right. This is my marriage and it has its issues, clearly. Thank you for your time, Mr. Mullen. I'll send you a check for what I owe you and see if I can handle this on my own."

My hands shook a bit when I realized that I might actually be getting out unscathed, at least from this element of the mess I'd made. "If there is anything specific you find out that I can follow up on for you, I'll be happy to do so. Good luck, Mrs. Brint."

"Hopefully, I won't have to. Goodbye, Mr. Mullen." Even the sound of her hanging up on me was a good noise.

I put the receiver down very, very slowly. "Holy..."

"Shit?" Celia asked. She was standing in the middle of the room, staring at me. I hadn't heard the door.

"When did you come in?"

"Right about the time you were telling the client to go to hell, but with nicer words. You lied your ass off, didn't you?" She looked impressed.

"I lied my ass off." I looked up at her, grinning. "I panicked for a minute, but then I did some quick thinking, applied it, and totally snowballed her." I probably shouldn't have been so pleased with myself, but man, was I smug. "I rock!"

"You do indeed," Celia agreed with a grin. "Now tell me how you're going to get your boyfriend to leave her."

I could have used a bungee cord for that nosedive. "Damn, Celia, who pooped in your corn flakes this morning? I'm buying you a drink. We can talk about this after the glow wears off." I reached for my coat.

"Oh, I want an umbrella in mine. And I can't get sloshed with you again -- I might say too much about Susan."

"I like hearing about Susan." I smiled a little more genuinely. "Come on."

"Good," Celia said, getting her handbag. "I like talking about her, I think. Although she seems a little weirded out that I get drunk and sleep with you."

"She's welcome to join us sometime," I joked.

Celia gave me a look that made me consider retracting that immediately, but then shook her head. "Nah, your bed isn't big enough for three."

"I have a feeling it's not big enough for just you two, either." I winked and pulled her out of the building by the hand.

"You know it, baby," Celia said with a swing of her head that almost sent her glasses flying. "Okay. Buy me a drink and let's plot. Operation Extract Daniel is still in play."

Some days, I just had to love that girl.

Chapter Sixteen

Four days later the love was dying.

"Just send them, Shane," Celia insisted, hovering over my mouse like some deranged devil. "You haven't come up with any other ideas about how to free Daniel from her clutches."

"I don't want to!" I insisted. Sending the pictures of Janet to Daniel, even anonymously, just felt wrong.

"Susan can set it up. He'll never know it was you."

"Yes, because adding another lie on top of all the others will help so much."

Celia frowned at me and retreated to her own desk, pouting. Great.

"Celia," I started, then realized I didn't have the faintest idea what to say next. "Just let it go for now," I finally said, my voice dropping low. God, I was tired.

It must have been the right tone, at least, because she stopped pouting and her look turned sympathetic. "Okay," she said. "At least the bitch paid us. We can afford to paint now."

I raised an eyebrow. Celia was wearing green again, and I didn't really trust her to pick colors for the hall. "Oh?"

"Mmm. I'm thinking gold leaf on the door. For our names, you know?"

I blinked, trying to decide if she was serious. "Our names."

"Yeah." She grinned and bounced up, almost pogoing to the door. "Mullen and DeWolfe. What do you think?" She flung the door open without looking and sketched an arc on the frosted glass. "Your name on top, of course."

"Celia." She'd lost her mind, clearly.

"No? DeWolfe on top of Mullen? Okay!" She grinned and turned to close the door, then froze in place. "Oh God, sorry," she said. "I didn't see you there. Can I help you?" Behind her back, she waved at me frantically.

"I was looking for Mullen Investigative Services," an all too familiar voice said. "I trust I found it before the name changed?"

"Uh, yes," Celia stammered. "I'm not sure if Mr. Mullen can see you right now, though. Can I help?"

Panic, a thousand times worse than when Janet had called, tied my stomach in a knot. I held onto my desk, white-knuckled, as if I was slowly being sucked in by quicksand. I felt my palms start to sweat as a stress headache formed behind my eyes and I took a deep breath to clear my head.

It didn't really work, so I tried another.

"I can wait," Daniel's voice cut through the panic and I realized I was busted. Janet's pictures and the ideas I had about coming clean with Daniel were all moot now as Daniel stood outside and Celia kept herself between us. I had no idea what he knew, or in how much detail, but he knew enough to be standing at my office door and that was enough to topple my house of cards whether I was ready or not.

"Let him in, Celia," I told her with a sigh. "I've got plenty of time for him."

Celia's shoulders slumped and even in profile I could see her too-bright grin fade to a grimace. She stepped aside without a word and Daniel walked in, his face set and his shoulders squared.

"Sorry, Boss," Celia murmured, going to her desk.

I'm not sure how long we stared at each other. I read the anger and then the confusion and pain in his eyes, and I'm sure he saw the embarrassment and the shame in mine. I understood in that moment what people mean when they say silence is deafening. It was also so oppressive that I was having trouble breathing and I finally had to break it.

"Daniel," I said stupidly, hopelessly, as if just my tone was apology enough. I knew it wasn't, though, and I invited him to sit. "Celia, why don't you go price gold leaf. Or a going out of business sign."

Celia got up slowly and picked up her purse, eyeing us both. "I'll be back in half an hour," she said to me. On her way past Daniel she paused and for a horrifying moment -- because I clearly needed another one -- I thought she was going to say something to him. But she didn't, and in a moment the door closed quietly behind her.

"So," Daniel said, just standing there. "You're in private security of a kind."

"Yeah. Of a kind. Of the private investigator kind." I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, but I held Daniel's eyes because I wanted him to know this was the truth now, and not another lie. "Of the hired by your wife to tail you because she thought you were a junkie and spending her money on drugs kind."

Daniel's jaw dropped and he looked completely stunned. Apparently, that part was news to him. "Drugs?" he asked. "She thought I was taking *drugs*?"

"Yeah. She sat in that chair and told me... wait a minute." I eyed him and backpedaled a bit. "Daniel, I'll tell you everything you want to know, I promise. But before I put my foot in my mouth along with my pride, maybe you should tell me what brought you here."

Daniel reached out and grabbed the back of the client chair and lowered himself into it. He still looked shocked, and I was wondering if he was actually going to be able to pull himself together. "Drugs," he said again. "Christ." He stared at me for a long moment and then his eyes focused. "You were... she paid *you* to spy on me."

"Yeah." Realization dawned on me. Or, more accurately, it landed on me like an anvil. I sat down heavily. "Jesus, Daniel. You didn't know you were going to find *me* here, did you?"

"No," Daniel said, shaking his head. Then his eyes narrowed and he straightened his back. "But you know all about me, don't you? That's hardly fair."

"Yeah. I do," I said, nodding slowly. "But she doesn't."

Daniel blinked again and bit his lip, looking away. He seemed to think for a few minutes, time that dragged on and on like a heavy rope, before he looked back. "I was at home this morning, stopping in to pick up a file I forgot. I needed to get a check, too, to drop off with the new pool maintenance place to set up our account. I got the check from her desk drawer and her balance sheet for her personal account was on top of the joint account one. I don't know why I even looked, but I did. Kind of stupid of her to write in the full business name, don't you think?" He leaned forward, staring at me. "So I came to see what she'd hired an investigator for. Your turn."

"Janet hired me close to a month ago." It seemed like much, much longer than that, all of a sudden. "She told me that she'd noticed some things, personality things, she said, and also that you'd been working long, erratic hours and she wanted me to tail you and find out what you were up to. I got an answer to that question the first night I tailed you to the park. Some guy named Jim in the back of your Lexus." I cleared my throat. "Anyway, I knew your circumstances, that you were a public figure and that outing you to your wife would likely cause you a lot more grief than just a divorce, so I decided to hold off for a week or so. She said you'd been spending large mounts of money and so I figured since the tricks were free, I'd find out where the money was going. Which, incidentally, I never did, so good on you."

I got up, ostensibly to get coffee, but really I was just feeling confined behind my desk. It also gave me a moment to breathe. I refilled my mug for probably the fourth time that morning and poured one for Daniel, too. I handed him his cup as I crossed back to my desk, but instead of sitting, I paced beside it.

"Not really a sound business practice," Daniel said. His voice was dry as dust, but he didn't reach for the coffee. "Screwing the client to get... what? So you could screw me, instead?" He looked at me, the anger back in his eyes, but not quite hiding the pain and bitterness.

"Yes." I looked down at him and set my coffee down on the desk. "If you really want to boil it down to its meaningless, tawdry base, yes. I wanted you, Daniel. But there is so much more to it than that." I put my coffee mug down. "I saw you, I watched you, and you intrigued me. The more I found out about you, the more I liked you, and the more I sympathized with the mess you were in. I screwed over a client. I did. But not so I could be with you; I did it because I didn't want to see you get thrown under a bus. And you're right, by the way. Likely I would lose my license if you decided to call me out."

Daniel snorted and stood up. "Like I'm going to do that," he said. "Sure. I'll just start a legal case against the guy who not only knows I'm gay and cheating on my wife in an almost manic way, but who also has documentation to prove it. Jesus fucking Christ, what a mess." He pushed a hand through his hair and made a sound of frustration. "You have me by the balls, you know. Even if you didn't tell Janet, you know it all." He looked at me again, his head tilted. "What did you tell her, anyway?"

I didn't have him by the balls at all, actually, though I would have liked to. That might have made this entire encounter much more fun for the both of us. "I told her you ate out a lot and had legitimate after hours meetings. I told her that she might want to figure out what was wrong with the marriage instead of looking at what might be wrong with you." I still had trouble believing I'd actually said that. "You don't really think I'd do anything with this information, Daniel, do you? I mean, why would I want to do that?"

"Why *wouldn't* you?" Daniel demanded. "I mean, seriously. I thought you were some guy I found. I thought you were special, Shane." His eyes were flashing again and his breathing had picked up. It would have been sexy if he wasn't pissed as hell. "I didn't know you were being paid to spy on me. Jesus, did you watch me hook-up? Did you follow me and watch me have sex? Did it get you hot, Shane? Is that why you were doing this?"

"I..." God, there were so many questions, I didn't know where to start. The only answer to most of them was

'I'm sorry', but somehow that wasn't adequate. "Yes!" I shouted back at him, pushing away from the desk again. "I watched! Okay? I'm the lowest kind of pervert on the planet, all right? Yes, it got me hot. Somehow, though, the only person I remember -- the only face, the only body, the only voice that I can recall is yours. And you know what?" I moved into his space, resting a hand on the arm of his chair. "You know what, Daniel? I am special. I am that guy you found. Just because I found you first and you didn't know it doesn't mean everything was a lie." I twisted my fingers into the lapel of his shirt and kissed him, quickly, but hard, and then looked him in the eye. "You have every right to be angry. Ream me a new one, I deserve it, I let this mess go on far too long. But I got tangled in it, Daniel, and I didn't know how to get out. The PI your wife hired is a big fat liar. The guy you found? He's just a big fat idiot. I admit it. I'm sorry."

Daniel blinked at me and licked his lower lip, his eyes wide. "I have no fucking idea what's going on anymore," he muttered. Then he grabbed me and kissed me back, just as hard, his fingers digging into my arms.

"Me neither," I panted, my words mangled a bit by Daniel's tongue invading my mouth. "God, me neither. But this is good." I had so much more to tell him, about this, about the pictures of Janet, but what I really wanted was to get my mouth around his cock. I pushed my hand against the bulge in his suit pants.

"Shut up, Shane," Daniel ordered, his hands practically everywhere. He pushed me back against the desk, his hips grinding into my hand and his tongue almost down my throat before he pulled back far enough to start licking and sucking on my neck, hands busy getting my belt undone.

"Okay. I can do that." I whimpered as Daniel slid my pants over my hips and his hands brushed past an erection that was far more insistent than I'd realized. "I don't have to talk all the time. But I thought you liked talking?" My own fingers felt clumsy and awkward, but I managed to get Daniel's fly down and the button at the top of his trousers undone. I wiggled my fingers inside his briefs and caught his stiff shaft against my palm. "Are you going to fuck me?"

"Jesus," Daniel gasped. His hand tightened around my cock and stroked hard. "Not if you don't shut up! There won't be anything left of me." He bit down on my neck once more and played with my dick, his palm sliding. "Over your desk. Say yes."

"Yes!" Orders were good. Orders meant I didn't have to think too hard. "Yes," I repeated, turning around and stretching out across the top of my desk. If anything went flying or fell over or spilled, I didn't notice. "Yes, yes. Please."

"Oh, God." Daniel draped himself over me, his cock pushing at my ass, sliding along the top of my thigh. "Contrary to what you may have seen," he panted in my ear, "I don't actually walk around with lube and condoms in my pockets. Please have some." He rocked his hips and I could feel the head of his erection where I wanted it most. "Or at least just the rubbers."

I had both, if I could control myself long enough to remember where. "Briefcase," I said with a groan, and pointed vaguely off to my right, hoping he'd see. "Rubbers. Maybe lube, not sure."

I more or less expected him to dive for it, scramble to get them; it seemed to me that would kind of with fit with the desperate-gotta-fuck-you-now thing we had going on. But when he dropped to his knees instead and licked over my ass, I found it hard to complain.

"Oh, shit!" I went rigid at first and curled my toes, fighting off the urge to come right then. It felt so good, so warm and slick and I arched my ass toward him and pressed my forehead into the desk. "Daniel! Oh, fuck."

Fingers curled tightly around my hips and he said something. I had no idea what, it was just vibrations and

sounds, and then his tongue was fucking me, licking and sliding into my ass and I'm pretty sure I yelled. A finger slid in, too, and then I could hear him, panting and making a needy sound I'd only heard in my bedroom, and not with a mic.

"Stay," he snapped, then he scrambled, almost dumping out my briefcase to get to the condoms.

