

Room For One More

Willa Okati



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By Willa Okati

Prologue

The sun's not even up yet, and the streets of the big old town are cold and empty. Well, no, not empty. There's going to be traffic no matter what hour of the day it is: yellow taxis zipping back and forth, workaholics in their Beemers or Jaguars, and the wavery beat-up clunkers of partiers just now coming home from a big night out.

Doesn't matter what night of the week it is. There's always a party going on somewhere.

Rhymer himself is on foot. Contrary to what some folks who see him might think, he's got his own apartment. 'Course, it's not much more than a hole in the wall with a tee-tiny bathroom and a gas range, just enough room for his single bed and one beat-up old chair, but he can call it home.

For now.

He's got other plans, though. His daddy would have told him that what he's planning is like baiting a bear, and he figures the old man wouldn't be wrong. His momma would have shaken her head -- but in mirth -- and told him to watch his ass.

God, he misses his folks.

They're long gone and past, though, and since then Rhymer's been making his own way in the world. He's wandered from state to state, packing up and hauling out whenever he gets the fancy to move on. From one side of the coast to the other, he's made enough of a living to get by doing what he loves best and putting in some hard work otherwise. Construction. Laying down track. Carpentry. Selling hot dogs. Whatever would pay the bills.

But now, he's got enough salted aside -- not in a bank, mind -- that he can just concentrate on his favorite thing, and that's playing music. Any dreams of big-name stardom he's ever idly entertained have been put aside as he's pretty much figured out those aren't his kind of dreams. He's an ordinary guy who knows how to play a guitar like a lover.

Or so he's been told. He's had plenty of men along the road, sometimes one-night stands and occasionally something that lasts for a few weeks or a couple of months. Rhymer's never been against commitment, but it seems that those he hooks up with don't quite get his urge to travel or his determination to live free and easy.

As he walks slowly toward his favorite spot on a certain broad avenue, guitar case swinging from his hand, Rhymer thinks about his last lover but one, an earnest dark man who made up for his small stature with a great big heart and a painfully loud mouth.

"You know what your problem is?" he'd asked, jabbing Rhymer in the chest with one bony forefinger. Rhymer had tried to grab Vance's hand and suck that finger into his mouth, but Vance was too quick and too determined. "People don't want a vagabond, Rhymer. That king of the road shit is for young guys."

"You saying I'm old?"

"Not old. Just older than you used to be. Someday your hands are going to knot up and your legs won't be strong enough to walk you around. Then where are you going to be? Sitting on the side of the road with a cardboard sign, begging for food?"

Rhymer had taken offense. "You don't think I can look out for myself?"

"No, I think you don't. And I think you won't let anyone else keep an eye on you, either. That's why you're always moving on. If you don't let anyone get too close, you don't have any regrets when you walk away."

"Now that's just not so. I'd have settled down long ago if I'd found someone who got me."

Vance had shaken his head. "That's the problem, Rhymer. I do get you. It's you who doesn't understand yourself. Take a good long look in the mirror, man. It's time to grow the fuck up."

They'd parted ways after that night, although a big part of Rhymer had wanted to stay right there and prove Vance wrong. He'd had a bus ticket, though, and the road was calling.

Sometimes he's thought about getting a motorcycle, maybe someday, when he's a bit more comfortable than he is now. Doesn't have to be anything fancy, just something that'll get him from place to place with minimal need for engine tinkering.

Or rather, he has thought about getting a motorcycle, that being in the past tense. Rhymer thinks he may have come to the end of his traveling days here in this vast city that never sleeps.

There's five good reasons why he doesn't want to move on.

He passes by old Jorge, sprawled out on the sidewalk as usual, an empty bottle of Mad Dog still clutched loosely in one old, dirty hand. Rhymer's got a soft spot for Jorge -- not enough to buy him booze -- but he likes to make sure the skinny man is okay in the morning. Nudging his leg with one foot, Rhymer grunts a good morning.

Jorge startles up out of his sound sleep, fumbling for his bottle. When he grasps the neck, he looks up, ready for either a fight or some serious flight. Then he sees that it's just

Rhymer, and he grins, a wide toothless smile. "You up to some kind of trouble?" he asks in his heavily accented English. "Or you just gonna play your guitar today?"

"Six of one, half dozen of the other. You hungry, Jorge?" Rhymer reaches into his pocket for the greasy sausage biscuit he'd bought for himself. The paper crinkles and Jorge's face lights up like a Christmas tree. "I got something to cut all that booze."

Jorge eagerly reaches out. Rhymer passes over the breakfast sandwich, not really regretting letting it go. There's another restaurant he can stop at, and he's got enough spare change for a second biscuit.

God, he remembers how his momma used to bake biscuits. They'd be crispy on the outside and buttermilk-flaky on the inside. Golden with butter and savory as any fancy hors d'ouvres he's ever been fortunate enough to taste.

It makes him wish for home. Even the sausage tasted better there, strong with sage and rich black pepper.

But hey, he's been a long time gone and Rhymer knows himself well enough to know that he's the kind of guy who can savor all the simple pleasures of the present without crying over the past.

Jorge's already halfway through with his biscuit, devouring the bread and meat with great hungry bites. How he chews, Rhymer doesn't know, but so long as it makes the old man happy he's good with providing a meal. "You take care now," Jorge says, waving his free hand and speaking around his mouthful of food. "Maybe you come by and see me on your way home, huh?"

"Could happen, Jorge. You stay out of trouble, yourself."

Jorge chuckles, a phlegmy sound, as Rhymer walks away. He's a little more careful as he walks. There's new folks on the streets every day, and the last thing he wants is to be mugged and robbed of his livelihood. You never know who's watching and waiting to make a pounce.

Rhymer wouldn't mind losing his jacket or his shoes, not so much, but no one better lay a hand on the battered black instrument case he carries. If he lost his guitar, he surely would start bawling like a baby. He's had that thing since his granddaddy gave it to him for his thirteenth birthday.

This instrument is quality, good wood that's only mellowed over time and gotten a sweeter and sweeter sound to her. She likes to be taken care of, and Rhymer's liberal with his love. Good new strings whenever she wants, a quality pick, and polishing her body until she shines.

He and this old guitar have been buddies since they first met. Rhymer doesn't see them voluntarily parting ways anytime soon.

Busking isn't a bad job, as jobs go. He finds a busy street, a good place to sit, and then he just sits and plays all day long. More people pass him by than do those who stop to throw a dollar in his case, but that's all right. He usually ends up with money enough to feed himself and put aside for rent on his little shanty of a home.

He likes his life.

The only thing missing, in his opinion, is someone to come home to or to visit on the long and lonely nights. But Rhymer's always been ambitious in his own way. When he dreams, he dreams big.

He's found the person he wants, and everyone else that comes attached.

While he's been thinking, Rhymer's been walking, and he comes to a stop in front of an ordinary office building with a basement entrance and a street-level front door. He's heard tell that this used to be a short-run publishing house, gay and lesbian only, which is what made him favor the spot in the first place.

The press has been sold, but the owners are still here.

Every single one of them.

Grinning to himself, Rhymer sits down on a good ironwork bench not far from the building's big plate-glass window and gently puts the guitar case to rest at his feet. He opens the fastenings and takes out his baby girl, quickly and efficiently making sure she's in good tune and fine fettle.

The sun's just about to come up, and that means it's showtime.

Sure enough, he doesn't have long to wait. The basement door opens and Rhymer hears the sound of a raucous goodbye, plus the moans and groans of those who aren't ready to get up yet. There's a pause and the soft, wet sounds of kissing, and then the door shuts. A lean man dressed in gray sweatpants and a hooded gray sweatshirt with a faded logo jogs up, smacking his hands together and exclaiming about the cold.

Rhymer plays a few notes in greeting. "Morning, Baz," he calls.

The blond turns in his direction and cracks a broad grin. "Fuck me. You ever get any sleep? Last I saw of you was sunset, with your ass still parked on that selfsame bench."

"I take enough rest." Rhymer lets his fingers roam over the strings, not really producing any kind of tune, but just testing out the chords that come to mind. "Off to walk the dogs?"

"Damn pooches," Baz grumbles. "They don't know how good they've got it."

"What are you up to now, six?"

"Great Dane, Dalmatian, Cocker Spaniel, two Beagles, and a fucking Chihuahua. He's barely big enough for a snack to the rest of that bunch."

"Gotta learn how to say no to the pretty ladies who don't have time to take their dogs on walkies, Baz."

Baz leers. "Yeah, well, I can't help it if I'm so hot that they're panting doggie-style themselves for a chance to see me a few times a week."

"Like you'd give them the time of day with the bunch you've got stashed away."

"Ah, you want to hear more about how things operate." Baz taps the side of his nose. "A gentleman never kisses and tells, you know."

"You aren't even close to being a gentleman." Rhymer tries for a complex chord and nails it right off the bat. "Ha!"

"That was a good one," Baz acknowledges. He jogs closer. "What was that, A sharp?"

Rhymer has to laugh. "Not even in the right neighborhood. But don't you worry about what I'm doing. You guys have a good night in last night?"

"Damn right. I'm still popping my joints from being bent around like a pretzel." Baz looks jubilant. Being well-fucked will do that to a man. "Not that I'm handing out any details, now, but let's just say I got lucky three times over."

"What happened to the fourth?"

"Ah, he gave out before he could get to me. I took pity on him."

Rhymer throws his head back and laughs. "Not likely. Bet you fell asleep."

Baz chuckles, but not with shame. "A man's got his limits."

"And you push them every day."

"Never know what you can accomplish until you try, do you?"

"That's true enough," Rhymer acknowledges. "Go on, then. Get your groove thing on and walk those dogs."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. God, do I miss the good old days sometimes." Baz bounces on his heels. "Best be on my way, then. I'll stop by again on the lunch rounds and listen to you play a tune or two."

"If the barking doesn't drown me out."

"Right." Baz snorts. "I'm on my way, then. See you later, eh?"

"Give me a kiss for luck." Rhymer lifts his face with lips pursed, deliberately playing for laughs. He gets what he wants -- Baz whoops with laughter, smacks the back of Rhymer's head, and gives him a damnably platonic smooch on the cheek. Obviously not giving Rhymer or the kiss a second thought, he takes off down the block with the long loose strides of a natural runner.

Rhymer watches him go, feeling the kiss still on his cheek like it's been branded there. When Baz is gone, he raises his fingers to touch.

The man doesn't know it, but Baz has just sealed his fate.

Settling into his bench, Rhymer starts to play some good-morning music, nothing too loud or fast-paced, just a few fine soft tunes to start the day. He's not really paying attention to his music, though. He's concentrating more on watching and waiting for what he knows will be coming up.

Next out the basement door is a dark-haired man carrying a battered blue duffel bag. His sneakers are definitely the worse for wear, and his hair could use a brush, but he's still one hot piece of shit. Rhymer's never met him, not officially, but he knows from what Baz has said that this is Ryan. He's taking community college classes during the day -- wants to be a nurse -- and working the occasional wait-staff gig. Rhymer salutes Ryan as he walks past, and gets a friendly nod in return.

Knowing each other by sight is a good start, in his opinion.

The progression goes on as Rhymer changes tunes. He slows it down into something old-world, the Appalachian music he was raised on, as another dark head comes up the basement stairs. This guy's short but wiry-tough, definitely no one to mess with. Usually has his head in the clouds about one thing or another. From the hand-shaped blotch of green paint on his briefcase to the jacket and tie he wears, Rhymer knows -- as he's known for some time -- that this is Aiden, off to another day at the races they call kindergarten.

He waves, but Aiden doesn't notice him. That's all right, though. Two out of three isn't bad. Shame, though. He's heard Aiden speak and that man has a voice made for sex. Low and smooth like the best sipping whiskey. His eyes are so green that Rhymer catches their color as Aiden passes by.

Rhymer's willing to bet those eyes can grow pretty damn heated under the right circumstances.

The next man out is a tall, slim type dressed in casual slacks and a button-down shirt. He's not wearing a tie, but from the sleek, smoothed-back mane of shiny light-brown hair to his wire-rimmed glasses to his polished shoes, this is Nicholas to a T. He pauses at the top of the steps to take a deep breath of the city air, which Rhymer knows for a fact isn't fresh, but which he seems to enjoy all the same.

"Nick," he says, running down a trill of notes. "How's it hanging?"

Nicholas looks vaguely perplexed as ever, then brightens. "Hello, er -- hello." He digs in his wallet. Nick is always good for a couple of bucks. He's got a warm heart like that. As the bills drop into Rhymer's case, Nicholas offers up a smile that warms Rhymer right down to his toes. "I'm sorry," he says, sounding truly apologetic. "I'd love to stay and listen to you play, but with this traffic I'll be late for work."

"I know." Rhymer feels his body start to react. All this tempting man-flesh about; it's bound to have an effect sooner or later. Casually, he moves his guitar to hide the rising bulge at the crotch of his jeans. "Still working at the Pansexual Research Center?"

"Yes, though I'm more often called upon for knowing how a computer operates -- insofar as I do -- than getting any actual research done. God, that sounds deadly dull, doesn't it?" Nicholas cracks a smile. "Boring as it may appear, though, I do love my job."

"Good man. If you don't like what you do, it's not worth doing."

"Bills have to be paid."

Rhymer grins and nods toward his case. "I get by."

"You're a remarkable man. I doubt many street artists earn a decent living."

"Ah, but you see, I'm no ordinary street artists. I," Rhymer says, putting on his best cocky look, "am a master of the art."

"Are you?" Nicholas's face is thoughtful, as if he's weighing Rhymer's words in the balance. "How do you do this all day without growing tired of it?"

"It's true love." Rhymer plucks off a chord. "Me and my baby here, we're gonna grow old together."

"That sounds a bit lonely."

"Doesn't have to be." Rhymer keeps his words deliberately vague. Now isn't the time, and Nick isn't the man he wants to start off with. Just good-natured friendliness will do for the moment. Damned if that voice doesn't make his cock want to sit up and sing, though.

"I really must run. I'll miss my bus." Nicholas hesitates for a second, then lightly thumps Rhymer's shoulder. "If you're still here when I come home tonight, I'll ask you to play me a tune."

"You're on."

And then he's off.

Rhymer sits back and runs over all of them in his mind.

Baz, a definite wild child. He'd be hell to keep up with in bed, but Rhymer likes a challenge.

Ryan, sweet as chocolate. Rhymer'd Bet he'd be something else between the sheets, big and hard, but melting in a pair of loving arms.

Aiden, a small man but a jumbo-sized mystery. What would he be like if they were naked, cock to cock, with nothing to do but each other?

And Nicholas. Nick comes off as being shy and diffident, but there's just something about men in glasses. He's caught a steely glint or two that has let him know Nick is a hell of a top, or has the potential inside of him.

But there's one man left, one guy yet to join the crowd and make the circle of five complete.

Rhymer waits on him, content to just sit and enjoy the morning.

Right on schedule the front door opens for the first time and *he* steps out. Taller than the others, broad in the shoulders as a football player and tapering down to a slim waist above bulky thighs. He could probably snap Rhymer in half, but damn if Rhymer doesn't think -- know for sure -- that he'd enjoy every second of the big guy's hands on him.

He's heard Baz call this one "Marcus". It's a rough, tough name. Suits him down to the ground.

He's also heard Baz call the man "clueless". As he glances around, completely missing Rhymer with his dark brown, almost black eyes, Rhymer drinks his fill of the vision.

Rhymer does love the tall, dark and handsome type. But then again, he's partial to all sorts. And men who have balls enough to declare themselves a fivesome? That many men who live in close quarters and haven't killed each other yet? Five different guys, each

bringing something to the mix? You'd have to be blind or dead not to want a piece of that action.

All he has to do is catch Marcus off guard, and he'll be in business.

Of course, this has to be handled with finesse. He's not out to break up a happy home.

He just wants to play.

It's like a game of chess, in his opinion, with him as one of the rooks. All he's waiting for is for the black knight to make a move.

Then... Rhymer grins as wide as he can... he'll see what he'll see.

If these boys let him in, they won't know what hit them.

But that's a big "if", and it's best left for another time.

Although, he thinks to himself, *you never know*.

Could be that this'll be the weekend.

Heartened, he continues playing, random notes smoothing their way into a song. A passer-by tosses a few quarters into his case, and Rhymer nods in thanks.

Just another day -- but he's a man with a plan. He can wait as long as it takes.

This vagabond has maybe come to the end of the road, and it's not a bad place to be. Not bad at all.

Now he has to see if there's a home for him where he wants to be.

"Time will tell," he murmurs to himself as someone else tosses him a dollar bill. He plays on, deeply content. "Time will tell indeed."

Chapter One

They're all naked.

This is a good thing.

They're in the shower room.

This is even better.

There's a game on.

Best of all.

Baz's just waiting to see what happens now that he's thrown down his gauntlet. And of course it's Marcus who steps up to be the first challenger. Figures, eh?

Marcus's face is serious, but his eyes are glittering as he gazes down at Baz. It's a look that Baz's grown familiar with. Sure, he has memories from years gone by, but those have gotten faded with time. Marcus's devilish side has grown honed and polished of recent weeks, shiny pitchfork and all.

Well, he's got something with a point, albeit blunted and rounded, but Baz figures -- good enough.

A tough, thick-fingered hand that can perform the most delicate operations caresses Baz's cheek. He waits, knowing that the little devil inside the big guy's mind is about to push this situation from a "possible" to a "definite". A great big hollering confirmation.

So he waits.

Marcus touches Baz ever so gently, but Baz knows there's enough force in those wide finger pads to bruise in the best possible way. So he waits. So do Aiden, Nicholas and Ryan. There's a sense of anticipation in the air that can shatter at a single word.

Then, Marcus speaks not one but several. "You can't do this."

Game on.

Baz grins, feeling his full lips pull back over sharp white teeth. He runs his tongue across those teeth, knowing how tempting he looks when he's on the hunt. "Those are fighting words," he says, keeping his voice in a low, lazy drawl. "You willing to put money on this, are you?"

That gets him Marcus tilting his head to a side and puts an extra wicked shine on his look. "A hundred bucks," he says after a moment's pause. "A C-note says you can't pull it off."

"Oh, I can pull it off, right enough." Baz pretends to make a lunge at the solid, heavy cock jutting upright between them, and not his own. Marcus makes an *EEK* sound -- natural enough for a man whose jewels are on the line -- and takes a hasty step back. Baz laughs, hearing his mirth echo off the cavernous shower room walls. "A hundred for each. That's four hundred. You, Aiden, Nicholas and my Ryan."

Naturally, the increased financial strain puts a temporary hold on the action. Marcus winces. Tight old purse-strings are twinging under their imagined strain. "I don't have that kind of money."

"Balls you don't." Baz's feeling the adrenaline start to build up now. He loves a challenge, and this is the kind of situation where he can perform at maximum capacity. He makes a grab for Marcus's own sac, letting the big lummoX feint away. "Four hundred dollars says I can suck each of you without blowing my own load. One hundred bucks for each time one of you comes."

Ryan raises his hand. "What if some of us come more than once?"

"Add a fifty for second go-rounds," Baz says generously. "Just icing on the cake."

Marcus narrows his eyes. "Not that I'm complaining at the thought of a blow job, but what's in this for you?"

Baz heaves a sigh of the long-suffering. "You mean besides the money and the fact that I'm on the verge of getting to suck off four fucking delicious men? Gee, let me think."

"Suck. Suck. Suck." Aiden is starting to chant in a low voice. After a sideways look, Nicholas grins slightly and adds his voice. Ryan chuckles and then joins in, egging Marcus on. "Suck. Suck. Suck."

Marcus gives in, just as Baz has known he would all along. "Fine. But you don't start with me."

Baz gives him a curious look. "Into self-denial now, are we?" He reaches out slowly this time, caressing Marcus's cock and sac with feather-light touches. Marcus's already so hard and ready. There's a part of the big guy that gets off on being in charge just about as much as the idea of sex. "Sure you don't want to be first in line?"

Marcus shakes his head and folds his arms across his chest, swallowing down a moan. "Nope. Choose any of the others that you want, but I'm last."

"Nope. Ryan's last." Baz is firm on this. "He's my boy, isn't he? I'll be taking care of him. He'll top me off in fine style."

Aiden has developed a skeptical look. "Isn't there a story about how this singer had to have her stomach pumped after swallowing--"

"Urban legend." Baz waves that off. "You're not getting cold feet too, are you?"

"This shower floor is pretty chilly." Ryan shifts from foot to foot. "Can we turn on the water yet?"

Baz considers that request. After a moment, he gives a gracious nod. "If you lot are in this game, then you can put the jets on full steam ahead. But once that water starts flowing, I'm in this for the thrill ride and the money. We agreed? Eh?"

Ryan reaches out and gives Marcus a friendly, if hard, sock to the arm. "It's win-win," he says reasonably, reaching down to give his own cock a couple of tugs. "You know he'll just spend the money on us anyway."

"After I buy that CD collection I've had my eye on," Baz points out. "But yeah. It'll all go into the New Bed Fund. Which you were mostly paying for anyway, Marcus, so suck it."

Marcus shakes his head. That glitter is back. "Nope. You suck them, and then you suck me." He nods to Ryan. "Get the water going. We're on."

"Now you're talking!" Baz rubs his hands together. "Everyone to your stations, now. Get good and soapy. I'll be around turn and turn alike. Feel free to watch, though. I do my best work in front of an audience."

"So I've noticed," Marcus says dryly.

Baz ignores him and seizes Ryan in a kiss for luck. Their lips cling together for a long moment as he savors the taste of his boy, sweet soda sugar and a faint flavor of the potato chips he had for breakfast. Diet aside, he's still hard and lean, muscles strong and corded. He's got a bit of a tan line left over from summer which just begs to be licked.

But all good things, Baz figures, come to those who wait. "You hold on," he says hotly against Ryan's lips. "You, special orders. No touching cock nor balls nor anything near there. I want you ready to pop when it's your turn."

"Like I'm not now?" Ryan's eyes are huge and dark, their pupils dilated until only a part of the brown iris is visible. Baz loves this about him, how he's off like a horse at the races Aiden likes, straining at the bit until he rushes over the finish line. Granted, they've had their sessions of sweet and slow, but sometimes Baz just feels like a bit of down and dirty. Good raunchy sex.

And hey, there's both money and personal reputation on the line.

Baz lets go of Ryan and pushes him gently toward his favorite shower spigot. "Go on with you," he says, wishing he could have one more kiss but figuring that delaying the inevitable will make it that much sweeter. "All of you, get that water running. I want steam. Ambience, you know." He reaches down to fist his own cock, just adding a little fuel to the fire.

"Game's off if you come first," Marcus warns as he strides toward the extra-tall shower installed directly for his height. "I can hear you jacking off. You want to win this or get disqualified before we even start?"

"Always all about the big picture," Baz mocks. "I'm gonna break this down into segments. Just like that daft pie-wedge trivia game you like to play, you big girl." He pauses to survey the men, all more or less in place. "Water on!"

Obedient to a man, they twist the taps on their individual showers, then turn around to watch. "Let's get started," Marcus taunts. "Go for it, Baz, if you're man enough."

Those words set fire to Baz's blood. He grins again, feeling savage. "Right. And who do I start with?" He sweeps the room with his gaze. "Looks like Nicholas is our lucky winner."

The tall, slender man has removed his glasses for the shower, so his blink at Baz is myopic and confused. "Me? Why do I go first?"

"Oh, honestly. All of you bitching like this is a trial." Baz crosses to Nicholas and grabs the man's hands, slamming them into the wall above his head. Nicholas moans and sags a little. Baz runs his tongue across his teeth before he smashes their mouths together, rough at first but then easing up. Nicholas isn't dainty by any means, but after fucking these men for well over a year Baz's learned each of his boys' individual approaches. Show Nicholas who's boss, then treat him with lustful respect.

Time to get down on his knees. Nicholas's a bit tall for proper comfort, but Baz's had practice and he knows how to rise up just *so* to get the right angle. Grasping Nicholas's balls with one hand and kneading lightly, drawing a gasp out of the shy man -- still so damned shy -- he uses the other hand to draw Nicholas's cock down into his mouth.

Nicholas needs the coaxing sometimes. Baz keeps that in mind as he gives slow, lazy laps to the long slim cock in his mouth, moving up and down with ever so much patience. Nicholas makes a strangled noise and reaches down to grasp at Baz's hair, just now starting to get wet from the water splashing off this particular lover. Baz would wince at the tug on his scalp, but Nicholas's always aware of what he's doing and lets go, fingers fluttering as if they don't know what to do.

Baz pulls off, lowers his mouth, and sucks first one ball and then the other into his mouth. He bites down lightly.

"Fuck!" Nicholas sounds ragged, surprised. Baz stifles his own chuckle. He's familiar with Nicholas's body, sure, but there's nothing like a little off-the-cuff to see what happens. He's never used his teeth on the man before, and it seems to be working like a charm. Nicholas's cock paints a wet stripe on Baz's face. The hand comes back to his head, directing him back to the object in question.

"Please. More."

"Happy to oblige," Baz answers, still easy because he knows he's already winning. He pulls Nicholas's cock back into his mouth and applies suction, bobbing his head up and down. God, he loves this man's cock. Not so thick that he'd have to worry about choking - well, not that he isn't well-practiced with all sorts by now -- and delightfully responsive.

On an impulse, he uses his teeth again, nibbling Nicholas's cock like it's a cob of corn.

That does the trick. Nicholas shudders hard and, with a snap of the hips, spills his load into Baz's mouth. Baz rolls the viscous fluid around his tongue, then swallows, loving the way spunk feels going down his throat. As he cleans Nicholas up, he uses his hands to twine a pattern up from Nicholas's ankles to the hard runner's muscles in his calves. Nicholas makes a pained noise and actually whimpers when Baz lets go of his cock.

"That's one," Baz says, raising an eyebrow. "And you were a treat, Nick. Great appetizer."

"Felt rather more like a full-course meal."

Baz chuckles. "It's all appetizers all round," he says easily. "With five of us, it's fair odds that you'll end up being nailed to the wall before the hot water runs out. Now!" He shifts around on his knees and scans the roomful of men, each one wide-eyed and fixated on him. "Who's next up?"

Aiden is the first to thrust his hips in invitation. Baz grins fiercely as he knee-walks over to the short, wiry man with a cock the size of a cudgel. Aiden's already panting. He does get off on his visuals, and Baz figures it won't take much to make him blow. Given that his own cock's begun to throb, impatient for a little action of its own, a little bit of rush is all to the good.

Getting himself into position, tempting cock just in reach of his mouth, Baz puts a hand on Aiden's rosy thigh and kneads like a cat. When he looks up, the man is gazing down at him in wonder. "You're really gonna do this," he says, sounding amazed. "One right after another, just like knocking down bowling pins."

"That's the idea," Baz agrees happily. "Now shut up, eh? Let a man get on with an honest day's work."

Groans and laughs break out through the shower room. There're gibes about how Baz never does a full day's work if he can get away with it, but Baz ignores them. In his opinion, the definition of work is fluid.

It gets looser when you cheat. Aiden's breathing hard and shaking, his cock dark red and beading up nicely sticky at the tip. Baz recalls that the one other thing Aiden likes with his sex, besides watching, is a bit of pain. Not much, mind, just enough for him to get off. Worked well enough with Nicholas; Baz thinks he's in the right mood, himself, for more.

With that in mind, as Baz sucks Aiden's cock into his mouth he reaches around and grabs the man's ass for a too-rough grope, squeezing hard. At the same time he thrusts his tongue pointedly into Aiden's slit. He tastes the bitter-salty drops of precome and then, as he sucks viciously hard on the fat head, a gush of come that takes them both by surprise.

Baz swallows, licks his lips, and sits back on his heels. Aiden is gasping, water running down his face and into his mouth. He watches Aiden swallow a few times and then shake his head. His coarse dark curls are flattened to his head with water, but so obstinate that the wet hair looks lumpy. He's a good one, Aiden is. Hardly ever a headache these days, which is a good thing considering how often he gets his blood pressure raised.

"Good for you, then, was it?" Baz asks with a wicked leer.

Aiden smacks him on the side of the head, not to hurt, but just to remind him of his place in this game. "So you got me," he says, sounding raspy around the edges. "Two down, Marcus. Two more to go. So far he's holding up his end of the bet."

Baz leers at Marcus, so tall and pale, a fuckin' linebacker without a team of suited-up brawlers behind him. His hand keeps making aborted grabs toward his cock, both long and thick, a nice happy medium between Nicholas and Aiden. "Anxious, are you? Still want to go last?"

Ryan gives an unhappy squawk. "I get to go last," he protests.

Marcus wavers. Baz waits. Marcus knows that he and Ryan are special, like, but for the sake of four hundred dollars Marcus might be an obstinate git. Baz makes a lewd gesture with his mouth, wagging his tongue. "Can already taste you," he says just loudly enough to be heard over four showers going full blast. He gazes at the big guy, hair plastered to his forehead. Should make a man look stupid, but not Marcus. Bastard manages to pull everything off with an impossible grace.

"Me next," Marcus finally relents. He puts his hands on his water-slick hips and cocks one in challenge. "Although I can already tell that you're just about desperate. Your cock's doing that twitchy thing."

"It wants to dance," Baz allows. "But four hundred dollars is on the line here. I win this bet, we can go and buy the new bed today instead of salting away a bit now and a bit later. I'm fucking tired of sparse leg room."

Marcus spreads his thighs wide. "Come on, then," he goads. "If you think you can handle me, that is."

Baz's nerves rush with adrenaline. Yeah, he and Marcus have had their differences in the past, but he's more or less made peace with that which has gone by.

Doesn't mean he can't summon up a bit of that competitive spirit when he needs it most, though.

"You're on," Baz growls, kneeling his way over to Marcus. Being that the bastard is so much taller than the rest of them, he has to get up in the proposal position. Not that the pose bothers him, neither that nor the whoops and catcalls of the men already satisfied and the one still waiting.

Marcus looks down at Baz, grinning and shaking his head. "You're going to blow any second," he says with gleeful certainty. "Sucking does things to you that ordinary sex can't compare with." He touches Baz's cheek again, running his fingers along the sharp bone. "A hundred extra dollars says you don't get through this without losing your cool."

Baz chooses not to answer in words. He blazes a taunting look at Marcus before leaning in and slurping cock into his mouth.

Now, where Nicholas apparently likes just a dab of pain, and Aiden likes a little more, with Marcus a man's got to be downright sado-masochistic. At least when one's not playing fair.

For Baz, this isn't about *fair*. It's about winning, and enjoying all his men while he's at it. So he has absolutely no qualms about digging his fingernails into Marcus's taut hips, stopping just shy of breaking the skin, and giving Marcus's cock a sharp nip.

