

Fantasies

volume III

six tales of homoerotic romance by ...

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Jamie Hill

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Phaze

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Phaze Fantasies, Vol. III
by J Buchanan, Jade Falconer, Eliza Gayle

Fantasies III

Six Tales of Homoerotic Fiction

by

James Buchanan, Jade Falconer,

Eliza Gayle, Jamie Hill,

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Phaze

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Mask

by James Buchanan

Also by James Buchanan

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Martín lay on his back under the cottonwoods. Straddling his hips, Hector reached towards the clouds and stretched. Every nerve in Martín's body awoke with the movement. A cloudless azure sky danced above the leaves behind Hector's head as the sun baked their bodies. If you looked too long into the distance, earth and sky would shimmer, melt into each other.

With eyes of burled mahogany, Hector stared down at Martín. Hector's shiny black bangs fell damp about his face, his lips parted just so, drinking in the dust. The rough wool from the serape beneath Martín's back was so different from the soft plane of Hector's pale skin. Both drove his senses as he ran his fingers up Hector's sweat-slick chest. He marveled at the differences between them: rough hands on smooth flesh, his fingers so dark against Hector's body.

"*Mi Corazón*," Hector drew his thumb across Martín's cheek. Trembling, Martín turned into the touch to kiss his palm. "Don't ever leave me."

How could Hector ever think such a thing? Martín laughed, "I cannot leave you." Thick heat sucked the marrow from their bones. The buzz of the cicadas thrummed in time with his heart. He lifted his hips, their pricks sliding against each other, satin flesh rubbing satin flesh. Both men swallowed their moans.

"You could." Hector shifted, rubbing their naked thighs together. Such gentle contact was both heaven and hell. "I wouldn't stop you."

Whispering the words against Hector's burning hand, Martín breathed, "My soul would wither and die if I left you."

Hector Aritza was so handsome, so special, and his. The blood of Spanish kings ran through Hector's veins. Royal blood was in Martín's heritage, too. His grandmother was the daughter of an Apache war chief who'd been taken as captive by Hector's grandfather. *Don* Sebastian Aritza Guerrero would roll in his grave if he could see his heir on his knees for the son of a *mestizo* slave: no matter that Martín might carry *Don* Sebastian's blood as well. Sinful, wrong, and so good: when they were boys it was just playing. But now, now they shared each other as lovers, as men.

Bending down, Hector's cock slid against Martín's own throbbing length. Two pricks trapped between slick skin and each other, in Martín's mind the contact neared perfection. He pulled Hector closer and sought his lips. Lingering hints of salt tickled Martín's tongue. The gentle kiss soon turned hard and needful as Hector rocked his hips. Hector's touch churned fire in Martín's own cock. Simple, but so good this way, even if they had to be quick today.

Hector shivered despite the heat, pressing his forehead into the hollow of Martín's throat. "*Corazón! Corazón!*" Hector chanted.

Martín never tired of hearing those words; he would go to the ends of the earth to hear that whispered in his ear. It was true. Their hearts, locked together since childhood, belonged to each other. Martín thrust hard against Hector's belly. His hands sought out every of inch of the lean hard body, running fire up his own arms. Long ago, Martín memorized the

hollows, ridges, and scars that made up the map of *his* Hector.

Martín added his own voice to that of his lover. "*Te adoro!*" He treasured Hector beyond reason. Time and again their pricks rubbed each other. The world faded, blurred at the edges, centering only on Hector and how he moved in Martín's arms. Hector gasped. He shook and then slick heat flooded across Martín's stomach.

Martín's swollen cock ached. He longed to be inside his lover and bring him to shudders again. Instead, he grabbed Hector's hips, grinding himself into the sticky juices cooling between them. Laughing, Hector reared back just enough to stare into Martín's eyes. Lust, satisfaction, and love all poured through the gaze. Martín managed to gasp, "Hector!" before he was carried up and over into ecstasy.

Hector collapsed, still chuckling, against him. "*Te amo, Martín.*" *I love you!* Every time Hector said it, Martín's heart danced like the first time. "Stay with me."

"Always." Martín swept his fingers across Hector's shoulder, making the other man twitch. "I was given to you as a boy, and you give yourself to me now." He smiled to take the sting out of the words. "I could never leave you."

"I gave you your freedom." Hector rolled off Martín's frame and onto his back. For a moment he stared up at the endless sky. Then slowly his eyes drifted shut.

Playing in the slick shine sparkling on Hector's skin, Martín teased, "And bound me to you forever." It earned him a soft, drowsy laugh. "*Don Aritza*, you are not allowed to fall asleep on me."

"Why not?"

Martín hated to remind them both of why. "Because," scrambling to his knees and then gaining his feet, he snorted, "your betrothed will arrive from Monterey any day now and you must be close at hand when she does."

"I don't want to be married." Hector sat up with a groan and ran his hand through his short cropped hair. The sun twisted strands of silver and gold into the locks as they fell into place. He glared up at Martín. "I don't know this woman except by a miniature painting and a few stilted letters."

Digging their clothes from a tangled pile, Martín tossed Hector his pants before hopping into his own. "Your father took great pains to arrange this marriage before he died. You should count yourself lucky to wed a Frenchwoman with ties to the Emperor."

Still sitting, Hector struggled into his tight britches. "I don't count myself lucky at all." His next words were muffled by his shirt as he drew it over his head. "I would rather just be with you."

There was no serviceable reply to that. Instead, Martín concentrated on finishing dressing. Drab trousers, shirt, and vest all were better than most men could afford. Martín finished stamping into worn boots before snagging his rifle from the ground.

When he turned, Martín almost lost his breath at the sight of his lover. One day he might be inured to the view, but thankfully not yet.

Hector fumbled with the last button on his short cropped, shell coat as he stood up. The deep green fabric accented

warm brown eyes. Every angle and plane of his sharp frame was cast into relief by the cut of his tight clothes. His secretive smile, when he caught Martín staring, caused the man's heart to buck in his chest. Hector sauntered over, slapping the dust from his broad brimmed hat. "You know," he slid his arm about Martín's waist, "you will always be my true love."

"And you mine." Martín reveled in the touch. "But you must act like a proper gentleman, *Don Aritza*, and be married whether you like it or not. I have the luxury of staying a bachelor if I choose." They stood together for a moment. Neither wanted it to end. Still, Martín always knew things could not stay as they had been forever. Life demanded other things from them. "We both understood this would happen someday."

Hector pulled him in tight. "I understood, but didn't want to believe." Then, with a deep sigh, Hector turned toward his horse, pulling Martín along by the grip around his middle. As they passed, Martín grabbed the blanket from the ground and tossed it across his shoulder.

Fiel, bay coat shimmering in the sun, whickered a greeting to both men. Reluctantly, Martín disengaged himself from Hector's grip. He loosed the reins tethering the horse to a scraggly Mesquite bush while Hector swung up into the saddle. Passing the reins to the mounted man, Martín grabbed Hector's outstretched left hand with his own. His foot supported by his lover's gave him some purchase. With a grunt Martín swung up behind the other man.

"Home, then?" Hector shot the question over his shoulder.

Martín didn't answer, as the query didn't require one. He tightened his arms around Hector's middle when he heard the "Heya!" Fiel surged beneath their legs.

Horses always ran faster when headed towards their manger, and Fiel was no exception. A wild ride through the *bosque* brought them to the edge of town where Hector reined him back to fast walk. Not more than a single lane, bordered by loose rock paths, drifted through the pueblo. Whitewashed adobes faced a *zocalo* filled with scraggly trees and beaten dirt. Holding tight to Hector's waist, they bounced through at a decent clip. When they hit the edge of the small cluster of buildings, Hector spurred the bay into a gallop, heading for home.

Stands of knife leafed agaves wove among saguaro and prickly-pear. Cactus ringed the perimeter of the *hacienda*, its red clay roof visible as the horse made a rise in the road. It kept all but the most determined marauder out. That, and the thick adobe wall with its broad grease wood gate and broken glass set into the top. Normally, the gates would be shut tight, only a little inset door left open for callers. Today, however, the entry stood open.

Rocks dropped one by one into Martín's stomach. That could only mean one thing. Even Fiel sensed it and, snorting, broke the pace himself. Slowing to a walk, they entered the *hacienda* courtyard.

As Hector reined their mount to a stop, Martín slid from the back of the animal, adjusting his vest and stamping tight-legged trousers back over his boot tops. He stepped aside as Hector swung out of the saddle and jumped to the ground.

When standing together people joked they could hardly tell the men apart, although Hector's fair skin had not been browned by working in the sun, and he cropped his hair short as was the style among important men. Martín carried a few years that the Don did not. But their smiles and the light in their eyes hinted at an unspoken shared lineage.

A young boy, his loose white pants and open shirt billowing, ran to grab the bridle and led Fiel off to the stable. Martín tousled the boy's black hair as he passed, heading toward the crowd that had gathered around the perimeter of the courtyard. Under the eaves of the outdoor kitchen, women in Indian blanket skirts, calico tops, and shawls thrown over their heads whispered to each other as they shushed their babies with bounces. Their husbands stood off in tight knots, trying not to look interested. At the center of their attention a carriage rested, its sides covered in tan dust, and a team of horses stood lathered from their pull. In front of that a woman they'd all been waiting months to catch a glimpse of paced. In her wake trailed a dowdy, older matron, fussing and fretting like a mother hen.

Fine, embroidered linen covered the young woman's head and draped about her shoulders. A fringe of ginger curls framed her high forehead. The traveling dress she wore was a demure dark brown, with a high collar for modesty and a cinched waist. Her face could have been beautiful if her expression had not been half so haughty. Lolita Moreau, the soon to be mistress of the *hacienda*, surveyed her tiny fiefdom as though the peasants might crawl forth and bite

her. She snapped a command and her attendant jerked as though whipped.

Off to one side another woman watched. *Doña* Aritza, Hector's mother, pursed her lips and seemed to be almost in prayer. When she caught sight of Hector and Martín an honest smile broke over her face. *Señora* Aritza gathered her skirts and headed across the small court toward her son.

"Hector," Martín hissed out of the side of his mouth, "that's your bride?" It was both a question and a show of sympathy. They could only hope the long trip soured her and that it was not her normal disposition.

Hector swallowed. "The painting made her prettier."

"Artists will do that." He nodded, fussing with the scarf at his neck. "If she didn't seem like such a shrew she might fit the image."

With a sigh, Hector held out his hands for his mother, cupping her frail fingers into his palms. "I see the *Señorita* arrived safely." His tone indicated he rather wished she hadn't.

"*Sí, mi'jo*, she is here." *Señora* Aritza's voice echoed agreement with her son's. After a heavy pause, she continued. "Come, let me introduce you." Turning, she led them across the yard, her arm laced through Hector's, Martín following a respectful distance behind.

At their approach, *Doña* Lolita looked up and smiled. Martín shook off a vision of too many teeth, and reminded himself that Hector was liable to incite smiles in almost anyone. However, when the lady caught sight of Martín standing behind Hector, her dark eyes narrowed and her lips

went tight. Apparently, she was not overly fond of the common Mexican. With a final glare in his general direction, *Doña Lolita* gave her attention back to *Señora Aritza*.

"My dear," the *Señora* began, pushing her son slightly forward, "my son, Hector Luz Aritza."

Hector dropped his eyes and stared at his boots. "*Muy amable, Señorita*. Welcome, I trust your journey was pleasant?"

"Is that any way for a groom to greet his future bride?" The words poured forth like rancid honey. "Staring at the dirt and unwilling to look her in the eye?"

Hector snorted and looked up. "No, you are correct." Turning slightly to catch Martín's eye, Hector raised his eyebrows in question. Martín shrugged. He did not like this woman. It went beyond her demeanor. It went beyond the irrational resentment he had for her ... no woman could take Hector from him. Still, something cold slithered down his spine each time she breathed. For a moment the men held each other's gazes: Martín tried to cover his unease and Hector seemed to offer reassurance. Both broke the link at near the same time. Hector's smile tightened as he returned his attention to his bride-to-be. "Welcome to your new home. I hope you will be happy here."

Ignoring the pleasantries, Lolita called, "*Tante!*" Fingers curled, almost pulling the older woman towards her as with strings, "bring me the gift."

"Gift?" Startled, Hector shifted. His mother patted his arm. Martín stood, suspicion gnawing at his insides.

The wedding gifts had been exchanged months before between the families. Again he shrugged the unquiet off. It was not out of the ordinary for small presents to be exchanged between betrothed. He should have thought to have one prepared in this event. Such things went with his duties as Hector's *mayordomo y compañero*. Fingering the small, etched coin hung about his neck on a cord, Martín's brain scrambled for an answer. Hector gave him the trinket years ago as a token of his love. Absently, Martín's fingers traced the pattern of a hand holding a heart carved into the surface of the metal.

Ah, well, they hadn't known exactly when the *Señorita* would arrive. Martín would insure they procured something appropriate before dinner; maybe the crucifix which had belonged to Hector's great-grandmother might be proper.

A soft snick jerked Martín's attention back. The *Señorita* held the lapel of Hector's jacket with one thin hand. In the other she held a broach, with the pin back sprung. Two open witches' hearts, their tails turned to the left, were crowned in gold. Garnets glittered red. Lolita smiled and leaned in to pin the charm.