"Where the hell would I go?" I snaked a hand under my hips, though, and grabbed my cock, giving it a conciliatory squeeze. It ached and grew even stiffer, if that was possible, forcing a groan from my throat that had to sound vaguely animal. "But if you don't hurry it up, I'm doing this without you."

"Wait for me," he said, his voice flatteringly breathless. He came back, ripping the condom wrapper as he moved, his pants slipping down in a way that would have been comical if it wasn't in mid-sex. Then the rubber was on and he was back, one hand on his prick and the other on the small of my back. "Couldn't find the lube, sorry," he said, lining himself up.

"I'll live," I said impatiently. I'd be a little sore, but I'd live. I pushed my ass back farther, kind of rushing things on purpose. "Don't tease."

"Not teasing!" I thought it was supposed to be a vehement protest, but the way it turned into a strangled gasp as the head of his cock breached me killed the effect. "God. Shane." He pushed in a little deeper, the hand on my back sliding around my body to my chest so he was holding me to him. His body was bent over mine, protectively, as he slid into my ass.

I opened my mouth to answer him, but what came out was a long moan, and after that words were useless to me. I pushed back again, knowing I looked wanton and not caring at all, gripping the opposite side of my desk with white knuckles and trying to at least get Daniel's name out. I wanted him so badly just then, needed him to move faster. "Please, please," I managed, followed by a needy whine.

Daniel groaned and thrust into me, any reluctance he may have had about the lack of lube gone. "Shane," he said brokenly, fucking me with long, hard strokes. "Wanted this." He moved again, leaning back and pulling me by the hips, his cock hard in me, slamming me against the desk.

I think we both knew this wasn't going to last long. I was half gone before his tongue even touched me. I let Daniel rock my hips into the desk, enjoying the friction and heat. "Need you," I started to say, but then Daniel's cock punched at my prostate and it turned into an involuntary scream. I was gone, Daniel's perfect aim and my headlong tumble toward orgasm consuming me, until just getting air was a challenge. "Come... coming!" My voice seemed a whisper over the roar in my ears and I let go, spraying my desk, heedless of what come might do to the veneer.

"God," Daniel gasped, his fingers tightening almost painfully. "Yes, yes, yes!" He thrust into me again and froze, a sound tearing from him like a growl just before I felt him twitch and throb inside me. "God, Shane," he managed to get out, his head coming down on my back as his body heaved.

I wasn't sure how long we stayed like that, though it couldn't have been long. Neither one of us had caught our breath at all when Celia suddenly said, "I'm glad he took it well, Boss. I'm going to go get really drunk now. Call me tonight."

I experienced a fleeting attempt at emotions: shock, embarrassment, amusement, but the complete exhaustion I was feeling prevented me from really hanging on to any of them.

"Daniel," I drawled, panting heavily under his weight, "this is Celia, the lesbian I was telling you about. This is vaguely humiliating, I realize, but I'm entirely too boneless to care."

"Celia," Daniel said tightly. "I'd offer to shake your hand, but as you're staring at my ass, I think we can skip it."

"Aw," Celia said, walking to her desk and opening a drawer. "And here I was thinking that I was being polite by locking the door after me." I had no idea what she was up to, but as her tone had gotten a little edgy, I thought it might be a good idea to stop her. Or stay completely out of her way.

"Celia," I started.

"No, no. I'm going," she said, putting whatever it was she'd gotten in her bag and standing up. "I'd just like to say, Daniel, that you currently have your dick in a man who is very important to me. He cares about you more than he's cared about anyone in a long, long time. He won't rat you out. But." She leaned forward and I groaned, hiding my face. "Hurt him and I will."

Daniel spluttered and I could feel his body shift away, his cock slipping from me. "I have no idea what's going on," he said to Celia. "Aside from the obvious."

"He'll fill you in," Celia said brightly. "You just listen. And don't worry, you'll learn to love me, I promise. Night, Shane!"

"Goodnight, Celia," I said with an embarrassed groan. I was going to have to thank her later, perhaps by asking her to rearrange the filing system. Or change all the light bulbs or something. Wench.

I listened as the door closed, still plastered to the desk. "Well, apart from that embarrassing interruption, that was incredible." I listened as Daniel moved about a bit, finally pushing up and off the desk. A couple of pieces of paper, my calculator, the stupid little desk troll with the pink hair that my mother had given me last Christmas, and a smattering of paperclips came up off the desk with me and then fell back down again, making a series of strange thumps.

I'd forgotten that my pants were around my ankles and that made that first step a little more eventful than I had planned. I stumbled backward a few steps and caught myself on the upturned leg of the chair Daniel had been sitting in and that had evidently been knocked over at some point. I didn't remember that at all.

"Whoa! I'm okay. Yep, got it. All good." I tugged my pants up with one hand and made an attempt to clean up with the tissues on Celia's desk.

"Shane." Daniel's voice was low and had a shake to it, which was why I actually looked at him. He hadn't sounded quite that shaken before, even the night at my apartment.

I looked at him, noting that he'd managed to get his pants done up without the procedure involving a chair, and finally made myself look him in the eye.

"Was she..." He paused and licked his lower lip, his face pale. "Was she telling the truth? You care about me? Because right now, this minute, I kind of really need that. I need to know that not everything was a lie. My life is falling apart kind of abruptly, you know."

I nodded, finishing with the buttons on my pants, and moved to him reflexively. I snaked my arms around his waist and just held him, pressing our foreheads together. "Yeah, it's true. I'd have preferred to tell you myself, but," I shrugged, "Celia is the next best thing." I kissed his cheek and then his mouth and let him relax against me.

"She saw me fucking you," he whispered, sounding almost awed. But he kissed me back and held me, and he didn't seem inclined to run away. Or hit me, which was a plus.

"Yeah, I guess our secret is out," I laughed softly. "She's cool, she'll only tease me about it. You, she'll be nice to for at least a month or so, then all bets are off. Anyway, she's seen my dick more than you have. I wouldn't worry about it."

We stood there another minute and then I pulled away. "Why don't we sit and I'll see if I can help you feel less overwhelmed about all of this." I could launch right into Janet, but I thought maybe he might like a little bit of a lead-in first to cut some of the sting.

"Yeah, okay," Daniel said with a sigh. "God, what a mess." He ran his hand through his hair and picked up the client chair. "So, she hired you because she thought I was doing drugs. I'll assume that if that proved true she intended to get me help and not merely avoid scandal by finding a way out of our pre-nup."

"This is where things get complicated. I haven't really figured out her motives. I've tried, believe me, but every time I thought I had it, I learned something new. At first, yeah, I assumed she wanted to send you quietly upstate to rehab where you could get clean and come home and not embarrass her or yourself. Then I learned about the pre-nup, which, in its way, has you both hog-tied." I sat in the chair beside Daniel instead of across from him behind my desk. I took his hand in mine, hoping maybe the contact would be reassuring, even if what I had to say wasn't.

"So after following you for a week or so, I'd realized just how unhappy you were and I started wondering about her motives. Unethical practice number one was getting off on you getting off. Number two was investigating a client. It's been done, but it's unorthodox and definitely not accepted practice."

Daniel's brow furrowed. "You investigated her? Why? I mean, I was just some cheating asshole, right?" He squeezed my hand and added, "It should probably freak me out more that you saw me doing all that. God, I must look horrible." He looked away, and if shame ever had a face, that was it, right there.

"You look freshly laid and I love it." I didn't make him turn his head back, though, I let him have some time. "I've never judged you, Daniel. I've done it; met men online, in bars, whatever. Hell, you know I have, I hooked up with you. And trust me, doing it is one thing, watching you do it made me feel like such a freak. Just... I felt dirty, but I couldn't help myself. I have more cause to be ashamed than you do." I patted his hand. "There's cheating, and then there's the closet, Daniel. I had, and still have, a lot of sympathy for you. I can see how tough it is. Anyone could. I investigated her because she seemed suspicious. The way she seemed to keep your cash flow tight, the schedule she kept, there was something else there and I wanted to know what it was. I also wanted to know what she planned to do with the information if I gave it to her."

"Yeah?" Daniel said, his voice a little rough. He cleared his throat, though, and looked at me. "We keep our money separate. By which I mean, she has hers, I have what I earn from my job, and she gives me two thousand dollars a month. I didn't know she was keeping an eye on what I spend." He shrugged one shoulder and sighed again. "She has money coming. She needs me to get it."

"Yeah, and she needs to not give you grounds for divorce if she plans on hanging onto you."

"I hardly think that me divorcing her because she sent someone to spy on me while I was cheating is something she's worried about," Daniel said with a grimace. "My lawyer is going to have my balls."

"Maybe, but..." I took Daniel's other hand in mine, too, and looked at him meaningfully. For some reason, despite the circumstances, I had this strange feeling the news might actually upset him. "Daniel, she's cheating on you."

Daniel stared at me and suddenly started to laugh. "Right. Janet wouldn't cheat on me, there's no payoff in it."

"Depends on whether you consider an orgasm 'payoff.'" I stood up, tugged my laptop off my desk, and turned it around so Daniel could see the screen. "His name is Derrick Slater, and we think he's a colleague on one of her charity boards. They have a regular weekly lunch, after which they both disappear for an hour." I clicked a few things while I talked and the pictures came up. "The reason I was in the neighborhood of Dimitri's last week was because I had just tailed her to the Westin where I took these." I pushed the laptop closer to Daniel.

Daniel stared at the screen for a long moment and even reached out to touch it, his eyes wide. "Jesus," he whispered. "Janet." He closed his eyes slowly and when he opened them he carefully turned the laptop back toward me. "I know him. Have for years. He's been to our house for parties and things."

I closed the computer and pushed it away. I'd never been in a situation quite as convoluted as this before and I had no idea what to say. "I'm sorry, Daniel," I told him, and then I remembered what Celia had said. "But maybe now you can let that guilt go."

"Maybe," he said softly, looking away again. "That money you couldn't find? It was guilt. All of it. I've been making payments on a very lovely, incredibly expensive diamond and emerald necklace. I was going to give it to her on our anniversary. I kind of figured that when she got her inheritance, I'd be leaving and I wanted to make up for what a horrible excuse of a husband I am. It would look really pretty on her."

I was still having a hard time getting my head around how much Daniel cared about Janet. Now, though, I was thinking of it as less about Janet herself and more about his responsibility to her. "You should see me in emeralds. They bring out the color in my eyes," I joked, hoping to lighten things a bit.

Thankfully, it made him laugh. "Maybe we could bribe Celia with them," he said. "She's cute. She could carry them off, easy." He looked like he was trying to smile and start dealing with his situation, though the smile was fragile. "So, do you know what she plans now? I mean, it's pretty clear that our marriage is more finished than even I had thought, and I'm looking at the end of my career in politics, too. Where do I go from here, Shane?"

I shook my head. I didn't have any more answers for him. "Right here." I held his eyes and gave my chest a pat. "You go right here first."

Daniel swallowed and nodded slowly before shaking his head. "You have no idea what you're letting yourself in for," he said softly. "This is going to be messy and public."

"Daniel," I ran my fingers through my hair before continuing, "Janet has an appointment with her lawyer on Friday. Maybe she's way ahead of you here, you know? And since when does a divorce mean the end of a political career?"

He gave me an odd look. "Come on, Shane. Let's take a look at the headlines, shall we? Elected official, husband to heiress, has been having a series of one night stands for gay sex. There's little to no chance of getting elected again even in municipal office, let alone working up the ladder. I'm done. I can go back to private practice, maybe, but it's going to take time and there's going to be a lot of talk. You really don't want to be attached to it."

"And as soon as she puts it out there that you're cheating, you can turn around and out Janet for cheating, too. Her family will love that." I snorted. "I don't know, Daniel, in light of all of this, I'm thinking she might

want to sweep the whole cheating thing under the rug. Now, that doesn't mean coming out will be easy for you, but being gay in and of itself isn't a reason to step out of office."

I got a little testy about the last part of his statement. "And don't tell me what I do and don't want to be 'attached' to. That's defensive political talk. I'm attached to you."

"Are you?" Daniel asked, giving me a searching look. "I mean, what do we have? Apparently I can't be in the same room with you without wanting to be naked and sweaty, but is that attachment? Before I knew you were investigating me, I would have thought maybe so -- and if you'll recall, I was fighting that attachment off."

I bit my lip thoughtfully and pulled away from him. "Okay, Daniel. You're not wrong to think it's just sex, I guess. You don't have any idea who I am. And apart from being aware what's going on, your marriage, such as it is, is in the same place that it was before you walked in here this morning. If you still want to fight me off I guess that's your prerogative."

"Oh, don't do that," he snapped. "Don't you dare get all hurt and holier-than-thou at me. You were spying on me, Shane! Lying to me. I opened up more to you than I have to anyone in my life, and not two hours ago I thought you were just some nice guy. Sure, my marriage was shit, just like it is now, but you were the one with all the knowledge. Just how fast do you expect me to come around and deal with all of this?" His eyes were blazing again, the anger coming back full force. It was a wonder he wasn't walking out. But he wasn't.

"Well, if it was left up to you, you'd probably never deal with it, would you? You haven't been dealing with it all this time, why start now? Certainly not on my account, because I'm not 'just a nice guy,' I'm a liar. I couldn't possibly be in earnest when I say I care about you." I stood up and paced away, needing a little space to absorb the volume level our conversation had suddenly taken on. "I am a little hurt, Daniel," I told him truthfully. "I am not part of this problem. The problem is you and Janet and your sham of a marriage. What I know or don't know is irrelevant, don't you see that? I'm all caught up in the middle of it, sure, but the solution to your marriage and career problems has nothing to do with me. I'm just trying to be there for you."