Marcus yelps and bucks forward, but the wily bastard's got determination on his side. He sets the pace against Baz's wishes, grabbing Baz by the shoulders and holding him still. Then, just as if he planned this all along, he begins fucking Baz's mouth in a slow and steady pace, in and out like he has all bloody day to play with this.

Trouble is, Baz knows that Marcus is right about him getting off on just giving a blow job. The slower and sweeter it is, the hotter he gets. Baz bristles with indignation even as he moans, drooling around the fat cock stuffed between his lips. He's not playing by the rules, sure. Where's Marcus get off on coloring outside the lines himself?

It's not just a challenge anymore, it's a game of dirty pool. Baz relents for a moment, hand wanting desperately to reach for his own cock -- the thought of all those bucks the only thing that keeps him from touching.

Well, that and Ryan, who's probably knotted up inside for fear that Baz won't get to him in time.

Ryan. Baz rallies. He's going to take care of his boy, and Marcus's games can be damned. He knows one trick that's never failed him before -- and for that reason, he keeps it carefully in the closet only to be used in cases like these. Digging his nails in again, he shoves his tongue underneath Marcus's foreskin and pushes, lifting it up, then bites the fragile tissue.

Marcus gives a mighty shout and comes like a pistol that's just been fired, hips bucking as he shoots a thick, ropy load into Baz's mouth. Baz savors the flavor. It's the sweet taste of victory.

As he backs off, Marcus is shaking. "You cheated," he accuses in between whoops of breath. "Who said you could use my foreskin?"

"Never told me I couldn't," Baz says cheekily. His cock is throbbing, desperately needy, his balls on fire. All the same, he manages to keep his outward cool. "That's one hundred for Nicholas, one hundred for Aiden, and two hundred for you. All that's money in the hand, right?"

Marcus looks pained, but nods. "Four hundred dollars in the bed fund." He suddenly gets a sly look and jerks his head to a side. "Think you can stand up to Ryan?"

Baz stands and takes a look at his boy. Ryan's still upright, but Baz can see him shaking with the effort not to move. Water's pouring down his shoulders and chest, tracing silvery patterns over those hard muscles and the tautness of his lower belly. His eyes are all come-hither, dark and inviting. If ever a man was on the verge of begging for a blow job...

This requires a moment's worth of thought. Baz takes the few steps needed to reach Ryan. He studies the man intently. Without him, none of this would ever have happened. Without a Ryan, there'd have been no Aiden. Without an Aiden, there'd have been no Marcus. Without the four of them together, there'd have been no Nicholas. Ryan's the heart of this fivesome. Tender, easily bruised, but absolutely overflowing with love for them and all the games they play.

So thinking, Baz leans in for a soft kiss on those full, tempting lips. His boy is still so sweet, still tasting like sugar from his soda, and his tongue is eager to come out and play. It's a wicked temptation to call the game quits right then and there.

Gotta be strong. You've come this far. Don't give up now, not even for Ryan.

Ryan gives a nasty little shimmy that bumps their cocks against one another. Baz groans from the bottom of his stomach and knows that he's not going to be happy with sucking Ryan off.

To hell with it, he decides, arm shooting past Ryan for the dispenser of lube right next to the one holding shampoo. Having the extras installed was, in Baz's opinion, the best idea they've had since building the shower room itself. A few pumps and his palm's full of slippery gel. He smacks his hands together and starts rubbing to warm the stuff up. "Turn around. Hands against the wall."

"Knew you wouldn't last," Marcus taunts. Baz flips him off with one slick finger and then uses that same finger on Ryan's ass. Ryan's a delicious bottom, still good and tight but knowing exactly how to relax and open up. The sound he makes as he turns around docilely as a little lamb sends shivers down Baz's spine.

"I made it through three of you, so I figure I should still get the four hundred I was promised, cheating or not now," Baz says, taking himself in hand. "Good enough."

"Just like that, game over?"

"There's winning and there's winning," Baz points out as he pushes the head of his cock against Ryan's waiting hole. "Now -- shut up."

One thrust and he's in, Ryan's hot, hungry body swallowing him whole. Baz's head spins and he has to put out a hand to balance himself against the wall. Ryan's channel grasps him so tightly that it stiffens his cock more than Baz would have thought possible, ramrod steel inside a heated gun barrel.

"You'll be the death of me," Baz breathes against Ryan's ear.

Ryan grumbles and pushes his ass flush with Baz's groin. "Fuck me."

Those words, uttered in a low, growly tone, are quite enough for Baz. He wraps one arm around Ryan's middle, giving him a bit of leeway to move, but keeping them nice and snug, then lowers his other hand to Ryan's cock. "Hang on," he grits out. "Gonna fuck you hard."

Ryan half-turns his head, eyelids partially lowered. He's temptation incarnate, this man, and damn well knows it. "Bring it on," he says, then licks his lips. "Get wet."

Baz moves them both under the steaming spray from the shower. He feels himself get soaking wet and shakes his head, droplets spraying, before he moves again. There's all sorts of ways to fuck, but Baz likes choosing blind, just going with the moment.

Right now, quick and dirty sounds pretty good to him. He pulls out a few inches, and then slams back in. Setting a rapid pace, he jerks in and out, timing his thrusts in synch with hard pulls on Ryan's cock. The noises Ryan makes are music to Baz's ears, even if they do sound like he's dying, what with the ragged yells and the gasping breath.

Ryan's always been nice and loud.

Baz fucks his lover, his special man, harder still. The way they're both shaking, it won't take long. He slips down to give Ryan's balls a yank, then pinches the base of Ryan's cock to stop him from coming. Ryan yelps and bears down, his internal muscles applying the kind of pressure only a Hoover could emulate. The top of Baz's head almost comes off, but he chokes his swelling orgasm down by a hair's breadth and a bit of luck.

He's not done yet.

Pulling out, Baz drops to his knees and jerks Ryan around. He doesn't let go of Ryan's cock until the very last microsecond, but then momentum's carrying him around face-first with Baz's mouth -- so to speak. Baz spears Ryan's perfect-size, perfect-length, perfect-width cock between his lips and gives a good hard suck, not letting up on pressure or tongue play until he hears Ryan shout and feels come splashing over his tongue.

He'd like to stay there, but that's not how the game is played. He swallows and, after a long rub down Ryan's shaking legs, turns on his knees to face the other men. They've stepped away from their forgotten showers, all staring at him with varying degrees of awe and amusement.

"You sneaky bastard," Marcus growls.

"Had your cake and ate it, too?" Aiden asks with a waggle of his eyebrows. "How come I didn't rate the special treatment?"

"You have to ask? Of course he'd save it for Ryan." That comes from Nicholas, who is definitely on the tickled side of good humor. "All right. You've won five hundred dollars."

Marcus winces out loud. Aiden and Nicholas hoot at him and shove his shoulders, throwing all their weight into it so that he rocks back and forth.

"Fine," Marcus grumbles. "Five hundred dollars. But who's going to help you with that?" He points at Baz's near-painful erection. "Need a hand?"

Baz grins, even though his vision is going wonky. "Got two of my own, thanks." He rests one of them on his thigh and reaches for his cock with the other. Wrapping his fingers around the nicely respectable shaft, he gives a hard tug and he's off, up, up and away, hollering his lungs out and spraying jism across the shower tiles.

He sways for a moment, light-headed, and then feels various sets of hands pulling him back up to his feet. When things are a little clearer, he feels Marcus in front of him, Nicholas and Aiden to either side, and Ryan pulled tight against his back.

It's a heady moment, all four of them gathered around a common purpose. Payback.

Marcus turns the knob on his shower all the way to the left, down into "freezing cold", and with a whoop of laughter they rush Baz directly under the jet. As he yowls and laughs, struggling against the arms holding him under the icy jet, Baz's doing back flips inside his mind.

Game, set and match. He wins. Hell, they all win.

They have enough for a new bed now, and damned if he's not going to have fun picking it out.

Chapter Two

Marcus knows he's being a mother hen. Any second now the guys are going to start waving their arms and clucking. The trouble is that knowing an action will result in inevitable consequences still isn't enough to stop him from doggedly pursuing his course.

Blame it on habit.

All around him there are semi-naked bodies in various states of dress and undress. Aiden and Nicholas are doing better than the others, their shirts and pants almost all the way on. Nicholas can even boast a pair of shoes. Ryan, however, seems to have gotten lost somewhere between putting his pants on and pulling them up.

This could be because Baz is on him like an octopus with too many tentacles, Marcus frowns... trying to go back for a second round or tickling him. Either way, Ryan's screaming and Baz is wind milling like Don Quixote.

A sharp clap of his hands brings them up short, but only for a second. Although to give Ryan credit, he tries to fend Baz off.

Baz just keeps on going. He's a damn Energizer bunny minus the floppy pink ears.

Marcus tries with the hands again.

Baz looks up in annoyance. "Clap on, clap off," he says, sounding irritated. "What's crawled up your ass, then?"

It's a trial not to roll his eyes and give a long-suffering sigh, but Marcus's more or less used to Baz after all this time and knows that the way to Baz's obedience is a long and twisted road, even if the goal in sight was Baz's idea to begin with.

"We're going to get a new bed," Marcus enunciates, each word snapped off nice and crisp. "I seem to remember someone who, I don't know, could be *you*, bitching incessantly--"

"Here, now! I do not bitch."

"--*bitching* without end about how he's tired of everyone stealing the covers. And how that happens when you're not on the end of either side of the bed, I don't know--"

"I do not bitch." Baz's jaw is set in a stubborn line.

Marcus can't hold back the eye roll this time. He loves Baz, honestly he does, but sometimes he'd like to take Baz by the neck and shake the guy like a rag doll. Then paddle his ass with a newspaper.

Paddling...

Marcus gets lost for a second in the visual. Then he shakes his head and comes back into focus. Baz, the smug son of a bitch, has ceased his tickle attack and is sitting -- bare-assed naked, of course -- in the middle of their current bed. Ryan's making a valiant effort to tug his own pants up, so Baz pushes him back down with a hand to the chest.

"Do *not* bitch," Baz says with a smarmy grin.

"Guys?" Marcus gives up and extends his hands to Aiden, Nicholas and Ryan for help. "Is Baz a bitch or not?"

Aiden and Nicholas give firm nods without breaking the rhythm of getting dressed. Ryan goes "hmm" and then scoots quickly back against the wall, out of reach of the tickling hands.

Baz narrows his eyes. "Say I don't bitch, and I'll get myself dressed. Otherwise, I'm going starkers until doomsday."

"And won't that be fun when you want to go for ice cream?" Marcus starts buttoning his own shirt. It's kind of fun to watch Baz watching him cover his chest up. The smug look turns woeful, as if Marcus's wrapping a present he can't have until after Christmas.

The man is insatiable and has a recovery time of nil point zero. Of course, this isn't the first time Marcus has thought as much. He does up his final button while taking in the sight of Baz looking at him. It's pretty clear that Baz is on the verge of a decision, but knowing Baz, pure stubbornness is holding him back.

Damned if Marcus is going to give in first, though.

Thank God that they have a Ryan in their life. Ryan struggles up from the rumpled sheets, does the button on his jeans, and slings an arm around Baz's bare shoulder. He gives Baz a hearty kiss on the cheek and rumples his hair.

"Watch the head!"

"You need to add some product anyway." Ryan ruffles Baz again.

"Oh, so it's 'product' now, is it? Last month it was 'slippery shit that smells like shoe polish'." Baz huffs, but he doesn't move away from Ryan.

Marcus watches with anticipation and interest. It's a little like seeing a potential car crash in slow motion. Will they collide and explode, or veer back onto course?

Ryan nuzzles Baz. "You don't bitch," he says fondly. "Now, c'mon. The shop we're going to is only open until noon."

"Noon?" Baz yelps. He does a series of complicated-looking bounces and jumps off the bed, landing on his feet. "Why the hell didn't anyone say so?" He reaches for a shirt, gets one of Aiden's, and has it halfway on before realizing the thing is both bright orange and too small. Cursing, he begins to extricate himself. "Open until noon? That's barely three hours minus travel time. We're supposed to pick out the primary sin zone in less than three hours?"

"There's absolutely no doubt that you're gay," Marcus informs no one in particular.

Baz gives him the evil eye. "Like you don't want this to be the best possible den of vice you can lay your hands on. Under budget, of course." He snorts. "Someone hand me my fucking clothes, would you? Ones that actually fit me, eh?" The shirt is finally off and tossed to the floor, much to Aiden's annoyance.

Baz ignores the scolding and takes the T-shirt and jeans that Ryan obediently hands him. He shoves himself into them one leg at a time, zipping up with a sound that's not unlike an accusation. The T-shirt goes on in a flash and then he's glaring at Marcus, tapping one bare foot.

"Shoes, too," Ryan says helpfully, offering up a pair of battered sneakers.

"Right." Baz sits down on the bed with a *whoof* and sticks out one set of naked toes. "Put those on for me, would you?" He shifts and the bed gives an alarming creak. "You're letting me test this one out thoroughly, mind. Barely a couple years of hard use and what we've got is already sounding like a cat on its wedding night."

Marcus folds his hand and taps his ring. It's a small gesture that helps him think. And Baz, like a good little thief, is drawn to anything that glitters. His eyes follow Marcus's fingers and the flash of light. "You're dressed," he says patiently as Ryan finishes lacing Baz's left shoe. "Ryan's dressed. Nicholas and Aiden are dressed. We can get a taxi and be there in less than fifteen minutes."

Baz cocks his head. "Fifteen minutes? No department stores that close by."

"Who said we're going to a department store?" Marcus straightens his sleeves. "We got lucky last time finding a bed that would fit four. If we want something to sleep five in relative comfort, we have to get it custom-made."

Which is going to cost a shit-load, he thinks but doesn't say.

"Custom?" Baz's perking up, starting to bounce on the balls of his feet. It's always all about the balls with Baz. "You mean, as big as we want?"

"Marcus, are you sure that's wise?" Nicholas is frowning. Possibly out-henning Marcus, he reaches for Marcus's lapels and fusses with them, brushing a speck of lint off the dark

collar. "We've all found work now that the press has been sold on, but surely we can't afford an extravagance such as this. Not yet."

"When did we enter the Twilight Zone?" Baz asks with annoyance. "Hello, Nick. The idea is to get Marcus, who himself has *plenty* of the ready, thank you, to fork out for a bed more than big enough for five."

"I would have gone with the three doubles, but..."

"Oh, like hell you would have," Baz says before he launches himself forward and starts tickling Marcus.

They make it out of the building more or less unscathed, albeit somewhat behind on time due to Baz's pouncing Marcus and refusing to be pried off. Marcus sometimes feels uncomfortably like he simultaneously has no idea what goes on in the man's mind while at the same time knowing it all. Sex good. More sex better. Constant sex best.

Improvements on sex are a variable. So while Baz is alternating between dragging his heels and yanking Ryan forward, Marcus has time to reflect on how the hell he ever got himself into a fivesome.

He gives it up after a minute or so. Mostly because Nicholas gives him a light kiss and Aiden gropes his ass as they both squeeze past. It's a weird life, sure, but it feels complete. After all, Marcus reasons, why should he complain? He's got a slice of everything any healthy gay man could want.

Sex on tap twenty-four-seven.

Baz, with his manic energy and insatiable appetite.

Ryan, mostly to be found with Baz, but good-natured and always able to find some humor in any situation. Courageous, too.

Nicholas, shy and sweet.

Aiden, an impish minx who never keeps him guessing, but never leaves him wanting.

Things could definitely be worse.

Marcus's in a decidedly better mood as he follows his lovers up the basement stairs out onto the busy city sidewalk. Baz is frowning at the narrow strip of concrete. "I still say they should widen this."

"We cannot walk hand in hand in hand," Nicholas reminds him. "Not unless we're going over a zebra crossing." That earns him a light whack to the back of his head. Possibly from Ryan. "Yes, yes, crosswalk. Do give it a rest, Baz. You can walk with Ryan, I call dibs on Marcus, and Aiden can go in the middle."

"Always in the fuckin' middle," Aiden grouses, but obeys, falling in line. Marcus gives his shoulder a squeeze and then reaches down to take Nicholas's slim fingers in his own, lacing them and his own together.

Life is good. Marcus has a sort of feeling of peace about everything.

Things couldn't be better.

"Oh, eh, there's the guitar player," Baz says abruptly. "The one I told you about." He comes to a stop. "Get out your wallets, lads. He's worth a buck or two."

Marcus frowns. "Since when do you tip street artists?"

Baz flashes a wicked grin back at him. "Since they're good enough to eat without a fork," he says, flickering his tongue. "You haven't seen him yet? Serious, now?"

"Not that I know of."

"Deaf as well as blind." Baz makes a *click* noise. "Listen to the man play. I swear he can do anything from blues to country to a bit of the good hard stuff."

"Is that possible on a single model of guitar?" Nicholas asks, looking curious. "I've only ever seen him with the one instrument." He gives Marcus a slightly guilty look. "Well, yes, I have noticed this man on occasion."

"Hush up, now, we're getting close," Baz warns. And sure enough, they are approaching a cast-iron bench set into the sidewalk, a wiry and tough-looking man in worn jeans and a faded shirt sitting there. He's cradling his guitar like a baby, not playing anything in particular. Just plucking chords.

Marcus gets a good look at the man's face and thinks: Marlboro Man. He's got that look to him, like he's lived hard, but can still ride tall in the saddle at the end of the... what the hell? He wants to smack himself. "I have four," he mutters. "Looking at someone else should be the last thing on my mind. There's a point where it stops being a relationship and starts being a free-for-all party."

"Marcus?" Nicholas tugs on his hand, a curious look on his lover's lean face. "Is something wrong?"

"Who, me?" Marcus forces a chuckle. "No, no way. Nothing's wrong. Nothing at all. Why would something be wrong?"

Nicholas is eyeing him as one would look at a crazy person. "You were talking to yourself. Rather intently."

Marcus grins wide and white. "Sorry, just thinking out loud. It happens sometimes."

"Yes, but usually when you've got something big on your mind."

"Nick, easy. It won't happen again. I'm just a little distracted because Baz told me to tip the guy."

Right onto his back and ride him until he screams...

And whoa, okay, Marcus has no idea where these thoughts are coming from. He's a top. Fine, so in their group that definition is a little loose. He's taken it up the ass more than a few times -- heat of the moment -- but he's the one who says "jump" and gets asked "how high".

Marcus squirms.

Well, at least that's the idea.

To cover his discomfort, Marcus reaches into his wallet. He riffles through the small bills there and pulls out a five. Which would be fine, except he'd meant to pick up a one. He goes to put it back, but then the guitarist starts playing something soft and melodic that sends chills up his spine. It's a bit like country but with a heavier dose of the blues.

Marcus knows genius when he hears it. What the hell is this guy doing busking on the open streets?

His hand clenches around the five as he approaches the bench where most of his lovers are already clustered together, Baz with his foot on the bench. They're all listening with rapt attention, Aiden nodding his head slowly in time with the rhythm.

Nicholas lets go of Marcus's hand to step forward himself. Left alone, Marcus feels kind of like a big dark blot on a perfect picture, yet he can't quite seem to move toward the bench. He has an odd urge to toe the sidewalk and take sideways glances at the guitar player.

Marcus is puzzled. What's wrong with him?

The song dissolves into a cascade of notes, and the guitar player tips his head back, laughing. Overgrown hair the color of sage honey brushes his cheeks, tickling the top of one admittedly kissable lip. He blows the strand out of the way and reaches out to high-five Baz.

"Not bad, huh?" he asks. His voice is low and sounds like the taste of bourbon. "I would've started singing if you bunch hadn't come along."

"Who's stopping you?" Baz nudges the man's shoulder. "Go on and give us a taste." He glances back at Marcus. "What're you doing back there? I see that money in your fist. Give it over. Rhymer here earns his living. Best damn musician I've heard on these streets."

Marcus moves forward slowly to pass over the cash. Rhymer reaches out with an easy hand and takes the bill with a slight brush over Marcus' fingers. His touch is hot and electric, making Marcus jump back a little. This guy's sitting just a little down and across from his office. From what he's gathering, it's Rhymer's usual station. Why hasn't he heard the music before?

Something flashes in Rhymer's eyes as he takes the money, but he doesn't give any other sign that he felt the buzz, too. His casual grin reappears as the fiver disappears in his guitar case. Aiden and Nicholas and Ryan are all digging in their own wallets for bills of various denominations. Rhymer's joking and laughing with them like it's all good times and not a business transaction.

Marcus decides that the man is way too damned charming for his own good.

"So you recognize the lot of us?" Baz is asking, still resting his foot on the bench. "And here I thought I was all special."

Rhymer swats at Baz's leg, a free and casual movement. "Get down. You'll ruin the paintwork. Can't not look good in my little spotlight, can I?" He eases his guitar down into the case and stretches out his arms, resting them on the back of the bench. "You, Baz, 'course you're special."

"Well, so long as we've got that much clear," Baz says, mollified, dropping a ten into Rhymer's lap. "Give us a bit of something good. A nice rocky edge, if you'd be so kind."

"In a minute." Rhymer looks mischievous. "Let me shake everyone's hands first. I've heard of threesome and I've heard of foursomes, but five? You all deserve serious props. Gotta give you the respect that's due."

Baz laughs and slaps Rhymer on the shoulder. He holds out his hand and Rhymer gives it a good hard shake, just like two buddies who're sharing a raucous joke. Ryan good-naturedly steps up to the plate, then Aiden -- with a mumble about his clothing being perfectly fine -- then, shyly, Nicholas.

Marcus is the only one left, and he has a very odd feeling about shaking Rhymer's hand. The man is getting to him somehow, deep down under the skin. His bones itch in Rhymer's presence. Good, bad, Marcus can't tell, but definitely not indifferent.

Rhymer spreads his arms wide, waiting for Marcus to make a move. There are lights glinting in his amber-colored eyes that have a definite meaning, but need a translator. Marcus's lost. He'll admit he's not good at picking up on signals. Now must be one of his particularly dense times. Because he'd swear that Rhymer's hitting on him, and the guy doesn't appear to be either foolish or suicidal.

Slowly, Marcus puts out his hand for the shake. Rhymer grins broadly and clasps his palm. Rhymer's hand is rough and callused, likely from all those years of playing, and feels obscenely good. A working man's hand. Not all the scratchy places are from guitar plucking. Marcus would bet this guy has hoed a hard row all his life.

Yet he seems to be completely at ease with himself.

It's a puzzle.

Just like that damned spark of energy flowing between them is a mystery.

Marcus politely extricates himself from the handshake and shoves both of his own hands in his pants pockets. *Is it just me, or is this silence verging on awkward?* He coughs and nods pointedly to his group of lovers. "We'd better get moving," he suggests. "Don't want to hang around all day and miss the shop."

"Oh, yeah!" Baz gets bouncy again. "Finally conned him into buying a bigger bed so everyone can sleep comfortable. As well as other things."

"You're shitting me. Bigger?" Rhymer shakes his head. "Way I hear it, that bed's big enough for five already."

"Yeah, but it's breaking down." Aiden shrugs. "We're in the market for something custom-made."

"Take a licking and keep on ticking?"

"Something like that." Nicholas is blushing faintly.

"We, uh, need more leg room," Marcus says. He grabs Nicholas by the arm and steers him toward the sidewalk. There. The tingles he feels with Nicholas by his side are normal, natural and good. He can feel his face heating up. Baz is overdue for a spanking, he thinks.

Although he's not sure why. Then he decides in favor on general principle and feels a lot better about himself.

The men gather behind him as Marcus steps past the row of cars parked on the curb and starts waving. "Taxi! Hey, taxi!"

A yellow cab zooms past.

Marcus hears Rhymer laugh, and then the guitar playing starts up again. It's an acoustic version of "Born to Be Wild". How the hell Rhymer is pulling that off, Marcus has no idea.

He gets lucky and a cab pulls up to the curb. Marcus leans in the passenger side window. "Fare for five to Bellemont and Winchester?"

The cabby gives him a baffled look. "All five of you?"

"Yep. All five of us. We're headed to the Three Sisters Sleep Systems."

"All five of you?" the cabby repeats.

"Yes," Marcus says patiently. "And no, I will not answer any questions about why five men are going to a bedding store."

The cabby shrugs. "Not my business, man. But hey, this is one for the books. And here I thought I'd seen it all when it comes to kinky. You guys beat out the twin transvestites DeeDee and E-Dee. Hop in."

Rhymer laughs behind them. Marcus turns long enough to shoot the guitarist a glare, then steps into the taxi. His lovers crowd in behind him, dispersing themselves among the seats -- tight fit -- and then they're off. Together. No music playing, not even on the cabby's radio.

All the same, Marcus can't help taking a quick look back at Rhymer.

And he doesn't know exactly why.

But he has this feeling... and even though he's not superstitious, it's a weird sort of feeling... they haven't seen the last of Rhymer.

Not by a long shot.

And damned if the thought doesn't arouse him just a little.

What the hell?

Chapter Three

The trip to Three Sisters Sleep Systems is, Nicholas thinks afterwards, one that he will never forget. Or be able to purge from his memory.

He wasn't part of the large group orgy that he now calls a "relationship" when the original bed had been purchased. As he remembers, the story goes that Baz went wild jumping up and down on box springs to test for durability, Aiden tried valiantly to pretend he didn't know these crazy men, Ryan quizzed the salesmen about regular versus adjustable, and Marcus simply groaned, then paid for the largest model available.

It's been a good bed. Nicholas has plenty of fine memories where it's concerned. Waking up with his head resting on Marcus's left shoulder, his arm across Marcus's chest. The flowers Baz gave them when he forgot Valentine's Day. Their whole snit with him about the day was more than a bit girlish, but Nicholas finds that he appreciates a bit of romance.

Although he does like hot sex rather a lot more.

There's been no lack of either in his dealings with the four men. Odd as it may seem, even with such disparate entities as Marcus, Baz, Ryan and Aiden, they've been happy for the most part. And when they've been unhappy, they've been able to talk about things.

Really, Nicholas considers that they have a remarkably stable relationship for almost one-half of a baseball team.

This does not, however, include their individual tastes in things such as, for example, music. They've been known to get into screaming matches over what's being played in the basement suites. In the cab ride to Sleep Systems, things are no different.

Their cabby has turned off his radio save for the small bursts of static coming through his walkie-talkie-like system, presumably all the better to eye the five men alternately wrestling, holding hands, and kissing, all the while chattering non-stop. Well, almost. Nicholas is sitting in his corner, next to the door, hands folded in his lap. Marcus would normally have laced his fingers through Nicholas's own, but at the moment he's busy shaking Baz until Nicholas thinks fillings are going to drop out.

"We are not listening to techno," Marcus says with a thunderous look. "You can't call that music, anyway. It's just *boom, boom, boom* with a lot of weird keyboarding thrown in. I'm not going to pollute my ears with that crap."

"Oh, yeah?" Baz jeers. "And I suppose we should be listening to the Andrews Sisters or Nat King Cole?"

"Hey! There's nothing wrong with liking the oldies. They're called classics for a reason." Marcus clears his throat. "I thought you liked Ella Fitzgerald."

"No, that would be me," Aiden cuts in. "Jazz, blues, give it to me, the whole lot. I know of a good station, too--" He reaches forward to twiddle the radio knobs, only to earn himself a chorus of disapproval and a nasty look from the cabby. Looking disgusted, Aiden flops back down in his bucket seat in the front of the taxi.

"Fuck all, then," he says resignedly. "Guess we don't get any music, do we?"

"My taxi, my rules," the cabby growls. He glances in the rearview mirror. Nicholas can see his eyes widen. He blushes, knowing without looking that Baz is doing something obscene with Ryan on the opposite side of the car. It could be something as innocent as fondling, although Nicholas sincerely doubts it. Baz could have Ryan's cock out ready for a blow job for all that Nicholas knows. He certainly wouldn't put it past Baz. And Ryan, well, he's willing to go along with anything that Baz suggests.

Nicholas has, of late, wondered about the increasingly close tie between Baz and Ryan. They've always been a bit of personal favorites, but if he recalls correctly it was Baz's willingness to share with Aiden that started this whole gathering of men coming together.

And coming and coming again, a small Baz-shaped imp whispers in Nicholas' ear. Nicholas stifles a giggle and shifts so that his leg is snuggled up next to Marcus's. He tugs on Marcus's sleeve to get him to lean down. When Marcus's ear is in range, Nicholas leans up to whisper: "Are we there yet?"

Marcus gives Nicholas a shocked look before a slow grin tips up the corners of his mouth. Nicholas plays the wide-eyed innocent before a smile breaks through and gives him away. They have to stop and chuckle then, leaving the world and the car behind for a nice moment, focusing on one another alone.

"Soon enough," Marcus says, cupping Nicholas's cheek. "It's just a couple more miles."

"I'll be able to pick this one out, too," Nicholas replies. "I love our current bed, mind you--"

"But you're tired of getting dumped on your ass every time you roll over, what with you being on the far side." Marcus pets him, clumsy, but reassuring. "Don't worry. We'll have plenty of room in this new setup. You could even stretch out your arms and legs." He pauses. "If you want to, I mean. Stretch out your arms and legs. I don't know." A worried tone has entered his voice. "I mean, you might like lying close and personal."

Nicholas feels a rising swell of fondness for the big man. Leaning up, he kisses Marcus on the lips, lingering and slow, but not putting on too much of a show for their inquisitive cabby. "We'll be fine," he says, feeling somehow that Marcus needs to hear this right now. "Look at it this way. This could be fun."

Marcus rolls his eyes. "You have heard the story about how we picked out the old bed, right?"

"I've been treated to a rendition or two of that event, yes." Nicholas kisses Marcus again, this time flicking his tongue over the strongly carved lips on the man. He can feel the cabby watching them like Big Brother, but what the hell, eh? Their driver has gossip fodder for ages to come, might as well add a little fuel to the fire.

So thinking, Nicholas slides his hand down into Marcus' lap. He's a little surprised to find the man half-hard. Just from a couple of mostly-chaste kisses? "Marcus, is that a cell phone in your pocket, or are you happy to see me?"

For some reason, Marcus gives a small flinch. It's quickly chased away by a hot look that does all sorts of nice things to Nicholas's stomach. "All for you," Marcus purrs, lying his hand on top of Nicholas's and pressing down. Nicholas can feel hard cock vibrating under his fingers.

He licks his lips. If Baz does have Ryan's cock out, then his motivations are suddenly understandable. However, Baz got the lion's share of sucking that morning, a good game albeit one that cheated the rest of them from a wake-up fuck.