"Aye!" Hector jumped back, hand on his chest. Martín stepped to his side, glaring at the woman.

Fox-like eyes narrowed, Lolita stood and watched as a single drop of blood fell from the tip of the pin. Her gaze tracked it as it tumbled to the earth. Then she looked up. "How clumsy of me," she purred, "to stick my husband like that. I must be tired." She folded her hand over the broach. "Perhaps someone could show me to my room."

Hector was the first to respond. "Of course, *Señorita*, I will show you to your apartments." His voice seemed thick to Martín's ears, like he was speaking with a mouth full of molasses. Offering her his arm, Hector glanced at Martín. Maple eyes grew cloudy, then Hector blinked and Martín thought he must have imagined it. Slowly Hector turned and led his bride to be into the *hacienda*. Martín, the *Señora* and finally the woman called *Tante*, drifted in their wake.

The house had been built by Hector's great grandfather. It was a grand structure: two stories with several bedrooms, a large kitchen, dining hall, and long corridors leading to storage rooms and closets. By the sour look on the *Señorita's* face, Martín could tell she was far from impressed. True, it wasn't the scale of some homes in the capitol, but still the *hacienda* had been well furnished. They passed by a life-sized portrait of Virgin and Child and Lolita snorted derisively. Martín always liked that painting.

"Please, *Señorita*," Hector paused at the foot of a flight of narrow stairs and shook his head, "I am not feeling too well. If you will forgive me, my mother will show you to your room." The stairway led to the second floor and a comfortable drawing room. Hector's apartments, as the master of the house, were upstairs as well.

She smiled again. If her lips stretched any farther, the corners would touch her ears. "Of course, my husband." Martín shuddered at the sickly-sweet voice. "I would not wish you to be unwell."

Hector nodded and put his foot on the tread. He seemed to slump for a moment. Martín jumped to his side. "*Compañero*, please, let me help you."

As Hector turned, his eyes clouded over again. Swallowing, he seemed almost unsure as to why Martín was at his side. Then he blinked. "Of course, you're my servant."

Even Hector's mother started at that. "*M'ijo*, you must be ill." The back of her hand pressed against his cheek, the *Señora* considered her son. Finally, she shook her head. "Martín, take him and put him to bed." She waved them towards the upper floors. "I will take the *Señorita* to her quarters and then we shall plan the *fiesta* to introduce her to the *pueblo*."

Ushering Hector into his room, Martín studied his friend closely. Pale, more so than normal, and drawn, every step he took seemed to weigh him down. Maybe sun stroke? Playing outdoors, in the heat, like they had ... Martín chided himself for being so careless of Hector. "Come on, I think you need to lie down for a bit and sleep. There is a fever in the valley. I would not want you to be laid low by that."

"No," Hector shivered despite the heat. Shucking his jacket before slumping into a well worn chair, he draped his arms over the rests. "I am just cold inside and a little tired."

"Should I," Martín knelt at Hector's feet, his hand resting on a rangy leg, "warm you up?" With a smile he pulled off Hector's boots. "We can't have you being cold, can we?"

Martín earned a laugh for that. The old Hector broke the surface with a wicked grin. "Depends on how you intend to warm me up."

"You're coming down with *la gripa* and you want me to warm you up?" Martín chided. Teasing like this reminded Martín of their first times together ... pretending the touches and kisses didn't matter when they were everything to both of them. His hands slid up Hector's legs, bringing him in close. Sun and dust couldn't quite cloak the spicy scent of his lover as he drew near. There were so much better ways of taking Hector's temperature. Martín pressed his lips to Hector's mouth, savoring the taste. Warm and strong and perfect. As he tugged the tail of Hector's shirt from his trousers, Martín whispered into the kiss, "Feed a fever, fuck a cold?"

Hector pulled back, snorting his laughter, and stared into Martín's eyes. "I think it was just a shock to finally see *that* woman." Hector confided before reaching out and brushing the thick, black hair from Martín's face. Martín wore it long, like his forefathers before him. It served to remind him of his heritage. Ever so gently, Hector's thumb ran over Martín's sharp cheek. "You don't like her?" He mused while his hand drifted down to tug free the wood buttons of Martín's vest.

"I have no reason to hate her." Not quite the truth, but it didn't serve any purpose to say how much he already loathed the woman.

Martín shivered as Hector's hand slid under the cloth and slipped it off his shoulders. "But you don't like her." Hector leaned forward and brushed Martín's lips with his own. They burned Martín's skin with their heat.

"No, I don't like her." Martín stood, pulling Hector up with him. "But, I love you."

As he walked them back toward the bed, Martín slipped his own shirt off over his head. Hector worked the fastenings of Martín's pants. When his knees hit the bed, Martín fell back onto the down mattress and kicked off his boots while slithering out of his pants. The whole time he watched Hector tug each button loose on his trousers. Inch by inch, that beautiful strong body came into Martín's view. Martín's cock ached at the sight of Hector's prick straining hard between his legs.

He held out his hand for Hector. "Come here." When Hector took it he pulled his lover down to the mattress with him. "Let me warm you up." No matter how many times Hector gave in and came to him, Martín was still amazed. *How could someone so wonderful, so privileged and so handsome want to be mine?* He'd died the death of a thousand angels the first time Hector said yes to him.

Hector wrapped his hand around Martín's hungry shaft, "I've already warmed you up, I see." As Hector moved to kiss him, Martín let his own fingers play along Hector's length. Solid and hot in his hand, such a nice contrast to the warm soft lips devouring his own. He let himself drift in the wonderful taste of Hector's kiss. His fingers fluttered over Hector's skin like doves' wings. Hesitant, not quite touches, from Hector's hands burned through Martín. No one, man or woman, could ever destroy this.

Finally, it was Hector who pulled back. He rolled away from Martín, fumbling under the edge of the mattress for the little jar of unguent they kept stashed under the bed. Martín followed his movement, running his hands over his lover's

pale shoulders. "Sí, you have." With a laugh he snatched the jar from Hector's fingers. "I think I need that."

"Really?" Head lazying over, Hector offered up a sly smile. "And just what do you propose doing with that, *Señor*?"

Pausing, Martín chuckled. "Maybe," two fingers swept through the rendered oil. Then he teased Hector's hole with the slick digits, "...something like this."

The touches earned him a satisfied hiss. "Sí, something like that." He bucked against Martín's hand. Fingers exploring the sensual heat of Hector's body, Martín sucked on the hollow of a sharp collar. When he hit *just there* Hector jerked against him. He did it again just to feel his lover shudder. Hector rocked his hips, his breath coming in short gasps.

Nothing ever compared to this feeling, how much they belonged together. Years it had taken him to memorize this body. A look could send Martín's pulse racing. He was so ready for Hector ... he was always ready for Hector. By the feel of it, Hector was ready for him. Martín groaned and withdrew his fingers. Then he slid his hard cock between Hector's legs to replace them.

Left leg thrown over Martín's hip, Hector moved against him. Gently he pushed inside, hissing as Hector's body accepted his. Tight muscle kept the pace measured. Each thrust gained an inch of heat. They sighed in unison as Martín slipped deeper and deeper. Oh so slowly, Martín buried his prick deep inside Hector's ass. Finally, he stilled. Martín savored how their bodies joined. He couldn't believe how wonderful it was to be wrapped in the silken velvet of Hector's tight body.

Each time they made love hit him as hard as the first.

Always the impatient one, it was Hector who first started to move again. Shivers crawled through Martín's belly. He reached over and took Hector's thick cock in his hand. As Martín stroked his hot prick, Hector arched up against him and moaned. Every muscle tightened. They rocked together, the slow start building to a frantic pace.

Hector writhed against him. One hand steadied them with a death grip on the headboard, the other reached back and dug into Martín's hip. Pain melded with fire building in the pit of his stomach. A warm glow filled every inch of him and then seeped into his prick. The pleasure neared unbearable. Hector shook and panted out "Martín!" The tremors wracking his body sent shock waves through Martín.

With a shout, Hector came. White hot cum bubbled over Martín's fist. Velvet convulsions sucked his prick. Unable to hold back, and babbling his love, Martín rammed Hector's hole. He came hard and hot, drowning in the heat pouring from him and filling his lover.

Sated, Martín wrapped his arms about Hector's chest. Hector took one hand in his own and pulled Martín's palm to his lips. "*Corazón.*" Licking each finger clean of the thick juice, Hector reassured him. "Give it a few days. I'm certain we will both find something charitable to say about my bride."

Why did he have to bring that up at this moment? With a sigh, Martín ran his tongue along the margin of his lover's ear. "If you insist, I will try."

"I insist," Hector turned and smiled, "that you at least try." Then he snuggled into Martín's embrace. Martín drifted to

sleep thinking on how wonderful it was to have Hector as his own.

Three days of trying, and Martín discovered that he had yet to determine anything charitable he could say about her. *Señorita* Lolita belittled and insulted them all at the smallest occasion. The woman did not know the meaning of either *thank you* or *please*. From the moment she woke until late into the night her demands flew.

Martín long since gave up the illusion that she would ever speak to him at below a scream.

The entire *hacienda* vibrated with her haughty and overbearing complaints. The betrothal party already smelled of disaster. It must be a masque ... because everyone in Mexico City had masques these days. She would die if there was no waltzing as she so dearly loved the waltz. And none of that peasant food should be served; Cook must learn to prepare what real people ate. Nothing pleased her.

Long fading in health, *Señora* Aritza took to her bed shortly after the new mistress' arrival. Whispers from the servants said it was because Lolita drove Hector's mother to fits ridiculing her son and his provincial ways. The only hint of compassion exhibited by the *Señorita* was giving her maid over to care for *Señora* Aritza. Beyond that small act, Lolita's humanity disappeared.

The *Señorita* ran them all ragged with her demands for perfection. Not even her husband-to-be was spared from her temper. Lolita's acid tongue bit into him at any opportunity. Martín mused on how things had turned as he walked through the *hacienda* on yet another endless errand. As he passed the

stables, Fiel threw his nose over the stable door and whickered. Martín stopped to scratch his nose. Even poor Fiel sensed something amiss with their master.

Hector withdrew from the world. He spent his days in the study looking out the window. Nothing Martín did could rouse him. The last time they'd even touched had been the afternoon of the *Señorita's* arrival. It so worried Martín that he'd sent for the visiting American doctor. After examining Hector, he'd diagnosed the *Don* with lethargy and left a few patent medicines which smelled like poison. Martín tossed the bottles after showing the man the door.

A pair of excited and angry voices broke through Martín's reflections. With a final pat for the horse, Martín headed to investigate. Maria and her daughter, Ana, stood at the back of the main house complaining ... loudly. Both women wore identical expressions of disgust. The tail of the conversation drifted toward Martín as he approached.

"...think that she can come into this house and set the world on its ear!" Ana's strident voice cut down Martín's spine.

"Just because she's," Maria drew out the pronoun like it tasted bad, "been to the capitol—"

"*Señoras!*" The word echoed sharp with rebuke. No matter that they all despised their new mistress, they should not complain publicly about her. "Do you not have work to do?"

Ana turned on him, her expression sour. "The *Señorita* dismissed us after we brought her a bath," she said. The girl drew herself up, mimicking one of Lolita's already well worn poses, "We were too coarse to attend such a fine person as

she." At that both women spit on the ground. "Do something about her."

Martín sighed. Hector, not Martín, needed to have a word with his bride. Putting the household in chaos and treating the servants like slaves did nothing but foster resentment. Perhaps such things were acceptable in the capitol. Here, on the margins of the country, it could get you killed. With Hector ill, however, Martín was the *hacienda's* leader. Everyone understood if it came from Martín's mouth, it was Hector's will.

Everyone, except their new mistress.

Shaking his head, Martín resigned himself to another verbal beating. At least she'd not raised a hand to anyone yet. Frustrated, he blew out his breath with a huff. "I will see what I can do." The promise was nowhere near as empty as Martín felt trudging toward the *Señorita's* rooms. Another of her seemingly endless demands ... her apartments must be as far from the noise of the common household as possible. At least that gave Martín some hope. If he were lucky, after the marriage, the *Señorita* would keep the small guest quarters for her own. Then he would have the *hacienda*, and Hector, to himself.

Gently he rapped on the outer entrance. No answer. Martín pushed open the door and slid into the first room. No one stirred. Quiet, because it was his habit, Martín moved toward the *Señorita's* sleeping room. Silence swallowed him. Slightly ajar, the doorway beckoned. He knew he shouldn't spy on his mistress. But this was the woman who was to share his

lover's life. Screwing up his resolve and beating down his reservations, Martín peaked through the gap.

Back to the door, the *Señorita* seemed oblivious to his presence. *Doña* Lolita sat on a wooden bench in front of a steaming tub of water, humming to herself. Chemise pulled up around her waist. Lolita slid tiny hands down her leg and grabbed just below her right knee. With a twist and a grunt the *Señorita's* leg broke loose from her body. Martín's heart froze. Brushing a bit of dirt from the limb, Lolita plunged it into the water. The contents of the tub hissed and bubbled. Great clouds of steam rose. They stank of sulfur.

Martín strangled a scream in his throat.