"You're the whole problem!" Daniel yelled, going to the other side of the room in quick steps. "Before you I could just hang on, see? There wasn't anything to leave *for*. I was the complete and total problem in my marriage, but there was reason to stay -- we might not have been happy, but it wasn't because of her, it was all me! I could deal with that, and I could put up with it because it allowed me access to people who could support what I'm trying to do on the Council. They won't follow me through this shit, and worse, I don't even want to try to pretend anymore. And that's because of you, so don't you even think about saying you're not part of the problem." He glared at me, but the very real dampness in his eyes conveyed more fear than anger. It was like he'd just vented it out and there wasn't anything left but confusion and pain.

"I'm not, Daniel." I shook my head and tried to soften my tone a little. "I'm not." I took a couple of steps in his direction, but the vibe I was getting from him seemed to indicate he needed some space. "The problem is the lie you were living before you met me. That's the problem. I might be the reason you feel forced to finally do something about it. I'd certainly like to be."

He looked at me for a moment, blinking rapidly before he gave in and rubbed at his eyes with the back of one hand. "You are," he said quietly, nodding once. "Damn it. You are. And it scares the hell out of me. I don't know what it's like, Shane. I don't know if I can come out, if I'm strong enough to do that. And it's not fair to ask you to pretend."

I wouldn't pretend, anyway. I never had and I wasn't going to start now, not even for Daniel, as painful as that idea was to me. I had no intention of telling him that right now, however.

I couldn't tell him what it was like to come out, either, because I didn't know. It seemed like I'd just always been out. I told my mom when I was thirteen, about two days after I figured it out for myself, and that was it. I'd never pretended to be straight. I was no use to Daniel at all.

"People tell me it's easier once you're out, if only because you don't have to lie and make excuses and hide all the time." I took another step in his direction. "Look, Daniel, this only gets harder from here, you've got to see that. You're a public figure and sooner or later someone is going to spot you hooking up somewhere."

"Yeah." He pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes squeezed tightly closed. "Yeah, I know. I said as much to my lawyer." He dropped his hand and looked at me. "I should probably talk to him. Fill him in."

"Probably, if that's where you're most comfortable starting." I took another step, and then another, kind of shuffling in Daniel's direction. He let me get pretty close before I felt like he was ready to step away himself. "Janet could ruin me, too, you know. As soon as all of this comes out, I'm going to send her back her check and hope that she decides to content herself with hating me."

"Don't be ridiculous, she was paying for your time. And you certainly used it." He almost laughed at that. "On the other hand, if she knows that you were having sex with me while on the clock... well." He gave me a steady look, the first time in a while that he'd looked normal, and I hoped that the storm was easing off. "Jason -- my lawyer -- is going to have to know everything you know. You know that, right? And if I'm to be perfectly fair, her lawyer will, too." He made a face at that.

Jason was going to have to know a lot, yeah, but he wasn't going to know everything. I wasn't even sure I wanted Daniel to know absolutely everything. Thank God for attorney-client privilege. "Yeah, uh." I rubbed the back of my neck. "I know who Jason is. I also know that he's handsome and his wife is pregnant. I was there when he told you. You had a club sandwich, I think."

Daniel blinked at me and then nodded. "Yeah. You sent me a text message. Where were you?"

"Back to back with you in the booth next to yours." I bit my lip and winced. "Sorry."

"Is this going to happen a lot? You just knowing stuff and me finding out you were there? Oh, God, are we going to have to relive every hook-up I had so I know what you saw me doing?" He looked like the thought terrified him.

"...no?" I asked, to see if he'd go for that.

Except yes, Daniel would probably want to know that, wouldn't he? He just didn't need to know exactly what I was doing while I was watching. "I could just give you the file," I offered in consolation. "In fact, I should just do that, just give you the whole thing." I stepped over to my desk.

"There's a file?" Daniel squeaked. "Of course there's a file. Oh, God. Pictures?"

"File, pictures, notes, phone log, instant messenger logs, a couple of audio recordings..." I looked up at Daniel and he had started to go pale again. "Okay, maybe that's too much information?"

"Better just show it all to me," Daniel said, sitting back down. "Audio? No video? And it's oddly comforting that you do this for a living and aren't a scary stalker."

"Still pictures only. You get into too much trouble with legal issues when you do video." I looked at him. "Don't give me more credit than I deserve. I was definitely a stalker, too." I grinned. "I've been a bad boy." I

pushed the file over to him. It was larger than I'd realized and even I was stunned by just how many pictures I'd taken.

Daniel flipped the folder open and started going through things, at first pointedly ignoring the photos. It took less than two minutes for him to pull the file into his lap, his gaze fixed on what he was reading. In less than four minutes the blush started and he began flipping through the photos, at first quickly and then slowing down. "Oh, my God," he whispered, staring. "I... Oh, God."

"Yeah, you're hot, right? Can't blame a guy for watching, can you?" I had this urge to flip through and point out my favorites, but I thought that might be taking things a little too far.

"I'm not hot," Daniel protested, looking at a photo. "I do appear to really like sex, though. God, Jason's going to kill me." He looked up at me, his face flaming. "You watched. Listened. Got off on it?"

"I... uh." I felt my own face flush and my ears got hot. I always knew I was blushing when my ears got hot. "How honest do you want me to be here, Daniel?"

Daniel gave me a cool look, even with his face still flaming and his hand clutching a photo of him getting off. "I think we've hidden enough already, don't you?"

I returned the look for a long moment and then nodded. "Yeah, I got off on it. Several times. I took the whole voyeur thing way too far. I also have a couple of those pictures on my computer... at home."

I looked at Daniel and started to babble. A horrible stream of words poured out of me in an attempt to soften that confession. "I swear, I don't know what got into me. I just... you were irresistible to me right from the beginning. I don't know exactly when it transitioned from work to... *that*." I swallowed and rubbed my face. "Oh, God, I'm such a perv. Somebody shoot me."

"Nobody is going to shoot you," Daniel said softly. He put the photos and all the other crap back in the folder and stood up, coming around to me. "At least, they better not. Look at me, Shane. I'm me. I'm here. I'm not running. I admit to wondering *how* you could watch me with others, but I'm not judging that you liked it."

"You're not?" I asked, surprised by that. "Maybe it's a kink I didn't know I had. Sometime, if you get me drunk enough, I could give you a lot more detail. You are hot, no matter what you say." I inched closer and he stood his ground, so I slipped my fingers into his. "Why aren't you running, Daniel?"

"I don't want to," he said softly. "I don't have the slightest inclination to run. Tell me what you did. Soon, if not now. Celia could come back."

"Oh?" I grinned a little at his request. "Does the idea of being watched turn you on, Daniel?" I asked saucily, stepping close enough that our bodies were touching. We were both a little aroused again, that much was plain. "How about we go back to my place to relax and clean up? Maybe get some food and I'll be happy to tell you what you want to know."

Daniel swallowed hard, not looking away. "I'd like that," he said, leaning toward me a bit. "I'm not sure if I shouldn't be doing smarter things, though. Like calling my lawyer." Then his mouth was on mine again and he stopped talking.

I kissed him back. He was such a great kisser when he slowed down enough to enjoy it. "Right," I said around the kiss, after enjoying it a great deal myself for a while. I pulled away reluctantly and licked my lips, still tasting Daniel on them. "Whatever we're doing, let's not do it here. That desk is murder on my

hips." I felt a little lightheaded. "Call Jason, Janet, work, whatever. I'll back off for a while. Use Celia's desk. I've got some cleaning up to do here."

Daniel nodded and kissed me once more, clearly reluctant to do what he had to do. He was a politician, though, and he'd had to face crises before. "Okay," he said with a sigh. "Phone." He went to sit at Celia's desk, pulled out his cell, and pushed a button. Speed dial, I guessed as I started to clean up the mess we'd made.

"Hi, it's me," he said, his voice utterly normal. "I won't be back in today, something's come up. Anything important come in?"

Office.

"Okay, great," he went on. "I might need you to move a few things in the morning, fair warning... I know, I'm sorry. See you tomorrow." He didn't look at me as he disconnected and then pushed a few buttons, apparently scrolling through his contacts.

"Good afternoon, it's Daniel Brint calling. Is Jason still in...? Thank you." He leaned back in Celia's chair and then bent down and picked up a pen, holding it out to me with a bemused look. "Jason, hey. Thanks for taking the call. Are you busy?... Can you get away? Now? It's kind of important... Yes, really... I know it's almost four in the afternoon. But you remember what I told you at dinner last time? It's hitting the fan... Yeah, really. Janet had a detective following me and it's complicated." He held the phone away from his ear and even I could hear the sound of the ringing 'Jesus Christ.' Daniel looked miserable. "Just get here, okay? No. Not there. Um. Hang on." He looked at me and mouthed, 'where?'

"What do you mean, where? You don't need me to... oh." Daniel was nodding emphatically. "You do? Jesus. Okay, then, how about here?" I suggested with a shrug, taking the pen from Daniel. It was bad enough I had to tell the whole mess to Daniel, but to Jason, too? While Daniel finished his call, I went to the window and propped it open to air the office out, then got a paper towel and scrubbed the sticky stuff off my desk. The veneer had taken the abuse remarkably well. Celia might not even notice.

Daniel hung up after giving out the address and tossed his phone on Celia's desk. "I am not calling my wife," he said emphatically. "And I am not showing Jason that file."

"I don't care if you ever call your wife again. And the file's contents are going home with us after this meeting where we will burn it in the fireplace. Although I might want to keep a few of those pictures." I winked. "God, I must look..." I shook my head, finally taking the time to tuck in my shirt again and brush the wrinkles out of my pants. "Tell me Celia has beer." I went to the mini-fridge under the coffee machine.

"After," Daniel said sharply. "Jason's a lawyer. Don't give him cause, okay? For anything." He softened it with a smile, though, and added, "We can have wine by that fire. And we can discuss which pictures you want to keep."

"Right, sorry. I'm just feeling really unethical and panicking mildly. Sorry." I ran my hand through my hair. "Why do you need me at this meeting? I've already told you everything."

"Because you have more facts than I do. Because I need you here. Because he needs to see those pictures of Janet," Daniel said rapidly. "But mostly because I don't want to do this alone."

I needed something to do, all of a sudden. Daniel was counting on me whether he meant to or not, and after all my talk about how I wanted to support him, I now felt inadequate to the task. Despite the Ghost of Celia sternly telling me not to put myself down, I could think of dozens of ways I was going to let Daniel down,

ruin things, put my foot in my mouth, or otherwise make myself and Daniel look like horny fools.

"I'll print those pictures for him, shall I?" I went back to my desk and sat, opening the laptop and hooking it up to the network.

"Thank you," Daniel said softly. Then he gathered up the dirty coffee mugs and said, "I'll put a fresh pot on." I guessed he needed to be busy, too.

By the time there was a knock at the office door, I had a neat stack of photos and a fresh cup of coffee in front of me. Daniel had made himself neat and tidy and was sitting at Celia's desk, looking pale again. He leaped to his feet at the knock, then looked at me with a slight blush. "I'll just get that."

"You do that," I said. Somehow I couldn't do it without groaning, though.

Daniel didn't seem to notice as he crossed to the door and opened it up. "Hey," he said, stepping aside to let Jason in. "Thanks for coming."

"You hardly left me a choice," Jason said, coming in and glancing around. "My dad always said not to take friends on as clients."

"Yeah, well." Daniel looked vaguely uncomfortable again, like his shoes were a size too small. "Jason, this is Shane Mullen. Shane, my lawyer, Jason Whittaker."

We nodded at each other and then Daniel blithely carried on with the bomb. "Shane is the investigator Janet hired to tail me."

I stood and made my way over, extending my hand. I glanced at Daniel, and then at Jason. "Actually, I'm Daniel's lover, who also happens to be the investigator that Janet hired to tail him. And there you have our entire dilemma. Have a seat. Would you like some coffee?"

Daniel looked thunderstruck, but Jason rolled with it. "Lover. Huh. Got any beer?"

I felt vindicated. "Sure. Thirsty, Daniel?" I walked to the mini-fridge again. There was a heavy silence behind my back and I'm fairly sure Jason and Daniel were exchanging meaningful looks and mouthing things at each other. That didn't bother me at all.

"Celia is a beer snob. We have Bass." I brought one to each of them.

"And Celia is...?" Jason asked, looking back and forth between Daniel and me.

"Vaguely scary," Daniel muttered, "but I'm sure a very nice girl."

"My assistant. Or my partner, depending on the day and who you're talking to. Right arm, Girl Friday, best friend?" I extended my arm, handing Jason the bottle.

"Thanks," he said, taking the beer. "Drink up, Daniel, we have work to do."

Daniel took the beer and actually brushed his hand over mine when he did it. "Thanks," he said again, looking at me.

"Daniel," Jason said with a hint of exasperation. "Damage control mode, here. Work with me. Save the googoo eyes for later."

I winked at Daniel and moved around behind my desk to take a seat.

"Right," Daniel said, tearing his attention away and focusing on Jason. "Bullet summary. Janet thought I was doing drugs, hired Shane. Shane figured out fast what I was really doing. He tailed me, didn't tell Janet what he found, fell for me, hooked up with me, now we're more or less in a weird relationship--"

"Excuse me," I interrupted, "but there's nothing weird about it, in my opinion."

Daniel looked at me and rolled his eyes, but went right on. "He tailed Janet to find out what her motives were, knowing already about our pre-nup, and now he's got photo proof that she's having an affair with Derrick Slater. Oh, and she's got an appointment with Lillian for Friday."

"Her attorney. Great." Jason drank half his beer.

Daniel and I watched, and I ran over it all to see if he'd left anything out. "That was concise," I said to him with a grin.

"I'm a lawyer, too," he said back, smiling.

"Do you have evidence of what Daniel was doing?" Jason asked, apparently ready to go into full-on damage control. He was good.