Making up for lost time seems like a good idea.

The cabby hits his horn. "What the fuck you doing? I could get arrested for public indecency."

Baz straightens up. "We're not in public, technically," he says with great good cheer. "We're all by our lonesomes in your little taxi cab. All one big happy family, right?"

Marcus groans. "Baz, quit molesting Ryan. Ryan, quit egging him on. Aiden, don't you reach for that radio dial again. Nicholas... no, you're fine." He lays his hand on Nicholas's knee as Aiden swears silently and flops back in his seat and Baz begins to grumble. "You can wait until we get back home. God, I hope you can wait. Then we'll put on some blues and I'll dance you around the kitchen."

The tips of Aiden's ears turn crimson. "Way to make me look like a pansy, Marcus."

"You're a whole fucking garden," Baz razzes. "Primroses and all. Everythin' nice and pretty, set up to please the eye. No wonder Marcus favors you."

"Favors me?" Aiden turns halfway around. "He wasn't the one sucking everybody off in the shower this morning. As I seem to recall, it was you who had all of our cocks down your throat."

"All at once?" the cabby asks, sounding more than a little interested.

"One at a time," Baz says amiably. "High-protein breakfast. The rest of this sorry lot had power bars. I think I've got the better part of the bargain, but we all got our ends away, right, lads?"

"So you really are all... you know..." The cabby makes a waving motion with his hands that seems to vaguely lump together all five of his passengers. "Together?"

"Right you are." Baz's being obnoxiously cheerful, which means he hasn't stopped pawing at Ryan yet. Nicholas dares a peek over and sees that Ryan's eyes are glazed over and his breath is coming in quick bursts. Good God, is he on the verge of an orgasm?

"Baz, whatever you're doing, stop it," Nicholas barks before he thinks.

Baz gives him a look that suggests butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. "Me? Doing something? I've no idea what you mean, Nick."

"I've told you not to call me by that abominable nickname."

"Nick," Baz says with his tongue between his teeth. "Nick, Nick, Nick."

"Jesus. You're not just fucking each other, you're brothers *and* married." The cabby snorts. "The guys aren't gonna believe this one." Almost reluctantly, he puts the taxi in park. "Three Sisters Sleep Systems. Who's paying the tab? You got forty dollars on the meter."

Aiden called shotgun, so the bill is on him. He wiggles around in his seat, fumbling for his wallet, groping himself all to hell in the process. Nicholas feels his own eyes go glassy at the sight of that tight little ass shifting to and fro. It's not often that he tops, and rarer still that he's topped Aiden, but the man does have a delectable derriere.

The cabby gets his forty dollars as they all begin to pile out of the taxi. He counts the bills as Marcus, in the middle, clambers awkwardly. "Hey, you. The big guy in the dark shirt."

Marcus glances around as if there could possibly be another large man dressed in dark clothing. "Me?"

"Yeah, you." A burst of static interrupts them. The cabby waits impatiently until it's passed, then goes on in his hell-bent quest for information. "So you're what, the boss of them? Whatever you say goes?"

Marcus freezes, a peculiar look on his face. Nicholas winces in sympathy. Marcus is often not precisely at his best when put on the spot.

"I... um..."

"Nah, that would be me." Baz pops his head back into the cab and smooches Marcus loudly on the lips. "Got leashes around each and every one of them, I do. They come at my command."

"This morning, sure," Marcus grumbles, apparently before he can stop himself. He closes his eyes in dismay. Nicholas pats him on the leg before he steps out of the taxi himself, hoping that Marcus will be able to escape this with some dignity intact.

Or at least escape.

Marcus opts for the latter choice, giving Baz a dirty look before he scrambles out of the cab. Aiden is waiting for them on the sidewalk, a shit-eating grin on his face. Nicholas sighs and rolls his eyes, jerking his head back at Baz. Aiden laughs, then reaches out for Nicholas's hand and pulls them together.

"Ah, don't mind the Wild Bunch," he says quietly, tugging Nicholas by two hands fisted in his shirt. "They're just a little... well... wild. And I'd know from 'wild', teaching a class full of kindergartners."

Nicholas feels himself smile. "You've no idea how proud of you I am over your going back to school and getting your degree." He leans in, caught up in the moment. "Have we all properly shown our appreciation?"

"Somewhat, yeah. I wouldn't say no to a little more approval." Aiden rises up on tiptoe and nips at Nicholas's neck. Nicholas gasps at the sting and feels his cock begin to fill. "What do you say about a kiss?"

"If you promise to fill my mind with horrid images afterwards so that I don't walk into this perfectly respectable establishment with an erection tenting my slacks."

"Fair enough." Aiden reaches up to twine his arms around Nicholas's neck, pulling him down for a deep, wet kiss. Nicholas moans into Aiden's mouth, his hands coming down to cup Aiden's ass and give the cheeks a good squeeze. This is nicely different, and something he thinks he could get used to.

When they part, Aiden's eyes are sparkling. Nicholas finds that he's smiling down at the feisty little package of energy and sex appeal. There's an almost unbearable urge to rumple Aiden's curls, but thankfully Nicholas is able to keep that in check. They're already tousled enough, Aiden's favorite method of hairdressing being to run five fingers through his rough cut and call it a day.

He settles on tilting his head down for another lingering kiss. When their lips part, Nicholas sighs. "Should we see what the others are up to?"

Aiden gives a nod. "Make sure they haven't gone ahead without us."

Automatically, Nicholas glances over to the side of the road, where Baz has his shirt lifted up, one leg thrust out, and is apparently flashing the cars zooming past.

"Nah," they say simultaneously, and reach for each other to take a third kiss. The other guys are going to be busy for a little while longer.

Three Sisters Sleep Systems appears to be a small house-like structure attached to the front of a sprawling one-level industrial building. The white paint and green shutters contrast oddly with the concrete and steel behind them. Baz is already making noises about daft women as he trudges along at the rear of their parade, apparently put out by having his games curtailed by the Wrath of Marcus.

"No fun at all," he grumbles as Marcus pushes open the door. A sprightly little bell jingles over their heads.

Marcus doesn't glance back. "We know you think you have a great body," he says dryly. "You don't need to prove it by showing the whole world and their brother. You almost caused a five-car pileup."

"Can't help it if I bring traffic to a screeching halt." Baz sounds as if he's preening himself. "'S the price you pay for being this hot, eh?"

The other four men make razzing sounds.

"Hey! I am too that hot," Baz protests. "Can't one of you say otherwise. I've got documented proof. I can show you the printed e-mails."

"We never should have given him a digital camera," Aiden opines. "Whose bright idea was that, after all?"

Nicholas glances back at Ryan, who has his head ducked. Marcus and Aiden look at Ryan as well. Baz beams at him.

"Okay, okay, it was me." Ryan untucks his shirt, letting the loose edges of the fabric down over the small wet spot on his jeans. "I just thought it'd be fun to have some pictures."

"That was before Baz turned into a shutterbug."

Ryan squirms. "So he's got a few X-rated shots."

"He uploaded them to a *web page*," Marcus points out. "With our names and 'call for a good time' underneath."

Baz waggles his tongue, completely unashamed.

"Um... can I help you?" a small, shy voice asks. "Are you interested in buying a bed?"

Nicholas turns around to face the woman, and finds that he has to look down. She can't be more than five feet tall, her shoes sensible Hush Puppies without any sort of heel. She looks more than a little overwhelmed, and she's clutching a clipboard to her chest as if it's a shield. "Um, I'm Lacey. I mean, Clothos."

Baz swaggers to the front of their small crowd. Gently lifting one of Lacey's hands from its death grip on her clipboard, he raises it to his mouth for a gentlemanly kiss. "Yeah, I'm interested in a bed. Don't mind the rest of these hooligans. You listen to me when it comes to the details, right?"

Nicholas groans with the other men. "Baz..." Marcus warns. "This is a nice, respectable place. Stop playing games."

Baz looks up, the picture of innocence. "And since when is treatin' a lady with respect something a fine upstanding gentleman wouldn't do?" He turns his attention back to Lacey, who's got an expression on her face that mixes wariness with a growing crush. "And a lovely young lady you are, too."

"We are here to buy a bed," Marcus says, stepping up to the plate. "Baz, let go of Clothos' hand. You might remember me. I was in here last week with some questions."

"Hey!" Baz rears back. "You went window-shopping without us?"

"There are only a couple of custom builders in the area. I had to prioritize and pick out the best possible source."

"Well, we are the best," Lacey says with a little edge of cheer on her nervousness. "If you need it, we can build it. Everything from the box springs to the mattress."

"We do custom sheets, too," a second female voice sounds from further back in the storefront. "Cotton, silk, linen, anything you could want."

"I'm thinking all these guys need is a dark corner," a third voice suggests.

Baz straightens up. "Atropos and Lachesis, I presume?" He bows from the waist as if they're princesses and he's come to court the fairest in the land. "Pleasure to meet you fine ladies."

Atropos, another small type, petite and tough, doesn't look impressed. "Clothos, don't mind the pretty men."

"They're gay as pink ink," the last one, she whom Nicholas supposes is Lachesis, puts in. "So, are all of you together or just a few guys looking for a good time?"

"I'm always lookin' for a good time." Baz leers. "If I weren't taken, and if I didn't happen to lean away from the fairer sex, I'd come over there and show you what I mean."

"Flattery gets you nowhere, friend." Lachesis hops down from a high stool and comes around the edge of the counter. "Clothos, let me have the clipboard. This is gonna be one for the memory book."

Clothos surrenders the sheaf of papers without complaint and scurries back behind the counter. Atropos pats her on the shoulder and offers her a sip from her own mug of admittedly tasty-smelling coffee. "They're not after your virtue," she says comfortingly. "Clothos is a trainee. Honey, they're definitely gay. And very much into each other." She sizes the lot of them up with a practiced eye. "I have a feeling that making this bed is going to be an interesting process."

"Nothing like a challenge to get those creative juices flowin'." Lachesis pulls a pencil out from behind her ear and sits down on a nicely upholstered armchair. "Everyone can take a seat. Just a basic questionnaire to go through before we start showing you examples and all that." She says this with a professional, almost bored air, yet her eyes are anything but apathetic, glittering with nosiness and something akin to glee. "Okay, so I'm going to bet I'm right about you being a fivesome."

Nicholas watches Marcus as he, their designated man with the plan, takes the lead once again. He supposes he can't blame Marcus. Better Marcus than Baz, and Aiden and Ryan don't seem to mind sitting back and relaxing in an equally nice loveseat. Marcus glances around, uncertain for a moment, then settles down in an oversized chair of his own.

Baz promptly sits on Marcus' lap.

Lachesis cracks up. "Okay, fivesome," she says, making notes. "Varying weights, varying heights, but I figure we can go with ridiculously wide and extra-long."

"You can actually make a bed big enough for all of us?" Baz sounds intrigued. "Leg room and everything?"

"Hell, yeah." Lachesis looks smugly confident. "Never had an unsatisfied customer yet. Don't plan on starting with you guys. Although I've gotta say, I've never seen a --"

"You have now," Baz says cheerfully.

"Yeah, but the logistics alone --"

"We make it work," Baz reassures her. He flings his arm behind Marcus's neck and pulls him in for a kiss on the cheek. "A little bit for everyone and everyone for all they can get, see? You'd be surprised."

Lachesis doesn't bat an eye. "Nothing surprises me anymore. A fivesome is nothing compared to some of the special orders we've gotten. One guy wanted a canopy with mirrors built in."

"Had a tasty woman or man he wanted to see when they were putting the blocks to one another?" Baz asks with frank curiosity. Nicholas can tell he's truly enjoying this.

"Nah. Just a narcissistic wanker. Literally." Lachesis makes another note on her papers. "Mattresses. Any preferences on height or anything? Tall, low, rippled...?"

"You can do rippled?"

"I can do the President in my sleep." Lachesis leans back. "Tell you what. You describe the ultimate bed to me and I'll see what we can do."

"No customer unsatisfied, right?" Baz asks.

She grins. "Not a one."

Baz claps his hands together and rubs them enthusiastically. "Well, first of all it's gotta be strong enough to take a good hard pounding on both sides..."

Marcus covers his face with one hand. Nicholas reaches down to squeeze the big man's shoulder. "Let Baz have his head," he advises in a whisper. "Afterwards, you can have a word with Lachesis and cut it down from the Titanic to a comfortably-sized sailboat."

The look of gratitude that Marcus flashes Nicholas makes Nicholas feel warm and toasty inside.

This is why he loves Marcus more than anyone else.

They're touring the back warehouse, Nicholas in the rear this time. Dozens of beds in various states of completion are lined up in neat rows. Nicholas can't help but boggle at some of them. It appears that Lachesis wasn't kidding when she threw out the word "rippled". He has to wonder who'd be willing to sleep on something that looks like a paralyzed caterpillar.

Then again, perhaps it isn't designed for sleep, precisely...

Nicholas drags his attention back to his four partners, all animatedly talking with Lachesis. She's more than a match for them, small like Clothos and Atropos, but definitely worthy of high, careful respect. Nicholas would wager that she's seen it all, done most everything, and built beds to suit the rest.

Which begs the question... "I don't mean to be rude, but how is it possible that the three of you manage such a large operation?" By which he means that some of these mattresses look impossible for a forklift to turn around, let alone three petite women.

"Hey, we're stronger than we look." Lachesis is grinning. "Besides, we do custom work. People who come to us know we're gonna give them the best. And the best takes time. Besides, we've got some hunky part-time help with serious muscle."

Baz perks up. "Any of them going to be around?" He gets pelted by fists. "I was just asking!"

Nicholas glances at Marcus, who looks uncomfortable. The big man shifts a few times, resting his weight first on one foot and then on the other. "So you were saying something about mattress height?" Marcus volunteers, probably in the hopes of getting Baz's mind off attractive young muscle. "What difference does that make?"

"Depends." Lachesis looks as wicked as Baz. "Do you want to climb up or hunker down? We could do a decent futon with steel instead of wood. Or we can have you lying high as a king. All up to you."

Baz is shaking his head. "Nah, nah. Has to be the perfect height. There's things a man needs to do that requires precise measurements." He scans the room, pausing every now and then, and finally stopping on a twin bed that's more than a little high and nicely padded. "*Geronimo!*"

"Baz, don't!"

Marcus' warning is too late. Baz's launched himself into the middle of that twin bed and is getting comfy, resting his weight on one side. "See, a bed's got to be the right height for a blow job," he explains earnestly. "Or for being bent over it and fucked. It's all a very exact science."

"Yeah, but for the fucking part you can use pillows to prop you up if you're too short." Lachesis' eyes flicker toward Aiden, who prickles up like an annoyed rooster. She ignores his indignant "Hey!" and focuses on Baz again. "I get what you're saying about blowjobs, though. Buncha different heights on you guys. Trouble is, if I bevel the edge to appropriate parameters, it's gonna be damned uncomfortable to sleep on."

Nicholas blinks. There's something odd about this casual woman, not unlike a female Baz, using words like "appropriate parameters". Then again, he supposes, it's proof that she knows her job. And as for needing the attractive young helpers -- attractive by intimation -- he has no doubt that she could easily flip a mattress by herself.

Baz, himself, is looking thoughtful. "Nah. Nick there sleeps on the far edge."

"You have assigned places?"

"Oh, yeah." They're having a proper conversation now, ignoring the others. "It's Ryan on the wall side, then me, Aiden in the middle, then the great white hope, and Nick on the far edge. That's just when we're actually sleeping, mind. Things get out of order otherwise."

Lachesis returns salacious grin for salacious grin. "Okay, so, what do you wanna do about it?"

Baz's thoughtful demeanor deepens. Then, his smile becoming so broad that it's almost wolfish, he beckons Nicholas and the rest closer. "All right, assume the position."

Nicholas can feel the blood rushing into his cheeks. "Excuse me?"

Baz waves at the side of the bed he's lying on. "This looks about the right height to me, but I want a quality check. All of you form a line and assume the position."

Marcus shuts his eyes tightly. "Oh, God."

Aiden looks uncomfortable. "You're not serious, man."

Even Ryan is fidgeting. "Baz, maybe not the time and place, okay?"

"When better?" Baz demands. "When this new bed is in the basement and we all have to kneel? Stand and present."

Lachesis is cracking up.

Nicholas treats himself to a dirty look and then, because he knows Baz won't drop this until he gets his way, shoulders to the front and comes to a stop beside Baz's head. "How's this?"

Baz assesses the various angles, tugging and pulling at Nicholas. He nods after a moment, pronouncing himself satisfied. "Just right, Goldilocks."

"I am neither a girl nor do I have blond hair."

That earns him a playful slap to the hip. "Right you are. Okay, you're only an inch or so taller than Marcus. He can skip this bit. Ryan, you're a little shorter. March on up. You matter."

Ryan is shaking his head and muttering about how he's missing a perfectly good day of work for this, but he gamely marches into place. Baz's features soften, yet another sign of how much he favors Ryan, and he gently nudges the man into place. He has to lean down a little, taking the weight mostly off his elbow, but the position looks right.

Ryan looks like he'd rather be anywhere else, but all the same his hand comes out to stroke Baz's hair. He bends down to kiss Baz lightly on the lips. "Do I pass?"

"With flying colors, you do." Baz caresses Ryan's hip. "We'll be the first to try this out. You stark naked, nothing but that glorious tan and your nice muscles, a great big hard-on just waiting for me to--"

"Baz!" Marcus barks.

"What?" Baz's the picture of wounded innocence. "Promises to keep, eh, Ryan? All right, then. Aiden, you're last."

"No one's gonna test you?"

"I'm the same height as Ryan, or near enough."

"Closer to me." Aiden folds his arms and glowers. "Shorty."

Baz rears up. "Hey! I am not short."

"Are, too. I'm not getting near that bed."

"Aww, now, Aiden." Baz's voice changes to wheedling. "Just a quick look-see? Promise I won't grope you."

"Don't let me stand in the way," Lachesis offers cheerfully. She appears to be enjoying the show.

Aiden gives her a glare, but reluctantly moves into position with his arms still crossed over his chest. His crotch is, Nicholas notes, nowhere near sucking level. Baz notices this as well and shakes his head. "Damn. We're gonna have to try another one."

"I'll stand on a fucking phone book!" Aiden snaps. "Besides, aside from this morning, when's the last time you gave me a blow job?"

Baz hesitates. They all know that his affections are mostly centered around Ryan these days, but Baz can be generous with the love. The more the merrier would be his motto. "I'd give you more if I didn't have to crane my neck."

"He's got a point there," Lachesis offers.

"Phone book." Aiden is firm. "There's no way I'm going through this twice."

"But this bed matters. You don't want it to be perfect?"

"Look at it this way. If it's short enough for me, it's not tall enough for everyone else. A phone book's not a bad way to go." Aiden's voice is softening into friendliness. He reaches out and rubs Baz's shoulder. "It'll be all right, man. This suits me just fine."

Baz takes Aiden's hand and squeezes it lightly. "You're a bit of all right, you know that?"

"Yeah, well, I try."

"Hey, it's all good. We'll do up a padded stepstool and throw it in for free. So, you'll take this height?" Lachesis has her pen poised above the clipboard to make one final note.

"Ridiculously wide, yep, extra-long, yep, and high enough that you'll have to clamber. Sound good to everyone?"

Nicholas glances around. He finds his look met and exchanged. Various thoughts appear to be flashing through everyone's mind, but Marcus is the one who comes to a conclusion.

"How much?"

Lachesis names a price that has Marcus blanching. All the same, Nicholas has to hand it to him. He does come through in a pinch. With -- hardly -- a facial tic, Marcus reaches into his pocket. "Okay. Do you take Visa? Um... Visas, plural?"

The expression on Lachesis' face is one of someone who's just earned her whole day's living at one blow... so to speak. She stands up, tucking her clipboard under her arm. "You got it. Okay, let's go see if Clothos has gotten over being traumatized and get you rung up. Delivery should be in four to six weeks. That work for you?"

"We can't just pick it up later today?" Baz asks in disappointment. A snarky laugh is his only responses. "Oh, fine, then." He sags. "Don't suppose you'd let us all have a moment of privacy...?"

"Not on your life. Front and center, guys." Tiny Lachesis manages to marshal them into order with a simple glare. "You just bought yourself a made-to-order bed. Room enough for five. Damn, the girls are never gonna believe this one." She shoulders her way through the crowd of men and Nicholas. "Okay, follow me. And don't worry." Lachesis glances back over her shoulder. "You're gonna fall in love all over again."

And just like that, they've entered a new era in their lives together.

Chapter Four

Marcus is standing by his window looking out at the busy city street below. People of every size, shape and description are walking past. Adults in business casual, mostly black or muted gray, kids on those weird little scooter things, one on a skateboard -- all of them plugged into their iPods, teenagers wearing slouchy hoodies and punks with hair in all possible colors on the palette.

And then there's Rhymer. Marcus shakes his head slowly as he zeroes in on the guitar player. He sits on that iron-slatted bench like he was born there, easy and casual, definitely in his element.

But talk about playing to the crowd. The man's a born entertainer with a sharp eye for his targets. Mostly, he strums out exquisitely performed acoustic numbers, but every now and then he'll change his tune. Something harder and rougher for the Generation X-ers, a bit of Elvis for the gray-haired set, and even a Celtic tune for a man with a shock of red hair who stands there through the whole song looking pleased as punch.

Where does that expression come from, anyway? Marcus wonders. How can punch be pleased, and why does it need to be happy? It's punch. A fruity beverage that may or may not contain alcohol.

Maybe if it's laced with something stronger than pineapple juice, it pleases us?

He blinks away his reverie to better focus on Rhymer. He's in a zone now, improvising tunes as he goes. Some of them peter out after only a few notes, but others he goes back to time and again. The way he chews on his lower lip when he's doing some complicated fingering is just about...

Whoa. There I go again with the inappropriate variety of thoughts. Marcus pinches the bridge of his nose. He's insane. That has to be the explanation. He has not one, not two, not three, but four lovers already. It's a delicate balance that, true, involves a lot of head-smacking and snarky banter, but works for them.

He knows he's got no business looking at another guy, regardless of that long, lean Marlboro body, those wisps of dark blond hair, that tough-guy jaw, that... *oh, shit.*

Marcus sighs. He really should be doing something besides standing at this window.

Damned if he can think of what, though.

Ryan's laughing, stumbling backward until his knees meet the edge of the bed. "I'm supposed to be at work," he tells Baz, who seems intent on pinning him down. "I took the morning off, not the afternoon as well."

"Hell with work," Baz growls as he makes a lunge at Ryan. Ryan dodges out of long practice, rolling to one side. He does end up overbalancing and tipping onto his back, which may be where Baz wanted him in the first place, so he really hasn't come out the winner on this one, has he?

"You can say 'hell with work'," Ryan informs Baz, fending off hands that want to grab. "I need my paycheck. We just blew an insane amount of money on a new bed -- which, let me point out -- we wouldn't need if you didn't keep tackling and pouncing like we're practicing football."

"Thought you liked a bit of rough."

"Hey, hey, not complaining about the rough. Bring some more of that rough down here." Ryan raises his face for a kiss. *Mmm*. Baz kisses him like that's what he was born to do. He seems to target Ryan's mood each and every time. Despite the grabby paws, this is a long, lingering kiss, one that makes time stop and sends waves of fuzziness straight to Ryan's mind.

Makes his cock perk up and take an interest in the goings-on as well.

Baz lifts his lips from Ryan's and gives him a knowing look. "Something's on your mind. Not just the bed."

Ryan hedges. "I never said I was thinking about anything."

"Dumbass." Baz lightly raps two knuckles against Ryan's left temple. "You think I can't know you this well and hear the single dried pea rattling around in your tin can of a brain?"

"Gee, that inspires me to fits of passion. Talk dirtier."

"Oh, I can do dirty. How's about this? I'd like to fuck you so hard you'll feel me for days afterwards. Every time you stand up, every time you sit down, and every time you walk, you'll be feeling me." Baz rubs against Ryan, almost purring. He tut-tuts and laughs as he pulls away from Ryan's own reaching hands. "First off, I want to know what's on your mind."

Ryan groans. "Ah, Baz..."

"Spill."

"You never let thinking get in the way of sex before."

"And is that what we're doing? Another mindless fuck? Not that there's anything wrong with those at all, mind you. Good times all around." Baz trails his hands down Ryan's

chest, stopping at the top of his jeans. He draws little circles and squiggles on the sensitive skin. Teasing. Toying. Not going any further. "Nah, I'm just in a mood. Indulge me."

Ryan sits up on his elbows. "So you're in a mood for Twenty Questions *and* for sex?"

"Never said I was one-dimensional."

"You're completely one-dimensional. You live in the dimension where everything, even a sneeze, is all about drilling someone up against the wall."

"Ooh, the wall." Baz tilts his head to a side, considering the notion. "Maybe later. Right now, we've got what remains of our great big bed to wallow around in."

"And again with the hearts and flowers. Come on, Baz." Ryan raises his pelvis a little. "I'm ditching work. I could get fired. Make it worth my while."

Baz looks wounded. "Just spending a little extra one-on-one time with me isn't worth calling in sick for an afternoon?"

"Not since we need money and lots of it if we're going to live in the style to which we'd really like to become accustomed. All of us have to work."

"Marcus doesn't, the lazy bastard."

"He does so. He's not doing too bad with the day trading. Why do you think he finally gave in about the bed?"

"Work." Baz dismisses Marcus's efforts with one wave of the hand. "If you can call sitting on his ass in front of a computer whenever he feels like it work. Me, I'm being dragged around by the leashes of a half-dozen-odd dogs every sunrise and lunch and sunset."

Ryan looks at Baz, curious. "So while you're here fucking me, or not fucking me, who's walking the dogs?"

Baz's grin is a thing of wicked beauty. "I called in sick." And with that, he nuzzles down into the narrow vee of hair leading under Ryan's jeans, and Ryan more or less gives up trying to follow Baz's convoluted thought process.

Much better to shut up and get fucked.

Marcus is tapping one foot to the rhythm that Rhymer's playing now. He can't hear *that* well, but with otherwise perfect stillness in the office the melody comes through. Rhymer's good. Really, really good.

That's the only reason he's standing there watching Rhymer. For the music. Right. Exactly.

It has nothing to do with the man's raw sex appeal, potent as rum, promising to be both sweet and strong. Even less to do with the way his hand felt in Marcus'. Electricity? Nope, none of that, just good old-fashioned appreciation of artistry going on.

Rhymer stops playing and turns around halfway, looking directly at Marcus's office window. Marcus jerks back before he remembers that the windows are shaded. Rhymer won't be able to get a good look at him.

Or so one would think. As a matter of fact, though, Rhymer is staring right at him. If you can call it staring. It's heavy on the come-hither with a strong hint of I'll-come-thither. While he watches, Rhymer raises a hand to his hair to push it out of his face, then puckers up and blows the window an air kiss.

Marcus stumbles back as if he's been pushed.

Unfortunately, he catches his ankle on the wheel of his computer chair and goes crashing on his ass. A futile grab at the desk knocks over his pencil cup and sends No. 2's raining down on his head.

"Damn it," he snarls grouchy as the last Faber plinks onto the floor. He's going to pretend that Rhymer's laughter outside is all about some joke a pedestrian told him. Rhymer did *not* see him doing a pratfall. "Damn pencils and damn chair and way too damn cute for his own good guitarist and--"

"Did I come at a bad time?" a familiar voice asks. "'Cause I have to tell you, I've stumbled in on you and your guys in all kinds of compromising situations, but I've never seen you lose a fight with a desk chair and a box of Eberhards."

Marcus sighs and slumps a little more against the ground. "Enrico."

"The one and only." Enrico ambles through the office with his easy catlike grace, odd in a man who's all long arms and legs. He's grown his hair out since Marcus saw him last. A couple more months and he'll actually have something to comb. "You need a hand?"

"I got down here by myself. I can get back up."

"Looks to me like gravity might have had a hand in the downward trip." Enrico doesn't push, though. He stands back and lets Marcus haul himself up, watching while Marcus tests his ankles for any possible twists. "Didn't get hurt, did you?"

"Nothing but my pride." Marcus winces all the same. That floor was seriously hard. Maybe after the bed's paid for he'll look into getting some kind of padded carpet for his office.

Oh, God, the bed. He still feels a knot of panic at the price that was first quoted and has now been assessed against his account. They definitely can't afford this, not at the present time, no matter what Baz says, but the guys were so persuasive and he's always been sort of afraid that Nicholas is going to end up rolling right off the edge of the mattress and landing on his head.

He likes Nicholas' head. Preferably unbruised. Not that there's anything wrong with kissing a sore spot... or kissing... or getting sore in good ways... or...

Enrico snaps his fingers in front of Marcus' face. "Oh, *hell* no, you don't. I know that look. You're the most level-headed of the bunch, but even you get those glassy eyes and an expression that tells me you're a whole damn bunch of light-years away from what's going on. Or downstairs."

A delighted whoop splits the air. Enrico shakes his head. "They're still not putting the soundproofing flap on, are they?"

Marcus sits in his chair, wincing a little. "Well, we mostly don't bother now that it's just us..."

"Uh-huh. I'd still vote in favor of it. There are alley cats outside who'll be needing some serious therapy." Enrico cocks his head to listen. "I've got enough practice by now... sounds like Baz and Ryan to me."

"Really?" Marcus listens, too. "They're both supposed to be at work."

"And since when has that ever stopped them?" Enrico looks wise. "Those two want sex, they'll find a way around the rules."

Marcus grins. "It's good to see you again, 'Rico. It's been too long."

Enrico offers his hand for a high-five. "You, too, man. You, too."

They're getting down to the nitty-gritty now, Baz's hands busy on Ryan's zipper, pulling it down click by click. He's sitting on Ryan's legs, both of them comfortably in the middle of the big bed.

And going way too damn slow.

Ryan can feel his cock straining to get free. He pounds his fists into the mattress. "Would you hurry up already?"

"Patience, Ryan, patience." Baz gives him a good grope through the damned denim. "I feel like drawing this out nice and slow."

"Fucker."

"Damn right I am. And I'm going to be."

"So who says you get to be on top?"

"I do. I'm in the mood." The zipper goes down another click. "Anticipation just makes it sweeter."

Ryan growls at Baz to no effect. "You're speaking in complete sentences. Start panting and grunting my name. Then I'll be happy."

"Pretty damn loquacious yourself, you are. See? That word-a-day calendar's coming in handy." Baz lifts one hand to tap the side of his nose with a finger. "Don't tell Marcus I said that, though. He'll think he was right about us needing to expand our vocabulary and we can't have him with a swelled head."