Iron spikes of fear nailed him to the floor. Terrified, Martín could do little more than watch, as first her legs, then arms, were bathed in the same fashion. When she reached up and took her face in her hands, horror of what was to come crawled through his insides.

With a long, sucking pop she lifted her head from her shoulders and set it on the bench beside her. Blind hands fumbled for the comb at her side. Tenderly, her body began to brush the fiery mane. Blood red lips drifted into a smile and her bilious green eyes drifted open. Their poison stare locked on Martín's soul. "You!" she hissed.

That broke his stupor. Screaming, Martín fled.

Shaken, Martín hid in the stable, leaning against Fiel for support. Somehow, the bulk and muscle of the big bay comforted him. A horse was an ordinary, living animal and that touch of normalcy allowed him to think. Who would believe him? Whom could he tell?

There was only one person he could tell. Martín set off in search of Hector.

Late in the afternoon, he found his lover returned to his apartments on the second floor. Martín had searched the entire *hacienda* at least twice before without luck. Hector rose from the great wing back chair as Martín stumbled through the door without permission. He slammed the wood behind him and stood for a moment, trying to still the pounding of his heart.

Unable to form a coherent thought, Martín blurted, "She's a witch!" He couldn't believe he'd started like that. "Your bride-to-be *es una bruja*."

"I know she is unpleasant," Hector rubbed his chest above his heart, "but it's hardly right that you call her a witch. Come, sit down, you're upset." Gesturing to the chair he just vacated, Hector indicated Martín should sit. When Martín didn't move, Hector approached and took his elbow. Gently, Hector guided him to the chair. He pushed Martín into the cushion before perching on the edge of one arm. "Did you fall off your horse? Did something startle you?" Concern and something else warred under Hector's tone.

"No, I saw something, something horrible." Martín wished he had a drink. A very strong drink would help his nerves. Still, he needed to get it out before he collapsed. "*Señorita Lolita* is not human."

Hector laughed and pulled Martín against his chest. Kissing the top of his head and then his ear, Hector whispered. "You're jealous." Jealous ... Martín was anything but jealous at that point. Scared witless, he could admit to that. Ready to

run screaming to the hills fit his mood. Jealous was so far off the mark as to be almost funny. Oblivious, Hector continued. "I knew this would happen. There's nothing for you to be jealous of."

"Hector," Martín grabbed his lover's face between his palms and pulled him down to stare into his eyes, "you must believe me."

"Shhhh, Martín." Hector kissed him. A little bit of the fear dissolved into the touch. "You're upset about the marriage." Sliding off the chair and onto his knees, he knelt before Martín. Then he moved to nuzzle Martín's neck. Slow and easy, Hector's hands undid his trousers. "You should not let it worry you, things will be fine." His lover pulled back and offered a wicked smile. "I know what will calm you down."

"Hector!" Martín jumped as Hector pulled his soft cock free. One of the farthest things on his mind at that moment was sex. But when Hector began to slide his flesh between his strong fingers, Martín's body betrayed his mind. He'd missed that grip so much. Martín covered his mouth with his hand. Even if he didn't want to ... Hector would certainly calm him down like this. Maybe, when Hector was not distracted by his own lustful thoughts, Martín could make him understand.

And the touch felt divine, especially days after not having him. Slowly, Hector stroked him to hardness. Those nimble fingers worked up his prick, driving chills under Martín's thighs. He shook under the attention and rocked his hips into the caress. When Martín was aching, Hector pushed his knees wide and bent forward. Martín's cock reared up, begging for the touch of Hector's mouth.

Hector blew across the head of Martín's prick and he quivered at the butterfly sensation on such a sensitive area. Following that, Hector fluttered his tongue over the very apex. A glittering bead of moisture formed at the tip of Martín's prick. Hector licked it off and ran it across his lips, as though savoring the taste. Then he circled just under the head where Martín's foreskin stretched taught. Between that, and Hector's left hand squeezing his sack, massaging his balls, Martín thought he would die. "Hector." He hissed. Martín could barely manage more.

Martín slid his fingers through Hector's hair until he cupped the back of Hector's skull. Trying not to dig too hard, Martín urged Hector on with his grip. Hector reached back and seized his wrist. Without stopping the sucking, licking, and kissing, he pulled Martín's hand away and pinned it against the arm of the chair.

Tongue dancing over the veins, Hector started at the base and worked his way up. When he reached the tip, he slid his tongue in the slit and laughed. "Do you like it?"

"Are you mad?" Martín groaned, "Of course I like it."

"*Bien, amigo.*" With a grin, Hector resumed licking. The touches were tentative and gentle. It didn't take long for him to have Martín writhing in the chair. Each time Hector reached the tip, Martín tried to angle into his mouth. Hector allowed just the smallest bit of his head between his lips before backing off and resuming licks. The heat of his lover's mouth shot shivers down Martín's spine.

After what seemed like eons of the blissful torture, Hector wrapped his lips over the crown, drawing it into his mouth.

His tongue danced over the tip and along the flared ridge. Fighting back the moan from the overwhelming sensations, Martín bit his lip. Hector sucked and teased until Martín shook then he backed away again, offering only tentative kisses on the tip. Again and again he took Martín to the edge and held him there. Finally, when Martín neared insensibility, Hector moved in earnest.

Deep, hard, and committed, Hector sucked his cock almost down to the root. Lithe fingers tickled his balls, and another finger slid into his ass. Martín gasped and shook. It always felt so incredible when Hector did that. Little circles massaged the perfect spot driving him past the point of rational thought.

Martín moaned long and hard. His cock swelled inside the inferno of Hector's mouth. Thighs burning, balls tingling, every muscle in his body went taut. Then ecstasy gushed forth between Hector's lips. As much as he gave, Hector took it. Finally, the shudders subsided and Martín dropped his head against the high back of the chair.

Rising, Hector smirked. He bent forward and kissed Martín, sliding his tongue between Martín's lips. His own flavor exploded inside Martín's mouth. Hardly willing to breathe, Martín licked and bit and tasted the skin under Hector's jaw. He worked his kisses down that pale throat. Never would he tire of the salty tang of Hector's skin.

Martín pushed his lover's shirt open so that his tongue could explore. Intending to work his way down that fine chest and stomach, Martín planned to bury himself in the taste of Hector. When the fabric gaped wide, he stopped. Just above Hector's heart, at the point where Lolita's pin had pricked

him, Hector's skin wept. The area swelled red, turning grey and shinny toward the center of the sore. Thoughts of further entertainment vanished at the sight of the wound.

"*Díos*," Eyes wide, Martín hissed. The lesion looked infected. The witch Lolita must have done it when she pricked him with the pin. "I'll send for Paloa Sebea," The local *curandera* would know how to treat such wounds ... far better than the useless American doctor. "She should look at that."

"No!" Hector snapped, pulling away. "Lolita's *Tante* has seen to it. She gave me a tincture to swab it with." Standing, he gestured towards a small bottle filled with viscose blue goo. "I don't want that *bruja*, Sebea, near me!"

Never before had Hector refused to be seen by Sebea. And he'd never called her a witch, either. Rising from the chair, he tried to touch Hector's face. His lover stepped away. "It pains me to see you ill. And you should have told me," Martín paused, embarrassed, "before we started."

"Why should it matter?" Hector waived off his concern. "It was just play on any account." The light, flippant tone in his voice dismissed everything they had ever done together.

Stunned, Martín jerked back. "Play?" It could not have stung more if Hector had slapped him.

"Yes, a boys' game." Hector laughed and walked toward his desk. "Lolita made me see it. She came to me earlier today and we talked. We have talked a lot these past days. She understands how we could need each other out here ... but she is right."

All Martín could manage was to drop back onto the cushions and stare. Finally he stuttered out, "About what?"

His heart ripped from his chest and pinned on *that woman's* sleeve. How could Hector be that cold?

"It is time to grow up." Fastening his collar, Hector shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Time for you to go out into the world. I've held you here too long." He plucked a folded set of papers from the desktop and held them up. Smiling as though he were offering Martín a present, he tossed the sheaf onto Martín's lap. A blue ribbon, sealed with wax imprinted by Hector's ring, bound the letters. "I have already co-signed the letter for you to take as introduction to the army. Lolita wrote it to her father's friend. She thinks you should leave soon, right after the *fiesta*, maybe sooner."

No, that couldn't be. Hector would never dismiss him. Forever together, they'd promised each other that. "What do you think?"

"She is my wife-to-be," Hector shrugged, "so I think she is right." Then he shouldered his jacket and moved to the door. Almost absently Hector stared at Martín. A vacant smile blew across Hector's otherwise indifferent visage. "Take care, *compadre*." At that he was gone and the world folded in on Martín.

Several times he tried to plead his case. Whenever Martín tried to approach Hector to change his mind, either Lolita or her servant intervened. No amount of begging turned his mind. She had completely and utterly bewitched him. No other explanation served.

On the night before the *fiesta*, Martín sat morosely in his lonely room surrounded by the few bundles he would take. On Lolita's orders servants packed Hector's old clothes for him.

Fiel waited in the stables. Hector's favorite horse, his favorite shirts, and his *favorite* cast off for that thing. Martín fumed.

The thought of the witch Lolita dancing with his Hector after they announced the betrothal was almost more than Martín could bear. If he could find a costume and mask, he could sneak, unrecognized, into the ball. Then he could mingle with the other guests. At midnight, when such things held power, the masks would be thrown off. Hector would see his lover standing at his side and remember that it was Martín to whom he had given his heart.

He understood he required something more than that. One thing Martín knew to be true, if you fight a witch ... you must fight her with magic. Who, but a *bruja*, could cure a headache by passing an egg across a man's forehead or cause one by burying needles in the ground? Illnesses produced by spitting invisible darts were vanquished by striking the patient's shadow with a broom. Bad magic could only be countered with good.

Only one witch in the pueblo possessed the knowledge needed: Paloa Sebea. He shouldered the bag with Hector's clothes and slipped to the stables. Saddling the bay, Martín heard soft footsteps behind him. He turned. *Tante* stood in the doorway.

"Leaving so soon?" The question undulated like a snake between her lips.

"Your mistress," Martín gave the cinch a final jerk, before leading the horse from his stall, "wishes me gone." *Tante's* hot glare burned through him as he passed her. "I thought I might oblige her."

"Good," she hissed, "*vaya con Díos, Señor*. You will need God's protection." Her laugh followed him across the courtyard.

It was already well past midnight when Martín began his lonely ride toward town. Fiel danced, skittish, along the dark road. A hollow yellow moon hardly lit the dirt path ahead. It meandered between stands of cacti, switching back on itself innumerable times. No matter how often Martín visited the witch, he never seemed to remember exactly how he got there. As they trotted along, it seemed that someone followed. Martín would swear on the Virgin that another being shared their path. He reined in Fiel beneath the overhanging branches of an ancient cottonwood tree and listened.

From deep in the darkness a growl throbbed. It seemed to come from the shadows near the cottonwoods. Martín dismounted. Cautiously, he shouldered his rifle and waded through the rank roadside weeds.

Fiel snorted and stamped. Martín hissed at the horse to be quiet. Another snarl wound around him. Within the earth clutching roots of one of the giant trees, two eyes, hot and red as coals, gazed hungry at him. Martín strangled a cry and staggered back. The thing, sinewy and large burst from the margin of the woods. In his fear, Martín dropped the rifle.

He turned.

He ran.

With each step he felt the cold breath of the monster on his heels. Vaulting into the saddle, he spurred the horse on. Fiel needed little urging.

They tore along the road, howls driving them both near madness. Not a hundred yards along, an odd chill passed through Martín. Fiel screamed and stumbled as a heavy weight landed on his back. Martín tried desperately to stay horsed. Fetid miasma choked his lungs and hot, heavy air swam across his neck.

Fiel was in a near panic, snorting, bellowing and side stepping frantically. It was all Martín could do to control his mount. The weight behind him grew heavier. He heard a raspy, panting breath near his ear.

Fiel bucked. Martín fell, rolling along the earth into a ditch. Stunned, he rose to his knees and crawled back on all fours to the edge of the road. Terror stealing the breath from his lungs, he looked toward the middle of the path. A wild, hideous beast, filthy hair covering searing eyes and rat tail whipping the air straddled the bucking, leaping horse. Ghastly talons cut ribbons into Fiel's hide. It roared its frustration and leapt from the back of the horse. Huge bat like ears turned to the sound of Martín's breathing. The thing shrieked and in that voice Martín could hear all the tormented souls in hell.

Completely insane, Fiel still reared and plunged. The demon dropped to all fours and crept toward Martín. Locked in that feral gaze, he couldn't move. Then Fiel brayed. Hard, heavy hooves landed on the foul beast's back. The monster inched in the direction of the weeds and cover. Again and again, the horse pummeled the thing. Green-black blood sprayed Martín with each blow from the powerful horse. Finally it shuddered and lay still. Fiel minced away, still snorting.

Martín swallowed. After what seemed like an eternity of trying to remember how his lungs worked, Martín managed to stand. Screwing up his courage, he approached the thing. No movement answered his cautious steps. With the toe of his boot he pushed the creature onto its back. Dead eyes stared at the moon. That was enough for Martín. He scrambled onto Fiel's back. They were off before his feet even found the stirrups.