"Yeah," I said. "We're burning it tonight." Well, most of it.

"Good. Let me see what you've got on Cruella, and tell me how you know about this meeting of hers with her lawyer."

I picked up the stack of pictures and handed them to Daniel, who in turn handed them to Jason. "The pictures I took myself, a few days ago, at the Westin Executive Suites. I found out about that meeting by, uh, well, I have a hacker who got into her online appointment book." I didn't think Jason would approve of that, but we were being truthful, right? "The meeting with her lawyer Celia dug up by contacting a friend of hers that works in Janet's lawyer's office. Really useful coincidence there." I glanced at Daniel and then back at Jason.

"It is, rather," Jason said absently flipping through the pictures. "Well, well. I was expecting our Janet to have a bit more discretion. Kind of hard to talk your way out of having a guy's dick in your hand, though."

Daniel rolled his eyes and cleared his throat, and Jason blinked at him. "Oh, God, sorry."

"Whatever. It's not like it was a happy marriage."

Jason smirked. "Don't be stupid, I was thinking about what you're going to be burning tonight."

"Don't ever hire a friend as your lawyer," Daniel told me firmly.

Interesting. I liked him. Jason might have been the first lawyer I'd met that I actually liked. Or, well, the first lawyer that I wasn't sleeping with that I actually liked. "I'm keeping as many of those pictures as Daniel will let me."

"Is there more beer?" Daniel asked, sounding a bit pained. I pointed to the fridge.

Jason smirked. "I don't need to know that," he said serenely. "Okay, do we know why Janet's going to see her lawyer?"

Daniel shook his head. "No idea. I'm assuming it's about the pre-nup, but I don't know if it's to make sure she can keep me or if she's trying to find an out."

"We never got an answer to that question either." Since Daniel wanted me at this meeting, I decided I was entitled to ask questions, too. "Jason, tell me about this pre-nup. We got hold of an early draft, but it's a lot of legal babble to me. Is there no out for Janet at all? I mean, assuming that they're both cheating and they're not going to rat each other out, is there no way to let Daniel go and for her to move on and still get her money?"

Jason looked thoughtful and sipped his beer. "I haven't read it in a while, since it was signed, actually, so I might be off a bit. It was hard, because it had to line up with her father's will, but still not be something that would be construed as removing free will. Basically, she has to be married to inherit, or show cause as to why she's not. He didn't want divorce, he didn't want her to have a baby out of wedlock, and pretty much put a price tag on her lifestyle. Further, if she did marry, she had to have a pre-nup keeping the money in her name; even if Daniel and Janet stay married until she inherits, it's her money. She can use it to fund him, of course, but it's exempt from any divorce settlement." He took another swallow of beer and held a hand up to Daniel when he tried to say something. "They can get a divorce if either of them can prove that the marriage had no reasonable foundation."

I looked at Daniel. "No reasonable foundation?"

Daniel looked back. "Like being gay?" he said tentatively.

Jason nodded. "Like being gay. You're coming out if you want to be divorced, man. Welcome to the world, it's fine out here."

"Says the man who doesn't have to come out," Daniel sighed. "Jesus. My parents are going to freak the hell out."

I had to ask one more question because I felt like Daniel needed the answer from someone other than me. "And if he comes out, apart from the very public nightmare, is there any legal reason why he has to step out of office?"

"Legally, of course not. It will be an uphill slog getting re-elected, though, especially if his extra-marital activity becomes public. If even one of his hook-ups comes forward and says, 'Hey, I did that guy!' he's sunk. Honestly? My advice would be to make a public statement admitting the whole damn thing. No worries after that about being broadsided."

Daniel looked faintly ill.

"Okay," I said. I got up and moved around to Daniel, crouching by his chair. "I'll stand up there with you if you want me to."

"You will?" Daniel said, looking slightly stunned and a lot worried. "But why?"

I put my hand on his knee. "Because if you actually get up there and do it, I'll be incredibly proud of you and I'll want everyone to know that."

"You'll be in the public eye," Daniel pointed out.

"For two days or so," Jason put in. "Come on, Daniel. Read between the fucking lines."

"Don't rush him, it took me all day to get him this far." I kissed Daniel's temple, stood up, and smiled at Jason. "I disagree about this friends as clients thing, incidentally. It seems to work well for you two."

"The bitching is a nice fiction that we maintain," Jason said with a grin. "I wouldn't trust anyone else to be his lawyer."

"Hi, still in the room," Daniel said. "Okay. Let's just... I'll be at your office tomorrow morning, Jason. Call in and make sure it's on the appointment book, eight a.m." He pulled out his own phone and hit a button. "I'm canceling my morning."

"He does move fast when he wants to," Jason told me dryly. He pulled his phone out, too, and in a moment they were talking to their secretaries and rearranging schedules. I had a wild urge to call Celia, just to fit in.

"Do I need to cancel my morning, too?" Not that I had a morning to cancel.

"Only if Daniel keeps you up all night," Jason said, looking over and winking. "By the way, I'll call Janet and tell her you're sleeping over at my house. It'll be like we're fourteen again and lying to our moms."

"Oh, shut up," Daniel told him. "I'll call her myself and say I'm not coming home tonight."

I stared. I think my jaw dislocated it dropped so fast. "You... you're going to tell her that? Yourself? For real?"

Daniel nodded. "Yes. No more lies. I can't do it. But honestly, I hope she doesn't ask where I'll be." He made a face and sighed. "One more lie. I'm afraid you're going to have to be just a friend until after tomorrow. She has Lillian on speed dial, probably."

"Okay, Daniel, this once. But after tomorrow, I'm significant. Got me?" I grinned and chuckled to smooth the words over a bit, but I was serious and he needed to know that.

"Significant," Daniel repeated, looking at me. "Like, stand next to me and be public and there kind of significant."

"And the penny drops," Jason deadpanned. "Somewhere, there's a clue just waiting to be found, Daniel."

"Yeah." I looked only at Daniel. "Like when are you moving in with me significant."

Daniel stared and Jason laughed. "When Cruella kicks him out. Tomorrow night is probably a good time."

"Jason, go now," Daniel said, standing up and reaching for me.

"Oh, God, not the desk again. That hurt!" I protested, but somehow the protest couldn't wipe the smirk off my face.

"Yeah, I could tell by the whole 'fuck me harder' thing," Daniel said, pulling me to him and kissing me hard.

"I'm gone," Jason said. "I understand there are pictures of this, maybe I'll catch the video sometime..."

I wanted to tell him that I don't do video, but Daniel's kiss was too consuming. His hands pushed into my

hair and his tongue into my mouth and everything -- lawyers, politics, pre-nups, wives, whatever -- all just went away for a while. But when my knees gave out and my ass landed on my desk, I ducked my head away, breaking the kiss. "Wait," I said breathlessly. "Seriously. Desk bad. Bed good. Home." I struggled to catch my breath.

"Now," Daniel growled at me. "Right now. We leave now or it's here."

"See ya!" Jason called, and the door rattled as he closed it too fast.

"Take me home. I'll call on the way." Daniel was already reaching into his pocket for his phone again.

"Sure. We'll take my truck," I said, scrambling around for my coat and my briefcase which I'd set to rights while I was cleaning up the office. "You might recognize it."

"Probably not. You're good at your job," Daniel said, smiling at me.

Chapter Seventeen

Daniel and I, through reluctant if mutual agreement, did our best to cool it off a little on the ride back to my apartment. He needed to call Janet, after all, and I had a bonfire to light in my fireplace. Plus, I'd promised Celia I'd call her and I knew she'd be calling me by dinner time if she hadn't heard from me.

So by the time we walked through my front door, which, I reminded myself as I grinned like a fool, might be our front door before long, we had both pictured enough icebergs to be friendly.

"Need wine for the phone call?" I asked, setting my things down.

"No, but immediately after would be good," Daniel said. He looked faintly ill again. "Look, Shane. I know it's not ideal, but I can't tell her yet. Not all of it. I'm sorry."

"I know. It's more complicated than me and you. I know that. You stick to your promise that you will, and it's all good." I wanted to kiss him, but that was a slippery slope, so I rubbed his back and then headed for the kitchen. "Whiskey a better sedative?"

"I want to be awake after," he said, patting my ass as he followed me. "Just... be here when I'm done, okay?" He took a deep breath and got his phone out.

"I'll be right back. I plan to be here for the whole damn thing." I hurried off for a bottle of wine and a couple of glasses. I could hear him clearing his throat in the other room, in a way I imagined he might before making a political speech or a statement. I came back with the wine just as he was putting the phone to his ear.

"Hi," he said a moment later, taking his glass. "How was your day?" Immediately he winced and I could see himself kicking himself for inviting conversation. "Look, I just wanted to let you know that something's come up and I won't be in tonight... No, no, not work this time. A friend in crisis." He rolled his eyes and pointed to himself. "I'll tell you all about it tomorrow." He sure as hell would. Or Jason would tell Lillian. Something.

Daniel listened for a moment, nodding. "I know. I do. I'm sorry. If I'd had more notice you would, too. Look, I'll explain tomorrow, okay? Okay. Goodnight." He hung up and shuddered, then promptly shoved the wine glass at me. "Fill it up. If I wasn't getting divorced, I'd be getting divorced, I think."

"That was well done," I told him, wishing it could have been more than it was. I filled his glass quickly and handed it back. "Wait," I said, filling mine as well. I knelt in front of him. "A toast, hm? To the truth. And to us."

Daniel stared at me for a moment, then smiled shyly. "That's a good one," he said, leaning forward to kiss me. "To truth and us. And a new start."

"And to the phone ringing," I said, getting up quickly to answer it. "You know who that is, don't you? And don't say my mother."

"Tell Celia I said I admire her timing," Daniel said, lifting his wine glass with a sigh.

I knew it was Celia, really. I just checked the Caller ID to be sure. "You just don't care what you're interrupting, do you?" I said with a laugh.

"Well, this afternoon I kind of thought it would be a fight. This time I was aiming for sex. By the way, do you always come that hard or is it a Daniel thing?" she asked sweetly.

I felt my ears get hot and I turned my back to Daniel so he wouldn't see me blush. "Shut up," I snapped.

"Oh, Daniel thing, got it. And he's there?"

"Yes. We had a very interesting afternoon after you left, filled with talk and lawyers and truth. Lots and lots of truth."

"Go, Shane," she said, sounding impressed. "You told him all of it? Wait, lawyers? Tell me. Oh, man, we're not getting sued, are we?"

I laughed. "Remarkably, no," I looked back at Daniel and grinned. "We are not being sued." I winked at him. "Actually, I need to ask you a big favor for tomorrow morning."

"Okay," she said slowly. "But I'm not cleaning up spunk or anything like it."

"Let us remember I'm not the first person to mess around on my desk, hm?"

Celia snorted. "My breasts don't make that kind of mess, Boss."

"And thank God for that." I laughed. "Okay, here's the errand. I need you to run down to the drycleaner and pick up my suit that's been hanging there for like ten years. Then I need you to buy me a stylish tie to go with it. Bring them both to the office. Oh, and wear something nice -- preferably not green. We're going to Daniel's coming out party."

"Okay, listen up, Shane. I will be there. I will be nicely dressed and I will have clothes for you. But there is no way in hell I'm letting Daniel see that suit. And will there be drinks after? Can I bring Susan? We can add a little class to the affair."

Daniel was looking at me with wide eyes and an empty wine glass. When he started coming toward me, I noticed the glint in his eye. Celia and her wardrobe plans suddenly seemed unimportant.

"Yeah, sure, sounds good. Buy me a suit to go with the tie. Bye, Celia." I hung up the phone. "Hi," I said to Daniel, meeting his hot stare and swallowing hard.

"Hi," Daniel purred at me. "Nice wine. Touch me."

I looked at the wineglass in my hand, took a long swig, and set it down next to the phone. "Didn't your mother teach you to say 'please'?" I teased, closing the last few inches of distance between us. I pressed my hand to the bulge in his trousers and grinned.

"She did," he said pleasantly, pushing against my palm and caressing my ass. "Please take me to bed, Shane. Or a nice bit of floor, even."

"Come on." I took Daniel by the hand and pulled him through the apartment to the bedroom. Last time we

were here we were on the clock. This time, as far as I was concerned, clocks didn't exist. I stopped him in the doorway and tugged off his belt, tossing it aside before my fingers loosened the button and lowered his fly. "I've been dying for a taste of this all damn day," I told him, and sunk to my knees.

"There's a bed right there," he pointed out, a little breathlessly. But even as he spoke he was leaning back on the frame of the door, one hand shoving his trousers off his hips and the other tugging his cock free of his boxers.

"And we'll get there," I said, lowering my gaze from his eyes to his cock and helping him with the trousers. "God, Daniel." I was feeling breathless myself as I leaned forward to taste him. Just a tease, just to hear him moan.

It was a rich sound, low and full of anticipation. "Shane," he whispered, his hand brushing my cheek before his fingers slid through my hair. "Please."

I leaned forward farther and opened my mouth, letting just the head in and wrapping my fingers around the shaft. It was solid in my hand, but silky against my fingers and I stroked slowly, finally able to give Daniel the attention I had in my fantasies.

His scent and the taste of his cock stirred heat in my belly and I felt my skin flush and then cool slightly as I started to perspire. I was too hot and too clothed and my free hand tugged at the buttons of my oxford.

"Yes," he said softly, almost in a whisper. I wasn't sure if he meant what I'd done with my tongue or not, so I did it again and he groaned. The hand in my hair tightened a little before relaxing and he laughed. "This is going to take me to my knees, isn't it?"

Looking up at Daniel from the floor, I stopped what I was doing so I could answer him and also use both hands to get my shirt off at the same time. I was starting to feel completely strangled by it. "Go sit. I'm on my knees already."