"Speaking of swelled heads," Ryan pleads. Sometimes he's happy to go where the wind blows Baz. Right now, he just desperately wants to get naked. Then move on to the tight, hot, squishy-noise-making part. "Give me a break here, Baz. Not literally!"

Baz sits back on his heels. He toys with Ryan's zipper. "Like I'd break something that good. Nah. Just can't get past the notion that you've got something on your mind."

"And you're going to use sexual torture to dig it out of me?"

"Could be. Or I can count on you being so boneless and brainless after you come out of your fucking *ears* that you'll spill the whole thing."

Ryan shakes his head. "Some things are still private. They have to be in a fivesome. Otherwise we all know everything about everyone and we lose all the mystery."

Baz chuffs a laugh. "Like you and I have anything to hide from one another. Besides which, I've licked damn near everything on everyone but their spleens. I'd say I know them pretty well."

That brings a pensive mood straight to the fore. "There are some things you don't know, Baz."

"Then I'll just have to kiss them out of you," Baz says gravely -- and, jerking Ryan's jeans all the way open, getting a good handful, he proceeds to do just that -- or give it his best shot.

"Oh yeah," Enrico says with the air of someone listening to a particularly inspiring symphony. "That particular pitch screams Baz and Ryan to me. And damn if I'm not turning gay myself if I can pinpoint who's doing what to whom."

"Sure we can't convert you to our side?"

"You never know. It could happen."

"Put the soundproofing flap over the door!" Marcus yells over Enrico's shoulder.

The bed starts squeaking, getting louder and louder. The weird thing is, now that he's actually listening, Marcus can tell they haven't even really started yet.

He clears his throat and tries for a normal conversation. "So... haven't seen you in a couple of months. Everything still good?"

"I'm tight." Enrico nods affably. "Got myself a job at the newspaper. Granted, I'm still making coffee and sorting mail, but it's a start. And you would not believe the hard asses down in the underbelly of the beast."

Marcus grimaces.

"I could have worded that differently."

"You probably should have."

Enrico chuckles and leans back in his chair. "That's my vintage Marcus. Always there with the right turn of phrase. Mind you that when I say 'my', it's on a completely platonic basis, now. I ain't man enough to get myself mixed up with a five-way. How do ya'll keep it straight when you're all in bed together?"

"It can get a little complicated," Marcus admits. "One time I thought I was grabbing Aiden but it turns out I had a handful of Ryan, and you just said that to see how hard you could make me blush, didn't you?"

Enrico snorts with laughter. "Worked, too, didn't it?"

"Go on, remind me of the glory days when we all worked together. Go ahead. Name a perfect example."

"I'd say that would be the time you conned me and Madison into shopping for you. You guys ever use that stuff or was it all just one great big joke?"

Marcus feels his cheeks turn darker. Enrico guffaws, slapping his knee. "You and those boys of yours are one kinky bunch. You'd think that with five, nothing would ever get old. I remember I had to pick up ropes and shit. What did you do, dangle someone from the ceiling and use them as a free-for-all?"

Whoa, how about we dodge that particular bullet? "Hey, how's Madison, anyway?" Marcus asks hastily. "I see her on the ten o'clock news, but she hasn't stopped by since her last paycheck."

Enrico shrugs. "We meet from time to time. Had lunch over at a way too pricey café a couple weeks back. She ain't holding a grudge or anything over you selling the press. That interview she wrangled ya'll into got her foot in the door at the local TV station. Woman who looks like her, you know they'd put her on camera."

"It's hardly the Hollywood dream she once had."

"Our girl Maddy? She sees it as the first rung on a ladder. That girl's gonna hit Tinseltown before a couple years are out."

"Technically, we're not that far from..."

"Pedant." Off Marcus's surprised look, Enrico grins smugly. "Hey, I know a few ten-dollar words myself. Verbose. That's another one. You usually don't talk this much unless you're trying to hide something."

More squeaks, starting to develop a rhythm, come up the stairs from the basement.

"Soundproofing flap!" Marcus and Enrico both roar.

"Fucking hell!" Baz hollers back. "I've got my hands full of lube, both of them, and you want me to prance over there to work the flap?"

They hear a murmur that is probably Ryan, deeply embarrassed, trying to dig a hole through the blankets to hide himself in. Then, the door slams open and Baz stalks up the stairs. His hands are indeed shiniely slippery, he smells like cherries, he's stark naked, he's got a hard-on that would make porn stars jealous, and he's pissed. "If you don't mind, and if you couldn't tell, you moron, I was having a good time. Oh, hey, Enrico. Nice to have you visit. Long time no see."

"Don't poke me in the eye with that thing," Enrico warns. "I know where it's been. And if you think I'm gonna shake your hand, you got another think coming."

Baz cackles. "Whoa, there. No need to get testy." He gropes his testes. "I'm heading back downstairs before Ryan decides to bolt. Take it easy, 'Rico, eh?"

"You do the same. And I am not smacking my palm against yours, old friend well met again or not."

Baz spreads two sticky fingers in a "V". "Peace out. Don't get too loud up here. But if there's a party, be sure to invite me. I'll even get dressed." With a cheeky look, he turns on his heel and points his erect cock toward the stairs. "Ryan, better be ready when I get down there. Hands and knees, baby!"

He clatters down the stairs. Marcus watches him go, that perfect bubble butt flexing with each step. He guesses Baz's going to be on top this time. Lucky Baz. Ryan's a sweet fuck, melts like soft molasses in your arms, and looks at you afterwards with huge dark eyes that do amazing things for a man's ego.

Enrico snaps his fingers again. "Back to the real world, big guy. I came by for a reason."

Marcus blinks. He bends to pick up a pencil and starts tapping it against his leg. "Reason? Oh. Is there something I can do for you? We're kind of tapped out at the moment, but if your truck needs repairs or you want a good word in at the newspaper, I'd be happy to--"

"No, no, no." Enrico raises his hand. "None of the above. I'm dropping by to let you know there might be trouble in paradise." He nods toward the window, through which Rhymer is still visible, playing another one of those growing songs. "Me, I think he's nuts, but I have it on good authority and the proof of my own two eyes, which are sharper than you might think. Guitarzan wants you."

Marcus snaps his pencil in half.

"What was that all about?" Ryan asks as Baz slinks back into the room, cock first and forward, hands still sticky-wet. He's kind of given up on the idea of topping, but hey, not going to complain. Ryan can all but feel the sweet stretch-burn of Baz's cock buried inside him. He feels empty without it there.

Rising up a little, he gives Baz his best come-hither eyes -- which, naturally, make Baz burst into a fit of giggles.

"Okay, so that was lame," Ryan admits. "I think you need double X chromosomes to pull that one off."

"Nah." Baz launches himself athletically at the bed, then waits for the squeaks and creaks to die down before he leans forward to kiss Ryan. The kiss is hotter this time, charged

with anticipation that's just about run its course. Tongues come out to play, deep and wet and nasty.

Baz tugs Ryan to him with one lube-slick hand and Ryan doesn't mind the wet palm-print on his back a single bit. He gets up close and personal, tweaking Baz's nipples until they stand up nice and hard, then shifting their legs just so, bringing their cocks together.

"Oh, now, not fair," Baz rumbles. "I had other plans."

"I'm improvising," Ryan says breathlessly. He thrusts up, pushing hard against Baz's lower belly. "Any objections?"

Baz hisses. "Not a one, Ryan. Keep on -- yeah, just like that. God."

They're both humping each other in a slow, steady grind. Ryan can feel his orgasm building. He can't help it; when he's with Baz he just goes off like a rocket. Baz is not helping him with the stamina, either, grinding hard as he can against Ryan's stomach.

Then he improvises, himself, and reaches down with both hands to push their cocks together. Ryan groans and thrusts up, feeling the hot, tight skin of Baz's cock rubbing against his own. Feels good. Feels so damn good that the top of his head's going to come off. The big head. The little head is about to pop all on its own.

Ryan comes in a burst of sensations too intense to describe. His mind soars to the top of all potential mountains while his vision blurs out and his body jerks like a marionette. All the while, he's vaguely aware of Baz whispering dirty words into his ear.

When he comes back to himself, he's draped over the bed, completely limp. "Mmm, good show," he says drowsily. "Gimme a second."

"So, we've had the sex. Want to tell me what's on your mind, now?"

Ryan summons up the strength of will to shake his head "no".

"Damn." Baz sounds like he's pouting. "All right, once wasn't enough. We'll see if you can go back for seconds." He begins to push at Ryan. "Up, up and at 'em. Hands and knees, as I recall requesting some time ago." Baz grabs the lube and rewets his fingers. "Gonna give you the fucking of a lifetimes."

Ryan says something garbled. What he means, though, is that every time with Baz is the best ever.

He loves the other guys, but he's *in* love with Baz.

Why it seems different now, he doesn't know.

Marcus is really, really glad he wasn't drinking coffee or anything. As it is, he has to sit patiently and let Enrico tweeze pencil splinters out of his palm. "Say 'shit'," Enrico directs as he gets hold of a particularly nasty yellow segment.

"Shit!" Marcus gasps as Enrico yanks the offending object loose. "Is that all of them?"

"Flush it out with hydrogen peroxide, slap a band-aid on, and you'll be fine."

Marcus obeys, mumbling under his breath.

Enrico hesitates. "Now, should I put this first-aid box away, or are you gonna do something else drastic and stupid?"

"Breaking a pencil is hardly drastic or stupid."

"So you didn't fling the computer at my head. I know you, Marcus. You don't just do things like that if all you are is surprised. Something's going on here, huh? Something to do with that guitar player?" Enrico hunkers down, eyes glittering with mischief. "You dog. He's not the only one looking, huh? So what, four aren't enough? You gotta go for lucky number five?"

Marcus gives up. "I'm not going after him," he mumbles. "I think he's going after me."

"Ooh." Enrico whistles. "I knew it. Double dog, then. But he's gotta know you're in this big complex orgy, right?"

Taking another glance out the window, Marcus sees that Rhymer has gone back to regular old slow ballads, playing as if he hasn't a care in the world, nodding and grinning as someone pours a handful of change in his guitar case. "I think so. I mean, I never even noticed the guy until today. He's been talking to Baz, though."

"He knows, then."

"Probably."

"Definitely."

Marcus sighs.

"You do tend to get the blinkers on when it's something you don't want to see."

"I just..." Marcus swivels around so he can get a better look at Rhymer. "I don't want to be attracted to him. Four should be enough."

"But you are attracted, and therein lies your problem." Enrico stands up in an obnoxiously easy motion and rotates his shoulders. "You are in such deep shit. If this guy wants you and you want him, it's all gonna end in tears. Or," he says, adopting a pose of thought, "you could look at it like this is some kind of polyamorous Thanksgiving dinner. You got the turkey, by which I mean Baz, and you got all the trimmings. But who doesn't save room for dessert?"

"Uh-huh," Marcus says absently, watching Rhymer's hands move over his guitar strings.

"Oh, lord. I am so outta here before I dig myself any deeper in."

"Uh-huh."

"You find yourself kicked out of that big bed, I got a nice lumpy couch you can sleep on."

"Uh-huh."

"Damn, you're gone." Marcus only vaguely recognizes the feel of Enrico's warm hand pounding his shoulder. "Think I might stop by here more often. Sounds like things are going to get interesting from this point out."

"Uh-huh."

Enrico chortles. "See you around, Marcus. You too, Ryan and Baz!" he shouts in the direction of the basement stairs.

A wailing cry answers him.

Marcus raises his hand in a farewell as Enrico heads for the door. He wants to look away, but can't quite seem to. As Enrico exits, Rhymer turns around again. Marcus knows Rhymer can't see him, but he winks all the same, then licks his lips.

Marcus shakes his head in frustration. "What do you want?" he demands, even though he can't be heard. Thus his impulse to say it out loud.

To his surprise, Rhymer gets up from his bench and heads for the main office door. He leaves his money-filled guitar case behind and everything -- although he does bring the guitar with him. The door creaks open and he's there, smelling of rich autumn life and fresh air and hard-working man, hair down in his eyes and a devil-may-care grin on his lips.

Marcus stares. Blinks. Stares. "Did you hear me?"

"Saw your lips move," that raw brown sugar voice answers. Rhymer gives him a bone-melting, shit-eating grin. "Figured you had something you wanted to say."

Marcus considers, for a brief second, lying. But he's always been a shitty liar and he knows it. He spreads his hands wide and leans back in his chair. "What do you want, Rhymer?"

Rhymer's dark eyes grow hot. "What have you got for me?"

"Oh -- oh -- oh -- God!" Ryan's almost sobbing as his second orgasm hits him, wringing his balls so tightly that a delicious pain rockets up his spine. Baz's got him stuffed to the gills, and he's still fucking away.

In time with his thrusts, he's chanting: "Tell me. Tell me. Tell me."

Ryan shakes his head. Then, deliberately, he starts thrusting back, impaling himself on Baz's cock. His body's worn out, but he knows how to drive Baz over the edge.

"Not fair," Baz accuses.

Ryan gives a short bark of a laugh. Sweat's pouring down his skin and he's just made a huge mess on the sheets. Not that they don't change them every day anyway. But still.

He's not saying a word.

"Ryan..." Baz groans. "Come on. Give it up."

Ryan bears down with his muscles, gripping Baz like a python, and Baz finally passes the point of no return. He roars out his climax, hot jism spurting deep inside Ryan in thick pulses.

After a few moments of shaking and swearing under his breath, Baz pulls out and collapses on the bed, dragging Ryan down with him. Baz is affectionate after a good fuck, which is a good thing because Ryan shares the same quality. They huddle together, Baz idly carding his fingers through Ryan's hair.

Add a shower to the changing of the sheets.

Baz seems to have forgotten all about his interrogation in the lazy warmth of afterglow. Ryan grabs Baz's arm and plants a light kiss on it. Maybe he's dodged the bullet this time.

He knows he won't be this lucky forever, though.

Baz's going to find out that Ryan can't get his mind off the guitar-playing vision out on the sidewalk.

And then?

There's gonna be hell to pay.

Chapter Five

Rhymer stands in the doorway for a minute, just savoring the look on Marcus's face. If a picture is worth a thousand words, Marcus is at work writing a dictionary or three. His mouth opens and closes a few times as he clearly fumbles for words, and settles on: "How the *hell* did you get in here?"

"Door was unlocked." Rhymer shrugs. "Pretty careless of you. Anybody could come wandering in off the streets. You ought to take better care of house and home." He bends to put his guitar down carefully out of the way, then straightens up nice and lazy as if he hasn't a care in the world. His heart would betray him, though -- it's pounding ninety miles to the gallon.

He doesn't let a bit of what he's feeling show.

Marcus has moved on past "confused" and looks to be well on his way, moving double-quick-time to "pissed". Rhymer grins at him, knowing the big guy's slow to act when he's taken by surprise. He's banking on it taking a few more minutes before Marcus actually gets physical about kicking him out.

Every second is one to be taken advantage of.

Rhymer's gonna work with all he's got.

"So, you mind if I have a seat? Nice comfy office you've got here." Rhymer chuckles as Marcus automatically rolls his own desk chair protectively toward the guest seat and puts a hand on the cushion. "Well, now. That's a pretty protective attitude for a guy who's *laissez-faire* enough to just leave his office wide open."

"I wasn't exactly expecting company." Marcus frowns. "Okay, so I know how you got in. *Why* did you not-break and enter?"

"I'd think my reasons would be fairly obvious." Rhymer adjusts his stance, planting his feet far apart and putting one hand on his hip. It's not exactly a silver-screen come-hither, but he guesses it'll do in a pinch. "Wanted to get to know you better. Figured I'd just stop by, seeing that we're neighbors."

Marcus boggles at him. "Neighbors? You sit in a bench out on the street!"

"Yeah, but I spend most of my waking hours there, so you could say that's where I live."

"Don't try using semantics on me. I have a scholar in my ranks -- and then there's Baz. I've been trained to deflect bullshit."

"Now, who said I was shitting you?" Rhymer's enjoying the hell out of himself. "I do more or less live out there, which, as I said, makes us neighbors. I've even slept on my

bench there a time or three. Never did get my shoes stolen, either, which is more than you can say for most guys who sleep under what passes for stars in this city." He tilts his head to a side, thoughtful. "You ever actually see any stars, or did you have a life before you moved here?"

Marcus looks indignant. "I've seen stars. I'm not a moron. I've traveled... some..."

"But you grew up right here." Rhymer comes in uninvited, snatching up a wooden kitchen chair from its place by the door and dumping the papers that were piled on it. "Oops. Guess you don't like a mess, do you? A man as neat and tidy as you, bet you're just squirming inside from what I did there." He swings the chair around backward and sits down, leaning on the slats. "Now how does a man like that manage what has to be seriously messy sex with four other guys?"

Marcus turns dark red. "Now we're getting into the realm of *none of your fucking business*."

"Language, language," Rhymer *tsks*. He can't keep a grin off his face. Riling Marcus has to be the most fun he's had in years. Makes the big guy look sexy as all hell, domineering and powerful instead of tongue-tied.

Rhymer does like himself a strong man.

Marcus stares at him for a long minute. "Do you want me to call the cops? You get your jollies out of harassing people?"

"Of course. I do it for a living. Who sits out on a bench and plays to the crowd without learning how to milk them for every dollar? A few notes here, a sweet lullaby there, and I make my living." He nods toward Marcus's computer, an Excel spreadsheet open, cells filled with neat serif typing. "What do you do?"

He's genuinely curious. It's been easy enough to guess what the other four occupy themselves with, but Marcus's a bit of a mystery. He sits up here in this echoing office, tucked into a corner, and works on his computer. Rhymer would bet money that Marcus isn't the type to leech off his partners, not when one of them walks dogs, for Christ's sake, so he must be up to something.

Marcus's face goes wooden. "I work from home," he says flatly. His hand goes to the keyboard and hits a button. A scrolling screensaver pops up, blocking what he's written from view.

Rhymer finds the running text more interesting. It's a big, bright blue font on a black background that reads: "BAZ CAME HERE FIRST, AND SO DID RYAN. ENJOY YOUR "WORK".

He cracks up.

Marcus glances at the computer, and shuts his eyes, squeezing them tight. "I told them not to play around with this thing. Stupid technology."

"And isn't that an interesting attitude for a man who, I'm going to guess, makes his living using that oversized electronic paperweight?"

"Oh, I know my way around a computer," Marcus flares. Rhymer hides his snicker. Hot spot. He loves finding those. "I used to head up a small press. We did things on the computer that you wouldn't believe."

"With five of you all fucking in between the lines, I bet I would believe pretty much anything you cared to share."

"We did not--" Marcus stops himself. He drums his fingers on the desk. "Okay, so you know a lot about me and my, um, lovers."

"Is the word so hard for you to say?" Prod, prod, prod. Big tough man, but bashful as a blushing virgin. That's got to be a surface reaction. Rhymer knows his target too well, and besides, a man does *not* get four lovers if he's the shy type all the time. "Lovers. In the plural, even. One, two, three, four. Shut the door."

"What?" Marcus looks confused.

"One, two, buckle my shoe. Three, four, shut the--"

"All right, all right. I get it."

"Not much for jokes, are you?" Rhymer rests his chin on his arms. Marcus hasn't gotten around to planting his size fourteens in his backside yet, so he figures he has a little wiggle room. "I've got a riddle for you."

"Really not in the mood."

"Oh, now, don't be like that. What's one plus five?"

Marcus's eyes narrow. "Don't go there."

"Now you'd think the solution is simple. Six," Rhymer goes on, ignoring Marcus. "Me, I'd come up with a different answer."

"And what would that be?"

"More than you can handle." Rhymer rests his cheek on one arm. "Or is it? Maybe you've been thinking about expanding your horizons."

Marcus gives him a flat look. "You went there. And now let me show you where to go next. I call it the front door."

"Now, now. We're just getting to know each other," Rhymer stalls. "Swear I won't make a move on you. Cross my heart." He makes a sketchy motion in the air with two fingers. "Hope to die, stick a needle in my eye, all that shit."

His fingers are mentally crossed behind his back. Like hell he won't make a move, not if he gets the chance. But easy does it. He'll keep prodding at Marcus, figuring out what makes him tick, and then when he finds the right button -- hey presto.

Marcus is still regarding him with suspicion, but the edge is wearing off. "Okay. So you got in here to basically, what? Be a pain in my ass?"

"Just being neighborly. I figure I've met the others, so you and I might as well have a sit-down."

"You've -- when? This morning?"

"Nah." Rhymer waves his hand. "I see Baz just about every sunrise, heading out to his job. He always stops to lollygag and chat with me until he's late. Ryan, he doesn't know me but to smile at me, and, well, I don't guess that Aiden knows me as well as I know him. But Nicholas, now, he and I have a nice relationship. He's a sweet talker, that one. Nice accent. Makes me think of schoolmasters and spankings, oh my."

Marcus is flushing red again. Rhymer chalks one up for himself on the mental score card he's keeping. "So I guess he does play those kind of games, doesn't he? I pretty much suspected."

"We're back on none of your fucking--"

"Yeah, yeah. No sex talk. Kind of hard to avoid when you're talking to one-fifth of a fivesome. Sex defines your lifestyle, so how about you define sex for me? Does it come with all those pretty little hearts and flowers, or is it all about getting down and dirty, up to your elbows in lube and balls-deep in someone's ass? Or maybe covered in Crisco with a fist or two in play?"

Marcus blinks. Rhymer thinks for a second he's gone too far, but Marcus doesn't let him down. He gets this hard look on his face again like he'd like nothing better than to turn Rhymer over his own knee and deliver a sound spanking, which Rhymer wouldn't mind in the least. "Shut up."

"Can't very well keep my lips zipped and hold up my end of the conversation."

"This is not a conversation. This is... is..." Marcus gives up. "When are you going to leave, anyway?"

"Right about when you call the cops, if you do. Otherwise, not until I'm done here. And Marcus, we have only just begun." Rhymer raises his head. "Now, I'm guessing that maybe your doe-eyed Ryan likes a little romance, but Baz, he wants it nasty as it can get."

"You really have balls, don't you? Where do you get off coming into someone's workplace and asking these kinds of questions? I'm getting seriously fucked-up stalker vibes." Marcus's hand reaches for a cell phone. "I'm putting in a call in precisely five seconds unless you give me a good reason not to."

Okay, the ultimate challenge is coming a little earlier than I planned, but you've gotta roll with those good old punches. Rhymer shrugs casually as he can. "In the words of wicked little boys everywhere, I want to join your gang."

Marcus's hand falls away from the phone. He gapes for a good few seconds before shaking his head hard. "Run that by me again?"

"I want in," Rhymer says, the words coming easier now he's taken the first step. "I've seen all of you, and I like what I see. You all apparently don't mind the looks of me, or at least that was the vibe I got this morning and have gotten since I first took up space on that bench out there. And you, just now, watching me out your window. I could feel your eyes burning into my back."

"The window is tinted."

"Yeah, but it's not completely black. I have good eyes. Every time I glanced around, you were watching me. There's a kind of heat in a man's stare that makes another man of like mind want to look back." Rhymer shrugs. "I felt that kind of come-hither from you. So I figured I'd come in and take my best shot."

Marcus looks annoyed, as if he's got a terrier at his heels. Rhymer doesn't mind the analogy. He likes the persistence he has, and he uses it. "You couldn't have said that in the first place?"

"Nope. You'd have drop-kicked me to the curb and locked the door. I had to soften you up a bit first."

"You call that softening me up?"

"Yep. You're not all pins and needles like you were when I first came in. For one thing, you're actually listening." Rhymer tilts forward a bit. "And you haven't said 'no' to my proposal. Makes a man think you might be interested after all."

Marcus says nothing with his lips, but a dozen different things flash through his eyes. Anger, doubt, worry, more anger, fury, all of those, but most important? Lust.

Rhymer moves to take advantage of that as quick as he can. Standing up so fast that his chair clatters to the floor, he moves to stand in front of Marcus, his hands on Marcus's arms and his face up in Marcus'. "Give me a kiss," he says, barely louder than a breath. "You know you want to."

Marcus looks him right in the eye. "Say you're right. Say I want to. I'm not cheating on my guys."

Rhymer shakes his head. "It's not about cheating, Marcus. It's about playing the game."

"This is all a game to you?"

"Actually? Sort of yes, but at the same time, nah, not as such. I'm not asking you to turn your back on those four. I just want a little peek inside."

"From what you were saying earlier, you want the whole thing."

"A man's gotta start somewhere." This close, Rhymer can almost hear Marcus's heart beating as fast as his own. He can see a pulse fluttering on Marcus's neck. The temptation to dip down and kiss that spot, to taste Marcus's skin, is nearly irresistible. "I picked you."

Marcus moves his head -- not further away, but closer to. "Why me?"

"Because," Rhymer says softly, "you're the one who does it for me, most of all. The others all have their charm, but you're the boss."

"You like playing around with power?"

"It's all about power. The power of love."

"You're saying you're in *love* with me? With us?"

"Don't go putting words in my mouth. I'd rather something else go there."

"No. No." Marcus backs away. "Quit playing around, Rhymer. I have a Baz in my life, and if you know Baz, you know that I've been jerked around by the finest. Be honest with me. What are you hoping for here?"

Rhymer can answer that one. "You."

And then, because for the life of him he can't figure out why the hell he shouldn't, Rhymer closes the gap between them and kisses Marcus on the lips. Full, soft lips that freeze under his like a block of ice.

For a moment.

And then, it's like being in the whirling wind of a hurricane. Marcus surges up from his desk, grabbing Rhymer by one arm and the back of his head, kissing Rhymer so hard that they start stumbling backward. Marcus's mouth leaves his, but then it's just everywhere, lips on his jaw and throat and at the place where his collarbones meet. A hand's tugging at the hem of his long-sleeved T-shirt, pushing up underneath the fabric and grasping at his skin. It goes flat-palmed, the heat of it burning a brand into Rhymer's skin, then it rushes around back to grab his ass and squeeze hard.

Rhymer laughs out loud. Looks like he made the right moves after all. But enough is enough, at least when it comes to this. Because he's *not* about breaking up the whole gang, and if this goes on much longer they're going to have some issues he's pretty sure Marcus most of all won't be able to overcome.

Except for Baz, maybe. He and Baz have gotten along pretty good so far, but he's wary about getting the man's back up. Gets a sense Baz would go ballistic if he's asked before he's ready about letting Rhymer in.

Rhymer generally goes with his gut, and he's rarely wrong.

"Easy, there. Easy." Rhymer backs up, pushing Marcus away. Marcus looks disheveled, his eyes hazy and his hands still hovering in the air. "That's as far as we go for now."

It's taking Marcus a minute to get his brain back in working order, but when he's together again he frowns. One hand reaches up to grab his own hair. "What the hell was that all about? You want me, and then you don't want me?"

"I want you to know yourself. I'm an X-factor, Marcus. None of you planned on me, but I can tell when a man's interested. All of you are. I happen to feel much the same way. This was about finding out for sure." Rhymer turns to go, much as it pains him, and heads for his guitar. She feels right at home in his hands. Good girl. "Now, it's up to you to figure out what happens next. Am I in? Am I out?" He looks back over his shoulder, one eyebrow lifted. "Do you go on the same way as you have been, or do you broaden your horizons?"

Marcus's lip twitches, as if he's trying to hide a rueful grin. "Five is pretty broad. I'd say we're wide open."

"Nope. Your ranks are closed. I'm the private at the gate requesting a pass. Somehow, I don't think most of you would mind." *Except Baz.* Rhymer turns around completely. He's serious, now, as he looks at Marcus. "You think good and hard about what happened here. Then you make up your mind as to what the bunch of you are going to do about me."

Marcus stands. "What makes you think I can boss them around?" He seems genuinely curious. "Each of us is our own man."

"That's true enough," Rhymer allows, "but every pack has its Alpha male. By all accounts, that'd be you."

Marcus shakes his head -- then pauses. "I never thought about..."

"Told you." Rhymer cradles his guitar and waits. Marcus is either going to make another move or let him go, and either action's going to mean a hell of a lot. The big man's deciding, though, and this time Rhymer's decided he's not going to rush him.

"Rhymer." Marcus' voice is steadier. "Come here."

So they're heading for curtain number one. Rhymer puts his guitar back down and ambles forward. Marcus meets him halfway. They're about the same height, not small, either of them, but Rhymer feels the delicious thrill of being with someone who could overpower him using a single finger. Marcus has just got that kind of might to him.

Rhymer stands still as Marcus puts one hand on his shoulder, then leans in and kisses him lightly on the lips. He doesn't use his tongue; it's not that kind of a kiss. This is more Marcus testing the waters, seeing if they're good for swimming in.

He makes a small noise and pulls Rhymer close. Rhymer goes, still feeling that rush. The scent of Marcus, all rich woody cologne and raw man, makes his head spin.

But he doesn't move his arms until Marcus reaches out and moves them for him, placing one palm on Marcus's hip and one on his waist. Rhymer gives in with an internal whoop of glee, letting the kiss develop into something more than just a brush of mouth on mouth.

It's a tender moment, and it's powerful, and it's like crossing a line drawn in the sand.

When Marcus moves away, his eyes are dark with lust, but wide in bafflement. "How do you do this?" he asks, sounding genuinely curious. "You just see what you want and you plunge in to take it?"

"It's a philosophy that's pretty much always worked for me, yeah." Rhymer licks his lips. "You gonna let me go or do we do this dance again?"

Marcus closes his eyes briefly and then moves away. "Go back out on the street and play your music, Rhymer. I have to think about things. I can't do that with you around."

"And here I thought I was what's on your mind," Rhymer teases.

"You are. That's why I can't be distracted by you." Marcus runs a hand through his hair again. Rhymer has to admit his logic makes a certain kind of sense. "I guess you probably know I was fantasizing about you earlier."

"Yeah, but it's nice to get some confirmation." Rhymer feels himself warming from the inside out. He's accomplished what he set out to do, and it hasn't been a bad afternoon's work. "Talk to your boys, Marcus. Be careful about Baz."

"What?"

Rhymer deliberately ignores Marcus' question. "See what goes down. I'll be around."

"Don't give me that 'all you need to do is whistle' line."

"How about the second part of that classic exchange?"

"That either." Marcus makes a wry face. "You let yourself in. You can see yourself back out."

"Fair enough." Rhymer goes to get his guitar, again, and heads for the door. One last thought strikes him as he puts his hand on the knob. "Hey. Marcus?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't keep this to yourself, now. The truth will always gets out, and I'd suggest it be a reasonable suggestion made on your own terms. With men like you, it'd just fester until you did something stupid. I want you, want you all, but it has to be above board from here on out. We have a deal?"

He can all but hear Marcus thinking. "Okay. Deal."