Shaking with exhaustion, mount and man made it to the witch's cottage. Martín slid from Fiel's back and staggered to the stoop of Paloa Sebea. Like any other house in the pueblo, adobe bricks made up its walls. Unlike other *casas*, something indefinable and menacing swirled about Sebea's abode. Before he could set his fist to the wood, the witch's door creaked open.

Momentarily blinded by the light within, Martín sputtered, "I need your help."

"Everyone who comes to me needs my help." A ragged voice echoed in his head.

Martín blinked and the world returned to focus. A young woman stood in the opening, her head draped with a strange shawl. Tattered strips dangled from its edges and odd symbols covered the expanse of the cloth. Dark and narrow eyes, hidden beneath sharply arched eyebrows, considered Martín. He swallowed. It was rumored that she once turned a man into a woman just by staring at him.

La Bruja looked into and through Martín. "You have come to the right person. I already know why you are here. You are worried that someone has bewitched your love." Martín

swallowed, nodding in confirmation. "*Bien*, I am a specialist in black magic," she hissed. "*La maldad negra* causes all illness, accidents, bad luck and even death." Turning she hobbled inside.

How one so young could seem so ancient boggled Martín. He hesitated. Reins held tight in his fist, he wondered what to do with Fiel. Somewhere, in the darkness, another creature might prowl. From deep in the night, Sebea's voice floated to him. "Do not worry about the horse. He is under my protection tonight. Make him comfortable and come inside." Martín swallowed. Then he did as commanded, removing saddle and bridle before stepping through the door.

The blackened walls swallowed the light of a dozen flickering candles. Flames jeweled off bottles filled with liquids of different colors—red, green, yellow, blue. Sebea stood at a rickety table. "With my prayers, I can take away the black evil." Considering the assortment, she chose a vile of amber slurry, uncorked it and sniffed. Seemingly pleased, she smiled at Martín. "I will unearth what has been buried in the graveyard by curses and send it away."

Martín ducked under amulets of bone and stone dangling from the rafters. As he neared, she poured the liquid into a black, iron bowl. "You have something your lover gave you?" It was less of a question and more of a statement.

"*Sí*," He slipped the charm over his neck. The coin caught the light, spinning stars onto the wall. When Sebea held out her hand, Martín dropped the trinket into her palm. With a bounce, she tested its weight and, satisfied by something, dropped it in the pot. The leather cord trailed over the edge.

Martín watched silently. More vile concoctions found their way into the mix. Every so often, Sebea would lean forward and study the brew. Then, using the thong to pull the coin around the bowl, she would churn the liquid.

Finally, she nodded in satisfaction. Wiping her hands on her skirt and offering a smile to Martín, Sebea moved from the table. Martín snuck a peek into the bowl. Its contents glowed a sickly green.

From a dark corner the witch pulled forth a package wrapped in brown-stained cloth. A thread, crusted black with blood, held the paper in place. "When I choose, I can also bring about the black evil, and cause great harm, even death," she whispered. As she spoke, her eyes grew hot like coals. Slowly she worked the cord loose and folded back the paper. As the paper dropped away, Sebea set a mask of reddened gold on the table among the other oddments.

Its broad forehead sloped down into sharp jowls; only the bottom lip and lower jaw of the wearer remained uncovered. "This is the mask of *Tezcatlipoca*, god of the smoking mirror." Large turquoise disks rested over each temple. Almond eye sockets sporting exaggerated raised eyebrows and separated by a hawk bridged nose gave the mask an almost shocked appearance. Lipless slivers of ivory formed the upper row of teeth.

After a moment, Martín swallowed. They weren't ivory slivers. They were men's teeth set into the mask. "Nothing hides from him. He knows and reveals the true soul of man." Only the eye lids and a square area from the middle of the eye sockets to the corner of the mouth remained smooth.

Otherwise, the surface was pebbled by tiny rubies and seed pearls set in elaborate swirls over the cheeks and brow.

Ugly in parts, as a whole the mask held a haunting beauty. Death and life danced across its surface. The effect drew Martín in and he reached to touch it. Sebea grabbed his hand. "The person who wears this shall have their true nature exposed to all. If the witch wears it, all will know."

Letting him free, Sebea reached over the bowl and selected a large egg. With a rusted iron nail, she pierced both ends then scrambled the contents. Handing it to Martín, she instructed, "Blow the contents into the bowl." As he leaned over and blew, the witch continued, "You have to claim your lover as your own again."

He glanced at the egg's former contents. The yolk ran thick and red in the bowl. Stomach rolling, he managed to ask her, "How am I to do that?"

"You will know when it is time." Again she pulled the token through the mix. "I will prepare the last of it. Go to the stream behind the *casa*, remove all your clothes, and bathe. Wash yourself three times while you say hail Marys. Then come back to me ... do not put on your old clothes. *Comprende?*"

Martín nodded his understanding and slipped out the back of the small house. A tiny brook clattered just behind the door. He shivered in the darkness of early morning. Shucking his plain clothes before he stepped into the water, Martín began to chant, "*Díos te salve, María, llena eres de gracia ...* " At that he plunged his head beneath the chill water. The next few lines were swept away by the water. Martín came up

sputtering, "*Madre de Díos, ruega por nosotros, pecadores, amen!*" Twice more he dropped his head into the water, scouring his body with his nails. Each time he sent another prayer to the Virgin.

Still wet from his dunk in the stream, Martín shivered and darted into the house. Sebea looked up and smiled with satisfaction, pointing to a small pallet in the corner. "Sleep," she ordered, "You will have much work to do this evening." Martín crawled beneath the blankets and even though he did not think it possible, his eyes grew heavy. As he drifted to sleep, Sebea's words comforted him. "I have much work to do now."

Midday sun shown through the windows when Martín woke. The witch still stood by the table, sealing the ends of the blown egg with wax. Beside him she had laid out a set of clothes. From within the bundle of Hector's things, she had chosen a fine linen shirt, the green shell jacket and matching trousers. A good pair of boots rested next to a tooled belt. Silver lined seams flashed in the late afternoon sun as he slid the clothes on his frame.

Noting that he was awake, the *bruja* stared with grim satisfaction. "You are almost done." She held out a small, bone handled stiletto. The sheath hung from the belt Martín buckled around his waist. "You know what you must do."

Martín swallowed as he took the knife. Wicked, sharp edges caught the light, turning the blade to blood. With a deep breath, Martín grabbed a length of his hair and sliced through it. Less resistance than butter met the blade. Slowly his boots were covered in hanks of thick, black hair. When all

the length lay scattered on the floor, Martín sheathed the stiletto in his belt.

He turned toward Sebea and she nodded in satisfaction. From the clutter on the table she produced a warped tin mirror. Shaking, Martín took it and held it to the light so that he could view his reflection. Hector's face, only a little darker, stared back at him.

"Good, good." Gathering the egg, the paper wrapped gold mask, and a soft leather one, she gave him final instructions. "The egg contains the essence of your heart. Break it over your lover and the evil will be cast out. You must find a way for the witch to put on the mask." She ushered him out the door to where Fiel stood waiting. "And the common mask shall hide you from their eyes ... but do not let anyone look too closely." Sunset tinged the sky gold and red. As he mounted, she reminded Martín again, "You know what you must do." Handing up the items, she reassured, "Do not be afraid, do not waiver in your tasks. It is the only way you will set your love free."

"I know." He smiled down at the witch. "I will do it." Then he turned Fiel towards home. Without any prompting the bay broke into a gallop. Within moments Sebea's house disappeared at their backs. Although Martín knew it was useless to look, he turned in the saddle. The road stretched as open before them as behind. When they passed the spot where Fiel killed the beast, only a slight darkness on the earth marked the previous night's battle. Fiel shied, dancing to the side of the road, before cantering off again.

Nearing the *hacienda*, Martín reined his mount back. Throngs of villagers, their costumes gay and masks ranging from simple cotton scarves to elaborate *papier-mâché* creations, moved along the road. Martín pulled the leather mask from his belt and tied it about his face.

Tonight the gates of the compound were thrown wide. Nearly all the people from the pueblo and surrounding lands came. None had been invited although all were expected to attend. As was custom, private entertainments would be held within the house for special guests. Outside the walls great pits held full steer turning on spits. The smoke and smell of roasting meat wafted over the crowd of revelers. Martín loosed Fiel into a makeshift corral constructed for the guests' mounts and then slipped beneath the gates with the crowd. He clutched the egg and package tightly to himself as he made his way toward the house. Although Martín knew many of the people, none recognized him and a few even called him *Don Aritza*. But when he stared at them, they would shake their heads in confusion and wander away.

Inside the court a tent, capable of holding almost a hundred people, held back the descending evening. Violins and guitars thrummed, accompanied by old women clapping their hands. Inside and outside was all movement and light. And dancing, everywhere there was dancing. Women stood upright, with their hands down by their sides. Faces as grave as funeral guests and eyes fixed upon the ground before them they floated over the makeshift dance floors. The hems of their dresses swept the ground in great circles. The men were

livelier. They danced with grace and spirit; circling, swaying about their nearly stationary partners.

A pretty young girl danced with her brother. A young man snuck behind her and tossed his hat directly upon her head where it fell down over her eyes. Quickly he disappeared into the crowd. She danced for some time with the hat on. Then, with a flourish, she tossed it off onto the ground. Shouts and cat-calls rose and the young man slunk out on the floor to retrieve it. If she'd kept it, and offered it back to him, the man would be her beau for the evening.

Young ladies amused themselves by breaking eggs filled with cologne or other essences upon the gallants. The girls hid a great number of these in the folds of their dresses. When the favorite's back was turned, a *señorita* would sneak up behind him and break it upon his head. He was then bound by honor to find the lady and return the compliment. Giggling, fragrant couples chased each other through the crowd.

One reveler among many, Martín moved towards the back of the *hacienda*.

"Did you hear about the Frenchwoman's servant?" A man's gruff question caught Martín's otherwise focused attention. "What happened to her?"

He paused for a moment to listen. "*Sí*," the voice of an older woman answered the speaker. "They say she fell down the stairs, but," her voice dropped to a near whisper, and Martín strained to catch the words, "my sister helped to lay her out. She says there were hoof prints all over her body, like the woman had been trampled by a horse."

"*Madre de Díos.*" The old man swallowed and crossed himself. Martín mimicked the gesture as he moved off toward his goal.

If he knew the *Señorita's* habits, and Martín was fairly certain he did, she would still be dressing. The lady required a grand entrance at the height of the festivities. Quietly, he snuck into the first room of her apartments. Behind the closed bedroom door he could hear the vile woman moving. Martín pulled the paper wrapped mask from beneath his shirt and cut the blackened strings with his stiletto.

He propped the jeweled piece where she could not fail to see it. Then he fished a paper from her desk and inked a quill. *My darling bride*, he scribbled in a fair approximation of Hector's script, *this priceless heirloom came with my family from the treasures of the Inca. I would be honored if you wore it this night.* Thinking a moment Martín added, *it is worth more than my entire estate.* Then he signed it—*Your beloved husband.*

As quietly as he entered, Martín slunk from the guest quarters. Now to find Hector. Most likely he would be in the *hacienda*, entertaining the more prominent visitors. A crowd watched the waltzing in the main hall and Martín vainly searched among them for his lover. Very few of the *gente de razón* knew the steps. Knowledge of the waltz was considered a high accomplishment, a sign of aristocracy. As the night drew on, spectators repeatedly and loudly applauded the dancers. Old men and women jumped out of their seats in admiration and the young people waved their hats and handkerchiefs.

A few times, Martín spotted the *Señorita* in their midst. Her crimson dress flashed as she moved. Red hair piled artfully on her head, side curls framed the mask. Some drew back from the visage of the jeweled horror, muttering prayers. Many, however, laughed, most likely thinking it a grand joke ... in the midst of life affirming marriage, death still wandered.

After hours of searching among the jumble of people, Martín spied the object of his quest. Hector stood near the stairs, removed from the bulk of the crowd without being conspicuously absent. Neither the dancing, nor the man with whom he spoke, seemed to hold Hector's attention.

Martín approached and tapped Hector on the shoulder. When Hector turned, Martín stamped down his rising distress. His lover's face was flushed feverish and drawn tight with pain. Clouded eyes held no recognition for Martín, the man who shared his life since they were children. Martín bowed, "*Señor*, your wife wishes your company for a moment."

Sighing as though in resignation, Hector nodded and indicated Martín should lead the way. Hector followed Martín into the narrow hall leading to the back of the house. It was one of the few areas where the guests would not congregate. The corridor terminated in a T-intersection, with a tiny door set in the paneling of the far wall. Halls stretched to both the right and left. Martín stepped out of the way as though to let Hector pass into the right hand passage. Hector barely acknowledged him as he turned to make his way to the back of the house.

With one hand Martín knocked off Hector's sombrero and with the other broke the egg upon his head. The Don stopped dead, the witch's oil running down his face and over his clothes. "*Madre de Díos*, what was that for?" he sputtered, furious.

Martín didn't answer. There wasn't time. He covered Hector's mouth with one hand and shoved him back into the tiny closet. Oil slicked fingers fumbled with the buttons on Hector's trousers. As Martín fought with the fabric, he pushed Hector against the wall. Never in his life had he treated his lover so rough. Still, he had to take him back, make him his again.