"Trust me, I noticed," Daniel said, his eyes burning with the same intensity they'd had in the living room. He didn't move toward the bed, either, but he did watch as my shirt came off, one hand lazily going to his erection. "God, you're hot," he told me.

"Maybe. Or maybe you're just really horny." I tossed the shirt aside and opened the top button of my trousers and my fly, which, given my suddenly impatient prick, were now starting to feel too tight as well. I leaned forward again and covered Daniel's hand with mine, making a quick note of his grip and the pace he'd set, then bathed him with my tongue again. There had been plenty of sex in my bedroom, but apart from what went on in my head, nothing had ever been this sexy.

Daniel started talking almost at once, after a shuddering breath. "God, yeah. Like that. So nice, just like that." He twitched when I tongued him just under the head, so I did it again, liking the way it made him groan.

It was a long slow blowjob, the kind you so want to get but never imagine being able to give yourself. But I was into it -- his taste, his sounds -- and by the time I felt his fingers tangle tightly in my hair, I wanted it as badly as he did.

"Yes," Daniel whimpered, his hips rocking. "Shane. Please." His fingers were flexing, not quite guiding me, but it was pretty easy to tell he was holding back. I could feel his legs start to tremble, and his dick got a fraction harder.

I groaned when I could get air. My mind was shouting "Yes! Do it, Daniel!" I didn't want him to hold back, I wanted him to know that he could have me. I wanted him to let go. I reached around behind his ass, digging my fingers into the tight muscles there and tugged him forward, pushing his cock into my throat.

"Shit." Daniel cursed and I could feel him resisting for a moment, but when I bobbed my head and did it again he groaned and pulled my hair firmly. "Shane," he gasped, starting to move with purpose. He plunged into my mouth, his hand pulling my head forward and for a good half dozen strokes he fucked me hard, taking me. Then he froze, his cock deep in my mouth, and groaned again as he came in long pulses.

I had to shift a little to swallow and I was completely overwhelmed by him. I started kissing and biting and working my way up his body as I got to my feet again, pausing at his nipples before taking his jaw between my palms and kissing him hard. I couldn't get enough, couldn't get close enough, and my trousers became more than just an annoyance. I growled, I think, and shoved them down impatiently, toeing my shoes off with them and kicking the whole pile aside.

"Want you," I told him truthfully. "Want you so bad." It seemed like the apartment was a thousand degrees. "Jesus, Daniel, touch me, will you?"

"I will," he said, almost laughing as he reached for me. "I'm trying." He might have been, I wasn't really sure. He was kissing me, though, and urging me to the bed, his hands on my hips and then my cock. "Wait for me," he said, kissing me hard and then pulling back to finish undressing.

I watched him, willing myself and my uncooperative body to wait. I had managed to catch my breath a bit until he let his shirt slide from his shoulders and then it caught again. It didn't seem like Daniel worked out regularly, but God, he was so well-made. His shoulders were wide and his hips tight and everything in between was beautiful.

"You are gorgeous," I said, scooting into the center of the bed. "Look at you. I can't believe you're mine."

I bit my lip and I blushed fast and hard, if my burning ears were any indication. The last thing I wanted to do was scare Daniel off by saying stupid things like 'mine.' "Shit, sorry," I stammered. "Um, I meant 'here.' Not that I don't want more, but, yeah, too honest. Damn it."

Jesus Christ, my apology was worse than the blunder. I was so rattled that my hands started to shake and I pressed them to my eyes. "Crap, I'm sorry."

"Shane." Daniel said my name just above a whisper and then he was on the bed with me, his weight making the mattress shift and his hands on my wrists, gently tugging them away from my face. "Shane, look at me. Don't say you're sorry. Please. I mean, you pretty much already laid claim to me in front of my lawyer, it would really suck if you went back on it when we're alone."

I let him tug my hands away, but my head was still reeling from the adrenaline rush and the chorus of "stupid, stupid, stupid" that I'd been repeating to myself silently. I thought up and just as quickly dismissed a whole host of things I could have said, finding them utterly inadequate to the moment. I met his eyes reluctantly, but I didn't find pity or sympathy or whatever it was I'd been expecting. Instead I found a little smile and something a lot more genuine.

"I'm not going back on it, I just... man, I've been here before and said too much too soon, you know? No filter when I'm horny, I guess."

Daniel gave me a curious look and then kissed me softly. "I like honesty," he murmured against my mouth. "Haven't had a lot of it in my life lately."

"You'll get more from me from now on, I swear," I said kissing him back. "Hey, here's some honesty for you: I really, really want to fuck you. Soon."

"How soon?" Daniel asked, kissing me again with a bit of tongue. But it was his hand on my prick that really got my attention. "This soon? Jesus, you've got a nice cock. Did I tell you that before? It's true."

"Yes? No? I don't know, say it again." My head clouded for other reasons this time. "Oh, and keep doing that. Yes. I was thinking soon like now on that fucking thing." I cleared my throat because my voice was getting husky, but when I started to talk again, it was lower still. "On your back, Daniel. I want to see you when I'm inside you, want to see what it does to you."

"Perfect." Daniel almost purred as his hand moved on me, rubbing and stroking. "I can pretty much promise it's going to make me yell. It's going to make me tell you over and over how much I want you, how good it is." He gripped me a little tighter and dragged the palm of his hand over the head of my cock. "Now would be good."

Something incredible happened to me then; my apparent inner caveman sent a growl up from the depths of my soul and I shoved Daniel, one hand securely on his shoulder and the other on his hip, and rolled him onto his back. I'm sure I had a deer-in-headlights look, but Daniel was watching me hotly and he lay back looking more than willing, his knees open. The lube and rubbers in the nightstand were easily within reach and I snagged them after only a moment of disorientation at the sudden possession.

"Now," I said, nodding. "Fucking right now." I slid my slippery fingers over his hole and teased one inside.

"Now," he agreed, pushing back. "More." His legs spread wider, bracketing me and sliding along my thighs, his hands going to my shoulders. It was hard to miss the way his cock was firming up again, too.

I removed my finger and nudged at Daniel's ass, my cock aching in a really lovely and distracting way. He arched, trying to do my job for me, and I hissed, moved over him, and pushed slowly inside him until I was seated deeply, balls crushed against his ass. "Daniel!" I panted, tucking my forehead against his chest until the lightheaded feeling passed. "Oh, God, yes."

"Shane." His hands moved over me, one running through my hair again and the other petting my shoulders. He was panting, too, his body straining under me as he let me in and held me, his legs curling around my hips. "Perfect. Knew it would be."

"Only gets better from here," I said softly, and started to move, trying for long, slow strokes, but knowing they weren't as long as I'd hoped. "Tight, Daniel. Oh, my God." Tight or not, after a few strokes, I picked up what seemed to be a natural rhythm. I say natural because I stopped thinking about it and just did what felt good; what felt right.

He moved with me, against me, and that was natural, too. His thighs were strong on my hips, sliding a bit as we worked up a sweat again, but his heels would dig in and I'd find myself driving into him.

"Yes," Daniel groaned, almost every time. His eyes were dark and out of focus and he darted out his tongue to lick his lower lip. I'd watched him enough to know the signs, but it was different, being with him.

It took me a minute to realize that Daniel wasn't just letting me fuck him, he was an energetic and enthusiastic partner in this thing, and it was hotter than I thought possible. "Daniel. So good." I changed my angle a bit, making my thrusts a little more shallow and faster. I'd always been a babbler in bed. I wanted to tell him how badly I wanted this, how incredible it felt, but words were hard for me this time; they'd flicker

over my tongue and get lost in a grunt or moan.

Daniel was oddly non-verbal, too. He wasn't grunting out directions or panting curses at me like I'd heard him do before. Curiously, I slipped one of my hands between us and gave his cock a tug.

"Shane!" he yelled, his back arching as he tried to both move into my thrust and push his cock through my hand. Cords were standing out on his neck and he clutched at my arm.

That? I had to see again. I stroked him fast, just for a few seconds, and then let his cock fall loose between us again.

His eyes flew open and cleared for a moment as he looked at me. "More," he said succinctly, driving himself back onto me. And then he smiled, his whole face lighting up, like he was having a hell of a good time.

I grinned back. "You slut," I said, and took hold of his cock once again. Braced on one arm, my thrusts felt a little uneven, but Daniel wasn't complaining, and I was pretty damn happy with the whole thing myself. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes a minute, just to feel, and everything fell into place again. I snapped my hips faster, and when I looked at Daniel again, his smile had been replaced by a beautiful grimace. It wasn't long before I felt everything narrow like a lens down to one single object.

"Yes!" My breath was shallow and tight, and my hips were starting to disobey me and move of their own accord, pumping heavily and causing the bed to sway. "Fuck, Daniel. Close!"

He made a noise, his fingers digging into my biceps, and nodded. "Harder," he gasped out. "Fuck me harder. Make me come, Shane. Jesus, make me come. Fuck me."

I let go of his prick and braced both arms up by his shoulders, thrusting harder and deeper, pounding blindly over and over again. I started to tremble and gulp for air as I fucked him, but I watched his face as long as I could, eyes wide open, just to see that look that first drew me in. I could feel little spasms building in him and heard his begging whimpers start to mix in with the groans. His fingers dug into my skin here and there, his need was so obvious to me and mine was becoming very hard to hold back. "Do it, Daniel. Fuck! Come on!"

His head tilted back and he cried out, his body going tight around me. His legs seized up around my hips, his ass clamped around my cock, and he yelled again, tendons standing out and muscles twitching as he came for me, yelling my name in a rough voice.

There was nothing better than hearing Daniel scream my name in a moment of passion. It was completely uncensored, honest desire and it sent shivers down my spine. My hips bucked uselessly against a vise and then the rush started, roaring through my body like a runaway train. I rode it out, unaware of anything I did or said; everything took a backseat to the sheer pleasure of it, the strength and satisfaction of my orgasm and the feel of Daniel's body under me were all I knew for a time.

Eventually, I felt myself blinking and the room came back, along with the sound of Daniel's panting and the sweet, satisfying smell of sweat and hot punk.

"Shane," he said again, much quieter. Gently. "Shane, look at me. Kiss me. Please."

"Yeah," I nodded, understanding exactly where he was coming from. I leaned down and kissed him, gently at first and then just a little more firmly, feeling the onslaught of emotion as if it was pouring off his tongue. "Shhh..." I hushed him around the kiss, knowing he had a lot he wanted to say stuck somewhere between his body and his mind. "I know."

He nodded and licked at my mouth before settling, his hair damp on his forehead and his hands petting me again. I don't think he even knew he was doing it, but it was there, all the same. Gentle hands on my skin, soothing and keeping contact. "I know," he whispered to me. "I know that you know. And that's what makes it right."

I pulled back enough to look into his eyes. After another moment of unspoken emotion, I had to break the tension. "That was..." I started to say, and then realized I didn't have the vocabulary either. "Wow." I grinned at Daniel. "Wow."

Daniel grinned back and laughed. "Yeah. Wow is good. As are wild and fan-fucking-tastic."

"And hot. I think you set my sheets on fire." I laughed and grinned down at him.

"That was all you," he protested, patting my ass. "Have I mentioned that you have a very, very nice cock?"

"You did. Thank you. Did I mention that your body is beautiful?"

"You did," he said with a wink. "And now that the mutual appreciation has been vocalized and demonstrated, it might be time to wash off the results." He looked vaguely hopeful about that part.

I looked down at my stomach and grinned, then traced a little trail in the sticky come on my abs. "Nice. But yeah," I agreed, shifting to let him roll out from under me. "We probably should head for th— whoa!" I guess my knee was closer to the edge of the mattress than I'd expected. Daniel moved, or the bed moved or something, and the next thing I knew my back hit the floor. I blinked hard, a little surprised to see the ceiling above me.

Daniel's face appeared and he looked down at me, obviously trying very hard not to laugh. "Are you all right?" he asked politely.

"Oh, yeah. I did that on purpose," I said with a snicker, shifting as if getting comfortable. "Just what my chiropractor ordered." Wincing a little, I started to sit up. "The bump on my head I could do without, however."

Immediately, Daniel was there with gentle fingers, feeling my head carefully. "Does it hurt? Are you okay, really?"

I batted them away. "I'm fine. I'm just a klutz. Celia will warn you I live with one foot in the emergency room." I got up, smiling at Daniel, who looked genuinely concerned. "Really. But I'll let you fuss over me if it will make you feel better."

"It will," Daniel said firmly. "I'll let you know when it gets old, though. How's that?"

"That's fair." I got to my feet, grinning broadly. "Now, which one of you do I kiss?" I joked.

"Both of us," Daniel told me with a nod. "But if we're three or more, you need a doctor. Got that?"

"Don't worry. There's only one of you." I tugged Daniel closer by the arm. "And you're mine."

Chapter Eighteen

I couldn't imagine a better start to my day than waking up next to Daniel Brint; all mussed and smiling and stomach rumbling. The smile faded a bit as the charm of that first hour of pattering around and getting dressed together started to wear off and the weight of the day he had ahead of him settled on his shoulders.

I got coffee into him and a few bites of toast, but he complained of a sour stomach and grimaced at the thought of anything else to eat. So after a long embrace in the front hall -- one of those hugs that had to last all day -- I bundled Daniel into my truck and we drove downtown to Jason's legal offices.

The waiting room was stylish and had windows that looked out over the city. I was a little stunned by how shiny it seemed, the chrome accents and glass coffee table sparkled at me, making me feel a little out of place. Daniel had been in with Jason for close to an hour and I had read both magazines and counted fifty-seven yellow taxi cabs while I'd been waiting.

"Shane? Can you come in here for a minute?" It was Jason, not Daniel, and he looked a little stressed. Not really what I wanted to see.