"Works for me." Rhymer whistles soft and low as he reaches for the doorknob. Marcus' chuckle follows behind him as he heads out into the street.

And once he sits down, he can feel those eyes on him again.

He starts to play, in a mood for love songs.

That went well. Now they'll just see what they'll see, won't they?

That is, unless Marcus really *does* go and do something stupid...

Chapter Six

Keys. Where are his keys? Nicholas sighs as he juggles a sheaf of papers from one arm to another, trying not to let any slide out of the sloppy, dog-eared pile. He'd been dragged into an afternoon conference -- without warning -- and presented as the foundation's resident expert on something he's actually barely familiar with, as he's been regarded as their relatively-competent IT specialist as of late.

Nicholas knows he's good at what he does, whether computer or research, but being tossed into the deep end like that will throw anyone off their game. Worse still, he found out very quickly this meeting was being held by some of the foundation's most prominent patrons, men and women who were accustomed to donating, slipping fat checks into wallets. The foundation's livelihood, his own job included, depended on the generosity of those who lined the room.

He hopes he made a good job out of a very impromptu presentation. He can't for the life of him remember what he talked about, for the most part, but seems to recall there being approving nods and grunts of satisfaction. Possibly when he was blathering on about ethical considerations and rewording policy statements.

Nicholas thinks perhaps he didn't screw up too badly. Either way, it's over and he's home now. Or at the threshold. He will be *in* his home if he can just find his blasted keys. Not in the left-hand-pocket -- and damn it, not in the right, either. He doesn't remember the feel of sitting on them.

Shit! Nicholas wonders if he's left them at work once again. He sighs, knowing that in all likelihood the keys are resting in a shiny tangle underneath some papers on his desk. It wouldn't be the first time he's made this particular mistake.

Resigned to going back across town to fetch them, for it wouldn't do if they got swiped, Nicholas tries the knob anyway. Perhaps someone's come home early. It's been known to happen.

He's pleasantly surprised when the door swings open with a gracious air. The scents of home rise up to greet him. The smell of men -- strong, but not unpleasant -- rather, a delight when one has a personal and intimate knowledge of these particular men -- coffee -- and something edibly fragrant.

Good Lord, is someone baking? Nicholas checks his watch. Cookery at five-thirty p.m. in the evening on a workday? It hardly seems likely. For this group of men, at any rate.

In a normal household, one might expect to walk in the door and be greeted by the fragrant smell of apples and cinnamon. With them? Lord, no. Ryan's culinary abilities extend to phoning in for takeout and Pop-Tarts. Baz has been known to make a rather sassy rice pilaf and chicken mole, but he never cooks unless he's got something to apologize for, and Nicholas doubts Baz could have done anything to top his performance

at the custom bed establishment this morning. Besides, where there's one the other follows close behind, and it's far too quiet inside for either of the pair to be around.

Quiet... yes. It is oddly quiet. Nicholas closes the door behind him, growing ever more curious by the moment. A quick glance around proves that nothing appears to be stolen, so it's unlikely that there's been a break-in or burglary. Besides, a thief would hardly stop to whip up a pie and set it to baking.

Aiden's not home yet. It's close to his time, but the first thing Aiden does when he arrives in the suite is collapse face-first across the bed and swear he's never getting up again, not ever, so help him God, and would someone bring him a bottle of something ninety proof?

They generally fetch him a can of pop instead. Marcus takes care of bringing on some club soda, too, as there's usually varied finger-paint stains or Magic Marker scribbles decorating any given part of Aiden's anatomy, and clothes do not, as Baz believes, grow on trees. It's all a nice, set pattern. Comfort Aiden, then rib Marcus unmercifully for being such a big girl's blouse.

Back to the original question -- while Aiden can cook, he limits himself to using the indoor grill in the preparation of meat that's properly burned, along with steaming jacket potatoes with which he possibly provides a carton of ice cream for dessert. When Aiden prepares dinner, it's no dainty affair. More often than not they're too stuffed for sex afterwards, and that is full indeed.

Which only leaves...

"Marcus?" Nicholas calls, bending to put his sheaf of papers down on a low side table. "Are you in here?"

No answer. Nicholas tries to shuffle the fliers and printouts into a more-or-less neat pile, and gives up when they slide to the floor. Grabbing them back up, he keeps pushing and nudging until they sit in an untidy but apparently stable heap.

"Marcus?" Nicholas moves forward into the bedroom, where no one is to be found. The smell of sex is heavy in here, thick and musky. Fresh. Baz and Ryan's pillows are both tousled, as are the sheets on their side of the bed. Nicholas grins. Rapsallions, those two are. Had a bit of afternoon delight and then moved on to wreak havoc elsewhere, did they?

"I have no idea what possessed you to start baking, but it smells divine," Nicholas says as he divests himself of his jacket, hanging it neatly in his section of their closet. It's tempting to go ahead and remove his shirt as well, but one never knows if they'll walk in on company. Perhaps Marcus is having a meeting with a client or a business associate. "Marcus, are you in the kitchen?"

"Nick?" he hears in response. "Oh, hey. Yeah, I'm in here. Come on through."

"Do you have anyone with you?"

"Huh? Oh. No. No, it's just me." Nicholas can almost see Marcus shuffling uncomfortably. His voice has that odd sort of awkward air he gets when he's least at his ease. "You're home early."

"I'm actually home precisely on my personal dot," Nicholas points out as he heads for the kitchen. "You're the one who's before his time. Generally we have to drag you down from the computer, whereupon you shovel a bit of dinner in your mouth and head back upstairs if we can't stop you." He pauses to lean on the doorway, both hands in his pockets, head tipped to one side. "Yet today you're down here playing homemaker, and I can't help but wonder why."

Marcus squirms. "I just thought it'd be... nice, y'know? I mean, we bought a new bed today. I figured that called for a little celebration."

"I see." Nicholas doesn't move. "And since when, around here, does celebration involve more brown sugar and nutmeg than wild, uninhibited sex?"

Marcus blinks, then starts to grin. "Okay, okay. Do your chicken dance thing. I'm being a mother hen again." He leans back, looking more at his ease. "I don't know. I just felt like cooking."

"Lord knows I've missed your culinary skills." Marcus is their personal master in the kitchen when he decides to turn his hand to the art, but it's been a while. "Still tidy as ever about things, though, aren't you?" Nicholas glances around and sees that the counters are wiped down, a potholder is neatly squared up on the edge, and the trash is full of Granny Smith peelings. "Not just made from scratch, but from actual apples? I think I may have to kiss you."

Marcus grins. "Wish you would."

"Mmm." Nicholas lifts himself away from the door and crosses the kitchen. He stops at Marcus's side and bends his head down for a long, lazy kiss that tastes of cinnamon and coffee. "Mmm." His repetition has a different inflection, one that he hopes indicates his pleasure in the act. Kissing Marcus is bringing the common gesture down to an art form. No one knows his way around the use of a mouth like Marcus.

Well, Baz is quite remarkable when it comes to wrapping his lips around cocks, but that's something else altogether, isn't it?

Nicholas speaks against Marcus' mouth so that their lips touch lightly with every word. "How much longer does the pie need to bake?"

"Apple crisp, actually," Marcus whispers, reaching up briefly for a more solid caress.

In his turn, Nicholas pulls back a little further. "When will the crisp be finished crisping, then?"

A small timer dings. Marcus's grin widens. "I'd say it's just about done."

"I see." Nicholas trails his fingers down along the line of Marcus's shoulder, all the way to his elbow. His touch is deliberately feather-light and teasing. "I would suggest you take it out of the oven so it can cool, then. I've something else in need of warming up."

Marcus can, occasionally, be slow on the uptake, but it seems that he's quite open to innuendo today. He laughs softly. "Bet I could guess what you have in mind for heating."

"You'd likely be right." Nicholas turns and begins a slow saunter out of the kitchen, enjoying his game more than just a little. He looks back over his shoulder. "You have one guess as to where I'll be after you've taken care of the crisp."

He hears Marcus start to whistle as he leaves the kitchen.

Highly amused, Nicholas heads back into the bedroom. He sits on the edge of the bed and toes his shoes off one by one, listening to the thumps they make as they hit the worn carpet. Everything seems languid and hazy down to the arousal burning in the pit of his stomach, a warm glow rather than an all-consuming blaze. Slowly, he lies down in his accustomed spot and relaxes his head into the welcoming pillow. One arm dangles off the edge of the bed and one rests on his stomach.

He waits, patiently, for Marcus to come and join the party.

One is the loneliest number, after all.

Marcus appears after a moment, dusting his hands off on his black jeans -- then wincing and checking to see if he's smeared flour on himself. Nicholas can't help but chuckle at the sight. Marcus looks up in curiosity, gets it, and smiles sheepishly. "So I'm a clothes horse."

Baz would no doubt say something about Marcus being a horse that wears clothes, but Nicholas prefers to think that he's above such gibes. The thought does amuse him, though. They all have a particular spot that the others poke at. Marcus's neatness, Baz's lunacy, Ryan's sloppiness, Aiden's scrappiness, and his own "prim" ways.

He's shown them all time and time again exactly how "prim" he isn't, of course. But he does like to maintain a reserve outside of the bedroom.

Occasionally, it can be fun within those walls, too.

"Marcus," Nicholas says softly, "what have you done?"

Marcus blinks, an odd expression of guilt crossing his face. "Me?" His voice comes out as more of a squeak than a grown man's should. "What do you -- nothing. I haven't done anything."

"You must have something on your mind, or you'd be otherwise buried in your work and not here for the tempting."

"Bad day on the market," Marcus says so smoothly that Nicholas knows he's fibbing. Perhaps he isn't able to work, but that'll be because he's got other things occupying his thoughts.

"Marcus..."

"I can't just want a quiet afternoon?"

Nicholas quirks an eyebrow and waits.

Marcus, as might have been predicted, folds like the proverbial deck of cards. "I had a meeting with someone today," he says. "It didn't exactly turn out like I'd hoped."

That's cause for a twinge of concern. "Nothing terribly bad, I hope?"

Marcus shakes his head. "Nah. Just something that took me by surprise, that's all."

"Was there a problem?"

"You could say so," Marcus mumbles. He's not looking directly at Nicholas now. Nicholas doesn't like this. Marcus is notoriously bad at hiding any secrets. But there's more than one way to skin a cat, isn't there?

"Get that look off your face," Marcus says, glancing away. "I don't really want to talk about it."

Oh, but you will. I'll get to the bottom of this. "We don't keep secrets, Marcus," Nicholas reminds him, keeping it firm but kind. "All in good time, though. I believe I mentioned something about warming up?"

That gets him a direct look again, and an eager-puppy expression. "Hey, good-looking," he sings, badly off key. "Whatcha got cooking? How's about cooking something special up for me?"

"Your knowledge of the classics never fails to astound." Nicholas reaches for Marcus's arm. "Sit still for a moment and let me do the work. We begin with these." He undoes the buttons of Marcus's shirt first at one wrist, and then another.

"This involves getting naked?" Marcus asks hopefully. "I could be up for that."

"I'm sure you will be," Nicholas murmurs. He starts at the top of Marcus's shirt, opening it one button at a time, letting his fingers trail over warm skin and hard muscle. Marcus hasn't let himself run to fat once since he's known the man, love of sweets notwithstanding. Perhaps it's all the sex. They do get rigorous daily workouts.

Marcus's eyes are half-closed. "Feels nice," he says as if in a trance. "Love your hands."

"They can do more than just remove a shirt." Nicholas draws back. "Take it off completely, then lie face-down on the bed."

"Not my pants, too?"

"Not yet." Nicholas moves aside so that Marcus can obey his command. It gives him a small thrill every time that Marcus lets himself be bossed around in their private games. So in control at all other times, he only gives in with Nicholas, so far as Nicholas knows. "Lie down."

Marcus stretches out, sock feet dangling off the edge of the bed. He tries to twist his head around to give Nicholas a quizzical glance. "What are you planning?"

Ah. Yes. Marcus gives in, but not without questions. Nicholas gives Marcus's firm ass a light swat. "Lie still," he says, choosing not to answer. At least not in words.

Now that Marcus is in a vulnerable position, Nicholas can begin his work. Nimbly, he straddles Marcus' legs from behind and plants his palms on the heated skin of Marcus's back. Moving ever so slowly, he begins to rub with his thumbs, digging in to knotted muscles.

Marcus gives a deep, hearty sigh that makes him vibrate. "Oh, God... you have no idea how much I needed this."

"I did have some inkling," Nicholas says, continuing to massage. "You're hiding something -- no, don't interrupt -- and that makes you tense as a virgin on her wedding night. A little rub-down should loosen you up."

"Really, it's not a good idea for us to be talking about what happened."

"On the contrary."

"It's nothing big."

"Then it won't hurt you to tell me, will it?"

Marcus heaves another heavy breath. "You're not going to give up until I start talking, are you?"

"I'm afraid not." Nicholas traces Marcus's shoulder blades with a light touch, then begins working on his neck. There are knots upon knots that need loosening up. "Marcus, I've no objection to your having personal business. I know you too well, that's all. The baking, the stuttering and stammering, these are all signs pointing to a deep, personal upset. And if there's something I can do to help, you should know by now that I will, and that you can trust me."

Marcus shifts a little. Nicholas rides the wave. "I don't think anyone else would understand," he says in a low voice. "You're the only one who'd listen to this and not make a huge fuss. And right now I kind of want to keep things low key."

"Is it so terrible?"

"Maybe." Marcus twitches again. "Nick, stop rubbing. Let me turn over."

"Of course." Nicholas rises up and lets Marcus flip onto his back. The view is just as good if not better, and the fact that Nicholas's groin is now flush with Marcus's cock is a definite bonus. He runs his fingernails lightly across Marcus's pectoral muscles, coaxing if not a smile then a less troubled expression out of the man. "I won't be upset," he promises. "Now. What's bothering you?"

"Nick..." Marcus reaches up to touch Nicholas's arms, stroking lightly. He bites his lip, and then blurts, "Would you hate me if I got kinda, you know, 'worked up' about another man?"

Well. Nicholas stops his light massage and examines Marcus curiously. He doesn't appear to be pulling anyone's leg. In fact, he looks so very much in earnest that he may well explode from the internal pressure.

It's a bit of a shocker, but Nicholas has developed a superb inner balance while co-existing with four other men. After the initial shock has passed, he merely nods and continues his light petting. "Is it anyone I know?"

Marcus blinks. "You're not mad?"

"Marcus, I share you with three others already. How could I be angry?"

"It's just... you know, with the rings and everything... I figured you'd think the circle was closed..."

Nicholas shakes his head. "Marcus, we're committed, not dead. It's hardly surprising that someone would catch your eye one of these days. And while it does have an impact on us as a group, it's better to know now than to let this fester into a deep pool of guilt."

"When you put it that way..." Marcus grasps Nicholas by the elbows. "Kiss me?"

"Gladly." Nicholas lowers his face so that their lips can touch. Marcus seizes him by the back of his head and keeps him fastened there, Marcus's tongue plundering his mouth. Nicholas kisses back for all he's worth, turning what might have been a quick brush into a deep and wonderfully nasty thing. He begins to gyrate against Marcus's swelling cock, letting Marcus know that he's interested in taking this to the next level.

Marcus makes a muffled sound and reaches between them to undo the fastenings on Nicholas's pants. He doesn't get far with them being pressed as close together as they are, and makes a complaining sound of frustration.

Nicholas isn't in the mood to talk anymore. He lifts up, balancing on his knees, and yanks his pants plus his briefs down as far as they'll go.

Then, he attacks Marcus's jeans.

Between the two of them, with some cursing and laughter bubbling up out of nowhere, they manage to get undressed, or at least close enough. "Want you, Nick," Marcus breathes hotly in Nicholas's ear. "Back or stomach?"

Nicholas inhales deeply as he thinks of the possibilities. "Back," he says after a moment's thought. "I want to look into your eyes while you fuck me."

"Mmm." Marcus steals another hungry kiss. "I think we can manage that. Lie down."

Nicholas rummages under the pillows as he goes and comes up lucky with a half-empty tube of lubricant. He chuckles as he thrusts the container at Marcus. "You'll need this if you plan to ravish me."

"Mmm," Marcus moans. "Ravish. Ravishing. Ravishment. I could go for that." He grabs the lube. "Hold me the way I like."

This is old habit, but each time feels just as new and exciting as the very first. Nicholas tilts his hips up for the cushion Marcus grabs up and shoves beneath him, then wraps one leg around Marcus' waist and lifts the other one to rest his calf on Marcus' shoulder. Marcus grunts as he settles into position, dropping all pretense at conversation to get down to hard-core business.

Lube first, Marcus in too much of a hurry to warm it up in his hands. Nicholas arches and hisses at the cold touch of the slippery stuff and the feel of Marcus' hot fingers rimming his hole. He's practiced at this and doesn't need much stretching, but Marcus' digits feel marvelous pressing inside, searching for and finding his gland with hardly a pause. He thrashes back and forth as Marcus works that hot spot. His eyes want to close, but he forces them open, all the better to see the manic gleam on Marcus' face.

The fingers are gone all too quickly, but Nicholas hears the sound of more lubricant being applied, this time to the massive erection jutting between Marcus' legs. Blunt pressure comes up against his opening.

Marcus makes a questioning noise.

"God, yes," Nicholas demands.

Marcus gives a strangled groan and pushes inside. His cock is as big as the size of his hands would indicate, and even for someone accustomed to being a bottom it's a tight, burning stretch that feels oh, so good. Nicholas moans and writhes as he's impaled on Marcus' dick, clutching at Marcus with his legs.

Great drops of sweat are standing out on Marcus' forehead when he's pushed in as far as he can go, wiry pubic hair tickling Nicholas' ass cheeks. "More?" he manages. Nicholas nods eagerly, feeling himself start to perspire as well. *Yes*, he shapes with his lips, although no sound comes out.

Marcus grabs Nicholas' cock, hard and thick against his belly, and begins to jack it in time with his thrusts. Despite his desire to keep his eyes open, Nicholas can't help but roll them back and let his lids flutter shut, drowning himself in the dark and the sensation of Marcus' prick shoving roughly in and out, the way his erection throbs in Marcus' grasp, and the way the bed moves with them, bumping in a steady rhythm against the wall.

Nicholas feels his balls draw up tight and hard. "Mar...Marcus," he manages to say, fisting his hands in the comforter. "Going to..."

Marcus doubles the speed of his thrusts. "Not before me," he grunts, jack-hammering Nicholas as if his life depended on it. The slickness between them grows as Marcus begins to leak creamy drops of precome. His hand slips off Nicholas's cock due to its own lubrication, making him swear, then come back for a harder grip.

"Marcus!" Nicholas is away, his very soul shooting out through his cock in thick, ropy streams that are hot against his stomach. Marcus shouts Nicholas' name and comes hard enough that his entire body is racked with spasms.

They lie still for a long moment, both shaking hard. Marcus doesn't move until Nicholas opens his eyes. "I love you," Marcus says, voice hoarse. "Don't ever doubt that."

Nicholas nods. "And I feel the same about you."

That seems to satisfy Marcus. He pulls out with a vocalization that could mean anything, then pats Nicholas's leg, telling him to move. "I'll get us a cloth. Wait right here."

"It's not likely I'd plan to go anywhere else while coated in spunk, my cock hanging out," Nicholas replies.

"Ha, ha, and yeah, well, you're not Baz. Thank God." Marcus's firm backside is a treat to watch as he heads for the bathroom. In addition to their marvelous shower, it boasts a large vanity with three separate sinks and a wall lined with towels and washcloths. Nicholas watches lazily until Marcus reappears, a bit of green terry in his hands.

The water is warm and tickles a bit as Marcus washes Nicholas's stomach and ass. His own cock is clean, so he must have taken care of himself while he was in the bathroom. Tossing the cloth to the floor -- neatness apparently being damned for the moment -- Marcus flops heavily back down and drags Nicholas to him, chest to chest.

Nicholas hums softly, under his breath. Marcus hugs him tighter, as if he's a comfort object. Which, Nicholas supposes, he is, at least at the moment. He doesn't mind.

"I was always sure," Marcus says without preamble. "I was never not sure. But this helps."

Ah. "So we're back on your earlier confession?"

Marcus gives an embarrassed sort of shrug. "I didn't want to talk about it then. Now I sort of do."

"What's to say? You found someone attractive and, knowing you, it sent you into fits of guilt." Nicholas nuzzles against Marcus's chest. "Unless this is the person you had your meeting with."

That makes Marcus squirm. "It wasn't planned or anything. He just barged in off the street."

"I see." Nicholas kisses Marcus absently. "Off the street, you say?" He thinks for a moment. "It wouldn't happen to be a tall, rangy musician, would it? One that we met this morning?"

He feels Marcus flinch. Bingo.

"And what did you do during this meeting? Please understand, Marcus, I'm not angry. I simply want the truth."

Marcus sighs. "He kissed me. I kissed him. There was some groping."

"Nothing more?"

"No... but it was him who stopped. I was... I was just gone, Nick. Out of my mind."

Nicholas thinks back to the man he's known himself, who was at his finest that day. "I suspect Rhymer is very talented at anything he turns his hand to." He runs his fingers across Marcus's bicep. "Are you apologizing for giving in to your attraction?"

There's a pause. "Is this a trick question?"

"Not at all." Nicholas laughs softly. "He's a handsome man, Marcus. As the last man introduced to this group, I never expected to be the final member. We may have formed a tight unit, but I'm not opposed to experimentation with others. If it weren't for speculation and interest from a foursome, I wouldn't be here."

"You're shitting me." Nicholas looks up into Marcus's face, which is disbelieving. "You actually don't mind?"

"Would you rather I said I was madly jealous and wanted you all to myself, you tiger, you?"

"Well, sort of," Marcus admits. Then he sighs. "I'm really just torn about all of this, Nick. I've thought for so long that this was it, we were a solid unit. Then Rhymer comes along and throws a couple dozen monkey wrenches in the works. I don't know up from down."

"You do know top from bottom," Nicholas teases. "But very well. I suppose you won't want anyone else to know about this?"

The look of relief on Marcus's face is immense. "Please. Just for now. I have to figure out what to do."

"So long as we can find a reasonable excuse for the apple crisp that won't have the others suspicious, I'll keep my own counsel on the matter."

"Jeez, Nick. A 'sure' would have worked just fine."

"Yes, but we would have left out the important issue about the confection in the kitchen."

"Twenty words to say 'shut up'," Marcus says fondly. He tightens his arm around Nicholas. "Thanks."

Nicholas nods. He examines himself and finds, somewhat to his surprise, that he's been nothing but honest. He isn't angry at Marcus, truly, but he knows that this shouldn't be a widespread piece of information, not until the time is right.

He'll simply have to trust Marcus to pinpoint that time. And he will, Nicholas's sure of it.

Rhymer will be dealt with one way or another. And until then, he can be their little secret.

No one need know a thing...

Chapter Seven

"Honeys, I'm home," Aiden calls out as he drops his keys on top of a messy stack of flyers and handouts. "Home after a long afternoon's work, thank the baby Jesus and all the apostles. Throw in the saints and the sweet Virgin Mary, too," he mumbles, toeing out of his shoes. Those are garbage unless Marcus can figure out how to get vomit off faux suede. So much for splashing out to make a good impression.

No voices call back to him. *That's odd.* Aiden glances around the apartment and finds it unusually empty. Usually at this time of day, there's at least one man milling around or lazing about. Baz with a beer, Ryan with the TV on, Nicholas reading a book, or on the odd occasion Marcus sitting in his chair, just enjoying the silence.

They should all be home. So why aren't they?

Not out ogling the guitarist, are they? Aiden thinks sarcastically. *Man's a sight too damned pretty for his own good, and he knows it, too. Problem is, we'd all have to be blind not to notice it ourselves. I got a nice eyeful, for one. But there'll be trouble where that fellow's concerned. Five plus one equals a big problem in the making. Somewhere, somehow, this'll all end in tears. Mark those words, you.*

Aiden follows his nose to the kitchen, where a damned tasty-looking apple crisp has been left out to cool. Never one to tread lightly when there's food involved, he opens a drawer, plucks a spoon out, and dips in the pan to get himself a taste.

He moans. Sweet mercy. Brown-sugar and butter crumbles. Fresh apples. No doubt it's Marcus who's done the cooking. No one bakes like their man.

So where is he, when he should be waiting to be thanked properly for his efforts? Frankly, Aiden's been looking forward to a one-on-one how-do since Marcus actually forked out for the orgy-sized new bed, delivery in four to six weeks or no.

"Marcus?" Aiden calls, just in case he was too tired to spot the man when he walked in.

No answer.

Aiden takes a glance up at the ceiling. The floors and walls are too thick to hear anything, but he's willing to bet that Marcus has had some sort of idea about a clever buy-sell-buy and headed back up to catch that passing thought by the tail. It'd be like him.

So that's one down.

Aiden takes a second spoonful of dessert, because it's just too damn good to pass by, and savors the tart bite of crisp apples along with the warming cinnamon and nutmeg.

"Wherever you are, you've outdone yourself," he murmurs, dropping his spoon in the sink.

He has no idea where the rest of dinner is, or even what it is, but even if they end up ordering takeout pizza, he's not going to be the one with his finger on the dial. He's not even going to get up to eat, much less answer the door. He'll damn well lie on his back in the bed until he gets some much-needed energy.

Possibly a power bar will cruise by of its own volition, and he'll grab a bite.

Until then? He's crashing.

Heading back out into the bedroom -- with a quick glance inside the shower to make sure there really is no one else down there -- Aiden makes straight for the bed and, with a supreme effort of will, launches himself onto the slightly sagging mattress.

The smell of sex comes up for a direct assault. *Bam*, right in the nose. Aiden makes a face. "God, boys, learn to air out the room," he mutters. On his left, Ryan and Baz's pillows are both rucked up into a mess. The covers have been tousled in a cross-hatch pattern near the foot of the bed, which he'll bet is owing to Marcus and Nicholas.

So much for group participation today.

Ah, hell. Aiden wants a beer in the worst way.

He's pretty sure *one* drink won't hurt, but he's not so sure about a single beer not leading to another and another, and before he knows it he'll be back in AA again, standing up to say: "Hello, my name is Aiden, and I'm a giant screw-up".

Would be awfully nice if someone were down there to offer him a cold one, though.

Ah, but he's wallowing in self-pity now, isn't he? Aiden gives himself a good hard shake to knock the doldrums out. It's just been a rough day, that's all. Morning jollies with bed shopping aside, he's had to wrangle thirty four-and-five-year-olds who apparently had far too much sugar for lunch.

Then he was kept late for a meeting. Apparently some set of persnickety parents had got wind of his personal lifestyle and were raising a stink. The principal had been on his side, but it's never easy explaining monogamous polyamory to someone who's been born and bred into the picket fence and two point five kids philosophy.

He knew when he went back to teaching that it wouldn't be easy. There are days when he'd trade it all in, his re-certification and every hour spent learning where to buy egg cartons and glitter and cigar boxes, because God knows none of the kids' parents keep those around, and go back to working at the press full-time.

Days long past, though, those are, and there's nothing to be done about it now. They've all made their choice to go in different directions, and it's worked out well for the most part.

And he does love the kids, truly he does. The look on a tyke's face when he's presenting a green and purple drawing of a horse with the letter "H" is priceless. Or something to that effect. A glittery "ballerina". Fascination with learning to tie a shoe. Endlessly practicing on Aiden's own shoes.

What he doesn't love, today, is the fact that while he was gone during the morning some daft substitute had introduced the lot of them to Silly Putty. As the ruin of his shoes will testify, the stuff is not edible and attempts at consumption often end in disaster.

Aiden reaches up to run a hand through his hair, checking to be sure that he got all of the tacky mess out. Feels okay, and he'll call that good enough.

But he is in a mood, make no mistake about that. He shifts, feeling itchy between his shoulder blades, like there's a sort of metaphysical thing that wants scratching. He doesn't know what it is, though, so he can't reach the troublesome spot.

Somehow he feels like being alone is the last thing that's good for him right about now. Yeah, he definitely needs at least one of the men down here. Someone to be quiet with, to commiserate about their days with one another. Someone to kiss. Someone to fuck.

Does he want a fuck, or does he -- God, what a girl he's being -- just want to be held?

He feels his cheeks flush in anger. What the hell's wrong with wanting a good old-fashioned cuddle, anyway? They've done it enough after sex or just watching TV, or any number of times for no reason at all.

Aiden reins his crankiness in check. First desperate yearning for a beer, then bitching at his own brain. He needs to take the edge off, and fast. It'd be better if there were someone else around to lend a hand, as it were, but this he can do on his own -- and enjoy it, too.

He reaches underneath Baz and Ryan's pillows, tossed about as they are, and grins when his hand closes on a familiar-shaped tube. One thing he can count on his boys for, and that's a steady supply of lubricant wherever it can be stashed. The way they all sleep on a bottle, you'd think the Ass Fairy was coming by to exchange the half-empties for a shiny silver dollar apiece.

Tube at his side, he unzips his plain "professional" khakis and thrusts a hand in beneath his boxer shorts. "Sorry there's no dinner and a movie before I head for third base, but you know how you just have to go with the moment sometimes," he explains to his cock.

The organ in question appears to be unimpressed. It's drooping along with the rest of him, bone-tired and worn out.

Fine, then, I'll just reach into my own stash of wank material. Aiden combs his mind for particularly racy memories and images. Baz that one Halloween when he went in drag,

no. Marcus massaging his feet, maybe. Nicholas sucking his fingers -- now they're getting somewhere. Ryan naked in the shower, water running in streams down his gloriously bronzed body.

"Oh, yeah," Aiden whispers. His cock is perking up, hardening slowly in his hand. He urges it on with whisper-light touches up and down the shaft, closing his eyes and imagining that it's Marcus being extra-gentle, the way he is sometimes. Like Aiden's going to break, what with the difference in their sizes.

Aiden can play a hell of a lot rougher before he cries "uncle", but he likes it when Marcus goes easy. Makes him feel special. Appreciated.

His cock stiffens into a very nice erection at the mental image of Marcus' dark head buried between his legs. Aiden wriggles a bit to shift his pants and shorts down so he can have a better view of the action. He might be short, and he might not be buff, but he has a hell of a prick and four other affirmative opinions on that particular matter.

His mental image changes from Marcus to Baz as he jacks himself with a firmer hand, enjoying the friction for a bit before it's time for a dab of slick. Baz plays hard-core with hand jobs -- always has, always will. He's not got a bit of finesse to him, just raw natural talent and a wallop amount of enthusiasm. When Baz is giving you a whack, you know about it for days afterwards.