Little bubbles of fear danced under Martín's skin as his lips traversed Hector's collar where his shirt gaped, his hand running across taut trousers. His breath flowed against fevered skin as he kissed Hector's cheek. "Forgive me," he whispered. Martín could feel the swell of his own erection pressed against his lover's back. As Hector struggled he used his weight to push him against the wall.

Martín rubbed himself against the body he'd missed so much. The touch brought a fever to his skin, the kisses along the base of Hector's neck, an ache deep inside. Desire welled up within Martín as he fought with their clothes. The cloth clung to his hips as he forced the material away from his body. Pressed against Hector's naked backside, Martín rubbed his cock in the cleft. Martín pulled Hector's cheeks apart, his cock head pushing against the tight entrance to his lover's body.

Fighting back tears, Martín prayed. "*Te amo, Corazón.*" He knew what he had to do. "*Me disculpas.*" Martín wasn't certain he could ever forgive himself.

Hector shuddered. He reared back, his entire body going taut. "Martín?" He hissed the question. "You came back to me?"

"*Sí!*" Martín could hardly whisper an acknowledgement.

"I thought you would never come back." Relief flooded Hector's voice.

"Always," Martín punctuated his words with hot kisses, "I would never leave you."

Hands braced against the wall, legs spread, Hector yielded to the pressure of Martín's shaft. God yes! To have him back, truly back. Slowly Martín entered, hissing as Hector's tight heat enveloped him. As Martín's cock stretched and pulled the delicate opening, Hector's hips pushed to meet him, until his entire length was sheathed within.

Hector looked over his shoulder, dark eyes half-lidded with desire. "*Bésame!*" He demanded and Martín complied, pressing his lips against Hector's hot mouth. Each shift, every tremble, was met with burning kisses. With a sigh, Hector opened his mouth, and Martín's tongue slipped inside. Heaven.

Martín thrust hard and his slick hand slid along Hector's cock. Hector threw his head back, the oil still running into his eyes and nose and mouth. They slipped under the surface of pain and pleasure as Martín rammed into Hector.

Folded over him, their weight was thrown forward onto Hector's hands. Martín caressed his hole with deep thrusts

and Hector's mouth and jaw with his tongue. Hector's shaft burned hot in his hand. Responding to moans and gasps, Martín thrust deep.

His swollen and hard shaft slid within Hector's body, Hector's shaft, swollen and hard, slid between Martín's fingers. The heat of Hector's channel burned up his prick and through his thighs. Hector's fingers clawed at the plaster dropping his head against his arm and the wall. Martín pushed them to the edge of release and held them there as he worked their bodies slowly, rhythmically. Hector cried out as he came, and Martín, cresting and falling on the edge of passion, let the sound sweep him over the edge to his own release. Wracked with the intensity of his orgasm, Martín collapsed across Hector's shaking body.

Hector twisted between Martín and the wall. His hand wandered up to pull the mask from Martín's eyes. "I did not know it was you at first." A flush crawled into his cheeks as he laughed. "When you asked me to forgive you ... I knew." Pulling Martín in close, Hector kissed him deep. Then he pulled back. "You left without saying goodbye. I thought I lost you."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Hector smiled. "The moment you pulled me in the closet, I thought it might be you." Tenderly, he brushed the short hair from Martín's face. "When you started to touch me, also I knew." Then he kissed Martín. "There was never anything," he whispered, "to be sorry about."

Martín stepped back and laughed. "I will never leave you, *Don Aritza*."

Hector opened his mouth to speak. Instead he gasped. His hands reached up to pull at his collar. Pain clawed Hector's features as he tore his shirt from his shoulders.

Hector's skin, where he'd been pricked, heaved, and blistered. Tiny, furry feet thumped at the edge of the wound, pushing the angry flesh open. Bile rose in Martín's throat. Hector stared at his own chest in horror.

Out of the lesion a spider crawled, its grey-black body flecked with puss and blood. With a shudder and a yell, Hector swept his hand across his chest flinging the foul thing against the wall. It bounced off the plaster and scuttled towards a corner. Martín jumped back unsheathing the stiletto. With a flick of his wrist, he sent the blade flying. It thunked into the creature's body, pinning it to the floor. The spider spasmed. Eight legs drummed out a soft staccato. Then it stilled.

Martín shuddered and stepped to embrace Hector. "It's gone." He whispered, righting Hector's clothes. "You don't have to worry."

"I'm not worried," Hector breathed as he leaned against Martín's chest, "You're here."

As the horror faded, Martín became aware of screams echoing from the main hall. Hector jerked back, confusion and lingering terror in his face. Martín shoved himself into some semblance of decency and stepped cautiously into the hall. Then he and Hector headed towards the sound of chaos.

A sea of confusion greeted them as they pushed their way into the main room. *Señorita* Lolita lay sprawled in the middle of the dance floor, her red dress and hair pooling like blood

about her body. Both men approached her form. Her chest did not move and her mouth hung open. Hector reached her first and knelt. Martín took his place beside the *Don* only seconds after. Tentatively he reached for the mask, sliding his fingers into the eye sockets and his thumb under the teeth. He pulled.

At first nothing happened, then a loud, wet sucking sound emanated from beneath the gold. Straining, Martín twisted. A loud pop and the mask broke free. Women screamed. Men retched. Hector and Martín fell back. Martín flung the mask onto the witch's chest as he scrambled to his feet.

A lipless fanged face, its skin bubbled and pocked, glared up at them. Rummy eyes of blood saw nothing. Blue veins laced the bare bone near the eyes and nose. A sharp, grey nose jutted from the thing's face.

Quickly they gathered a pine box, dumping the body within and nailing the lid shut with iron nails. Then Hector, Martín and six of the strongest men drug the box to the edge of the cottonwoods. They hastily dug a shallow grave and, with little ceremony, dropped the coffin into the pit. As the men shoveled dirt over the wood, Martín tossed the mask into the grave.

Morning light bled over the horizon as the last of the earth was patted down. Finished with the horrid task, the other men left quickly. None seemed eager to stay. Finally, only Martín and Hector were left as witnesses to the burial.

"*Díos*," Hector shuddered, "to think I almost wed that." Both men crossed themselves in unison.

"Thank God you didn't," Martín agreed.

"Thank God," Hector slid his arm over Martín's shoulder, "I have a *compadre* like you to save me."

"I don't want to have to go through that again. Next time, I get to choose your wife."

"No, *Corazón*," Hector's grip tightened as he leaned in to whisper in Martín's ear, "I think that, after that, I shall live very happily as a bachelor with you."

Phaze Fantasies, Vol. III
by J Buchanan, Jade Falconer, Eliza Gayle

Devotion

by Jade Falconer

Also by Jade Falconer

Morningstar

Cold Hands, Warm...

Girls on Film

Tangled Web

Escape

Sanctuary

Savior

Wilhelm sighed, adjusting the hood of his cloak. "I hate this, I can't see anything," he complained, hurrying along beside an older, gray-haired man. He had to nearly run to keep up; his steward was almost a foot taller than him. He tried to stay alongside the older man, but the crowd was thick and he had to duck behind him to avoid running into people.

The older man slowed his steps slightly. "We are almost there, Your Majesty. We must arrive early to see the best prospects. You'll thank me in the end."

Wilhelm resisted the urge to pout. There was no one to see, anyway. He had to keep his face covered. It was a huge concession, and strictly against the rules, for him to even be out like this. But what was the good of being a prince if you didn't get to break the rules, he grinned to himself. He was excited to see the slave auction. He had gone through so many slaves that he insisted on choosing one himself.

The street widened, and the crowd eased a little. Wilhelm could see they were coming into the public square, and there were hundreds of people milling about. The buzz of conversation surrounded him, and he stayed close to the steward.

The older man steered Wilhelm towards a railing at the side of a small dais where the slaves would be displayed for the merchants. "If you want to see any of them turn or come closer, simply tell me, and I shall do the talking on your behalf," he instructed. "And, of course, I will bid on whichever you choose."

Wilhelm nodded, moving to the very front of the platform. He was so excited he could barely stand still. It was about time he was allowed to pick his own slaves, after all. He spent more time with them than his family. His father was busy running the Kingdom, of course, and he'd never known his mother. She'd died in childbirth. He suspected his father had never quite forgiven him for that. So he'd been raised by the castle staff—some free, but mostly slaves. But now that he was older he needed his own personal staff, and none of them had been quite right.

The auction began and a number of slaves were lined up beside the platform. The first was led up to the center of the makeshift stage, and a handler began hawking him. The steward leaned close to speak quietly to Wilhelm. "Well muscled. He could surely perform any physical task. He seems docile enough," he commented.

Wilhelm nibbled on his lower lip as he stared at the slave. He tried not to admire the man's body too obviously, but he couldn't help it; he liked men much better than he liked women. But this man was too big. Wilhelm himself was lithely muscled; he exercised daily. But he was nothing like this man, who looked like one of the ancient statues he'd seen. "No, I don't think so," he said softly.

A number of slaves followed, none of whom were of a quality that the steward considered acceptable, so he kept silent. He pointed out another two or three large and capable looking slaves, but Wilhelm still seemed uninterested. Finally, a slender young man stepped up. Again the steward remained silent. But Wilhelm was entranced. The slave was slim and

pale, with nearly black hair to his shoulders, and features delicate enough to belong to a girl. In fact, the slave was pretty enough that Wilhelm could imagine he'd been mistaken for a girl a few times. But Wilhelm could immediately tell this slave was all male. He reached out and touched the steward's arm. "What about him?" he whispered.

The steward looked shocked for a moment, before he covered it with a blank expression. "He looks a little thin, sir. Will he be able to serve you adequately?"

Wilhelm smiled wickedly but then forced himself to look serious. "I bet he's stronger than he looks," he offered, then said hesitantly, "Can I ... I mean, can we see him? Have him step forward?"

The steward signaled to the auctioneer, and the slave was brought towards them.

The slave went where he was directed, eyes respectfully lowered. He didn't look up.

Wilhelm licked his lips, heart rate picking up a little. He leaned forward, looking the slave over. He was even more attractive closer up. Wilhelm knew the slave's appearance shouldn't have any bearing on whether he bought him or not, but it did matter to him. Especially when this one was so beautiful. "I want him," Wilhelm said softly.

"Of course, Your Majesty," the steward said in a hushed voice. He waved the slave away and placed a bid.

The slave couldn't help but glance back as he was led away, and for a moment his gaze locked with the richest, most captivating dark eyes he'd ever seen before he was forced to look away or stumble over his chains.

Wilhelm beamed, glad now that he was hidden under the cloak. He couldn't wait. The slave was going to be his. He moved closer to the steward and said, "Make sure I get him. Price doesn't matter."

The steward won the bid, although it didn't go exorbitantly high. The other bidders were more interested in larger, stronger-looking slaves. He slipped off to the fee collector and paid for the boy, named Marcus, finally leading him back to Wilhelm.

Marcus was purchased by an older man, and led out to the crowd. He seemed reasonably gentle, and he didn't mind him, until he realized that the first was merely acting as an agent for another. The man with the captivating dark eyes he'd briefly glimpsed when he was led forward. He looked down quickly, not wishing to displease his new Master.

Wilhelm was excited. He'd never gotten to choose a slave before. He knew it would be unseemly to show it, though, so he tried to act cool as he addressed his steward. "Do you think any of the others are suitable for the staff?" He kept peeking at the new slave from under his hood. He was breathtaking up close.

"There are a few, but I can engage someone to bid on our behalf if you'd like to return now. I wouldn't wish to keep you waiting out here all day, Your Majesty," the steward said. He nodded politely and left Wilhelm's side again to find an agent to engage.

Marcus had heard the softly spoken title and his heart started pounding. He was alone with royalty, though he really knew nothing about those who ruled.

Wilhelm gazed at the new slave curiously. He stepped closer and whispered, his face still covered, "What's your name?" He wanted to know everything about him. He wanted more than that.

"Marcus, Your Majesty," he stuttered, barely above a whisper. He kept his eyes down, looking at his own, tethered hands. Clearly the other man didn't wish his identity to be revealed, and Marcus had to wonder why such a man was in the market, buying a slave personally.

Wilhelm's heart beat even faster. The slave's voice was soft and quite lovely, to match the rest of him. He appeared to be about the prince's age, or perhaps just slightly younger. He couldn't wait to find out more about him. "Where are you from?" he asked, thinking it was a reasonable question.

"A village on the coast," he said softly. "A very small place. You probably wouldn't have heard of it." He hadn't been there in years, anyway.

Wilhelm nodded. He tried to know all the names of the villages, but it was quite impossible. He was about to question the slave further when he noticed the steward returning. He stepped back; he had a feeling the older man would disapprove of him conversing with the slave in public.

The older man came up beside them. "The others will be transported later in the day. Are you ready to return?" he asked Wilhelm officiously. He gave Marcus a glance that betrayed a slight distaste.

"Yes," Wilhelm replied firmly. He was anxious to get back to the castle and get to know his new slave. He couldn't help

stealing looks at him. He was the prettiest man he'd ever seen.

They made their way back through the crowds to where the carriage was parked. Because they were traveling incognito, it wasn't the finest coach, but it was large, well-made, and pulled by four matched gray horses.