"Did he faint?" I asked, heading for Jason's office. "He wouldn't eat breakfast. I wanted him to, I tried, but he was too anxious and--" I shut my mouth abruptly. "Sorry. What's up?"

"Oh, jeeze, not you, too." Jason rolled his eyes and led me into his office, closing the door behind us. "You," he said to me, pointing at a chair. "Sit. And you, Daniel, can explain to Shane why coming out today and making a public statement would be a bad idea."

I felt like a chastised child. "Sorry," I muttered again, looking at Daniel. "It's a bad idea?"

"Well," Daniel said, glaring at Jason, "he's made a couple of points. Like it would be good to actually have Janet served and tell her first. And tell the Mayor. And my campaign manager. And get things in motion so the people who will be asked what they have to say aren't broadsided."

I looked from Daniel to Jason to Daniel again, not caring much for all this political spin stuff. "Oh."

Daniel nodded sharply. "That's what I said. Then he pointed out that this is going to be all over the news and that it wouldn't exactly be helpful if the Mayor is asked to comment on the situation and he's utterly blank. Kind of hard to get re-elected if you screw the system you're working for."

I sighed and sat back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest. "Okay." Stupid logic. Sure it made sense, and Daniel had a career to protect. Sure, he wanted to get the papers in order to have Janet served. That all made perfect sense. "Back to the closet for us, then? Fine. I'm defeated. Now what?" I tried not to look like I was pouting.

Daniel raised an eyebrow at me. "Who said that? I can talk to Janet in an hour and I've got a call in to the Mayor for this afternoon. One way or another, I'm moving this along fast."

Jason didn't look too happy about that, but what did I care?

I watched Daniel. He looked like he was starting to lose a little of that helpless look in his eyes. I decided I'd better at least try to be part of the solution instead of the problem I'd been for the last two days. I looked at Jason. "Can he stay with me or does he need to stay in a hotel?"

Jason snorted. "I don't get a voice on that one. You didn't hear the yelling?"

"Why, no. I didn't." I grinned slowly and looked back at Daniel. "Good boy," I said, my grin growing wider still.

Daniel grinned back. "I don't do *that* kind of thing. At least, I didn't. We can talk later." He winked and reached over to take my hand. "Today is going to suck, though."

"Yeah. Maybe tomorrow, too. Tell me it's worth it? I hate to think you're going through all of this out of obligation or because..." I stopped and mentally kicked myself while I took a deep breath, letting it out in a long sigh. "I guess I'm feeling a little insecure. I'm sorry. That's the last thing you need today, I know."

"It's worth it," Daniel said softly, looking at me intently.

Jason cleared his throat. "Um. Gentlemen. If I may direct your attention back to the matter at hand?"

"In a minute," I said, leaning in and kissing Daniel lightly. He kind of melted against my lips, and in that moment I would have let him toss me over Jason's desk if he wanted to. And I bet he wanted to. I shoved the image from my mind, though my prick was a little harder to subdue. When I pulled away I winked at Daniel and smiled. "I guess we should let him talk."

"He talked a lot already," Daniel said, utterly ignoring his lawyer.

"Daniel." Jason's voice was sharp enough to make both of us look at him. "Get up. Go leave your wife. Tell her the papers will be with her lawyer this afternoon. Have one drink. Come clean to the Mayor, the council, and your campaign manager. Then hide. Clear? Make your statement tomorrow morning."

"One drink? You're making him walk the plank with one drink?" I tried to look shocked.

"I'm trying to keep him from confessing to paying for gay sex to the Mayor while he's drunk," Jason said bluntly.

I stared at Jason for a minute, then looked at Daniel. "Oh. Yeah."

Daniel's eyes dropped. "He's kind of got a point."

"I don't care, you know. If it matters. I get that someone else might, but I don't."

"A lot of people will," Jason put in, not unkindly. Then he pointedly turned his back to stare out the window.

Daniel nodded slowly. "Okay," he said. "I kind of have to believe you, really. It hurts too much to think that it does matter to you, you know?"

"I'm all about truth, remember? We've had enough lying." I gave Daniel's hand a squeeze. "Okay, so Janet first?" I looked at Daniel. "You want a ride? Or would you rather pick up your car?"

"Oh, man." Daniel made a face that even I couldn't find attractive. "I better take my car. I'll meet you, after."

Um, your place or your office?"

"Call or send me a text message. I have no idea where I'll be."

"Okay." Daniel stood up, dragging me with him. "Thank you," he said, kissing me firmly.

"Thank you." I smiled after the kiss, feeling warm. "You can do this, you know."

"God, I hope so," he breathed. "It's more that I can't not do it, though."

I nodded and looked over my shoulder at Jason. "Thanks. We'll be in touch soon."

"Sooner than you think, if Daniel actually answers his phone. I'll be a big part of your lives for the next while."

"Great, you can help me move," Daniel said with a grin.

"Get out of my office," Jason said, grinning back.

I took that as an order and tugged Daniel after me. We didn't talk much on the way to get his car. He kissed me and I wished him good luck and then he drove off, to Janet. By the time I showed up at the office I was pretty lost in thought and I'd forgotten the surprise I had for Celia in my briefcase.

"Hey," I said as I walked in, going right to my desk.

"Hey," she said slowly, looking at me over the glasses of the day. "What are you doing here? And your new suit is hanging up in the loo."

"Oh. Won't need that today. Maybe tomorrow." I sat down in my desk chair and immediately regretted it as I stared at the coffee pot. It seemed miles away. "Daniel's lawyer smacked us with a reality check this morning and Daniel is on his way to tell Janet he's leaving her."

"Um, that's good, isn't it? The leaving part?" Celia sounded confused, which meant she was annoyed. She hated being confused almost as much as she hated people who don't pay up on time.

"Yeah, the leaving part is good. Even putting the party off a day or two is okay. It's the look on Daniel's face and the tension in his shoulders that I can't take. God." I rubbed my face and grunted in frustration. "And there's nothing I can do to make this easier except be there after he's done."

Celia raised an eyebrow and clicked her tongue. "So, what you're telling me is that he's doing exactly what you wanted him to do, that it's a short term hurty thing, and you get to comfort him." She shrugged and dropped her pencil on her desk before coming over to sit on mine. "You do know that you being all achy about it is really quite adorable, right?"

I looked up at her. "I should fire you for being so cheerful," I said. But she had a point. It was short-term, or at least it ought to be. And I was achy. Adorable, I couldn't attest to, however.

"It means you love him," she said, smiling broadly at me. "His pain is your pain, his laughter is your laughter, and all that other crap they put on the yucky greeting cards."

Oh, my God, she said the "L" word. Sober. Even I hadn't said the "L" word. "My God, you're right, I do. I better tell him."

"In person!" she yelled, looking horrified. Like I'd really just call him up.

"Actually, I was thinking of letting you do it." I snorted. "I need coffee." I stood up and made my way over to the pot, and that was when I remembered what was in my briefcase. It would be a perfect change of subject. "Oh! I have a present for you."

"Is it a pony?" Celia hopped off my desk and bounced a bit. "A diamond? Plane tickets for two to a wonderful deserted island except for the person serving umbrella drinks? A new mouse 'cause I broke mine yesterday?"

"What? You broke your mouse?" I pretended to sound annoyed. "Ugh!"

"That's exactly what I said! Gimme my present."

I grinned. "What time is it?" I headed back to my desk with my mug.

"What do you mean, what time is it? It's present time, obviously."

I laughed and looked at my watch. Ah. Perfect. I put my mug down, opened my briefcase, and handed Celia a long flat box. "I didn't have time to wrap it, sorry."

"This is not a pony," she said, taking the box with a grin. "Heavy. Hmm. Thunks nicely." She took the box to her desk and carefully lifted the lid off, like the gift was going to leap out and bite her. "Oh, Shane," she said, all teasing gone. "This is gorgeous."

She lifted the heavy, antique magnifying glass out of the box and peered through it at her broken mouse. "Wow."

There was a knock at the door. I grinned at Celia and went to answer it. "Good morning, gentlemen," I said to the two workmen in the hall.

"Uh, yeah. How are ya? Mr. Mullen?"

"That's me." I really shouldn't have been so pleased with myself.

"You wanted a name added to the door?"

"Yes, please. Celia DeWolfe. D.e. capital W.o.l.f.e. Got it? Right under mine."

"DeWolfe, yep. You got it." The door closed again and the men started working in the hall.

I looked at Celia, whose mouth seemed to be hanging open just a little. "Welcome to the firm, Partner."

Celia put the magnifying glass down with more care than I've ever seen her take with anything, including my mother's wine glasses that Mom swears are from my great-grandmother. Celia's terrified of those glasses. Then she stood up, still not saying anything, and flung herself at me with enough force that we both hit the wall. "Yes!" she yelled, wiggling a little too much for my comfort. "If Daniel doesn't keep you, tell your mom the wedding's on. Or, you know. We can have dinner or something."

I laughed. Celia deserved the promotion for sure, and she was so delighted I wondered why it had taken me so long to realize it. "Why don't we just call it a day and have lunch? I have the wrong bits, remember?"

Susan said so."

"Susan is smart, and has the right bits, but still. God, Shane." Celia was grinning like her face was going to split in two, and if I wasn't totally off the mark, there was a shine to her eyes, too. "Thank you."

"My pleasure. This whole experience has made it very clear to me that I can't possibly run this business without you. And if you're that vital, then you deserve to be a partner. Plus," I said, sitting on the edge of my desk, "this way I can blame stuff on you from now on."

"And I can blame you," she said. She got herself a cup of coffee, as well, still kind of vibrating. "So, Partner. What's going on today?"

"Don't you blame me for everything anyway?" I winked and sat back down behind my desk to watch Celia's name go up on the door backwards through the opaque glass. "Oh," I looked at Celia again. "We need to refund Janet her money, I think, and send her attorney copies of our file on her while we're at it. Shall I let you write the accompanying letter, Partner?" I grinned at her.

She stared at me and blinked once. "Why are we giving her back her money? You spent a lot of time tailing her husband, just like she wanted."

"Daniel said the same thing," I sighed. "You think we should keep it? Really? I mean... I lied to her, too. At first I had a good reason, but as soon as she finds out about us... hm. Of course, we do have the dirt on her, too, so... it doesn't feel unethical to you?"

"Screw ethics. We have bills." Celia pointed to her inbox on her desk and snorted. "It's not like you sat on your ass and did nothing, Shane."

"No, I did plenty of stroking off, thanks for reminding me." I sighed. "Okay, so we'll keep it. Pay the bills, Partner." I sipped my coffee. "I like saying that word. Mullen and DeWolfe. Sounds good, right? I can't work today. Do I have to work today?"

"No," she said, reaching for the bills. "What you have to do is fill me in before I break down and beg. Christ, Shane. I've been a good girl. Where's Daniel? What's going on?"

"Well, like I told you, he's off breaking up with his wife. After that, he has to talk to," I threw my hands up in frustration, "I don't know, the Mayor, the council, his campaign manager, his secretary, his mother, and God only knows who else. He's got to do all of that before he can out himself to the rest of the world, you know? People have to have answers to questions before they're asked. Political spin. A game plan. A party line." I set my empty coffee mug down on the desk. "He's got an incredibly emotional day ahead of him, assuming he can really do all of this in one day, and I have to sit here until he is done with it."

"And why is that?" Celia asked, not even looking at me as she flipped through bills. "You're a private eye. Follow him. Or, you know. Buy me a celebratory drink at lunch, which is in about twenty minutes."

I looked at her. The thought had not even occurred to me. Celia was much sneakier than I was. "He... didn't ask me to follow him. He didn't say that I could. I think that would be dishonest, don't you?"

Celia glanced at me, her brow furrowed. "Yeah, I guess. Huh. It's weird, having the mark in on the secrets. I guess that leaves lunch, then. Is Daniel going to call you when he's done with the ho-bag?"

"He's going to call me at some point, yes. I don't know if it will be after Janet or after the mayor or what, but I told him to get in touch on my Treo and I'd be wherever he needed me to be." I stood up. "And he's not 'the

mark' anymore, he's my boyfriend." I grinned. "Let's go eat."

"Right, right. Boyfriend. Partner. Hey, it's been a big day for you--you should totally tell your mom that you've kicked all your commitment issues." Celia grinned at me and grabbed her purse. "I want something with a lot of calories."

Except that I hadn't yet. I trusted Daniel, and I wanted to believe that he could do this. I told him he could, I told myself that he could, but part of me wasn't going to be satisfied until we didn't have to hide anymore. Until I could shout out how happy we were from the rooftop of my apartment building. Or maybe something slightly less dramatic. "Cheeseburgers?" I asked, grabbing my coat and checking to be sure I had my Treo with me.

"Lobster," Celia beamed at me.

I laughed. "Fine, lobster. But only because we can write it off as a business expense." I shoed her out the door. "Careful," I said, still laughing. "Don't smudge the painters' work."

We tiptoed past them and Celia paused to admire her name, her smile growing even wider. "I've got to call Susan," she said, finally heading down the hall. "She'll get a kick out of that. Oh, by the way, she wants to know if you need help moving Daniel's things. I think she has a brother or something who owes her a favor."

"Tell her yes and book him for the weekend," I said, looping my arm around Celia's shoulders as we left the building. "Tell her the two of you can come help us rearrange the furniture and then we'll all go out on a double date. I know this Greek place..."

Chapter Nineteen

Celia did have lobster, in fact, but she seemed to realize about halfway to the restaurant that as a partner she somehow had to become fiscally responsible. She assured me that the lobster salad was fantastic, though.

We had a good lunch and tossed around ideas for painting the office when we had the time, and Celia made plans for business cards, stationary, and for actually getting her license. She was happy, which nicely distracted me from thinking about Daniel for whole minutes at a time. I kept my phone under close watch, however, so when it finally rang I answered halfway through the first ring.