When the blond's fucked you, you walk like a cowboy.

Mmm, yeah. This is what I'm talking about. Aiden arches his back in pleasure as the first drops of precome start oozing from his slit. He thumbs them away and lifts his hand to his mouth, tasting. This is something Baz introduced him to, and while he'd been grossed out at first, he's gotten to enjoy the flavor. It's different when it's your own. Nice and kinky. Definitely good.

Time for the slick. Aiden uncaps the tube with one practiced hand and squeezes a dollop on the edge of his curly black pubic hair. Quick, so it doesn't get all tacky, he slides the lubricant up the length of his shaft. He hisses as he does; it feels so damn good.

He imagines Nicholas watching him. Nick gets off on taking in a show. If he were down there just then, Aiden bets he'd be on the edge of his seat, panting and shaking, eyes riveted to the jerk-off session currently in progress. Aiden likes Nick liking that. Drives a man to even greater lengths, wink, wink.

Things are feeling really good right about now. His sac's drawing up hard against his body, his cock is a hard rod in his hand, his fist pumping up and down like a slippery piston, and all he needs is... yes... just one finger behind his nuts, pressing hard on the strip of skin below them.

"Hot *damn!*" Aiden shouts as the orgasm hits him like a freight train on a midnight run. Come spurts over his chest, ruining his shirt, but he'll be damned if he can find it in himself to care.

God, that was a bit of all right, wasn't it?

He relaxes into the bed, going nice and melty, all boneless and glowing. Oh, yeah. A good orgasm took the edge off nicely, didn't it? A proper seeing-to puts heart in a man.

Aiden figures he might even be up to eating, now.

But first, a little more of the taking it easy. Closing his eyes, he puts all of his effort into going limp, starting with the toes and working his way up. It's an old trick he learned some years back from a casual boyfriend who was into self-hypnosis. Slow, steady breathing. In, out, in, out. Set up a rhythm and stick to it. Toes first. Then calves. Then thighs. Relax, relax, relax.

He's up to his chest when the phone rings, and so much for that, then, eh?

With a growl, Aiden reaches for the cell phone tossed on their nightstand, which he notes is kind of in need of replacement itself. Too many hasty tugs open to find still more lube have the drawer tilting at a crazy angle. It wobbles as he picks up the devilish ringing contraption, hunts for the "talk" button, and presses it to his ear. The damn thing's ridiculously tiny, making him feel like he's talking into a credit card.

"Whoever you are, this phone's owner isn't here."

"Aiden? Oh, my God, Aiden!" The feminine squeal on the other end of the line makes him jerk away from the receiver, but he goes back with a broad grin on his face. He knows that voice.

"There's my best girl. How are you, Maddy?"

"No more nicknames," she scolds. "It's Madison now, no longer relegated to making your coffee. Nay, not even doing special assignments on monkeys who can play the piano. I'm reporting live from the studio."

Aiden flinches back again. "What, right now?"

"No, moron." She sounds put out. "Geez, after all the time I spent with you guys you'd think one of the bunch would take the time to watch me in the spotlight."

"I see you on the news all the time, darlin'." Aiden nestles back down. "And you look beautiful as ever."

"Sweet talker. If I didn't know you were straight as a Slinky, I'd accuse you of flirting with me."

"I am flirting with you. I'm gay, not blind or dead."

"Bad Aiden. I'm going to tell Marcus on you."

"Oh, God, no. You get him wound up and we'll all have to deal with the fallout." Aiden hesitates. "You wouldn't go telling stories, now would you?"

"I'm insulted. Of course not. Unless..." She pauses. "Aiden, is there something going on?"

"Nothing so far as I can tell," Aiden answers honestly. "Why d'you ask? Natural suspicion?"

"Well, that and Enrico called me to say... um... to say he was by there earlier and Marcus was acting weird. Weird for Marcus, anyway, which is pretty damn weird. Are you sure he's not mentally challenged in some way?"

"Just because he never knew how to handle you."

"Oh, yeah?" Her voice takes on a pert tone. "And just how does a man, gay or straight, handle a woman like me?"

"With extreme caution and great respect," Aiden says, very serious. He grins as Maddy begins to laugh. God, he's missed having her around. She had her ways, and they weren't all good, but she'd brightened their lives in her own fashion. "So, how are things?"

"Good. Did I tell you I've been seeing the weather girl?"

Aiden chokes.

Her giggle is wicked. "What, you didn't think you had a patent on this whole lifestyle thing, did you?"

"No, it's just that you never -- I mean, you didn't say -- the weather girl?" Aiden struggles upright on his elbows. "Not the one with the hair that looks like she stuck her finger in a light socket?"

"Dumbass! That's exactly what your hair would look like if you grew it out, Mister Curls. And no, it's not her. It's Susie, the meteorologist for the morning show."

"Your station has an awful lot of pretty girls on staff."

"And you're noticing, these days?"

Aiden thinks guiltily of how Baz has to visually assess and comment on everyone who crosses the screen, man or woman, when they've got the TV on. He doesn't mean anything by the running stream of chatter -- it's just Baz being Baz. "Not so much. You know my heart's split up in four equal pieces."

"Equals, sure. You know, when I tell my friends about you, they don't just want to hear more. They want autographs."

Aiden laughs. "It's not such big a deal, really. We're just five men who happen to get on really well and like a lot of sex."

"Double dumbass. You five love each other, so don't give me any macho bullshit. I remember how hot and bothered you all got over Valentine's Day, the one where Baz gave you flowers."

The reminder causes Aiden to squirm. "Ah, now, we're really not usually into all the frills and such."

"The bloom has gone off the rose?"

"Nah. It's just..." Aiden grows pensive. "Well, now that we're all doing our own thing, so to speak, we don't run into each other as much anymore. Used to be we'd have the morning, noon and night, all of us together. Now, sometimes we've barely more than a passing acquaintance during any given day."

"Hmm." Madison pauses. Aiden finds that he's hoping for some bit of wisdom. Maddy can dish with the best of them, and she's been known to give damned good advice. "So you're in a fivesome, but you're lonely?"

"Er... pretty much."

"I'm going to come over there and personally kick your ass."

"Maddy!" Aiden protests. "Tell a man what he's done before you go and commit assault and battery."

"Listen. Maybe you're going through a period of adjustment, but you still love each other, right?"

"Course I do." Aiden doesn't hesitate. "Each one in their own way."

"Expand on that. What are their ways?"

"Aw, Maddy, c'mon..."

"Nope. Spill it. And for the record, I'm taking notes."

Aiden sighs. "All right, then. I don't see the point to this, though."

"You will."

"Fine, then. Ryan, he's like this big overgrown puppy, right? The kind you laugh and wrestle with and isn't on your side when it comes down to getting the last snack cake in the box. Nicholas, he's quiet and shy, except in bed -- you asked for this, mind you -- but he's always there to listen when you need him, and he never judges, not a bit. Baz is... hell, he's Baz. You love him or you go buy a pistol. God knows he comes on with the force of a gunshot. Knocks you down, bowls you over, and has the balls to back up whatever he says. And Marcus... he's this big protective guy who's always got our backs no matter what. He can be a goof, yeah, but he's always looking out for our best interests. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be back doing what I love."

Aiden pauses for breath. The thought crosses his mind that someone's going to be mightily pissed when they get their cell phone bill.

Madison's quiet for a long few breaths. When she does speak again, it's with the tone of someone who's going to smack him across the head with a rolled-up newspaper. "And you say you're lonely? God, Aiden, listen to yourself. The guys haven't drifted at all. You're all right where you always were, and with one another. If you want to see more of them, I'm pretty sure that all you have to do is ask."

"You think it's that simple?"

"Yeah. I really do."

Aiden rolls the thought over in his mind. "I'll give it a try, anyway. Just don't come over here to pound something through my skull. It's too thick; you wouldn't make a dent."

"How are the headaches?"

"Lots better these days," he says, glad that they've changed the subject. "Haven't had a migraine in weeks."

"Good. I worry about you, you know. All of the guys. For better or worse, you shaped some formative years in my life."

"Ah, Miss Psychology."

"Go kiss those boys for me," Maddy directs. "With sugar on top. And tell them all I said hi. Also, tell Baz not to bitch about his phone bill. It's gonna be huge."

Aiden tilts his head to a side. "So this is his phone? Why were you calling Baz, then?"

"His was the only scrawl I could read on my Rolodex."

"Ouch." Aiden winces. "I'll have you know my handwriting's improved."

"God knows it couldn't have gotten any worse."

"Always full of barbs and stings no matter how well meant, you are. I'll give your love to the guys. Marcus has gone and baked something for dinner." He pauses. "I think I'll call in for pizza. Care to come by and have a slice?"

"Can't, sorry. I'm having an early dinner out with Susie at this *fabulous* new Italian place I found the other day."

"This Susie, does she treat you well? If not, she and I might have to have a talk."

"Do you really want the details about what goes on in her bed or mine?"

"God, no."

"She treats me just fine, Aiden." Madison's voice gentles. "We're happy."

"You should be happy, Maddy. And hey, thanks." Aiden rolls over on his side, absently caressing Nicholas' pillow. "I needed to hear a friendly voice. And vent a bit."

"Any time. It's been too long since we've talked."

"But now you have to go."

"I do. E-mail me your phone number and I'll call again soon." She sighs, but not sadly; it's the sound of a woman who's well-satisfied with herself. "See you around, Aiden."

"See you around, darlin'." Aiden clicks the "OFF" button and puts the phone back down in precisely the same spot where it originated. He snickers at the thought of Baz's reaction when he sees the bill. Oh, he'll be pissed, and then doubly pissed when he traces it back to Maddy, but Aiden reckons he himself can chip in for the cost of the call.

Madison's words ringing in his ears, he lies thoughtfully on his back and gazes at the ceiling, gaze wandering from tile to tile as if he's watching clouds pass him by. Slowly, he begins to smile.

He's making plans for the night. Baz's not the only one who can take four on at once. They'll never know what hit them.

"Pizza for dinner?" The voice surprises Aiden. He turns to see Ryan, shirt off and pants hanging temptingly low on his flat stomach. Ryan grins sheepishly. "I hear the word 'pizza' and I'm on the scene as fast as I can get there."

"Oh, God, not another slice of that enters the house. I vote for Thai." Nicholas appears, looking a little rumpled but good-natured despite his words. He reaches the bed and leans over to stroke Aiden's arm. "How've you been? You look exhausted."

"Just need a good meal and I'll be back in fighting form."

"I made apple crisp." Marcus comes in hard on Nicholas' heels, looking hopeful. "I can warm it back up. And I vote for delivery Chinese."

"No way," Baz announces, walking in on the heels of that suggestion. "Not pizza, not Thai, not Chinese. You've got apple dessert in there and that demands burgers. Big juicy ones."

"Don't think I'm up to manning the grill tonight," Aiden confesses.

"No one says you have to." Baz riffles through a stack of menus and comes up with one printed on green copier paper. "Steak Shack. Delivery to our door in... oh, however long it takes to cook and deliver two burgers medium, one rare, and two well-done." He leans over to give Aiden a hearty kiss on the cheek, one that turns into something wicked and enticing when Aiden turns his head and their lips meet.

"Call in after a few minutes," Aiden suggests abruptly. "All of you come and lie down with me a bit first."

The four of them exchange glances.

"I need a shower," Ryan says apologetically.

"I should make sure the crisp's okay."

"I'm in need of a wash myself."

"Sorry, love, I'm too hungry to wait. I'll have a coze with you when I've phoned the order in, though, all right?"

Aiden sighs. He'll take Maddy's advice, he will.

But he has a feeling this is going to require more than a little work.

Chapter Eight

By way of a savory rather than a sweet dessert -- just not in the mood for more apple crisp -- Aiden reaches into a kitchen cabinet and comes out with a bag of corn chips. He's full up on burgers, sure, but sometimes a little junk food does wonders for the soul.

Bag in hand, munching on the rich, crispy chips, he heads back out into the bedroom with its adjacent sitting room. He stops at the doorway to take stock of the men, all his men, admiring each in their turn.

Marcus is in a battered old armchair that's just the right size and shape for his long legs and wide shoulders. He's reading a book, although Aiden doubts the plot is gonna hold him for long. That paperback's been on the nightstand for ages. Still, the man tries. Gotta give him that.

Nicholas is sitting at a small desk, studying a considerably thicker tome. There's a gap in the bookshelf which draws the inevitable conclusion that Nick is boning up on the Napoleonic Wars, for whatever reason he's interested in them. He seems to be doing a better job of paying attention to his reading material than Marcus.

It's kind of amazing, really, given that Baz is stark naked and doing step aerobics.

Aiden snorts around a mouthful of corn chips as he takes in the sight. Wang waving, a dark flush mottling his skin, Baz is seriously into his exercise. He's often wondered just how much dog-walking pays, but Baz is always there with his share of the bills and, Aiden has to admit, the man's in just about as hot a shape as he often claims.

Ryan's eyes are all for Baz. He's sitting with his hand on top of a CD player, probably with the intent of providing music, but he's glazed over at the sight in front of him. Baz is so into stepping up, stepping down and stepping up that he's in a zone, not noticing the lack of tunes.

With that in mind...

Aiden's reminded how, of all of them -- well, after his first crush on Marcus -- he fell for Ryan first. From the moment Ryan saved him from smashing his head on a desk to all the furtive looks when they were dancing around the subject to the first man he fucked in this group of theirs, sweet-natured Ryan has been near and dear to his heart.

He puts his bag of chips down and reaches to rest a hand on Ryan's shoulder. "Hey, there," he says softly. "Enjoying the view?"

Ryan nearly jumps a mile. "What the--? Oh. Aiden." He grins, a flash of white teeth in a tanned face. "Sorry, I was kind of..." He waves at Baz, still deep in the heart of Zen. "Well, you can't not get fascinated."

Aiden regards Baz and his zeal. Up, down, up, down. Muscles flexing, long cock a definitely fascinating sight, he can understand Ryan's fixation.

But enough's enough. Aiden has a certain brown-sugar guitarist to get off his mind, and it's easy enough to turn his mind to thoughts of Ryan. Without taking his hand off the man, he riffles through a stack of CD's and comes up with a familiar black-and-white photograph. Cheap cover, fantastic music.

Aiden pops the CD in the player and hits "play". There's a pause and then the sultry sounds of good old Ella Fitzgerald fill the room, singing about how her love had come at last. Aiden rocks for a moment, letting the music wash over him. He's not what he would call a dancer, not at all, but there's not much to slow songs, is there? He considers them an excuse to get up close and personal and let someone know that you're interested in more than a bit of bump and grind.

Ryan's grin widens. He looks at Aiden, obviously expecting something.

Aiden holds out his other hand. "May I have this dance?"

"My pleasure." Ryan takes one last look back at Baz and then he's folding himself into Aiden. Aiden takes into account that he's a good six inches shorter than Ryan and changes their position, resting his head against the crook of Ryan's shoulder instead of the other way around. He can feel the ghost of Ryan's breath on the top of his head, making him tingle.

Okay, so there's nothing wrong with a bit of bump and grind. Moving in closer still, Aiden rubs his cock against Ryan's leg. Not exactly an elegant move, but hopefully it'll get the job done.

It does. Ryan chuckles, running his fingers down the line of Aiden's spine. "So when you asked to dance, that was a double entendre, right?"

"Could be." Aiden lifts his head and looks up into lovely dark brown eyes, just different enough and familiar to boot. "How about we start with a kiss first? Just a wee taste, enough to whet the appetite."

"I can do a kiss." Ryan uses his other hand to thumb Aiden's lower lip. "One, or possibly two."

"Go whole-hog and give me three."

"You're on." Ryan lowers his lips to Aiden's. Their first kiss is chaste and sweet, their bodies still swaying to the smoky sound of blues and the incomparable Ella's dark, rich voice. Aiden savors the texture of Ryan's lips, soft but capable of doing wicked things.

They part. "How am I doing?" Ryan asks in all seriousness.

"Grade A," Aiden replies. "Give us another shot."

"With pleasure." Ryan tilts Aiden's head a little further back and comes in for his second landing. This time, it's the kiss of a lover to another lover. Still not down and dirty, but nicely slow, his tongue making languorous sweeps through Aiden's mouth. Aiden catches that tongue between his teeth and sucks, feeling Ryan give a small start and then hearing him moan.

When they part, both are breathing quickly. Ryan's eyes have dilated, a sure sign that he's aroused. Aiden can feel the proof of that lying hard and insistent against his lower stomach, prodding at his abs -- yes, he has abs, he works out -- and insisting that it wants out to play.

"Three times in one day?" he asks, moving with the music and turning them both around in a lazy circle. "You must really be in top form."

"How did you know about the second time?"

Aiden chuckles. "You took off work this afternoon. So did Baz. There's a second set of fresh sheets on the bed. I teach one plus one equals two. So..." He squeezes Ryan's ass... "how about my third kiss? I don't want to feel left out here."

Ryan doesn't tease him or give him any warning. That warm mouth descends upon his with a demand that he open up. Aiden finds his lips parting and his hands clutching at Ryan's back, kneading the cloth of his shirt like an oversized cat.

This kiss is wicked. It's raw, it's primal, it's earthy. This is the kiss of a man who's found his mate of the moment and wants to thrust his way inside. Ryan's tongue fucks Aiden's mouth in time with his humping against Aiden's stomach. Aiden pushes right back, giving as good as he gets, the two of them going at it like wild dogs right in the middle of a good saxophone interlude.

When Ryan pulls away, his lips are swollen and red, his eyes a little wild. "You think we might need something with more of a beat?" he asks.

"Mmm, I dunno." Baz's come up behind Ryan and slips his arms around Ryan's middle. "If good old Fitzgerald inspires you to this kind of hanky-panky, leave the old lady to sing. You mind if I join the dance?"

Ryan's face lights up into a brilliance. He half-turns into Baz's arms. "Anytime you want."

Aiden feels suddenly tired. "Actually, you two go ahead. I'll just enjoy the music."

"Hey." Ryan touches him, hand in the middle of Aiden's chest. "We were having a good time. Weren't we?"

"Yeah, we were." Aiden summons up a smile. "But I'm not daft enough to get between the two of you. Go on and dance. Invite me back in if you've got a mind to."

He figures, as he watches Ryan twine himself around a sweat-slicked Baz, that there won't be much odds of either remembering their audience. Those two are so into one another that they might as well be joined at the hip.

It's odd. He frowns. Once upon a time, neither would have let him walk away. It does seem, though, that they're dividing in their ranks these days. Marcus...

Aiden glances across the room. Marcus's abandoned his book for the live show, sitting with one hand on his chin and his eyes fixed on the dancing pair. He's got an absent air about him, too, though, as if he's thinking about other things and they're just a pleasant backdrop.

Marcus. Good solid Marcus, a stronghold to lean against. Aiden picks up his abandoned corn chips and heads over to the armchair. Placing a chip between his lips, he bends down and prods Marcus's lower lip with the thing.

Marcus blinks out of his reverie and, after a second's confusion, smiles and takes the chip from Aiden's mouth. They both crunch contentedly.

Then, because it seems like the right thing to do, Aiden slides down to sit at Marcus's feet. He tucks his legs beneath him and rests his head against Marcus's leg. After a second, he feels big fingers start to run through his hair.

"Problems?" Marcus asks in a low voice. "Not that I'm prying. You just seem kind of blue."

"I am, a bit." Aiden takes another chip and chews it, thinking about his response before he opens his mouth to answer. "Feels like we're drifting apart, to me. Maybe I'm over-thinking things, but it's like I'm the odd man out, you know? Baz and Ryan, Marcus and Nicholas, but where does that leave yours truly?"

Marcus stills. "You're not serious, are you?"

Aiden shrugs. "I don't know. Maybe. Yes. Might be you've not noticed, but here and lately the only time I get some is when we're all having fun like this morning or when I'm using my good right hand. Being in the middle isn't that much fun when there's a pair on either side."

"Aiden." Marcus's fingers start stroking again. "I haven't..."

"Yeah, you have." Aiden's feeling decidedly glum now. "Nothing's changed for me, man. I love you all the same as I ever have. But the more I love, the further away everyone drifts." He lifts his hand and waves it to and fro. "Leaves a man wondering what good he is, when he can't get any in a fivesome."

"God. I never thought-- I never realized-- didn't know--"

"Well, now you do." Aiden tips his head back to look up at Marcus. "Question is, what are you gonna do about it?"

"I'm not sure."

It's not the answer Aiden's been looking for.

On the other hand, he's not thinking about a raw cowboy guitarists anymore.

He's thinking about Marcus, who he knows loved him first and best, once upon a time.

"Not sure?" he echoes, trying to catch Marcus' gaze with his own. "Do you want me gone, man? If I'm not wanted, all you have to do is say so. I'll be on my way."

"Aiden?" Nicholas has abandoned his book to come and sit on the other side of Marcus's legs. He reaches out with one slim hand and lays it to rest on Aiden's knee. His eyes are tremendously earnest beneath their wire-rimmed glasses. "Surely you're not thinking we don't need you."

"Want and need, they're two different things." Aiden doesn't know why he's being stubborn, but he needs to hear the words that neither Nick nor Marcus has said yet. "Why should I stay?"

His last sentence is spoken in a pause between song tracks. Aiden registers Ryan and Baz ceasing to dance. Ella starts back up, and the two of them do as well, not moving to the music but instead coming over to crouch by his side. For once, even Baz is serious.

"Look here," Baz says firmly. "I can see where you're coming from, I can. We've been leaving you out and that won't do. Wasn't on purpose, though. Swear on a stack of Bibles."

"And since when did you believe in God?"

"On a stack of Playgirl magazines, then." Baz rolls his eyes. "You're wanted, love. You were the first one we invited in, and damned if I've changed my mind since then. His Lord and Master might have forgotten, now--"

"I haven't." Marcus stands, dislodging Aiden and Nicholas, but reaching down to pull Aiden up on his feet. He puts his hands on Aiden's hips and sways them in time with the

music. "You're a part of us, an equal share." Hearts and flowers don't come easily to the big guy, but he takes one for the team. Fingertips lightly caress Aiden's hip bone. "We love you. I know that for a fact. And I love you."

Aiden bites his own lip. "Nothing needs to change then, right? The five of us are in this together, good and tight, nothing leaking around the seams?"

There's tiny -- infinitesimal -- flicker in Marcus's eye, but it's gone in a heartbeat. Then it's just solid brown warmth that feels as good as a hot bath. "We few, we lucky few," he says softly.

Aiden can hear the naughtiness in Baz's voice. "What d'you say we all convince him of the fact?"

Marcus' smile turns into a savage grin. "Are you all thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Damn well hope so. You two get his legs, Ryan and I have his arms!"

"What? No. Hey! What the hell?" Aiden yelps as Marcus surges forward along with Nicholas and he feels himself being grabbed from behind. The four laugh as they manhandle him over to the bed, and he can't help it, he's laughing, too. "Put me down, you great big morons. Give a guy half a chance here."

"Not on your life," Baz says, his face coming into Aiden's line of vision. "You're about to be seduced, ravished, plundered and pillared, and that's just for starters. Then we move on to the real fun."

Aiden gives a whoop and surrenders his body up in the interests of science. Yeah, that's it. Science.

The science of sex.

Things get a little blurry then, what with so many hands working him over. Aiden loses track pretty fast of who's doing what when and where. He just knows that his shoes are off when there's a thunk-thunk of them hitting a wall. His feet tickle when someone peels his socks off. He's encouraged to sit up so that the shirt can be gotten rid of, and held aloft so that someone can undo his jeans and slide them off his legs.

He does know it's Baz who gets impatient and decides to cut his boxer shorts off. Aiden would normally be concerned about having sharp implements so close to the goodies, but as Baz is the one to bury his face in Aiden's crotch shortly after the boxers are gone, he decides not to complain too much.

Then it's all nothing but sensation: hot kisses on one shoulder, small nips on another, fingers stroking down his chest, sometimes with twined hands or with those hands parted, petting him like one of the thoroughbreds he used to bet on. Someone's lavishing

affection on his leg like it's an extra-big cock -- and speaking of which, Baz's doing a damned fine job of swallowing that down to the root. He only stops when Ryan, apparently he of the leg, pushes Baz aside for his own turn.

Marcus fastens his mouth over Aiden's and Aiden automatically closes his eyes. Their tongues play together even as Aiden gives a little hitch when what he guesses is Nicholas's teeth fasten on his left nipple and tug. Nick is a great man for tit play, and he knows his art down to a, well. science.

Aiden thinks he would be happy for this to go on forever. They're not pushing him out, they're welcoming him in, and maybe they've had a lesson learned. He's reaping all the rewards himself, swarmed by four men bent on getting him off as hard and fast as they can. Hands everywhere, tight heat surrounding his cock, and not a stitch of clothing on him. The bed is soft beneath his back, and he can hear rapid breathing even over the squeaks and creaks of the box spring.

"Yeah," he whispers into Marcus' mouth. "That's how I like it."

Marcus laughs back against his lips, then closes avenues for conversation by tilting his head just *so* and fusing a seal between their mouths. He doesn't even stop for air, just keeps on going and going.

Aiden's cock is throbbing now, pulsing to beat the band. He can feel his balls drawing up high and tight against his body. Ryan applies more suction, the pressure almost painful but at the same time absolutely fucking delicious. He knows what he's doing, that one.

Then someone -- probably Baz, the sneaky little bastard -- thrusts a slippery finger into Aiden's ass and nails his prostate on the first probe. Presses down hard, too, none of your playing about.

Aiden arches his back, shouts into Marcus' mouth, and comes with what feels like a dull explosion in his gut. Ryan makes messy, sloppy noises as he slurps up every drop of semen, chasing trickles down the length of Aiden's cock and giving him a polish on the way up.

Instead of pulling away, all four fall forward onto Aiden, near crushing the life out of him but at the same time a comforting weight and warmth. Aiden lets himself go and just floats, high on endorphins and adrenaline and all those good things that come with an orgasm.

He reaches out and finds someone's head to caress. From the feel of the silky hair, more than likely Nicholas. Glasses dig into his side and there's a bony knee hard against his calf. Marcus's breath smells of corn chips. Ryan's snuggled between Aiden's own splayed legs.

He couldn't be happier.

Who needs a honey-rum guitarist? he asks himself happily. We're all that's required here, and now I've got my proof.

We're a perfect circle, the five of us.

All for one, eh?

Chapter Nine

If it weren't for the really nice tingling in his limbs, Ryan would think he couldn't feel his arms or legs. He stretches just to prove the point to himself and is rewarded with a series of sleepy mumbles and groans when he pokes various bodies.

This is the kind of "worn-out" that comes from five men going at it with no holds barred, all but literally fucking each others' brains out. Although when Ryan comes to think about it, semen does look a little like dissolved brains, which idea is definitely not conducive to his tranced-out state, so he abandons that line of thought double-quick.

"Mmm," he groans, savoring the sharp burn in his ass and the sore muscles in his thighs from fucking and being fucked.

"Mmm," various other voices answer back.

"Who was in me when?" Baz asks, sounding groggy. "Thought it was Nicholas, but I could have been wrong."

"Ladies and gentlemen, the heart and soul of romance," Marcus says, his voice dry as the Sahara. "That was Aiden. And I was in Aiden."

"What did Ryan get up to, then?"

"If I recall correctly, it was I," Nicholas replies. The head lying on Ryan's arm moves, as if Nicholas's chuckling softly. "Well. We haven't had an evening like that in some time."

"Beats all hell out of dirty-word Scrabble and cop show reruns, if you ask me." Baz sounds as content as a cat who's having its belly rubbed. Then again, given that they're all splayed in different directions on the bed, someone could be doing that very thing.

"Oh, yeah," Ryan answers him. He takes in a deep breath and holds it, willing the ceiling to come into focus. He knows it's been good when he can't half see straight afterwards. Then, he sniffs. "It smells like a monkey cage in here."

"I changed my mind. Ryan, you get to wear the crown." Marcus punctuates his sentence with a jaw-splitting yawn. He makes a few smacking noises and then a sound of disgust. "Okay, so there's a definite aroma. But that doesn't mean it's bad."

"Smells like about ten orgasms to me, and that smells pretty damn good," is Baz's opinion.

"Then you can bundle up the sheets and carry them through to the laundry." Nicholas raises his head. Loose strands of hair fall down around his face, framing his blue eyes. They're hazy as always when he has his glasses off, but Ryan's pretty sure some of that is afterglow. Sweat's drying on his skin.

Ryan has a sudden, almost irresistible urge to rise up and lick it off.

Then decides: *why the hell not?* and lifts himself on one elbow. Nicholas chortles as Ryan laps at his face, then pushes him down. "Keep going like that and you'll set off a chain reaction," he chides. "If I'm off, then you know the rest of this bunch won't be far behind."

"I could go again."

"Shut up, Baz," the rest of them say at once.

"Was only suggesting," Baz grumbles. "That's it, then? Wham, bam, lie around like broken mannequins, and goodnight everyone?"

"Are you missing the heartfelt declaration that you are my one and only sunshine?"

"Nah, we did that bit earlier with Aiden." Baz sounds absent, like he's rolling something over in his mind. "Can't help but feel we've skipped a step or two along the way."

"You covered kissing, sucking, rubbing, rimming, edging, fucking and being fucked. I don't think there's anything much left on the list except fisting. And what you're missing is *laundry*." Nicholas grabs a pillow from his far side and lobs it in Baz's general direction.

"Since when am I your fucking maid?"

"Baz, just do it," Marcus says, his words on the target but the tone of his voice miles away. "No, wait. Don't do it yet."

"Why not?" Baz asks, miffed.

Aiden yawns. "Because then we'd have to get up, and I for one am not ready to tackle that job yet."

"Oh. Good enough, then." Baz settles back down. "I am lying on a wet spot, though."

Ryan tosses a pillow at Baz, himself. "We're all in the middle of wet spots. I don't think there's much on the bed that isn't wet, stained with come, or stained with lube, and that includes the major parts of our bodies."

"Just lie there and be still," Marcus directs. "Enjoy the afterglow."

Baz is quiet for all of five seconds. "Yeah, but you've sorta ruined the afterglow with all your talk about washrooms and wet spots. That's not glow, that's reality."

"Yeah, and the reality is that you've just spent the better part of two hours partying your way through an orgy." Ryan nudges Baz with his toe. "It's cool. If you're wired, let the rest of us lie around and be lazy. You can wait."

"For what? You lot to fall asleep where you lie?"

"Baz," Marcus groans. He's rubbing his hand across his cheek, from the sound of bristling stubble. "We love you. This is why we haven't killed you yet. Don't push your luck."