Marcus sat on the box with the driver, and the steward joined Wilhelm in the coach. As soon as they were off he visibly relaxed. "Are you certain that was a wise choice, your Majesty?" he asked critically.

Wilhelm looked at the steward, pretending innocence. "Of course. I do not want some muscle-bound idiot bumbling around my rooms, knocking things about. Mar—" He caught himself; he really shouldn't already know the slave's name. "This slave seems graceful, and obedient. I think he will do perfectly."

The steward pursed his lips and nodded. "As you wish."

Marcus was unaware of the discussion below. He held onto his seat, incuriously watching the countryside go by. He'd already traveled so far from home it no longer felt as if he was in the same country. But he didn't mind. He would rather be a slave to royalty than some cruel shopkeeper that wanted someone for hard manual labor. At least he had a reasonable expectation of a warm bed at night and perhaps more decent clothing, and regular meals. He was starving, and his stomach growled as he thought about food.

Wilhelm was nearly bouncing as they approached the castle. He wondered if Marcus had a clue who had purchased

him, or where he was going. Well, he would know soon. They drew close to the castle gates.

When the carriage pulled up to the castle courtyard, Marcus felt a shiver of apprehension. He climbed down from the box and waited meekly for instructions.

The steward climbed out of the carriage to hold the door and position the step for Wilhelm to exit safely. "Shall I have him bathed and adequately clothed before he is sent to your rooms, Your Majesty?" he asked, bowing.

Wilhelm stepped out of the carriage and stood before the slave. For the first time, he lowered the hood of his cloak. He gazed at Marcus, trying to disguise his pleasure at his new slave. "Yes, please," he answered the steward, though he looked only at the slave. "Make sure he is fed well, too."

Curiosity got the better of Marcus, and he stole a quick glance at the man before him. His eyes widened at the sight. A long cascade of silky raven hair framed an angular face. The lips were sensual, the nose straight and proud, but it was the eyes that held him. Huge brown eyes that he'd glimpsed before. Delicately shaped eyebrows. Lashes that would make any female jealous. Though each feature itself was acceptable, the combination was magnificently handsome. He swallowed and lowered his eyes again. "Forgive me, Your Majesty," he whispered.

The steward walked over and took hold of Marcus by the elbow. "Come along, insolent boy. We must make a silk purse of you before evening."

Wilhelm watched them go, smiling serenely. After a moment, he went to his rooms to rest. The journey into town

for the auction had been longer than he was used to. He couldn't stop thinking of his new slave. He'd never thought he needed a personal staff, but his father had insisted. He wondered if his father would object now.

Marcus was taken away to the slave quarters. They were more comfortable than he'd been expecting. The man who'd bought him left him with another servant, and before he knew it he was being shoved towards a warm, fragrant bath and told to scrub thoroughly. He hadn't bathed in quite a while, so it felt wonderful. Even the stiff scrub brush didn't bother him.

When he was clean, he was given fine clothes—a pure white shirt and soft wool britches. His old shoes had been meticulously cleaned and polished. After an older woman combed his hair as if he was an unruly child, he was brought to the cavernous kitchens. His stomach growled again at the smells, and soon a meal was placed before him. He dove in like a savage, moaning as he ate his fill of meat pies and potatoes.

Finally, when all he wanted was to curl up in front of the fire and fall asleep, he was brought down long corridors, and up stairs to a much grander part of the building. He was ushered into a bed chamber and instructed to wait.

It wasn't until after dinner that Wilhelm managed to get back to his rooms. He'd almost forgotten about his new slave, but when he walked in, he stopped cold. Marcus was there, waiting for him, and it was like having a new toy when he was small. He just looked at the smaller man; he'd bathed and changed clothes, and he looked even more beautiful than he had before. Wilhelm knew that men weren't supposed to be

beautiful, but this one was. Marcus' hair shone in the firelight, his skin was pale and perfect, and he seemed made for gazing. So Wilhelm did, walking forward slowly.

Marcus glanced up and instantly looked down again. The man looked like an angel. Or a demon, he wasn't sure which. Whichever it was, he was surely the most handsome being Marcus had ever laid eyes on. And he was his new Master, apparently. He was more than willing to serve such an ethereal creature.

"Hello again," Wilhelm said softly. Now that they were alone his heart was beating faster. He knew it was frowned on to fraternize with slaves. There were special pleasure slaves for that purpose, and it wasn't spoken of.

"Hello, Master," Marcus said quietly. He looked up for a moment, a little panicked. "Should I call you Master? Or Your Majesty?" he asked.

Wilhelm smiled soothingly. He was used to dealing with slaves, but he liked to treat them like the human beings he knew they were. Many people didn't, but he didn't believe in that. He considered. Everyone called him 'Your Majesty.' He wanted Marcus to be different. "Master is fine," he finally decided. "Do you like it here so far?"

Marcus nodded. "Oh yes, thank you, Master. I hope I will not eat you out of house and home," he said quietly. Overall, he felt extremely fortunate. There were far worse places he might have ended up, no matter what he was asked to do here.

Wilhelm stepped closer. "I do not think that is possible," he said softly. "I wish you to be happy here. So eat well." He

walked slowly around Marcus. The young man was even prettier close up. "Have you been treated well so far?" He knew that the other slaves could be jealous of the royal personal slaves.

Marcus smiled. "Yes, thank you, Master," he said breathily. "I've had a warm bath and these lovely clothes, and as much as I could eat." He looked up shyly, and he was momentarily mesmerized by the sight of the other man.

Wilhelm let himself imagine the slave naked in a bath, and his face flushed a little. He hadn't purchased Marcus with the intention of lusting after him, he really hadn't. But he hadn't counted on being so attracted to him. "You must be so very tired," he said, reaching out to push a strand of hair out of the young man's eyes. "You've had a very hard day."

Marcus gasped when the Master touched him so gently. He could feel his body start to stir in reaction and he blushed, too, swallowing hard.

"When we are alone, you may speak freely," Wilhelm said, gazing into the slave's pale eyes. "Please relax. If you please me, things will be easy for you. I am not a harsh Master."

Relaxing was the last thing on Marcus' mind. He looked into his Master's eyes. "The bath and the food made me a little sleepy, but I can serve you however you wish, Master," he said quietly. Just looking at the other man was delightful. He imagined he could take quite a lot of harsh treatment if the reward was one of those smiles.

Wilhelm's smile widened. He knew what he wanted. "I am a bit tired myself," he admitted, "but I would like a bath

before bed," he said. He wanted his slave's hands on him, even if it would test his control.

Marcus nibbled on his bottom lip. "Yes, Master." He stepped back and went to the alcove off the bedroom that held the bath. "Do you have any special requirements, Master?" he asked. He hoped he would get direction so that he could please him.

"I like the water very hot," Wilhelm replied. "The kitchen staff knows this so if you tug on the bell three times, slaves will bring the water." He went on, "I wish the vanilla scented oil tonight. And..." He considered. He usually preferred to bathe himself, but now that he had a personal slave he thought perhaps he should get used to it. "And you will bathe me." His body started to react at the thought of it.

Marcus nodded and summoned the water. The very idea of seeing his Master naked, of touching him while he was naked, was making him uncomfortably hard. He tried to think of something else. Anything else. But it was no use. By the time he had the steaming hot water ready, scented with the vanilla oil, and the other slaves were dismissed, he was afraid it was obvious.

But Wilhelm was distracted by his own problems and didn't notice the slave's arousal. He wanted this, but he didn't want to frighten Marcus by being obviously aroused. So by sheer effort, when it came time to disrobe for the bath, Wilhelm had his body under control.

Marcus stepped forward and started to assist his Master with his clothes. His fingers were trembling as he unbuckled his beautifully hand tooled belt.

Marcus' soft touches were pleasing, and he let the slave take his clothes off, fighting with his body the entire time, willing himself not to be aroused. He was proud of his body; he worked hard to stay fit, and he wondered if it pleased the smaller man to look upon it, or if he was only attracted to women.

Marcus was very nearly panting and hard as a rock by the time he had the Master undressed. He kneeled to remove his shoes and hose, and he looked up at him, licking his lips.

Wilhelm looked down at the slave on his knees, and started to lose control of his body. Marcus just looked so perfect like that, and surely the young man would soon notice. He closed his eyes and concentrated.

Marcus slowly rolled to his feet. He knew it was only a matter of time before the Master noticed the stiff bulge at the front of the slightly too large trousers, and he colored, embarrassed. He looked down and waited for the Master to get in the bath so that he could serve him. Perhaps if he did a good job he would be forgiven.

Wilhelm turned to step in the bath, and out of the corner of his eye, he noticed something. Now, Wilhelm liked men. He liked to touch them, kiss them, and make love to them. He loved to look at them, and he noticed things. His slave was aroused. His beautiful, obedient slave, who was alone with him in his rooms, was hard. It made Wilhelm aroused, too, but he sat down in the hot bath quickly.

Marcus stood beside the bath. "Do you wish me to bathe you, Master?" he said in a choked whisper. He couldn't look at him. His face was burning with shame.

Wilhelm knew he shouldn't, that he was tempting fate. He wasn't the sort of Master that took advantage of their slaves this way. His Kingdom and his family were known to be kind and gentle rulers. But he wanted Marcus' touch. He was almost sure that the slave's arousal was for him, and he wanted to know for sure. Certainly he wouldn't be able to keep his body from responding, but he would try. "Yes," he finally said.

Marcus nodded and rolled up his sleeves. He knelt beside the tub and started to gently lather the Master's skin, starting with his chest and working his way down. He lost himself in the task, caressing more than scrubbing. The Master had a fine body, and it was a pleasure to touch him.

Wilhelm moaned softly, enjoying the treatment. He finally said, his voice a rough purr, "You have a very pleasant touch, Marcus." He licked his lips. "But I do not wish you to get your clothes wet. Perhaps you should take off your shirt?" He wanted to see the slave's body.

Marcus nodded and leaned back. He shook the water off of his hands and pulled the shirt off over his head, folding it reverently. He moved close again and started touching the Master's beautiful body again. He glanced up for a moment.

Wilhelm was gazing openly at the slave's slender body. Marcus' skin was porcelain pale and completely unblemished. He was absolute perfection, in Wilhelm's opinion, and as he looked up, suddenly he was gazing into the slave's eyes. He'd been caught staring.

Marcus' breath hitched, and he stared wide-eyed at his Master. He was so beautiful it was hard to look away. He only

belatedly realized that his hand was resting lightly on the other man's upper thigh under the warm water.

Wilhelm was close to panting. He reached out and ran his fingers lightly over Marcus' bare chest. He still didn't speak, afraid to ruin the moment.

Marcus whimpered at the Master's touch. His cock was aching, and he prayed silently that his Master was touching him because he wanted him, too. He licked his lips, and his gaze traveled down the other man's body to see. The Master was hard.

"You're beautiful, Marcus," Wilhelm breathed, but surely the slave knew that. He let his fingers slip lower, over his perfectly flat belly, and tugged at the drawstring of his pants. "Want to see all of you." He was very aroused now, his cock lying against his stomach.

Marcus pulled himself to his feet, and toed off his shoes. He tugged open his trousers and slid them off his slim hips. Again he folded them carefully and put them aside with the shirt. He stood still, letting the Master look his fill.

Wilhelm hardened fully when he looked upon his beautiful slave. He'd never seen anyone as perfect or desirable. And Marcus was aroused; that made Wilhelm moan out loud. He knew he shouldn't do this, but he ached to touch, to taste him. "Marcus," he whispered. "Please. Join me in the bath."

Marcus wondered if two baths in one day could be bad for him, but he didn't want to protest. He stepped into the bath and crouched down in the water between his Master's knees, not sure how he should position himself. It was a narrow

space, but he knelt before him in the water, making himself as small as possible.

Wilhelm smiled reassuringly at Marcus. He sat up and traced his fingers down the slave's chest. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do," he assured him, though the slave was as hard as he was. Marcus was so beautiful that Wilhelm could hardly stand it, but he wouldn't force himself on him.

Marcus looked into Wilhelm's eyes. "I would be honored if you should want me, Master," he said breathlessly.

Wilhelm wondered whether the slave was telling the truth, but the evidence was before his eyes. And he wanted this too much to refuse what Marcus was offering. "I do want you, Marcus. So much." He leaned forward, putting his hand behind his head and pulling him close enough to kiss. He pressed his mouth gently against the slave's.

Marcus whimpered and surrendered to the kiss. He leaned into it, responding as if he wasn't kissing royalty. He parted his full lips and tilted his head a little to one side, offering himself without reservation.

The way the slave yielded set Wilhelm on fire. He'd wanted Marcus from the first moment he'd seen him, and his desire had only increased since then. Now, they were both naked and aroused and nothing was stopping them. Wilhelm explored the other man's mouth, claiming it like he would soon claim his body.

Marcus leaned closer, his hands coming to rest naturally on the Master's chest. It had been a long time since he'd been kissed, and he soaked up every nuance of hot, wet touch. He

sucked gently on the other's tongue, inviting him in sweetly, holding no part of his desire for him back.