"Hey, it's me," Daniel said, his voice weary.

"Hi, you," I replied, pointing at the phone and mouthing 'Daniel' at Celia. "Where are you in your day?"

"I know that," Celia said clearly. "Hi Daniel! I got a promotion!"

"She... uh, that's nice?" Daniel said. "Wait, that means you gave her a promotion. What?"

"Yes," I smiled, despite Daniel's listless tone. "I woke up a couple of days ago thinking there was no way I could do what I do without her anymore, at which point I thought I'd better do something to make it worth her while to stay with me. I had her name put on the door this morning. Mullen and DeWolfe. What do you think?" I looked at Celia and mouthed 'salary talk later.'

"It sounds good," Daniel told me. "Not as good as Mullen and Brint, but good anyway. Are you at the office?"

Celia merely looked gleeful and I could almost see her planning her future investment strategy.

"Mullen and Brint is an entirely different kind of..." I cleared my throat. "Firm. We're out to lunch, we were just finishing up. Are you okay?" That was a stupid question, and I knew it. "Need me to be somewhere?"

"Your place," Daniel said promptly. "Um. Our place. I need a key. And you. Please."

"I can be there in twenty minutes, okay?" I looked at Celia and mouthed 'sorry.'

Celia waved it off and rolled her eyes at me, so I knew she was cool with me running out.

"Twenty is fine," Daniel said. "I might be half an hour, so don't get stopped for speeding, okay? I'm at my office, making some calls. But I need to see you."

"I'll be there, Daniel. Promise." I waited for Daniel to say goodbye and hang up first in case he had anything more he needed to say, and then I shut my phone off and reached into my pocket to pull out my business credit card. "Put it on this," I told Celia, standing. "I'm sorry to run out. I'll call you later when I know what's going on, okay?"

"Sure, Boss. Um. I mean Shane." She shrugged. "You might be stuck with 'Boss.' I'm used to it."

I laughed, wondering when "boss" became a term of endearment. "Okay, and I'll call you 'my girl.' Janet would approve." I was never calling her 'Mrs. Brint' again. I was Mrs. Brint now. Or... well. Yeah.

"You do that," Celia told me, looking pleased. "Now shoo. Go see your boyfriend and give him a hug. I'll head back to the office and pay the bills. Don't forget to call me, and I want to know where to be tomorrow when he makes his announcement."

"I'll call." I leaned over and kissed Celia on the cheek. "Congratulations." I winked and hurried out to my car.

The trip home was faster than I expected because traffic was light. My apartment was in a shambles because Daniel and I had sort of floated out the door without much caring where we left yesterday's underwear. I spent the time cleaning up while waiting for Daniel, which was good because it kept my mind off the state I assumed he was in. I'd had second thoughts and wondered if I ought to have picked him up, so I was just hoping he could make it to my place in one piece.

I'd left the door unlocked, but he knocked anyway, about ten minutes after I got home. I let him in, not even managing to say hello before he stepped close and put his head on my shoulder, arms loose around my waist.

"That sucked," he said succinctly.

That had to be the understatement of the century. I stepped backwards, pulling him through the door with me and kicking it closed. I held him for a while just because it felt good, just because he needed it, or maybe just because I could, finally. "Tell me," I suggested, pulling out of the embrace enough to look into his eyes.

"She was kind of pissed, when she got over the sheer shock. You know, I don't think she saw it coming at all." He ran his hand through his hair and pulled back a little more, not quite letting go of me. "When I got there she was all set to rip me a new one about not coming home last night."

The list of questions I'd had for him doubled then, but I kept them to myself for the moment. "Come on, let's sit." I let him sit, but he didn't get comfortable, perching rigidly on the edge of the couch. I sat with him. "So you walked in and dropped the bomb? Was it a long conversation?"

"I went in," Daniel said slowly, "and told her we had to talk. She was in a foul mood and got snippy about last night, and I just..." He took a deep breath and looked at me, his eyes intent. "I said I was leaving, that Jason was filing the petition for divorce today, and that I was sorry I'd hurt her and wasted years of her life."

"You wasted years of your own, too, Daniel. And she's been cheating on you also." I felt anxious to know what he'd actually said to her. "Did you tell her why? Did you tell her about being gay? About me?"

"Yeah, she wasn't about to let things go and say 'oh, okay. Have a nice life.' I didn't have much choice." Daniel sank back on the couch and sighed. "She said that I couldn't just walk away, that I had to think about my career. I said I was thinking about it and, yes, I was leaving. She said she'd fight it. I said she didn't have to, her inheritance would be safe. And then her eyes got a little scary and she demanded to know how that was possible. So I told her that we should never have gotten married, seeing as how I'm gay."

I winced. "Yeah, that sounds very clear to me," I told him, tightening my hold on his fingers. I would have given anything to have seen the look on Janet's face when he said that.

"She kind of looked like a fish," Daniel said thoughtfully. "A very pale and angry fish. She asked if I was

fucking around. I said I had been. But now I wasn't fucking around. I'm involved with a man and I was going to start living my life. Then she sat down really hard and just stared at me."

"God," I sighed. "No screaming fits? No tears? No accusations?"

"Oh, that came later. She's not at all sure she's going to get her money, she threw my things into one bag, told me she's keeping the house, demanded support, and basically kicked my ass out and called me a cock-sucking whore. When I left she was on the phone to Lillian."

"Well, there will be no support, no worries there," I said with a snort, getting up to get Daniel his one drink. "Celia is sending our file on her to Lillian. It'll be there tomorrow morning." I looked at him over my shoulder. "And you're my cock-sucking whore."

"What if I want to be the cock suckee?" he said with a feeble attempt at a smile.

"Well, then I'm the cock-sucking whore, of course." I grinned at him as I brought his drink over. "Your one drink. Make it last," I said, sitting down with him again. "So, did you want me to be a cock-sucking whore now?"

Daniel shook his head and then stopped. "Actually, yeah," he said, grinning. "That might be just the thing." He tossed back his drink and shuddered, then looked me in the eye. "Or we could just make out for a bit. I have to see the Mayor in an hour and a half. Did you really promote Celia?"

"I really promoted her," I said, demoting myself to the floor. Making out was nice, but I wanted to give Daniel some courage to take with him. A little of that smug, in-control vibe I always got when someone was kneeling between my knees. I reached forward and lowered his fly and undid the button at the top of his trousers.

"You don't have to," he protested, touching my cheek and saying entirely the opposite with his body.

"That always makes it better, doesn't it?" I pushed my hand in past the fabric and pulled his cock out, admiring the way it grew stiffer and pinker before my eyes. "Mmm. Nice."

"Not as nice as yours," he said, shifting his hips. Any hint of reluctance was gone, no matter the reason. He may not have wanted me to feel obligated, but he sure as hell wanted me. Period.

I gripped him gently at first, stroking slowly as I circled the head of his erection with my tongue. I drew it around the circumference, then along his slit, and finally bathed the head until it was wet and shiny. "God, you taste so good," I confessed, talking while I could because in a moment my mouth was going to be happily busy with other things.

Daniel made a rough noise and petted my hair again. "Shane," he whispered. "Want."

"I know," I whispered back, tightening my grip and pumping his cock a little faster. "I know." I opened my mouth and took the head of his prick in and sucked hard.

His fingers carded through my hair and he moaned, his breath already speeding up. "Yeah," he whispered. "Like that. Please."

I pulled off his cock with an obscene "pop" and hooked the fingers of both hands in the rich fabric of Daniel's trousers. "Down," I growled, surprising myself, and tugged them open and down and over his hips in one motion, exposing his balls. I pushed at the hem of his dress shirt, baring the soft skin on his hip and

that funky, sexy scar. "Mmm." I felt myself purr as I leaned into him, knowing he was pinned by his trousers and under my weight. I angled my chin forward and ran my tongue across his scar, slowly, trying to feel the raised, damaged skin underneath it.

"God," Daniel gasped, his fingers pulling my hair a bit harder. His hips twitched, unable to lift much, but it was enough to let me know he liked it. His breath was coming in shallow pants and his cock heaved up a little of its own volition, straining.

"Yeah, Daniel," I whispered into his skin before pressing my lips to the scar and sucking on it gently. My fingers were itching to stroke him, but I wanted to tease him a little, so I slid them under his balls and rolled them against my palm instead.

Daniel whimpered. The sound that came out of him was long and drawn out, pleading. If that didn't tell me I was getting to him, the way his body moved up and back did. "God, God, God," he chanted. "Please, Shane."

Wordlessly I moved my mouth back to his cock and took him in, as deep as I could manage, letting go of his balls and reaching to stroke my fingers across his hips instead. He bucked up, with more force than I'd thought he would, but when his cock shoved into my mouth I took it as best I could, sucking hard when he fell back.

"Shane!" he yelled, fingers once more pulling at my hair.

I did it again, dragging my tongue over him, loving the panting and the noises he made, the way his cock was leaking into my mouth.

Something made me think about where he'd just come from and why I was doing this and I was struck by a strange possessive impulse. This was Daniel's cock, and it was in my mouth; Daniel was mine and so his beautiful, heavy, hard, leaking, aching cock was mine, as well. Mine. I pushed at his hips to keep his ass firmly on the couch and sucked harder, tasting and teasing with my tongue and bobbing my head in his lap, hard enough that I could feel it when his cock went deep into my throat.

"Jesus Christ!" Daniel groaned and yelled, his hand suddenly on my shoulder instead of in my hair. "Shane! Close. Oh, God."

That was what I wanted to hear; the yell, the tremor in his voice as he said my name. I felt his body try to lift off the couch and dug in with my fingers to stop him, growling a little when I could get air. I could feel his orgasm coming on, hear it in his gasps and groans, and I pushed him on, taking him in as deep as I could manage.

With another yell he let go, his hands off me and his cock throbbing as he shot. His body curled over mine, every muscle tense for a long moment before he slumped back, moaning and shaking.

When I had him clean I pulled away slowly, licking, and then finally sitting back on my heels to watch him. He had an utterly destroyed look, his face flushed, his chest heaving, his fingers tangled in his own hair, and I was so smug about it I wanted to do it again. "Fuck, Daniel," I swore. I wasn't one to throw the F-word around, but there was just nothing else to say, looking at him like that.

Daniel made a sound that wasn't a word and looked at me with glazed eyes that slowly lit up. "Hey," he said, starting to smile. "Come here."

I crawled up his body and straddled his lap, then leaned down to kiss him. "You're gorgeous," I told him

honestly. Honesty was so easy with him now, so much easier than it had ever been for me with men before.

"You are," he countered, pulling me in tighter and kissing me hard. His hands floated over me, at my waist and ass. "Want."

"Want what, Daniel?" I asked coyly.

"You." He kissed me again and undid my pants, his fingers warm on my skin as he brushed against me.

I nodded, feeling breathless myself all of a sudden. "I was hoping you would say that." I kissed him harder, letting him push my jeans open and get his hand inside.

"I'll always say that." He nuzzled me and stroked my prick lightly. "So hard for me. Beautiful."

"Yeah, that happens when I feel you shake and taste your come in my mouth," I growled at him. "Love making you fly." I shifted off of him. "Come on," I said, and stood, tugging Daniel to his feet. We stumbled over each other for a few steps until we reached my desk, where I pulled a condom from the top drawer. I pressed it into Daniel's hand, still kissing and nipping and biting anything that I could reach.

"Over the desk again?" he asked with a grin. Then he sank to his knees and rolled it on me, palming my balls as he did. "I could develop a kink, you know."

"No, that desk can't take it," I said with a harsh laugh. His hands were warm and strong. "Wall, couch, kitchen counter... anything. Just soon. God." I could have ignored my own aching forever while I was still watching him, but now that he'd turned the tables on me, I couldn't ignore how much I needed him.

"Floor," Daniel growled. He licked me, right where my leg met my balls, and turned, shoving his pants all the way down to his knees. "Now," he said over his shoulder.

Everything in me got tight watching him present his bare ass for me. "Oh, God. That's pretty." I admired him, ass in the air and looking at me over his shoulder with smoldering eyes as I pushed my jeans to my ankles and sank to my knees behind him. "Need you," I told him, though I'm sure that was plainly obvious, and I pushed into him, probably more quickly than I should have, but it felt so fucking good.

"Shane." He seemed to really like saying my name, but I didn't dwell on it as he pushed himself back against me. He was still in his shirt, mostly dressed as I fucked him on the floor, and he was loving it, so I didn't take my time. I thrust into him, feeling my orgasm already gathering, making my breath come in shallow pants and my head get muzzy. He wanted me so badly that he was kneeling on my living room floor without a thought for his expensive suit or even how wanton he looked.

"I love you," I told him before I knew what I was saying. The thought had been on my mind since I'd talked to Celia and it just came out, needing to be said. There wasn't any stopping the rush of emotion that followed it and propelled by the adrenaline rush that went with it I thrust deeper and harder, taking and claiming as if that alone could prove that I meant it.

"You -- what?" Daniel's head swung around and he looked at me, then gasped. He dropped his head low again and yelled, "Yes! God, yes. Shane!"

I grunted and didn't let up, feeling the sweat bead and cool on my skin. "I love you," I repeated, breathlessly. "Daniel, I'm... fucking hell. Soon." I hung my head forward and tugged on him as I surged forward.

Daniel gripped me tightly, his shoulders dropping down and his ass lifting high. "Now," he said. "Right

now, Shane. Do it."

"Fuck. Fuck!" I don't know how long it went on, but it felt like I came forever. Buckets and buckets, on and on until my thighs were trembling and my ears were ringing. I gulped air, finally getting enough breath to speak. "Christ," was all I could manage to say, however, followed closely by a long moan as I dropped my head to Daniel's back. His shirt was as damp as my forehead, and I grinned.