"All you had to do was say the words." Baz blows air kisses at Marcus, who shakes his head and lets his hand drop -- after he flips Baz off.

Ryan chuckles. This is the part he likes second-best. Sex, of course, has to be in the number one spot. But the laziness afterwards is almost beyond compare.

Some nights it's just a couple of them, with the others enjoying a free show.

Sometimes, they divide into twos and threes.

Occasionally, it's just one putting on a live performance.

When they've had a big group thing, though, the kind that would send cartoon birdies flitting around their heads and leaves every muscle in their bodies aching, this *laissez-faire* lolling around is just perfect.

He doesn't know what he was thinking about earlier. He's seen Rhymer before, every time he heads out to work in the morning. The man seems to rise as early as Ryan himself does, usually eating his McBreakfast on the bench. He'll play Ryan a few notes of something that would make a cowboy cry and gives him a grin as he heads on his way.

He's talked to Rhymer before when he's been out with Baz. Baz likes him -- hell, Baz likes everyone. But he and Rhymer really seem to have hit it off. Baz always stops for a chat.

Once he tried to get Rhymer to teach him a chord, and offered to give him a non-hands-on demonstration of how to give the best blow job this side of the Mississippi.

Rhymer had laughed and said no, thanks, he was already pretty good if he did say so himself.

Pretty much gay, then. But even after that little run-in, Ryan never thought about Rhymer as a possible sexual partner. He's got Baz, he's got Marcus and Nicholas and Aiden; he doesn't need anyone else.

It's just that today...

Maybe there's some kind of hocus-pocus going on. All of them were gathered around Rhymer at once, and Ryan felt a wave of lust roll over him like the tide on a beach. Hit him hard and fast, leaving him not knowing what the hell had just happened or why.

He'd covered by slipping a ten into Rhymer's guitar case.

Now, he feels guilty. Like he's betraying Baz as well as the others, but especially Baz.

What would Baz think about his moony-eyed crush?

And the money -- was he paying Rhymer off for perving over him?

This is what he wasn't able to tell Baz about earlier. They're all for one and one for all, sure, but he and Baz have a special bond. They were the first guys to hook up, after all. Aiden was a surprise but a fantastic addition. Marcus -- well, Ryan had had his doubts, but Marcus turned out fine. And he was definitely on board with getting Nicholas in there.

The problem is, though, where does a man have to draw the line? Are fantasies okay or a great big uh-uh? What would he want with Rhymer, anyway, besides a quick fuck to ease the overwhelming physical urge?

Ryan winces. He's not that kind of guy, and it grates at him to try and reduce Rhymer down to one common denominator: his cock.

To tell the truth, Rhymer's the kind of guy Ryan would like to get to know. Maybe in his thirties, with a weathered face that says he's lived hard and a *joie de vivre* that says he's partied harder. He must have a hundred and one different stories to tell.

Looking at Rhymer, Ryan suddenly wanted to know what those stories were. It wasn't just lust -- it was interest. A definite sexual interest in Rhymer, but with the rider of friendly interest.

There's no way he can talk about it, though. Baz would be the first one he'd normally go to with any problems, but Baz's made it pretty clear he only sees Rhymer as another one of his multiple friends. With Aiden and Marcus and Nicholas, Baz was the one to have the idea about bringing them in. The more the merrier, right?

And so far that's worked. Yet Ryan just has a feeling that Baz's going to throw on the brakes when it comes to Rhymer.

So he's keeping his mouth shut. Praying he can erase the images of Rhymer's face and the sound of Rhymer's molasses voice from his mind.

Either that, or that Baz will turn to him and, with a lewd grin on his face, suggest something that involves Rhymer, whipped cream, and a game of hide-the-cherry.

Ryan chortles despite himself. Baz would be right there with the can of Reddi-Wip if he ever tilted in that direction. Rhymer wouldn't know what had hit him.

"What's funny, then?" Baz asks. He's sounding sleepy now, too. "Having another one of your little mind trips?"

"Sort of," Ryan admits. He doesn't *really* have to share the sordid details, after all. If he plays his cards right, Baz will never find out the truth. "It's nothing."

"Nothing sounds pretty damn funny." Baz's more alert now. "Come on, give."

"I gave at the office."

"Nah. You've had something on your mind all day. A good fucking or three didn't clear your head, so you might as well spill."

"Leave him alone," Marcus rumbles. "Ryan's business is his own."

"In other words, do shut up, Baz," Nicholas tacks on.

Baz grumbles for a bit before settling back down. Then he pops up. "Right, every man Jack of you, off the bed." He scrambles to his feet and claps his hands. "I'm stripping this thing down to the mattress pad and popping the sheets in the wash. The rest of you go and start getting the jism off before it dries on." At their groans, Baz acts surprised. "Oh, give the bitching a rest. I'll be in there myself after I've remade the bed."

"Fine." Marcus heaves himself to his feet. He offers Aiden a hand up, and does the same for Nicholas. Baz cheerfully hauls Ryan away from the sheets -- maybe with a little too much enthusiasm for grace. Ryan ends up almost falling on his ass.

"Sorry, Rye," Baz says, giving Ryan's head a hearty smack with his lips. "Phew. You reek. We all do. Showers, everyone, double-quick-time."

Ryan groans but accepts the hand that sets him steady on his feet, and then pops him on the ass. Trailing after the row of men headed for their shower room, he can't help but grin again at this X-rated version of ducklings crossing a street.

Marcus, of course, being the mama -- er, papa -- duck.

They're all so sleepy that the shower room isn't, at this point, seen as a source of potential fun. Yawning and rubbing at their eyes, each man heads for a spigot and turns the water on full blast. The room soon fills with steam that makes it difficult to see, although Ryan still gets some glimpses of soap-slippery asses and limp but definitely pleasing cocks.

He steps forward to grab a washcloth from the rack, having forgotten in his sleep-walking plod toward the shower itself, then returns to get the bit of terrycloth good and wet. A double-pump of the dispenser rewards him with a palmful of hearty, manly body wash, slightly redolent of Old Spice but with a bit of a kick.

Ryan's soaping himself down when Baz ambles in. His hair's sticking up in a dozen different directions, his eyes are heavy with exhaustion, but he still manages to look like all that and a bag of chips.

Or maybe Ryan's partial.

Either way, Baz looks good enough to eat even after the banquet they've all just had. Ryan's pleased when Baz heads directly for him to steal a kiss, lingering yet deep, plundering Ryan's mouth with his tongue while groping his ass.

All the same, no matter how willing the spirit, the flesh is crying uncle for the night. Ryan pulls away with a fond grin and shoos Baz on his way. "Promises to keep," he whispers.

"I'll hold you to that," Baz replies with a wink. He gives Ryan's behind a second smack, louder in the tiled room, and strides off to his own shower. Ryan admires the view as he goes. Light on his toes, all lean muscle and smooth skin dusted with golden hairs, Baz is the epitome of man.

No wonder they fell in love way back when.

Ryan concentrates on washing himself then, running the soapy washcloth up and down his arms, his legs, and then his torso. The smell rises up around him, spicy and rich, meant to wake a body up, but making him sleepy instead. He's wrapped in a cloud of steam and scent, just about dead on his feet, but God, does it feel good.

A thought enters his mind unbidden and unfurls itself into a full-blown fantasy.

Himself in the morning, up before the others, up before the sun itself, humming softly to himself as he sluices down after a good night's sleep.

He hears soft bare footsteps approaching, but doesn't turn around.

He knows who'll be there.

Solid arms come around to circle his waist. The man behind him isn't tall enough to rest his chin in the crook of Ryan's shoulder, so he noses Ryan in the back. "Sleep well?" a husky voice asks.

"Mmm. Like a baby. Not the kind with colic. A content and healthy child."

He hears a chuckle. "You were making some pretty good music there a minute ago. Why'd you stop?"

"Someone snuck up behind me."

"Smartass." The nose prods Ryan's shoulder blade. He feels the slick slide of a tongue tracing the bone. "What would it take to get you to sing?"

"You're the singer, and you know it."

"Love me tender, love me true."

"I do," Ryan says, meaning it with all his heart. "I really do."

"Then turn around." The wisps of air that escape with the man's words are cool against Ryan's back when compared to the billowing heat of the shower. "Come on and give me a kiss."

And in his fantasy, Ryan turns to look a little ways down into a Marlboro-perfect face, overgrown amber hair wet on the man's forehead. He's got nothing on but a cocky grin, but he boasts an impressive hard-on that he accidentally-on-purpose bumps into Ryan's morning wood. "What do I get for a kiss?" he manages to ask, stunned by the audacity of what they're doing.

The man's eyes smolder. "Baby, you get the whole wide world."

Their lips come together in a kiss, Ryan whispering the man's name before he stops thinking altogether: "Rhymer..."

"Whoa!" Ryan exclaims, slapping a hand into the reassuringly real shower wall to steady himself. He shakes his head, droplets of water flying everywhere. "What the fuck?"

Aiden looks up. "Hey, you okay?"

"Me?" Ryan jumps, then forces himself to relax. "It's nothing. I'm fine. Just got a little dizzy for a second."

"Ryan, turn the water down a notch. I know how hot you like it and I don't want you getting heatstroke," Marcus chides.

Glad to have something to blame his spazzy behavior on, Ryan obeys. The flush in his cheeks, however, has nothing at all to do with the temperature of the water.

"Careful, Ryan," Baz rumbles. Ryan looks up to see Baz gazing at him with an odd sort of concentration. For a second Ryan thinks that Baz has seen through him and read his

thoughts, but after a heart-stopping moment, Baz grins and turns away, concentrating on his own soapy washcloth.

Whew.

After he rinses off, Ryan stands under the fantastically hot spray for a few minutes, just enjoying the feel of the water pressure on his skin. He has no idea what was up with that little hallucination fantasy, but God, he hopes it doesn't happen again. He belongs to Baz; he and Baz belong to the others; that's where things are and that's where they should stay.

After a few minutes, Ryan's feeling much closer to normal. He notices with amusement that Baz's made quick work of his own hose-down and is now slinking around the room to make sure no one needs "help". Not that he'd seriously offer. Nah, he's just in it for a kiss here and a grope there, teasing his way through all of them.

That is, until he reaches Marcus.

Baz makes a grab, and Marcus stands there like a statue. Baz feints left and Marcus dodges right. "Did you wash behind your ears?" Baz teases, nuzzling forward. "Come on and let us check."

"Baz, knock it off."

Baz thumps the heel of his hand against Marcus's forehead. "Nope, it's stuck fast. Too bad. Put that lump of yours to good use and kiss me."

"Baz, I'm worn out."

"One kiss won't push you into the grave. Come on." Ryan knows this tone of voice. Baz isn't going to give up until he's gotten his way. "One little kiss. Doesn't even have to involve tongue."

Marcus regards Baz with a mixture of amusement and irritation, kind of like he's not sure whether or not to go ahead and kiss Baz or to kick his ass. Marcus's a good guy at heart, though, so he gives in with a melodramatic sigh and drags Baz to him.

They kiss. And despite what Baz said about there being no tongue, there is definitely no lack of tongue in this particular smooch. The two cling together for long moments, droplets of water beading on and rolling down their skin, the spray surrounding them as if they're standing at the base of a waterfall.

Ryan feels himself starting to get hard again just from looking.

The two men part. Baz looks surprised yet pleased, then twines his arms around Marcus's neck. "And what do you say, big guy?" he teases.

"Oh, God. Rhymer. Kiss me again..." Marcus murmurs.

The silence is instant. Someone drops a bar of soap and they all listen to the rattle-thump of it bumping its way down to the drain. Ryan's mouth opens and closes. He glances around and sees that both Nicholas and Aiden are goggle-eyed.

Marcus is still swaying, lost in the moment. Not really seeing who's standing in his arms.

Oh, God, is he in for it, Ryan thinks. Then: Rhymer? As in guitarist Rhymer? The guy I thought I was the only one perving over?

We're all in deep shit.

Marcus blinks and comes out of his trace. "Oh, fuck." His hand flies to his mouth. Now, he looks horrified.

And Baz?

He's pissed.

The bed's neatly made up with the covers turned invitingly back, but none of them are going anywhere near it. Ryan and the others have all gathered around their low kitchen table, pulled up close in their chairs. Each one has his hands wrapped around a glass or mug -- except for Baz.

Marcus has decaf coffee.

Ryan has cocoa.

Nicholas has tea.

Aiden cast a few longing looks at the liquor cabinet, but went for caffeine-free soda.

Baz's Jolt is sitting unopened in front of him.

There's nothing but silence for way, way too long. Ryan has an odd feeling that the tension is getting wound tighter and tighter by the second, like someone had a vise pinching them together while the wheels turn on and on.

If someone doesn't say something soon, Baz is going to explode.

Ryan doesn't think that he should be the one to speak up, though. He can't defend Marcus. On the other hand, he can't blame Marcus, either. Marcus just gave a voice to what Ryan's been feeling off and on all day.

And besides, Marcus is the one Baz is glaring at.

In the end, the big guy is the one to give in. "What do you want me to say?" he asks, cradling the big white coffee mug that looks small in his hand. "Would an 'I'm sorry' work for you?"

Baz's glare becomes diamond-hard. Ryan has to sympathize. There's nothing worse than being called by another man's name in a fit of passion.

Unless it's a woman's name.

Now that would be really bad.

"Of course not." Marcus puts his mug down. "Although for what it's worth, I am sorry."

Baz gives a jerk of his head. "Won't happen again, then, will it?"

Marcus's pause is filled with meaning, but as he opens his mouth Baz cuts him off. "How long has this been going on, Marcus? You with a case of the hots for our street bard. Acting all innocent, like you didn't know him from Adam."

"I didn't. I don't." Marcus raises his shoulders helplessly. "I'm being honest with you, Baz. I wouldn't lie about something like this. Today's the first day I noticed Rhymer."

"Rhymer," Baz mocks. "Say it again. From the tone of your voice, sounds just like you're having your dick sucked by the man of the hour."

"Baz, darlin', calm down a bit. So, this is bad. I'm not any too happy about it myself," Aiden adds. "Marcus, what were you thinking?"

Nicholas clears his throat. "I suppose he was thinking much along the same lines as I have been all day."

Baz's hard stare turns toward the shy glasses-wearing man. "And what would those lines be, then?"

Nicholas gazes back with no apologies. "That Rhymer is a fine-looking man and one well worth lusting over."

The noise Baz's chair makes when he jumps up so quickly that it falls over is loud enough to make everyone flinch. "You've got a damned nerve," he spits. "You, the last one to join this group?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Nicholas wants to know. He seems calm as ever, which of course means absolutely nothing. Maelstroms could be raging behind his

façade and no one would ever know. "But as the last one in, as you say, I'd be willing to wager that my own name was whispered a few times in the heat of the moment before I arrived on the scene in person."

Baz scowls. "That was -- that was different. We'd all talked about you, decided we were going to invite you in."

Nicholas tents his fingers. "Then perhaps we should have a discussion about inviting this Rhymer to play a few games with us."

Once again, they have perfect silence. Baz's lips part in shock. Ryan hurries to get his chair righted and back in place before Baz plops down in it. "You can't be serious," he finally splutters. "Rhymer?"

"Why not?" Nicholas is still being utterly patient and rational. "We've been a happy fivesome for quite some time now. Mind you, I'm not saying that we should invite Rhymer to move right in. But when we come down to it, he *is* a fine-looking man, he's charming, and seems to have gotten along well with all of us. It'd do us no harm to get to know him better."

"I don't love you any less," Marcus says gravely. "And I really am sorry about earlier. That was -- that was shitty, and no one deserves what I gave you."

Baz snorts.

Marcus leans forward. "I do love you. It was you I kissed. I don't want there to be a big upset about this."

Baz stewes for a minute. "Then why'd you say his name?" he demands, turning to Marcus. "No, don't. Don't answer that. You want Rhymer? Get to know the fucking vagabond if you want. Take my blessing." He stomps into the bedroom, where they hear him rummaging for a minute, and then reappears with a blanket and pillow. "We still got that couch upstairs? Right? Good. And if anyone comes after me, they'll be asking for a fist in the nuts."

Swearing under his breath, Baz heads up the stairs. Ryan hears him kick open the door and then slam it shut.

It's been a night full of abrupt sounds. Each one has made Ryan more and more nervous, like they're playing Russian Roulette.

"Well." Nicholas's tapping his fingertips together. "What do we do now?"

They all look to Marcus.

Marcus sighs, shrugs, and shakes his head. "I think," he says glumly, "we have a hell of a lot to make up for with Baz."

"Yeah," Aiden agrees. "I mean, we razz him and all, but he's got a heart big as all outdoors and we've gone and stepped on it."

Nicholas looks embarrassed. "I meant no harm. Surely all of you know that I care as much for Baz as I do the others in our group."

"Yeah, but you sure weren't showing it," Ryan says abruptly. "And for the record, Marcus? Yeah. That was supremely shitty." He's building up a head of steam now. "Baz puts it all on the line for each of us, everything he's got. He drives each person in this group crazy but he loves us unconditionally. What did he get in return? I'm going to guess that it starts with a 'b' and ends in '-etrayal'."

Marcus closes his eyes. "I know. And I'll apologize, just as soon as I'm sure he won't kick me in the balls for having the nerve to talk to him."

"You think that's gonna be any day soon?"

"Maybe not," Marcus allows. "But I'll apologize just the same. We all will. Agreed?"

There are murmurs and nods from around the table. Ryan feels somewhat mollified on Baz's behalf -- and guilty. When he looks at himself in the mirror, he's going to see the face of a man who was fantasizing about a complete stranger, someone who Baz obviously doesn't want involved. Unless he admits that to Baz, things are going to be hellishly strained.

They've never kept secrets before. This one is going to be murder to bring out in the light of day, but Ryan makes his decision -- he'll be honest with Baz. And maybe he'll find out what's going on.

In the meantime, while they're letting Baz simmer down a little -- God knows they're all well aware of his temper -- they have another problem to discuss.

"I'm not going to lie," Marcus says slowly. "Never met the guy before, but I'll admit I'd like to get to know Rhymer better."

"Despite Baz's disapproval?" Nicholas wants to know.

"That's the tough part. I mean, we're at each other's throats, sure, but..." Marcus spreads his hands. "There's love there. If it came to a choice -- and maybe it will -- I'd pick Baz."

"I'd thought Baz and Rhymer were friends." Nicholas looks thoughtful, leaning back and folding his arms across his chest. "He was the one to introduce us, after all. Ryan, you

know Baz best of all." Nicholas's eyes are intensely blue beneath his glasses. "How has he talked about Rhymer in the past?"

Ryan shrugs, feeling uncomfortable. "Not much. Not more than any of his other friends. But he likes Rhymer's music. He's even got a CD that Rhymer was selling a couple months back, and Baz doesn't usually go for power ballads."

"Power ballads?" Marcus makes a face.

Ryan waves his hand. "Okay, maybe not power ballads. But really pretty, sweet love songs. I've listened to it a couple of times. Rhymer's got a hell of a voice." His own tones soften. "We made love once with that in the background. Baz even joked about it making the occasion an unofficial threesome, 'cause Rhymer's singing was just as big a part of the fucking as our cocks."

"It seems to me," Nicholas says slowly, "that we have two different issues at hand here. One, the matter of apologizing to Baz. Two, equally weighing Baz's reactions and our own attractions, what are we to do about Rhymer? I'm certain that two of us are interested in the man. What of you, Aiden, and you, Ryan?"

Aiden looks skeptical as he lifts one shoulder. "Man's all right, I guess. Haven't thought about it that much."

"But a little?" Nicholas presses.

Aiden's cheeks turn pink. "Okay, maybe once or twice today. Never *before* today, though, I swear. I didn't know what the hell his name was until this morning."

"Names do mean a lot," Nicholas muses. "Ryan, what about you?"

Ryan stares down at his cocoa. The marshmallows have melted into soggy white glop. It looks about as appealing as mushy ice cream. He mumbles something that isn't exactly "yes" and isn't exactly "no".

Nicholas seems to read right through him. Damn his scholarly insightfulness, anyway. "So we're all agreed," he says, sitting back. "Rhymer appeals to all of us in some way, whether small or large."

There's mostly silence, but it's an agreeing sort of quiet. No one protests.

"I propose that we ask him to dinner, then," Nicholas says. Ryan stares at him in surprise, because talk about walking up to a hornet's nest with a big sharp stick. But there's an odd sort of determination on his face, and a strange something Ryan can't identify when Nicholas looks at Marcus.

Marcus lets out a *whoof*. "You've got brass balls, Nick."

"Would you rather we all stewed in our own juices until things got even worse than they are now?" Nicholas wants to know. "If we get to know this man, we can all make an informed decision as to how close we let him get."

"I think he wants to get pretty close," Marcus mumbles.

Nicholas's eyes sharpen. "Did he speak to you about this?"

"Not in so many words, but..." Marcus gives up. "Yeah."

"No wonder," Nicholas muses. He seems to be giving the matter some serious thought, then nods. "Dinner. We'll all go into it with open minds, weigh our attraction against the possible repercussions of opening our circle, and come to an informed decision."

"Jesus, man. You sound like a theoretical scientist testing a hypothesis." Aiden sees them looking at him and twitches irritably. "What?"

Marcus sighs. "I think Nick is right. Rhymer wants to get close to us, and we pretty much want to check him out. Except for Baz."

"Apologies to Baz come first, and in addition I would say that the final decision needs to be unanimous," Nicholas warns. "A conscientious objector would nullify the agreement between equal partners."

"Cold and clinical..." Aiden mumbles.

"Practical," Nicholas counters. He softens a little. "Marcus, this really is the best way to go about handling the matter. It's the only option open to us except for wholly turning away. Which we can do, if everyone so chooses."

There's another pause. Aiden shifts position a couple of times, but keeps his mouth shut. Glancing around the table, Ryan can see various expressions flit through three different pairs of eyes, but no one's speaking up in favor of the complete and total turn-down.

To his shame, not even himself. God. What kind of asshole is he?

Nicholas takes off his glasses. "We're agreed, then."

"Baz hasn't," Ryan interjects. "Agreed, I mean."

"He did give us his blessing."

"Yeah, but he was pissed." Ryan wavers. "You guys go on to bed without me. I'm gonna go see if Baz needs anything."

"That sounds like a good idea." Marcus stands heavily. "It's late and we have a fresh bed to get into. Let's all get some sleep. Ryan, you should go talk to Baz. Let him know it's not anything personal, if that's what he's thinking. This guy Rhymer has us all worked up into knots, but Baz's part of the group and Rhymer's not. His voice counts. Depending on what Baz says, we'll think about a dinner." He glances around. "That sound okay?"

Slowly, all of them nod, Ryan included. He feels like he's cheating on Baz, damn it all. Right about now he hates himself.

Marcus, Nicholas and Aiden get up, leaving their mugs and cans on the table. Each one lays a hand, either roughly or lightly, on Ryan's shoulder as they pass him by. Only Nicholas pauses long enough to speak. "It'll be all right." There's a note in his voice that Ryan feels he should be able to read, but isn't. "You'll see. Now go talk to Baz."

Ryan nods, scooting his chair back. He'll go see what he can do.

But he's taking a pillow and a blanket of his own.

Looks like tonight might be a long night.

Baz approached him, way back when. Baz is the cornerstone of everything. Ryan doesn't want to watch this building crumble.

Maybe he can shore up the foundation and make it strong again.

He'll see what happens.

Chapter Ten

As Ryan comes up the stairs, he has to pause near the top. What's he going to say? How's he going to say it? He's seen Baz in a temper before. Lion tamers would hesitate to approach.

He raises his head to look for Baz, and stops again because, standing in front of the big plate-glass window and framed by the dimmed streetlights outside, Baz is a vision that stops his breath.

Nude except for the blanket wound around his waist like a towel, he seems to be captured in marble, utterly still. Nothing moves except for the slight in-and-out of his breathing, not a toe twitching, not a single tousled blond hair moving. His jaw is set in stony lines and he's glaring out at the street as if he'd hope looks could kill.

Ryan doesn't have to guess what Baz is watching. It's going to be the now-empty bench where Rhymer sits during the day. God knows what kind of thoughts are going through his mind, but Ryan's fairly sure none of them are good.

"Hey," Ryan says softly, even though he knows that Baz has to have heard him coming up the steps. "You mind if I come join you for a while?"

No response.

Ryan half-expected this. He tentatively takes the last few steps, but on instinct leaves his pillow and blanket behind him. He can always come back for them, but he has a feeling Baz isn't going to want him around for long.

Still, he can try. He can always try. He and Baz have meant so much to each other from the very beginning. Maybe that'll get Baz talking.

"I just wanted to..." Ryan stops. He's a guy; apologies over mega-fuck-ups don't come all too easy, especially over something as awkward as this. "Look, what happened before was wrong. Okay, so Marcus was the one to put his foot in his mouth, but we were all still sticking a knife in your back."

Baz stares stonily out into the street.

"Baz, it's me. It's Ryan. We ran away to this city together. It's always been just you and me against the world, even after the other three joined in. Remember what it was like on the drive up? You were flooring the gas as if we were running from Hell itself. Music blaring, dodging in and out of traffic, hollering out the window like you were having the time of your life. All I could do was hold on and pray we wouldn't rear-end something six times our size." Ryan wants to touch Baz so badly he aches. "Those were good times, weren't they?"

No response.

"Baz, come on," Ryan pleads, shuffling his weight from one foot to the other. "Turn around and look at me. I'm standing right here, and... I'm sorry. I should have stood up for you down there."

That earns him a half-turn of the head. Baz's eyes are hooded and full of accusations that could mean dozens of things. None of them are friendly. He looks suddenly much older than Ryan, and as if he thinks Ryan is a child. Someone not grown enough to understand how things work, especially not in a relationship like one they all share as a group, much less the times that came before hand.

"Baz, please. What do I have to do? Tell me, and I'll try my best." Ryan reaches out a hand, tanned fingertips dangling in the air. "At least say something to me."

Baz snorts softly. "Go back downstairs," he says, his voice silky and deadly dangerous. "I don't want you here."

The words hit like a punch to the gut. Baz's always wanted him there. "Baz?" Ryan asks, confused. "What's--"

"Go. Back." Baz turns around to look at the street again. "I don't want you. Not here, and I'd say not there, except I don't know where else you'd go."

Ryan won't accept this. "Baz, you've gotta know I'm on your side."

"Mmm." Baz shakes his head slightly. "That secret I was tryin' to winkle out of you all afternoon. Was it Rhymer you were thinking about? Maybe imagining him on top of you, pumping his cock in your hole? Him, instead of me?"

Ryan pauses.

Apparently that's enough to damn him in Baz's sight. "Get *out*," he snarls. "So help me God, if you're not gone within the next few seconds I'll come and punch your flapping jaw for you."

That stuns Ryan. "You've... you've never hit me. I never thought you ever would."

"First time for everything." Baz is stony again. "Go on. And don't come back."

Ryan feels sick to his stomach. After everything they've shared, this is like being pushed out into the cold by his lonesome. "Can't I say anything?"

"You can say goodbye." Baz makes a growling noise. "Go."

Ryan doesn't know what else to do. He'd *like* to run up to Baz and hug him until he softens, to pull Baz's head down onto his shoulder and stroke his fluffy hair until he's convinced that everything's okay, but he has an uneasy feeling that Baz really would hit him.

But if he leaves, isn't that just going to convince Baz even more that Ryan's been falling for another man?

"Swear to God, Ryan," Baz says in a low, menacing tone. "Get your ass out of here."

And Ryan goes. Numbly picking up his feet one after another, he turns around and starts back down the staircase. Automatically, he collects his pillow and blanket. He guesses he won't be needing them after all.

The trek back down to the basement is a long and lonely one. He can feel Baz's anger pushing him along like a hand to the back, shoving him away. It makes the spot between his shoulder blades tingle, just as if someone were running an ice cube down the length of his spine.

When he comes to the foot of the stairs and opens the doors, he drops his pillow and blanket on a chest that normally holds laundry. There's the warm, soft light of lamps glowing in the bedroom, inviting him in. He can hear the quiet sounds of voices speaking quietly to one another, along with the rustling of pages.

For some reason, this pisses him off. What right do they have to be acting like everything's all right? If Aiden's reading, he's going to throttle the small man. The fuss they made over him earlier and then...

Ryan turns into the bedroom and takes in the sight of three men in bed, or rather on the bed. They haven't gotten underneath the good heavy comforter. Each one is dressed in sweats and T-shirts of varying colors and states of rattiness. Aiden's head is on Marcus's chest, his fingers picking at a small hole in Marcus's shirt, making it broader. Nicholas isn't reading a book, but instead looking through a portfolio of pictures and sketches. He wasn't a bad artist to start with and he's learning more day by day.

It helps when you have four bodies willing to pose as life study models.

Maybe three, now. Ryan isn't sure that Baz's going to come back from this.

They all look up when the lights cast Ryan's shadow across the bed. Nicholas puts down his folder of artwork and folds his hands across his lean stomach. His blue eyes are sympathetic. "I take it you didn't get far?" he asks kindly.

Ryan shakes his head, running a hand through his hair. "Not far at all," he admits. "Baz wouldn't even talk to me, except to order me out. Then he figured out that I'd been thinking about Rhymer, myself."

"Oh, dear," Nicholas murmurs. "What did he do then?"

"Threatened to punch me." Ryan finds his way to Marcus's armchair and sits heavily down. The contours don't fit him, but that's okay. The way he figures things, he deserves to be a little uncomfortable. "He's going to stand up there all night and stew. I know him. And when morning comes, if we don't get through to him, he's gonna leave us."

"You can't know that for certain."

"Do you think he's planning to stick around, thinking we don't want him enough to care what he wants?" Ryan demands. "Not Baz. He's loud and he's flashy, but he's proud. He's not going to stay where he's been insulted."

"If we can't make it up to Baz, how do we stop him?"

Ryan slumps. "I don't know. But we've got to try." He raises his face, knowing he must look like the last puppy in the shop. "Maybe if someone else tried talking to him...?"

Aiden, Marcus and Nicholas exchange glances. "I don't think that's such a bad idea," Nicholas says slowly, as if thoughts are rushing together in his mind. The more languorous his tone is, the quicker he's coming to conclusions. "I'll go first. I've my own apologies to make. I'm not at all certain that he'll listen to me, but I'll do my level best."

"He wouldn't even listen to Ryan," Aiden points out. "Nick, what makes you think you have a chance?"

"I don't." Nicholas swings his legs over the side of the bed and stuffs his feet into soft gray slippers. "That doesn't mean I won't try." He leans back over and kisses Marcus. "I'll be back in a few minutes." He kisses the top of Aiden's head.