Wilhelm was stunned by the way Marcus reacted. Not like a slave at all, but like a lover. It was divine. He couldn't get enough of his sweet mouth. He shouldn't be doing this and it made it all the sweeter. He let his hands trace lightly over the slave's skin.

Marcus was not trained as a pleasure slave. He only knew sex from personal experience, mostly with other slaves. From an early age he'd realized his attraction to men was greater than to women, and since he'd been sold into slavery he had never grudged himself stolen moments of passion. He loved the feel of strong hands touching him and he moaned when the Master did so.

Marcus was too perfect, and Wilhelm knew he had to possess him fully. He could have ordered any number of pleasure slaves, but he had always preferred a willing partner. His hand strayed down to the slave's cock and he wrapped his fingers around it with a moan.

Marcus broke the kiss on a gasp. He stared into the Master's eyes. He wanted him so badly, but it wasn't his place to ask for anything. "I want to please you," he whispered, finding that the closest he could get to what was really going on in his mind.

Nothing Marcus might have said could have made him happier. He wanted the slave to please him, wanted it more than anything in the world. "I wish to take you, beautiful one," Wilhelm murmured. He ached for it but he could still hold back.

Marcus nodded, still panting. "Anything, anything you want, Master," he whispered hoarsely. He had to hold himself back from touching the other man without permission.

Wilhelm groaned. This slave was his fantasy. "Have you been with a man before?" he asked softly. From the way Marcus reacted, he figured he had, but he wanted to be sure. He stroked him just a little, under the water.

Marcus nodded and looked down, blushing. "Yes, Master. Many times." Marcus didn't want to admit all of his sexual adventures, but when a handsome man propositioned him, he couldn't help himself.

Wilhelm raised an eyebrow. Marcus looked so innocent. "And you like it?" he asked softly. He wanted to give Marcus pleasure, as much as he wanted to take pleasure from him.

"Yes. I do, Master. Perhaps too much." He wanted to squirm, but his Master's fingers were still curled around his throbbing cock. He was completely helpless, a slave to his own body.

Wilhelm didn't know quite what to make of that statement, but now wasn't the time to ask questions. "You have a gorgeous mouth," he whispered, gaze fixed on the slave's full lips.

Marcus licked his lips. "Thank you, Master," he whispered. "You..." He lowered his eyes. "May I speak, Master?" he asked softly.

"Of course," Wilhelm answered immediately. "When we are alone you may speak freely." He still caressed the slave's pale skin, unable to get enough of just touching him.

Marcus swallowed hard, hoping he wasn't going to offend his new Master. "You are the most beautiful man I have ever seen in my life," he said softly. "I am on fire for you, Master."

Wilhelm smiled. "Thank you, Marcus. You please me very much." He pushed back a strand of damp hair out of the younger man's face. "Let's go to the bed. Let me touch you."

Marcus climbed out of the bath and grabbed a towel. He held it out for his Master, wrapping it around him when he got out. He dried himself off quickly with another, then moved to the bed.

Wilhelm followed, drying off perfunctorily, much more interested in Marcus. He lay down on the bed and beckoned him to follow. He was unashamed of his naked body, and he couldn't take his eyes off Marcus.

Marcus lay beside him, hesitant. He was still very aware that the other man owned him, though he wanted him badly. "May I touch you, Master?" he asked.

"Oh please, yes," Wilhelm breathed, pulling him close. "I want you to do what feels right." He wanted Marcus so badly, and it was thrilling that the slave wanted him, too. He pinched one of Marcus' nipples before sliding his hand lower, down his belly.

Marcus moaned and slid his hands around the Master's body. His skin was as smooth as cream and he stroked lightly down his back. "Are you the prince?" he asked softly.

Wilhelm looked at him, surprised. "No one told you? Yes, I am the prince." He stroked a thumb over the slave's full lips. "But please, don't be afraid. I won't force you to do anything, or hurt you."

Marcus hesitantly stroked the tip of his tongue against the Master's finger. "You can hurt me if you want to," he whispered. "I don't mind." His hand wandered down over the most perfect ass he'd ever touched, his breath hitching just a little.

Wilhelm gasped; that idea was incredibly arousing, but he pushed it aside. "I want you to know that though you are my slave, I would never ask you to do anything sexually that you didn't want to do." He wanted everything but he wanted it to be mutual.

Marcus appreciated the sentiment. "I want to do everything with you, Master. Everything you want to do," he said breathily. "Please ... there is nothing I would not want. With you."

It was almost more than Wilhelm could bear, the slave's abject surrender to him. He ached for him now, and he wanted to take him. But, he would not rush, because neither of them would forget this first time and he wanted it to be memorable. He rolled on top of Marcus and kissed him passionately.

Marcus moaned into the Master's mouth. His slender fingers curled over broad shoulders and he wriggled beneath him until he could slide his knees apart. The beautiful man above him wanted him. They were going to lie together. He was going to be taken by a prince. It was almost too much to comprehend.

The man below him was so accommodating, so yielding, that Wilhelm knew he would be hard pressed to take his time with him. He rocked slowly against Marcus, their damp skin

rubbing deliciously. The whole time he kept his gaze on the slave's pretty face, entranced by him.

Marcus was half-crazed with need for the beautiful man on top of him. His fingers threaded into his soft hair and he whimpered helplessly.

Wilhelm kissed Marcus thoroughly, then moved on to his smooth neck. The slave tasted sweet and clean and male, and Wilhelm craved it. He needed to bury himself inside the sweet young man.

Marcus moaned again and tipped his chin up. He was sure he'd never been with so skilled a lover before, and certainly none so beautiful. "Ohh," he breathed. "W-want you ... M-Master. Please..."

"You will have me, all of me," promised Wilhelm. "But there is no hurry. We have all night." He wanted to savor every moment.

Marcus drew a shaky breath and nodded. "I am sorry for my impatience, Master," he whispered. He was still panting hard, but he concentrated on trying to behave.

Wilhelm stroked the slave's silky hair. "Do not be sorry. It pleases me that you want this so much." That was an understatement, but it would have to do for now.

"How could I not?" he whispered. "You're beautiful, Master." He gazed at the other man's face. "I would want you whether or not you were my Master."

It was exactly what Wilhelm wanted to hear, needed to hear. He moaned, rubbing their bodies together as slowly as he could. He looked up for the vial of oil he would need; it was sitting on a small table near the bed and he bade the

slave wait for him as he fetched it. He returned to the bed as quickly as possible.

Marcus stayed where he was, naked and spread out. The bed was unbelievably comfortable, and he was about to be taken by his gorgeous Master. He counted himself very fortunate indeed, and he hoped he pleased this man well. He never wanted to leave this place.

Wilhelm climbed back up on the bed, between the slave's long, lovely legs. He looked down at him for a long moment, warming the oil in his hands. He wanted to remember this moment forever. He handed the vial to Marcus and said, "Oil me?" He wanted Marcus' hands on him.

Marcus leaned up and accepted the vial from his Master. He poured some into his palm and let it warm for a minute, then started to smooth it down over his cock. He stared into the other man's eyes as he did so. "I cannot wait to feel you inside me, Master," he whispered.

Wilhelm bit his lip to keep from crying out at Marcus' touch. There was one more matter to attend to, however. "I do not wish to hurt you," he said. He knew that pleasure slaves prepared themselves before they were sent to serve, but Marcus was not a pleasure slave.

"Oh," Marcus said, blushing slightly as he understood. He put some more oil on his fingers and lay back. He pulled his knees up high and slid one, then two fingers inside his own entrance.

Wilhelm reached out to stop Marcus' hand. "No," he said firmly. "Allow me." He moved the slave's hand and replaced it

with his own, smoothly preparing him with generous amounts of the soothing oil.

Marcus' eyes widened, and he watched for a moment, amazed to think that the fingers inside him belonged to the son of the King. Then he lost the ability to reason as his Master touched a particularly sensitive spot. He moaned and lay back on the soft bed.

Wilhelm smiled as he felt the slave's reaction. "Does that feel good, my beauty?" he whispered. He knew that being inside Marcus was going to feel like heaven. He moved his fingers in and out, taking his time.

Marcus whimpered and nodded, almost afraid to speak. "It ... oh, Master ... ohh ... p-please..."

"Please what?" Wilhelm urged. "You may speak, Marcus. I want to know what you're feeling." He wanted Marcus to want this as much as he did.

"PleasetakemeMaster," he moaned. "I ... I am afraid that I will disappoint you if I can't stop myself." His gaze was unwavering as he breathed heavily.

Wilhelm knew what the slave was trying to say, and he withdrew his fingers. "You will not disappoint me, I am sure of it," he whispered, but he moved into position between the slave's legs. He pressed the head of his cock against his entrance, teasing himself.

Marcus was relieved when his Master moved into position. He spread himself as open as he could manage. Though he was slender, he was extremely fit and flexible, having worked hard for most of his young life. He was more than ready and he gazed adoringly upon the handsome young prince.

Wilhelm stared right into Marcus' beautiful eyes as he pressed in slowly, gently. He groaned as the tight heat of the slave's body gripped him. The first slide in was always the best.

Marcus exhaled a puff of breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. His eyes drifted closed for a moment and he let out a low, soft moan. It was perfection, as he'd known it would be.

His gaze fixed on Marcus, Wilhelm began to move, thrusting deeply and smoothly. The pleasure was instantaneous and incredible, and he felt as if the slave's body was made to receive his cock. They fit together perfectly.

Marcus couldn't speak. All he could do was moan and slide his fingers over the Master's smooth skin as he felt himself impaled over and over. It was better than he'd ever experienced before and he held back his climax with all the self-discipline he could muster.

Wilhelm already knew he was going to want Marcus over and over. He was so beautiful, so obedient, so perfect in every way. He slowly built up speed, holding back as long as he could. He wanted it to last forever. He knew the slave was enjoying it, too; he could feel the hard cock between them. Nothing had ever felt this good.

Marcus was whimpering piteously. "Do ... do you ... can I ... ohh..." The effort to hold back was almost painful, but he didn't want to do anything without permission. He clamped down around his Master's cock reflexively as his lithe body began to tremble.

"Tell me, Marcus," Wilhelm commanded, pounding into the slender man beneath him. "First, tell me how it feels. Do you like me inside you?" He wanted to hear it, in the slave's sweet voice.

Marcus gasped and looked into his eyes. "It feels perfect, Master. Please ... may I ... may I come?" he asked.

Wilhelm shook his head. He was losing his own control now, but he wanted more. "Tell me ... is it the best you've ever felt?" He craved hearing it.

Marcus nodded. "Better than anything, Master. You are the most desirable man I've ever been with." He meant every word.

Wilhelm moaned. He thrust harder and deeper, and whispered, "Come for me, sweet Marcus, let me hear you..." He knew he would be close behind.

Marcus was more than happy to let loose, and he screamed as he came. He pulsed between their bodies, and shook from the raw power of the climax. It left him whimpering again, spent and sated.

Marcus grew even tighter around him, and the friction drove Wilhelm over the edge as well. He moaned the slave's name as he emptied himself inside him. The pleasure was unlike anything he'd ever felt, and he never wanted it to end.

Marcus was panting still. His entire body felt weightless and paralyzed. He smiled shyly at his Master. He was already infatuated, and he knew he would do anything to please this man. He hoped he would want to keep Marcus in his bed forever.

Wilhelm all but collapsed on the bed next to the slave. He gazed over at him and whispered, "You are amazing." He pulled him close and kissed him deeply. He was drunk on pleasure, his body humming from it.

Marcus kissed back gratefully. The way his Master held him was more like a lover than a Master, and he couldn't have asked for more. He let his hand rest lightly on the strong arm embracing him and sighed softly with contentment.

Wilhelm had never been happier. He knew that this was breaking the rules. That he was already getting far too attached to a slave that was supposed to be his personal servant, not a sex slave. His father would strongly disapprove. But what his father didn't know...

He snuggled close to Marcus, determined to enjoy the moment.

Marcus drifted off to sleep in his Master's embrace. He'd never felt so safe and calm, at least, not since he'd left his family's home.

When morning came his Master took him again and it was all like a dream. Marcus was happy to serve, and even happier to share his handsome Master's bed.

His idyllic existence continued like that for some time. He was resented a little by the other household slaves simply because the prince favored him so. But Marcus didn't abuse his position. He didn't break the rules or ask for any special privileges except what he needed to, to serve the prince.

* * * *

One day a new slave came to the castle. He was skilled in music and was soon a favorite among the royal family. Though he was purchased to assist in the kitchens, in short order he was the main entertainment at meals and family gatherings. His name was Frederic, and Marcus found him extremely handsome, though not as handsome as his Master.

Wilhelm had also noticed Frederic. The slave was slender, but not quite as slender as Marcus, and a little darker in complexion. Wilhelm also got the impression that he wasn't quite as subservient as he should be, though he never got reprimanded. When he played music, he was even more attractive. He had natural talent, and he clearly knew it.

Wilhelm noticed Marcus watching him, too, and it gave him an idea.

One afternoon when the prince was out riding with the king, Marcus came upon Frederic in the kitchens. No one else was around, as the cook was out at the market, getting fresh food for the evening meal. He leaned in the doorway, half hiding behind the wooden doorframe. "Hello," he said softly.

Frederic looked up from where he was peeling potatoes, and smiled brilliantly. "Hello, Marcus," he said, looking at the other slave. "That *is* your name, isn't it?"