"God," Daniel whispered. "I may not live through the next six months."

I huffed, the closest I could get to laughter just then. "If that's dying, I'm totally in that handbasket."

"You are the handbasket," Daniel said, laughing. He eased himself down to the floor, taking me with him. "Hey," he said softly.

I rolled off to his side so I could look into his eyes, keeping an arm draped over his back and a knee resting on his thigh. "Hey, yourself."

"Did you mean it?" he asked, eyes soft and wide.

"Did I...?" I was about to ask him if it wasn't obvious by how hard I came, but then I realized what he was actually talking about. "Oh. Oh." I bit my lip and nodded, then mustered up the courage to say it out loud. "Yeah. Yes, Daniel. I meant it. I completely and utterly meant it. I hadn't meant to tell you that way, but," I grinned and shrugged. "Nothing seems to go as planned around you. And I think I'm starting to like that."

Daniel smiled at me, his mouth twitching. "My life used to be pretty smooth, years ago. But I like the changes. Don't much care for the process, I admit, but... the payoff is pretty enormous." He moved his head to mine and kissed me softly before I could say anything. "I love you."

"Daniel." I smiled at him. For some reason, I hadn't expected to hear it from him yet. I was ready for him to say that his life was too shattered, that he couldn't be sure of anything right now. Or just not say anything. "This is crazy. Are we crazy?"

"Possibly," he said solemnly. "But that's okay. Everything else is, right now."

That was for sure. "Do you have any idea what you did to me just a minute ago with the kneeling and the bare ass and the... oh, my God."

Daniel's eyes twinkled. "My ass has a pretty good idea, yeah." His smile grew and he kissed me again. "I think I can survive the rest of the day now."

I frowned a little, not wanting to let him go but knowing he had to. "What's next for you? Want to borrow a shirt? Or get the iron out?"

"Oh, man." Daniel rolled over and looked at his shirt. "Fresh would be better, I think. Next up is the Mayor, and then Philip. Um, my campaign manager."

"Philip," I let the name roll off my tongue, wondering how I'd managed to miss that detail in my study of Daniel's life. "I love that name. Sexy. Mrrowrr."

"Philip is almost seventy," Daniel said, laughing.

"Seventy is the new... uh... fifty?" I grinned and sat up, back against the couch. "I'll get you a shirt. Why

don't you freshen up? Shower, if you want. Oh, and we're moving your stuff this weekend, I have a lead on some big, strong straight guys to carry the stuff and a couple of lesbians to help us set up house."

"If I can get access," Daniel said, rolling his eyes. "Mind you, we might be able to just pick it up off the lawn if she got really pissed."

"That would be good, then I wouldn't have to see her." I squinted, pushing the conversation I didn't want to have with Janet out of my mind.

"Christ, what a mess that would be," Daniel said, wandering toward the bathroom. "If I'm not out in under ten minutes, yell at me. I really can't be late."

I stood. "Under ten, or I'm sending Philip in to get you. Naked."

"As long as it's not Celia," he shot back, then vanished behind the closed door.

Chapter Twenty

Daniel looked pale again. He'd been nervous and edgy all morning, and mostly silent. I assumed he was mulling over what he was going to say and how, memorizing words and phrases and considering tone, all those things politicians do when they speak to the public. That side of Daniel, the public face, was going to take some getting used to for me, but right now I was enjoying getting to know the wild abandon and how easily he lost control.

Celia and Susan were standing with us near the stage and had been there all morning. It was killing me to watch Daniel like this. I wasn't nervous myself, but my anxiety level was high and at the moment I wasn't getting what I needed, either. I was holding Celia's hand because Daniel wouldn't let me hold his; "Not yet," he'd said. He needed to say the words first. I'd touched his shoulder a couple of times, but it seemed to make things worse, not better, and so I let him be, let him do what he needed to do, knowing that within the hour this would be over and we'd be able to do as we pleased.

"Stop it," Celia said under breath, somehow not moving her lips at all.

Stop it. Stop what? Stop watching? Stop being anxious? Stop holding her hand? I just looked at her, then looked back at Daniel. It was the bravest thing I think I'd ever seen anyone do, coming out in front of a crowd, admitting to infidelity and asking for forgiveness from hundreds of people he didn't even know, setting his private life out for public scrutiny. Maybe that's what Celia meant. Get over myself, this wasn't about me. What I needed right now didn't matter one iota.

"I'm proud of you," I told Daniel softly, loud enough for the four of us to hear, and maybe Philip, who wasn't far off. "I don't know if I could do what you're doing, but I know you can."

He looked back at me and nodded once, his eyes smiling at me even as his mouth was a tense line. "I hope so," he said softly. "Thank you." Then he looked at Philip, got a nod, and stepped up to the microphone.

"Thank you for coming," he said, his voice calm. "I know it was short notice. I won't keep you long, however." He cleared his throat and things in the room seemed to speed up and slow down at the same time, people shuffling and lights coming on, voices hushing.

"I'm here to make a statement about my personal life, and I'll try to be as clear as possible as I won't be taking questions afterwards. First, I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize publicly to my family, my friends, and mostly to Janet."

A soft buzz started as people suddenly noticed her absence and realized that this was no typical political press conference. I squeezed Celia's hand and got one back, both of us staring only at Daniel as he faced his future.

"I regret to inform you that Janet and I are planning to divorce, which would not be worthy of a public statement if it were not for the reasons why. Through my actions and words, I have lied to her for many years and it is now time to come clean. I am gay. I have lied about that for a long, long time."

The buzz grew, and Daniel noticeably relaxed. "I have been unfaithful. In the past I have used the internet to

find partners. I have also paid for gay sex. Those days are over. I have damaged my life and hurt people close to me, which I sincerely regret. I will make amends to the best of my ability, and will live my life honestly from now on. I am focused upon mending my life and maintaining my professional commitments. To that end, I am not stepping down from my elected office, but am going forward with the many projects I care very deeply about."

He looked back at me then, and once over to Philip, and nodded at the cameras. "Thank you for your time, I have no further comment."

As he stepped back from the mike a loud roar went up, everyone yelling questions at him, which he ignored.

"I do," I said, stepping forward quickly. I couldn't help smiling at him. "I love you."

"I love you, too," he said, then kissed me.

"Woo!" Celia said, clapping her hands, which I barely heard over the snapping of cameras.

I kissed him back, not caring about the cameras or anything else but Daniel, who was trembling slightly. I looped my arms around him. "This is right, Daniel. It'll get easier now. Open and honest is so much easier."

"If you say so," Daniel said. "Can we go now? I think Celia's planning a party."

"Oh, I so am! Well, Susan's been helping."

"Oh, God, please. I need a drink." I took Daniel by the hand and led him down off the platform and out a back door, Celia and Susan following closely behind. "Where is this party?"

"That Greek place you told me about," she said with a grin. "Ouzo."

"Oh, dude." I tugged Daniel off to the side. He looked tired, but better. "Hear that? Ouzo. Are you okay, babe?"

Daniel nodded, then shook his head a tiny bit. "I'm not sure, honestly. A little overwhelmed. I thought I was going to be sick."

I watched him carefully. "You were amazing. You seemed confident and strong, to me. I was impressed." But maybe the confidence was a trick of the politician.

My suspicion was confirmed when Daniel kind of shrugged one shoulder. "It's talk, it's cameras. Even with something as staggeringly personal as this, there's an element of show." He turned to look at me, stepping close but not exactly leaning into me. "That could have been the end of my career. I honestly have no idea if I'll ever get elected again, Shane. And no matter how happy I'll be when my divorce comes through, and how much better I'll feel when you and I get a few moments peace, it's still a scary thing. I don't think I've ever felt this exposed and open before."

I nodded. There wasn't much I could say. It was a scary thing, even a little scary for me with the immediate future so uncertain, and I wasn't the one in the media spotlight. He'd hidden himself for so long this had to be jarring. "You *are* very exposed right now. We are. I'll do whatever you need me to, Daniel. If you want me to step in and send everyone away, I'll do it."

"No, no," he said quickly. "It's a celebration, it's okay. Besides, the alternative is to go back to your place -- our place -- and listen to me ramble. I think I need to..." He gestured to where Celia and Susan were laughing at something, getting ahead of us. "I need to make it about more than just me for a while. It'll be

about me for a long time. Can you cope with that? Days and weeks of me being the hot topic, and hearing all about today on every news bite during the next election?"

I laughed. "Daniel, you've been the hot topic in my life every day for weeks. I can cope. At least now I can talk with you about it instead of worrying I might end up in jail."

He blinked at me and slowly grinned. "Jail would be bad. Shame on you, doing naughty things in public. How ever will you get your kicks now?"

"Shame on me, and shame on you for deciding you were okay with it. Kiss me, you perv."

Daniel laughed, the sound bright and happy. "You're the pervert," he pointed out, right before he kissed me. Right there in public on the street, even. True, there weren't any flashing cameras this time, but it was a huge step, and one I wanted him to take over and over. Too bad my growling stomach had other ideas.

Daniel laughed again as I broke the kiss. "Very attractive. I like a man with big appetites."

"Shut up. So are we good, Mr. Brint?"

"Yeah, we're good. Really good, actually." He pulled out his phone and switched it off with a flourish. "And even better now. Let's go have a drink or two and lots of good food. Then Celia can tell us all about her promotion."

It was all I could do not to skip all the way to the restaurant. "Excellent. And then Susan can tell us how Celia is in bed," I said plenty loud for the ladies to hear.

"Short version or long?" Susan called back.

"Long," Daniel said with a grin. "It's payback."

My phone rang, interrupting the moment, and I kicked myself for not shutting it off as Daniel had. "Uh-oh," I said, looking at the display. I glanced at Daniel and answered it, stopping on the sidewalk to take the call. "Hello?" I looked at Celia and Susan as they caught up with us and grinned at them.

"Shane Finnegan Mullen." Like most, my mother always started conversations with my full name when I was in trouble.

"Oops." I mouthed at Daniel, still grinning. "Hi, Mom," I drawled.

"I just saw the most curious thing," Mom said in a haughty tone, as if I had no idea what she meant.

"Did you?"

"Yes. I could swear I just saw you standing behind Councilor Brint during his press conference." Her tone was clipped.

"Really?"

"Don't get smart with me, my boy. Elizabeth called me just now and told me she saw you, too. Half the neighborhood is calling."

It hadn't even occurred to me to tell my mother before Daniel made his announcement. I suppose I could

have warned her, but thinking again, I decided this was too much fun.

"Yes, that was me behind him, Mom," I admitted.

"Are you dating Councilor Brint?" she asked, sounding incredulous.

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"Have you been... with him?"

"Oh, uh." I looked at Daniel. "Well, yes, Mom. We're lovers." I made a face and shrugged at Daniel who was blinking at me rapidly. Celia was cackling in the background. I shushed her with a finger over my lips and she cackled more quietly. Susan was practically holding her up she was laughing so hard. The bitch.

"And why didn't you tell me this sooner, young man?"

"Oh, well I--"

"Do you not trust your own mother anymore?"

"It's not that, Mom, I--"

"I need to meet this man. Is that understood?"

"Oh." I looked at Daniel again. He looked so terribly bemused. "Yeah, okay, but--"

"Soon, Shane. If he's good enough to steal away from that tart of a wife, he's good enough to meet your mother."

If I'd had anything liquid in my mouth I'd have spit it halfway across the street. As it was, I actually stumbled back a step, my mouth hanging open for a moment before I got it together enough to answer her. "Fine! On Sunday, okay? Jeeze, Mom." I thought Celia was about to hyperventilate and she hadn't even heard what my mother had just said yet.

"Sunday." Mom sounded terse, but placated. "Good. Tell him we look forward to it. And be on time."

"Okay, Mom."

"I love you."

"Love you, too, Mom. Bye." I hung up. "Offoffoff." I fumbled with my Treo until the damn thing shut down. "Oh, God." I hadn't been so embarrassed in my life. "And you," I said, pointing an accusing finger at Celia, "did not help matters at all, you heartless dyke."

"I'm not heartless! I'm cute!"

"Yep." Susan leered at her.

"You're all right," Daniel allowed, looking her up and down. "Not as good as him, though."

"I protest!" Susan yelled, waving a hand.

They were all insane.

I looked at Daniel and gave him a sarcastic grin. "I can put off my mother."

"Something tells me she'll be scarier if we make her wait," Daniel said with a smile. "She really didn't seem... she doesn't hate me because I lied and cheated?"

"My mother is incapable of hate. Honestly. She has no concept of tact, however, so if she asks you something a little too personal -- well, you're a politician, just turn on the charm. Seriously, she's sweet. She makes jokes at my expense. She's not going to be shocked by you."

Daniel gave me a wry look. "I'm going to be shocked by her, aren't I?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes, you are." I smiled. "Just try to remember she loves me and she's well-intentioned."

"Okay," Daniel agreed. "I can do that."

"Are you two coming in or what? We're trying to order and the party can't start without the guest of honor!"

I looked at Daniel. "She's so bossy," I said, hustling him toward the door.

I've always loved my job. But I used to sit in a truck, watching and wishing I had the kind of worries other people had, if only to have something to talk about other than someone else's lies and deceit. It occurred to me, as Daniel laughed at yet another one of Susan's off-color jokes, that all the lies I, myself, had told hadn't buried me the way they did other people, and for that I would remain ever grateful.

Lunch was just lunch. The food was good, the company was entertaining, but really, I wanted out of there. I wanted to get my hands on Daniel and ask for a little more forgiveness with my fingers and my tongue. I wanted to tell him all kinds of truths about what he could do to me. But he just sat there across the table, happy, and grinning like a Cheshire cat.

And I had forgotten my camera.

End