Then, coming up to Ryan, he bends and brushes his lips over Ryan's. "Don't worry," he says in a voice pitched for only the two of them to hear. "We'll get through this."

He straightens and heads toward the stairs, his step light as he walks up the treads. Ryan watches him go, hoping for the best... but expecting the worst.

Maybe he'll get lucky.

Maybe.

Nicholas tops the stairs, almost silent in his slippers, and stands for a moment to get his bearings. This wide room has changed so much since the glory days of the press. His bookshelves and their filing cabinets remain, but they are, for the most part, empty. He's

moved his private collection downstairs. The only area that looks lived-in is Marcus' corner with its neat desk, computer, and cup full of pencils.

Baz stands by the window, arms tightly folded across his chest. "What is this, a parade?" he asks. His voice is bitter as the horrible black coffee Madison used to make, and barren of any life as the desert. "Coming up one by one to try and talk me down off the ledge?"

"Not precisely." Nicholas is sure to walk carefully as he makes his way toward the couch. It is, just as he remembers, lumpy. A spring pokes him in the ass as he sits down. Good Lord, it's uncomfortable. And Baz plans to sleep here?

Or does he plan to stand at the window until dawn and go down to attack Rhymer?

Nicholas follows Baz's line of sight out to Rhymer's normal station. "It's a perfectly harmless bench," he remarks. "Certainly nothing deserving of your withering disapproval."

Baz snorts. "Only you would take a dozen-plus words to ask me to turn around."

"That's true enough," Nicholas acknowledges. "How long do you plan to stand there?"

"Long as I need to."

"I suppose you're waiting for Rhymer to show up."

"Usually does, right before dawn. I see him when I'm heading out to walk the dogs."

"So your plan is to charge down onto the streets wrapped in nothing but a blanket, attack him, bruise him up and break his guitar in half over your knee?"

"What the hell else am I supposed to do?" Baz snaps, turning sharply on Nicholas. "Pretend as if nothing happened? Go downstairs and get all snuggly with you lot, then wake up and go walkies like everything's just fine and dandy?"

"No. That's not what you should do at all." God, Nicholas would like another cup of tea, something to soothe him and to warm his fingers, which are feeling icy-cold in the unheated office. "Neither of your options are viable at this point."

"Well? You're all-knowing, then, aren't you? Tell me what I should do."

"Talk," Nicholas says simply. "Or listen to me, to what I have to say. And I've quite a lot on my mind. Why don't you get comfortable?" He pats the couch cushion next to him. "It can't be easy standing there like a statue."

Baz's jaw hardens. "I'm fine where I am, thanks."

"Very well." Nicholas gives in gracefully, not having expected Baz to take him up on his offer in the first place. "To begin, I think you should know Marcus is very desperately sorry about what he's done. He's told me, and I believe he means for you to know, that he feels like a prime jackass over what happened in the shower."

Baz takes on a look of scowling disdain. "Yeah. He was only fantasizing about another man while we kissed. A pretty little apology's going to make it all better, isn't it?"

"I didn't say that. And I'm not finished. Marcus aside, I must apologize myself. I had no right to bring Rhymer up as if what we were doing was having a conversation about someone we'd all agreed on giving a try. You were right. I, the last one in, have no right to presume or push when it comes to the status of our group." Nicholas laces his fingers together and puts his hands under his chin.

Baz is looking somewhat doubtful now. Perhaps that's a good sign.

Heartened, Nicholas goes on. "There's pushing and then there's pushing," he says. "I was careless in what I said, and I can certainly see how it would injure your feelings."

That earns him another snort. "Injure my feelings, you say. Damn you, Nick. I'm not a sodding girl come up here to boo-hoo over what you said."

"Aren't you?" Nicholas counters. "Marcus aside, where we've put him, I can't help but think you're up here because your heart took a hit. If the talk of Rhymer truly didn't bother you, we'd all be downstairs tucked into bed, and Ryan wouldn't look as if he's been given an uppercut to the jaw and a knee to the balls."

For the first time, Baz's eyes change from angry to slightly concerned. "He's that down about this?"

"And more. But let's put Ryan aside, too. This is about you and I, what we're speaking of right now." Nicholas tries to organize his thoughts, usually so neatly compartmentalized. "I'd like to talk about my position in this group, which I referred to earlier."

Baz rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Last one in, you pushed, blah, blah, blah. I've heard this one. Spin me another tale."

"Call it a second chapter to the story, then, if you will. I recall the first night that I was inducted into what was then a foursome. I'd come down to take a shower, and you picked the bathroom lock. Came in after I'd just finished abusing myself and washed me off, rubbed citrus shampoo into my scalp and rinsed it away. I remember how Ryan came in and the both of you bracketed me. The sensation of being carried away is something I'll never forget. And to find out later that all of you had agreed that I was wanted... well." Nicholas clears his throat and looks down. "It's burned into my memory. Tonight, it reminds me of how foolish I've been, pressing for another member when I had no one else to back me up -- Marcus' mistake notwithstanding."

Baz seems to be rolling all of this over in his mind. "I don't regret letting you in," he says abruptly. "You've been fine. But I think you should go now. Not ready to talk to you yet. Nor any of the others."

"Ryan did say you wouldn't speak to him."

"All of you are just alike. Telling tales out of school."

"We don't hide anything from each other."

"You sure as hell did today."

"Granted," Nicholas gives in. "And see what the result has been?" He stands, wincing a little at how stiff he's become from merely a short stint on the couch. "It's going to be hell sleeping there, you know," he says mildly. "Or standing by that window until dawn."

Baz sighs and shakes his head. He turns back around to face the street. "Go on back down, Nick," he says, sounding tired. "Back to your big warm bed. Leave me be."

"As you like." Nicholas aches to cross the room and touch Baz, but somehow instinctively knows that this would be the wrong thing altogether to do. "I can't guarantee the others won't be up to see you, but you do as you see fit where they're concerned. Do bear in mind, Baz, we're all sorry and want to make amends. We're all sincere. Be patient with us."

All he gets in answer is the twitch of one bare shoulder.

Nicholas sighs and nods. "Good night, Baz," he says, heading back for the stairs. He hears nothing as he descends, and nothing as he opens the basement door. Baz's not been mollified in the slightest, then. Perhaps softened a little, but not at all ready to forgive them.

Ryan looks up, his eyes huge. "Is Baz coming after you?"

Nicholas hates to disappoint him. "No," he says gently. "I wasn't able to get through."

Ryan slumps. He sighs. "Maybe I should go back up?"

"Perhaps, but perhaps not." Nicholas raises a hand to stroke his chin. "He's heard from the both of us already. Perhaps what he needs is to see a united front. Either Marcus or Aiden should go up to speak with him in their turn."

Marcus and Aiden exchange looks. The small man and the huge one seem to come to a sort of agreement without words, and then Aiden's pushing away from Marcus and off the bed. He has no slippers or socks. "I'll go next."

"The floor's cold up there."

Aiden shrugs. "Baz's barefoot. Why should I get the comfort of warm toes?" His voice drops. "I'm just as guilty, y'know. I gave Rhymmer a passing thought or two myself, and then I went and threw a great big pity party. I'm a damned hypocrite, I am, and I've got to make amends."

He hesitates. "Anyone mind giving me the key to the liquor cabinet? If I ever needed a drink, tonight's the night."

Aiden's shut the basement door carefully and he's light on his feet, so he supposes that it's the sound of clinking glasses that alert Baz to the fact that he's coming. He gets a good look at Baz in profile, staring out onto the street, and is reminded of the first time he saw the man.

He'd never seen anything better-looking except Ryan. Ryan, who was there to help him out from the start. The day when he had a bad migraine and had to lie down, his head cradled in Ryan's lap.

The way Baz came to kneel by their sides and stroke his hair. Promising that they didn't have to break up anything good, that they could just... share. Aiden's chest aches at the thought, remembering the days when he was deathly afraid that his crush on the brown-haired, brown-eyed man could destroy Ryan's relationship with Baz.

So here they are, again. Full circle, only now it's him who's come to do the comforting.

"Knew you'd be up," Baz says shortly. "Either you or Marcus. I can see what's going on, you know."

"Out there on the street?"

"No. With the group of you men. You'll hit me one at a time, hoping I'll break down." Baz sounds tired and resigned. "Suppose you've come up to extend your apologies as well? You may as well not get your hopes too high. I'm not in a mood to listen to another 'sorry'."

Aiden readjusts his thinking and nods. "Suit yourself. I won't say what's on my mind. We'll have it your way." He puts his bottle and the two shot glasses down on an end table. "I won't say a word about feeling like a gigantic shit over what happened, and how I've been cheating in my mind. Nope, not a word out of me about that."

"Aiden..."

"Hey, I said I wasn't going to mention it." Aiden unstoppers the bottle of fine Scotch, a good expensive year, and breathes in the fumes. They don't trigger the same signals that they used to. In fact, despite how he feels like he needs one, the smell of the drink turns him off more than somewhat.

All the same, he pours two shots. With one in each hand, he walks over to Baz and holds out the measure meant for him. "Have a drink with me, if you will. I'm not saying a word about how this is a kind of olive branch, mind. Just offering a friendly shot."

Baz makes a face, but takes the glass. He tilts it back and swallows the shot at one go, contorting his features at the harsh burn of the alcohol. "Am I supposed to be mellow now?" he asks sarcastically. "Gonna need a lot more than a single tot of Scotch for that."

Aiden shrugs. He passes over his own glass and takes the empty back. "Try another, then."

He watches the muscles in Baz's throat work as he tosses the shot back. His hands ache to reach out and touch, to run his fingers down Baz's neck and over that pale white chest. To trace the fading tan lines left from summer out on his job.

He doesn't move, though.

Baz squeezes his eyes shut through the rush of the second drink. "What the hell did you do, pick the most potent shit you could find? And I thought you were on the wagon."

"Technically, I still am. Haven't drunk a drop yet."

Baz's eyes narrow. "Willing to fall off for me, are you?"

"In a manner of speaking." Aiden takes the glasses and goes to refill them. "I'd rather drink with you than because of you. I haven't said anything, remember, but I've found that peace can be reached over a sup of the single malt." The Scotch glug-glugs as it fills the shot glasses. "Will you drink with me?"

He hears a sigh. "Aiden, you know that's dirty pool."

"All's fair in love and war."

"This isn't war."

"No? Could have sworn you were taking up position against the enemy." Aiden crosses back to Baz's side. He extends Baz's glass a second time. "My first, last, and only drink of the night. Come on and toast with me."

Baz frowns as if he expects something dastardly to come out of Aiden's mouth next.
"And what are we toasting to, exactly?"

"One another, and apologies that haven't technically been made." Aiden grows serious.
"You mean a lot to me, man. Just want you to know as much. You were there for me, and I'm here to say -- deliberately, yes -- that I'll be here for you."

"You were lusting after Rhymer just the same as the others," Baz says flatly. "Don't try to deny it. I could read you all like big-print books. Pictures, even. Aren't those supposed to be worth a thousand words and all?"

"I'm not saying I didn't entertain a thought or two," Aiden allows.

"Figured as much."

"Yeah, but what you're not taking into account is the fact that at heart, he's still an outsider. You and I and the others, we've plighted our troth. Got rings and all to prove it." Aiden makes bold enough to tap Baz's hand with its silver band. "Way I see it, we've cheated. And if that's not enough to drive a man to drink, I don't know what is."

"I never said..."

"No. Doesn't make it not the truth, though, does it?" Aiden lifts his glass. "Toast with me to not screwing up a second time."

Baz bites his lip. He toys with his glass. "I've got a lot to think about, right? But cheers for the drink."

"Figured you'd want one." Aiden's patiently holding out his glass. "Clink them together, man. Give me that much for all I've said and haven't spoken a word about."

Baz gives Aiden a look that's pretty much unreadable, but touches their glasses together. The sound of crystal rings out through the room as both of them take the shot.

Tastes bitter as all hell to Aiden. When he's done making faces, he looks up to see Baz almost smiling. "Get back downstairs and hop on your wagon again," he says. "You're not the man you used to be."

"And thank God for that, most days." Aiden grins. The atmosphere has relaxed somewhat and he can sense Baz loosening up a little. Maybe it's the booze, maybe not. Could be they're getting through.

"I suppose it'll be Marcus up next, won't it?"

"If we can hold Ryan back. The man's in agony down there, Baz."

Baz flinches. "Yeah," he says softly. "I know. But I can't see him yet, can I? Go on and leave me be. But don't take the bottle, will you? I might want another nip or two."

"Yeah. It's fucking cold up here," Aiden says. He's backing away now, careful not to bump into anything. "If you want, we've got a warm bedroom downstairs."

"Not now, Aiden." Baz sounds weary again. "Maybe when I'm ready. Right this moment isn't the time."

"You want us all to troop up here after you?"

"Don't *want*," Baz says, tracing the rim of his glass with one finger, making the crystal sing. He looks up. "It's more like *need*."

Aiden nods, acknowledging the truth.

Then, he turns to go.

They're making progress.

Marcus is hesitating at the basement door. From what Ryan and Nicholas and Aiden have told him, Baz is calming down some.

But he knows when he himself goes upstairs, he could screw the whole thing up six ways from Sunday.

When did it all get so complicated? Marcus knows he can be a pretty big moron, and he was aware of all the dynamics and possible big-ass problems that could come of getting involved with a threesome. But back then he'd been so into Aiden, and the only way to be with Aiden was to join up, and...

He sighs. Baz and he have had their differences in the past. What they were don't so much matter now, but there's a background of enmity. At the best of times, they smack each other around before they fuck.

It appears to be the worst of times now.

All of this is his own fault. How stupid could he have been, letting reality blur its way into fantasy when he was kissing the man? He knows, he knows, it's happened to thousands of other couples, and it probably ends up the same way, except that the party who did the injuring is usually the one on the lumpy couch. Leave it to Baz to take himself away and play the martyr.

But no, that's not fair. Baz has every right to be injured by what happened. Marcus is just pretty damn sure he'll put his own size twelves in it again when he goes upstairs. He's got to be the last person Baz wants to see at the moment.

And yet...

Aiden said Baz was asking after him. Maybe not in so many words, but Baz is expecting Marcus to come up next. Could be they'll have a showdown. That would be like Baz, just waiting to vent his spleen.

Marcus figures he deserves it, though.

So. Up the stairs he goes, ready to take whatever punishment Baz sees fit to dish out. One step at a time, knowing how loud he sounds with his bulk that never did learn the art of grace, his feet shod in rubber-soled slippers that clunk and thunk against the grade with its worn carpeting.

He's not sure what to expect when he opens the door, but it's not Baz standing at the window looking as if he's lost his last and best friend. The expression of sadness on the man's face is heart-breaking, and Marcus knows who's put it there: he, Marcus.

Yet despite his sorrow, Baz is as beautiful as a fallen angel. Marcus has always known this, even when the two of them were at such odds that half a state wasn't enough distance to keep them both satisfied. He's never not loved Baz's body. But after Ryan and Aiden, he learned -- again -- to love the man himself.

With him and Baz, there's more than love and lust at stake. There's history. Years of hatred followed by a mad rush of passion. Things have been good. Spectacular.

He should never have let Rhymer in, or allowed that single, challenging sentence to linger in his mind. It doesn't matter how tempting the honey-haired guitarist might be. Baz is already here and real and he's what counts.

Marcus finds himself completely at a loss for words.

So he lets instinct, fickle as that bitch has proved to be, take over.

Instead of saying anything awkward or hedging around for a second, he goes straight to Baz and stands behind him, wrapping his arms around Baz's waist. Baz stiffens, but doesn't jerk away or run off. It's like holding a sculpture, but Marcus figures he can deal.

He lowers his lips to the nape of Baz's neck and bites down lightly, then soothes the spot with his tongue. As he lifts away, he whispers, "Baz."

Baz sighs, a long and lonely sound that goes straight to Marcus's heart.

Marcus kisses him again, this time on the curve of one shoulder. "Baz," he says softly, moving his mouth in a trail over the upper edges of the man's back. "Baz. Baz. Baz." He kisses in between voicing the man's name, rubbing against him. He's not hard, but that's not the point. He's just going with what feels right.

"Marcus," Baz finally breathes, lifting a hand to catch the back of Marcus's head. "Marcus."

Marcus nods. "Yeah. It's me." He kisses the nape of Baz's neck. "Just me. Just you."

Baz sways as Marcus rains more kisses down on every inch of bare skin that he can reach and then, in a bold move, turns Baz around to press them chest to chest. Baz's eyes have gone hazy, although there's still some wariness lurking in the shadows.

"Only Baz," Marcus murmurs before lowering his mouth to Baz's.

Baz is still for a long moment, and then, all in a rush, he's clinging to Marcus with two strong arms, kissing back with a fiery passion. Their tongues meet and duel, Baz pushing forward insistently and Marcus letting him have his way.

When their mouths part, Baz shakes his head. "I'll do the talking now," he says quietly but firmly. "I'm not daft, Marcus. I know you want Rhymer. You never could hide a secret from me. But this here, between us, this has just been you and I. I know, now."

Marcus keeps quiet, hoping Baz will be able to read him even further.

Baz nods. "We're all right, you and I," he says. "Me and Aiden, me and Nicholas, too."

"And Ryan?"

"Ryan." Baz's expression turns pensive. "I need to have a word with him again. He's not gone to sleep yet, has he?"

"He was still wide awake when I was just down there. Not even dressed for bed or anything."

"Good." Baz seems absent, as if he's thinking of other things besides the man in his arms. Marcus is okay with that; he can deal. With a quick grasp of Marcus's arms, Baz backs away. "Send him up."

"He doesn't have to," a voice says tentatively. "I couldn't wait. I'm here, Baz."

Baz has the ghost of his old cocky grin on his face. "Just couldn't stay away, could you?"

"Not from you." Ryan has his hands jammed into his pockets, but his expression is steady and determined. "I had to try again."

"Didn't trust Marcus not to cock up the whole deal, right?"

Ryan cuts Marcus a quick look. "Well, I..."

Marcus has to grin. "Yeah, we can't blame him for that one. Go ahead, Ryan." He stands aside. "I'll be downstairs, Baz. I hope you'll come join us."

"Maybe in a bit," Baz answers. "Me and Ryan have a few things to talk out between us first."

As soon as the door closes behind Marcus, Baz and Ryan resume their Mexican standoff. There's a lot of staring going on, but Ryan has no idea how things are working right now.

Baz's looking at Ryan as if he's never seen Ryan before. "You were always the prettiest thing," he says abruptly. "There I was in a town where I hardly knew half-a-dozen people, and then you step into a bar of an evening. I didn't even know if you were gay, but I couldn't have stopped myself from chatting you up."

Ryan half-grins. "You remember our first night together?"

"You mean the first time we fucked out in that alley, or the first time we used a bed, or the first time we fell asleep lying against one another?"

"All of the above."

"Oh, yeah. Crystal-clear, every bit of memory. You know, I love them all, Ryan, but it's you I adore. I've always left the circle open. Now, the rest of you are wantin' to widen it another crack. An' the way I figure it, it comes down to me when we're makin' the decision." He tilts his head. "Tell me, and tell me true: do you want this Rhymer in with the rest of us? I'll know if you're lying, mind."

Ryan feels his cheeks heat up. "Yeah," he admits in a low voice. "I don't know why, but I do." He looks up. "That doesn't mean I don't still want you. More than anything, that's how much I want you."

"Then that's all I needed to hear." Baz opens his arms. "Come here, then, before things get awkward."

Ryan rushes into Baz's arms. The collision of their bodies is hot and frantic, Baz's blanket falling away and his hands working busily at the zipper of Ryan's jeans. Somehow they fall to the floor with Baz stripping him all the way down and then they're rolling together, cocks hard and thrusting against one another's stomachs.

"Baz," Ryan pants. "No time. Wanted to be in you, but... or you in me..."

"Later," Baz soothes.

He grabs hold of Ryan's ass and uses it to push Ryan harder against him. They're humping each other like crazy things, driving one another higher and harder toward an orgasm that it feels like Ryan's been waiting his whole life on.

When Ryan comes, it's with a sharp, surprised cry. Baz growls something unintelligible, then bucks against his stomach and the spreading wetness between them doubles.

"You an' me," Baz is saying as they come back down from the dizzying height. "You an' me, and the rest of the world be damned. As long as I know you're with me, that's all I want."

"I swear," Ryan whispers, meaning it with all his heart.

"I know." Baz eases Ryan's head down on his chest and begins stroking his hair. "I've been thinking, I have. I never looked at Rhymer that way. But he's gotten to you, to all of you. And I'm figuring -- no, hush, now -- that if he's that much of a draw, I should see what all the fuss is about. I'll agree to a dinner, and maybe even to a test drive. But Ryan, if he's not everything as advertised, I'll speak my mind about it." He lets Ryan tilt his head up. Their eyes meet. "That sound fair enough?"

Ryan doesn't know what to say. He still feels ashamed, but at the same time there's a thrill of excitement coursing through his stomach. He still doesn't know anything about Rhymer but his name and the fact that he plays a mean guitar, but Baz's going to give them the chance to find out more.

"I don't deserve you," he says, knowing it sounds sappy but not caring.

Baz chuckles. "Damn right you don't. Lie here for just a minute longer, love. Let me catch my breath before we go back downstairs."

"You're coming with us?"

"Why would I want to sleep on that grotty old couch when there's a perfectly good bed? Besides, we both need a shower." The old twinkle has reappeared in Baz's eyes. "But this time, no one drops the soap."

Ryan grins. "You're on. You are so on."

"Good. Then come up here and kiss me, and we'll call it a done deal."

Ryan goes gladly, fusing his mouth to Baz's and grasping his bicep with one hand. He squeezes, hoping it conveys all his unspoken words. Baz makes a soft noise into their kiss which seems to approve.

The relief Ryan feels is immeasurable.

One obstacle cleared.

Now, one more to go.

Dinner with Rhymer.

It could be great or it could be hell. But at least things have been made right with Baz, and Ryan knows that the others will understand.

There could even be make-up sex.

"Let's get downstairs," he suggests quickly.

"I like how you think."

The two of them scramble up and make a dash for the steps, laughing as they push each other out of the way.

It's going to be okay, Ryan thinks. *It's all going to be okay.*

Thank God.

Chapter Eleven

The sun's coming up over the boulevard, and Rhymer's right back in his accustomed place. His guitar case is leaned up against the bench, but not opened, not yet.

He's taking a moment to enjoy the morning, and to think.

Way Rhymer figures it, there's no telling what happened yesterday in the basement of delights. When he left, the lights were on but he wasn't gonna look to see if there were silhouettes walking to and fro, or even worse, try to listen for voices.

There's being interested, and then there's just downright being a stalker.

He thinks he did, if not the right thing, then what he had to do with Marcus. Maybe. Rhymer's the kind of man who likes to think he's rational and logical, but sometimes a button gets pushed and he flies right off the handle without a thought to caution or overall strategy.

Actually, he has to admit to himself, he feels somewhat guilty about what he did. Marcus was fun as hell to bait, just like Rhymer had thought he would be, but he's got a feeling that the big guy's like a bear with a sore paw when he gets pissed.

Did he piss Marcus off? Rhymer's not sure.

He'd give his left nut to know what happened after he left.

But there doesn't look to be any informants out there on the street this morning, so he's just taking a few to collect his thoughts. Could be that his kiss left no more of an impact than the light smack of a flyswatter. Could be it hit like a Mack Truck against a little VW Beetle. Either way, though, he did make a move. Let them know, all of them after a fashion, what's on his mind.

He wants what they have. The stability of a place to call home after years of footloose and fancy-free. A group of men who understand it's okay to make your own way doing what you love, who won't try to tie you down to a "respectable" job. So long as you chip in what's fair, there's no questions asked -- or so he expects. Might be a street artist would fit in with that bunch.

And he's got to admit to himself, the idea of all that sex, all those different men to play with and all the fun you can have with friction -- that excites him more than a little. He'd never imagined such a thing as a fivesome could be possible, but it's a hell of a delicious image and the kind of challenge he's never been able to resist.

But again, there's no way of knowing if his opening gambit worked. So he might as well play his guitar, wait for the foot traffic to get heavy, and start collecting his daily wage. He's in a mood for slow songs, the old classics by Elvis and Cash and Hank Senior.

He might even sing a bit, if the fancy takes him. He doesn't always, but maybe today he'll do "Love Me Tender" when one of the men comes out for whatever reason.

The wickedness of that makes Rhymer grin. He just can't help himself. It's in his nature to dig, dig, dig until he gets what he wants or has the door slammed in his face.

Doors were open yesterday, literally and figuratively.

Maybe they still are.

Rhymer relaxes back against his seat, watching the sky turn slowly from dark gray smog to lighter gray, what would be in a civilized place a fading from indigo blue to the pinks and yellows of a sunrise. That is one thing he dislikes a great deal about the city. Nothing you can really call a fine morning to wake up to.

He's just about to reach for his guitar case when he hears a door behind him slam. Instantly, all senses are alert. If he knows that particular sound, it's gonna be someone coming out of the basement apartment. It's a weekend, though, so no one should be venturing out this early.

His spine tingles. Is this the moment he's been waiting for?

Rhymer doesn't look around. He pretends he's heard nothing, and just sits caressing the battered black guitar case, waiting to see if whoever-it-is comes to visit a while.

"Here," a gruff voice says. Rhymer glances up to see Baz standing there, looking like he's just rolled out of bed after a night of restless sleep. His T-shirt is wrinkled as if it's the one he slept in, and his sweatpants are just about indecently loose.

Great muscles, though. All fit and toned.

He's offering Rhymer a cup of coffee in a ceramic mug that reads "Devoted Slave of Caffeine". The flip side says: "No Fucking Apologies". "Well?" Baz grunts. "You going to take this, or have I gotten up and brewed a pot for nothing?"

Rhymer nods and takes the mug from Baz. Baz, who's apparently a cola man, pops the top on a can and takes a long, foamy sip. He wipes his mouth off with the back of his hand and gives Rhymer a nod. "It's public property, so I'm not going to ask. But I figure I should warn you I'm sitting down."

"Be my guest." Rhymer moves over a bit, shifting his guitar case to the ground again. "Plenty of room for one more."

"Yeah, so there is." Baz hops the bench from behind, only spilling a little soda, and slouches down next to Rhymer. He gives a huge yawn and rubs at his cheeks, ever so slightly rough with a growth of stubble.

Rhymer eyes him up and down. Bags under his eyes, unshaven, un-showered... "Pardon my saying so, but you look like hell."

Baz snorts. "I guess that's fitting enough," he says cryptically, but doesn't expand.

A long silence passes between them.

"I know what you did," Baz says abruptly. "Marcus has told us all the whole story. He tried keeping it a secret, the big ox, but the truth will always out. You nearly blew us all to kingdom come. Just so's you know."

"Shit." Rhymer feels honest regret. Then he wonders if the coffee's poisoned. Be a shame if it were. It's damn good coffee. He takes another swig regardless, enjoying the black bitterness of the morning jolt.

Baz studies his soda can intently. "I'd thought we were friends, you and I," he says apropos of nothing. "Exchange a few words in the morning, wave to one another, chatter a bit about this and that and nothing important at all. Then I go and find out that you've made a move on one of my lovers." He glances up. "Why him? Why Marcus?"

"You really want to know?"

"Yeah. I do."

"I can't help scrapping," Rhymer answers honestly as he can. "I see a big man like Marcus, the patriarch of a clan like yours, and I've got to take a crack at him."

"So it's all about the power? The rook makes a sneak attack on the black king?"

"Nah. I wasn't heading for a checkmate. More or less just trying to get on the board."

They sit in silence for another few minutes.

Finally, Baz nods. "All right, then. This isn't a 'you win', but they said the decision was up to me, and I'm making a call."

Rhymer tenses, all his muscles going stiff. He tries to keep his voice casual, though. "So what's the verdict?"

Baz clears his throat. "First off, let me say that if you ever hurt a single one of them, I'll kill you. Wring your neck like a chicken and have your giblets in my gravy. Don't think I'm kidding, now. I mean every word I say."

Damned if Rhymer doesn't want to get up and shuffle out a dance right there on the sidewalk. "I'm in?"

"Not in as such. We don't half know you, and even with a group like us there's got to be some sort of courtship. But they figure you're worth a try to see how we run together."

That tempers Rhymer's excitement a bit. "And you? What's your take on the situation?"

"If you asked me last evening, I'd have said hell, no." Baz drains his soda and puts the can on the pavement. He folds his hands under his chin. "I've had a while to think, though. Fairly sleepless night, as you might have guessed. I still don't get you, Rhymer. But I'm willing to try and see what happens."

"Are you?" Rhymer turns to face Baz. He has to get a good look at the man's face. "It's not just Marcus I want, you know, even if I did test those particular waters first. I want all of you, from the tall to the small, and that includes yourself. You gonna give me a fair shake?"

"I'd like to shake you down and see what falls out." Baz sighs. It's not an entirely unhappy sound. Matter of fact, seems like he's getting a bit of his old accustomed zing back. "I didn't count on someone like you. Don't think any of us did, for that matter. But here you are, and there we stand. The front's united. We'll see where it goes from here."

"Yeah?"

Baz nods. "Yeah." He hesitates, then gives a shrug and reaches out. "Might as well start you off right. Come here."

Rhymer falls right into the kiss that Baz offers, parting his lips under the man's assault. It's just the way he expected. Baz kisses like the feel of another person's mouth is water in the desert; he's thirsty and he's eager, even if he has his reservations about the canteen.

The kiss goes on long enough that Rhymer takes the initiative to run his hand up through the short blond locks on the back of Baz's head. Baz makes a small noise and rotates his chin, tangling his own fingers in Rhymer's overgrown mop.

When their lips part, Baz's eyes are alight with an odd sort of glow, one Rhymer can't quite figure out.

He has a feeling it's gonna be fun finding out, though.

"Come on," Baz says simply, reaching for Rhymer's hand. "Grab your guitar and follow me downstairs. Everyone's awake, and they'll be waiting on us."

"What happens next?" Rhymer wants to know.

"Hell if I know. One step at a time, that's how we go." Baz lets go and stands up, impatiently waiting. "You coming or not?"

Rhymer grins. He takes hold of the handle on his guitar case and gets to his feet, eager to follow where Baz might lead.

"Marcus is gonna bitch no matter what," Baz remarks casually. "We just went and bought a bed sized for five. I don't know, though. Could be room for one more." He glances over his shoulder, a wicked look that Rhymer recognizes as pure blood kin to his own grin. "Come and find out."

And Rhymer goes, a song in his heart.

He's made it past the gates, and he's sure that what lies inside is gonna be one hell of an adventure.