Marcus nodded shyly. "Yes. You're Frederic, right?" he asked, his voice high and soft. He took a hesitant step into the room. "I heard you play last night. I snuck into the anteroom beside the dining room to listen. You're very good." He took a seat on a bench across the rough hewn table from the other slave. He was lovely to look at—deep dark eyes and a friendly smile.

Frederic shook his slightly too-long hair out of his eyes. "Thanks," he said, still smiling. He looked around to make sure no one was listening. "Look, I'm probably not supposed to ask, but what do you do here? What's your job? Because, I heard some of the other slaves talking..."

Marcus blushed. "I'm the prince's personal slave. I do whatever he needs me to do," he said. "Why, what have you heard?" he asked. He wasn't surprised to find out that the others talked about him, but he wasn't particularly concerned about it, either. Just curious.

"Oooh, really? Anything he asks you to do?" Frederic asked with a little purr in his voice. He'd put down the potato he was peeling and he leaned back.

Marcus worried his full lower lip between his teeth. "What do you mean?" he asked. He didn't want to reveal what his Master liked to do, what Marcus liked to do, too. It didn't seem right to be gossiping about it.

Frederic's gaze traveled obviously down Marcus' body. "Well, there's the gossip, and I didn't quite believe it, but," he paused for a moment, then went on, "the prince is very handsome, isn't he?"

Marcus couldn't lie about that. "He's the most handsome man I've ever laid eyes on," he said quietly. "But what does that have to do with gossip? 'Tis an obvious fact."

"That wasn't the gossip, of course," Frederic teased. "But, since the prince is a handsome man and you are a pretty young man, and the prince seems to want you about him at all times ... naturally there is gossip."

Marcus' eyes widened. "People are just jealous. You shouldn't listen to such things. Anyway, it's no one's business, anyway, is it?" he said defensively.

Frederic looked down contritely. "I'm sorry. It really is none of my business." He looked up, right into Marcus' eyes. "But if I had such a handsome Master, and such rumors were true, well, I don't think I'd be able to keep my happiness to myself." He smiled at Marcus again.

Marcus smirked. "Well, then I suppose you could say I'm quite happy. But I am sure your only difficulty is finding someone as handsome as you are." He looked down, blushing.

Frederic took a step closer. "Can I just say that the prince is a lucky man?"

Marcus gasped, smiling. "Thank you, but I am certain that I am the lucky one," he demurred. It was definitely of interest that this handsome slave shared their inclinations. He only hoped his Master would not tire of him and move on to Frederic.

* * * *

A few days later, when Marcus was summoned to his Master's room, he saw Frederic again. He was sitting on the bed without a shirt on, and Marcus blinked. He looked at his Master, who was standing beside the bed. His first thought was that he was being replaced.

Wilhelm smiled as his favorite entered. "Marcus," he said, approaching him. "Have you met Frederic?" He'd had his eye on the new slave for a while, and though he was quite

enamored of Marcus, when he'd encountered Frederic alone in the corridors, he'd spoken to the slave and been entranced with him. He'd had a flash of guilt, but the slave had made it very clear that he would be eager to join the two of them. Frederic was gorgeous, and Wilhelm couldn't help himself.

Marcus lowered his eyes submissively. "Yes, Master. We have met," he said quietly. His heart was a drumbeat in his chest. "Shall I leave you alone, Master?" he asked, his voice very nearly cracking.

Wilhelm gasped softly. "You misunderstand," he said. "I asked Frederic to join *us*." He paused. "If you don't want to, you are free to go." He tried not to sound too disappointed.

Frederic lay back on the bed, not speaking, but gazing at Marcus intently. He smiled just a little, stretching his lithe body.

Marcus smiled, visibly relieved. "I will do whatever you wish, Master," he said. He took a step towards him, then glanced at Frederic. He really was exceptionally handsome. "Did you need musical accompaniment, Master?" he teased gently.

Wilhelm laughed softly. "I prefer the music of sighs and moans," he said. He settled on the bed, licking his lips. "Why don't the two of you help each other undress?" He could barely hide the lust in his voice. This was incredibly sexy.

Frederic stood smoothly and approached Marcus, smiling. "Good to see you again," he purred.

Marcus' lips twitched a little as he looked at Frederic. "I suppose what I said before was wrong. You didn't have much

trouble finding someone as handsome as you," he said quietly before glancing over at his Master.

Wilhelm sat down on the bed, watching the two beautiful young men intently. His heart was pounding, and he was hard as a rock. "Take your clothes off," he breathed.

Frederic stepped in front of Wilhelm, not obstructing their Master's view. "Can I help you with your tunic?" he asked softly, reaching out.

Marcus let the other slave help him pull the garment off over his head, stepping closer still to Frederic. He let the soft linen fall to the floor, then reached out for the other slave's drawstring, tugging it free.

Frederic allowed Marcus to untie his pants, and he stepped out of them easily.

Wilhelm gasped. Frederic was fully aroused and his body was tanned and gorgeous. He couldn't wait to get his hands on him.

Frederic reached out for the tie of Marcus' pants, smiling at him reassuringly. "You're so pretty," he whispered.

Marcus swallowed hard as his gaze slid over Frederic's body. At the same time his own trousers dropped to the floor. He stepped out of them and looked to his Master for direction. He was hard as a rock in just the few minutes since he'd learned what his Master wanted.

Wilhelm knelt on the bed, watching the two beautiful slaves. "Kiss for me," he whispered, his loose pants doing nothing to hide how aroused he was.

Frederic smiled at Wilhelm, then turned back to Marcus as he stepped closer. He reached out for Marcus, putting his hand on his shoulder.

Marcus stared into Frederic's eyes. He was doing this for his Master, but it was no hardship. He stepped closer and put his hands lightly on Frederic's hips. Then he leaned in and kissed him.

Wilhelm moaned, biting his lip as he watched. He'd never done such an erotic thing as watching two beautiful men, and he knew he could do anything he wanted to them. He intended to take them both. Eventually. He watched as Frederic moved closer, deepening the kiss, his hands going to Marcus' back. Their cocks touched, and Wilhelm's own cock throbbed.

Marcus ran his hands up Frederic's chest and tilted his head. He whimpered when their bodies pressed together. Frederic was an excellent kisser. His hands skimmed along the broad, smooth shoulders.

Wilhelm had never thought that watching someone else kiss would be so erotic. But when the ones kissing were two beautiful naked young men who would do anything he told them, it was incredible.

Frederic's hands went to Marcus' ass, pulling them closer yet. Marcus sucked in a breath when Frederic grabbed him. He moaned into the kiss and started rocking his hips back and forth restlessly. There was something about his Master watching that made it so much hotter. Yes, Frederic was gorgeous, but it was the man on the bed that Marcus truly ached for.

Wilhelm watched the two slaves kissing, rubbing at his arousal through his pants. Finally, he said, "Come here. Both of you. Undress me."

Frederic pulled back from the kiss, looking into Marcus' eyes for a long moment before he turned and walked to the bed. Marcus crawled onto the bed, moving around behind his Master. He lifted his shirt, pulling it off like he'd done many times before. He watched Frederic from over his Master's shoulder.

Frederic leaned down to untie the prince's trousers. He let his hand press against the bulge under the fabric and Wilhelm knew it was deliberate. But he didn't mind. He arched up into the touch, leaning back to nuzzle Marcus' neck.

Marcus slid his hands around his Master's chest. He toyed with his nipples in a way that he already knew that he liked. He couldn't help a little twinge of jealousy when he noticed Frederic rubbing the prince, but he tried to suppress it.

Wilhelm moaned more loudly, and he reached back to pull Marcus' head around, kissing him deeply. He felt Frederic pull his pants down, exposing his very hard cock. He moaned more loudly as he felt warm breath on his length.

Marcus pressed against his Master's back and kissed him, stroking against his tongue. He could feel the tension in every taut muscle of his Master's lean body, and he knew what Frederic was doing without looking.

Four hands on him, two mouths ... it was lovely, and Wilhelm wondered why he'd never thought of this before. It was going to take all his control to enjoy both these beautiful men to the fullest, but Wilhelm certainly was going to try his

best. He felt Frederic nuzzling at his cock and he reached down to pull the slave's mouth closer, encouraging him to suck him. The heat of the mouth that surrounded him made him moan loudly.

Marcus pressed his body closer as he leaned over his Master's shoulder to kiss him. His cock was trapped between his own body and the small of the other man's back. His hands roamed everywhere they could reach.

Wilhelm was drowning in sensation. Frederic's hot mouth was taking him in and Marcus was kissing him and both slaves were very aroused. Tonight was going to be incredible. He pulled out of the kiss and said, "Frederic. I want you to pleasure Marcus with your mouth." He wanted his favorite to be rewarded.

Frederic pulled off of Wilhelm and smiled up at Marcus. "Yes, Master."

Marcus gasped and looked at Frederic. He scooted back and crawled across the bed towards Frederic. For a moment he wasn't sure what to do or where to go and he looked at his Master. "Should ... should I lie down?" he asked.

Wilhelm smiled. "Yes. I think you should. Frederic's mouth seems quite talented." He lay on his side so he could watch the two young men.

Frederic kneeled, looking at first Marcus, then Wilhelm. He licked his lips. Marcus shifted and stretched out on the mattress between his Master and Frederic. He stretched out, reaching up above his head, making himself completely vulnerable.

Frederic looked up at Wilhelm and smiled before crawling up the bed toward Marcus. He moved like a cat, and Wilhelm said, "That's right, Frederic, make sweet Marcus feel good." He watched the show as Frederic straddled Marcus' legs, then bent his head lower.

Marcus leaned up on his elbows. He licked his lips, panting already. Frederic was beautiful, and he couldn't take his eyes off of him. He looked over at his Master and smiled shyly at him. Hearing him call him 'sweet Marcus' made his heart skip a beat.

Frederic leaned down and didn't hesitate. He licked a line up Marcus' hard cock, then swirled his tongue around the tip. Marcus gasped, his head falling back on a moan. The wet heat surrounding his cock was unbearably wonderful. He lay back and reached out for his Master. He rubbed his knuckles lightly across his jaw, gazing longingly into his eyes.

Wilhelm was touched by the way Marcus reached for him, and he leaned closer. "Enjoy, beautiful one," he whispered, before capturing his mouth in a deep kiss.

Frederic slowly sucked Marcus' cock into his mouth, inch by inch, taking his time. Marcus whimpered loudly into his Master's mouth. Frederic was definitely skilled at what he was doing. Marcus was sure he'd never felt anything like it. His other hand moved down and his fingers threaded into Frederic's hair.

Wilhelm loved the sound of Marcus' pleasure, and he slid one hand down the slave's chest as he kissed him. He could hear Frederic sucking on Marcus, and he finally pulled back from the kiss so he could watch. Frederic's head bobbed up

and down as he skillfully took Marcus in all the way to the base.

"Oh, god," Marcus gasped. "I ... you should ... ohhh ... s-stop now," he moaned. He was so close already. He didn't want to come too soon. He leaned up again, and looked from his Master to Frederic, his full lips parted.

Frederic stopped his motions, but didn't take his mouth from Marcus' cock. He looked up at Wilhelm for instruction.

"Don't you like it?" Wilhelm asked softly. "I want you to be rewarded for being so sweet and obedient." He felt more for this slave than he had for anyone.

Marcus looked at his Master, worried that he had displeased him. It was difficult to talk, but he croaked out, "I ... I can't hold on ... much longer." He looked apologetically into his Master's eyes.

"I understand," Wilhelm soothed, stroking his fingers over Marcus' soft skin. "But I want you to feel good. I am sure you will have no trouble becoming aroused again." He nodded at Frederic, who began sucking Marcus again. "Just enjoy."

With those words, Marcus gave himself over to it. He moaned helplessly as Frederic's skillful mouth worked on his cock. The slick, tight feeling drove him over the edge a moment later as his slender body arched. He shivered as the climax overtook his senses, his fingers tightening in Frederic's hair.

Frederic swallowed down every drop, then licked Marcus clean. Wilhelm felt his own cock pulse as he watched. As soon as Marcus was done, he pulled him into his arms, stroking his hair soothingly. "Did you like that, Marcus?" he asked.

Marcus cuddled close with a sated sigh. "Yes, Master," he said. He nuzzled into the crook of his neck for a moment. "Thank you." He felt warm and happy to have so considerate a Master. He hoped Frederic wasn't jealous.

Wilhelm held Marcus for a moment, then kissed him deeply. He pulled back and gazed into the slave's half-closed eyes. "You rest, and recover, while I take Frederic," he instructed. "You may prepare yourself if you wish. I will take you next."

Then he looked at Frederic, and said, "Fetch the oil on the table, and put it on me."

Without hesitation, Frederic scrambled to get the vial, brought it back to the bed, and slowly slicked the prince's arousal.

Marcus moved to make room. He took the vial of oil from Frederic when he was finished with it. He watched as the other slave stroked his Master's cock, and his own body started to react again. He scooted a little farther over in the wide bed and drizzled some oil into his own palm, slicking his fingers with it, and lying back to prepare himself.

Wilhelm moaned at the way Frederic touched him, and he couldn't help but marvel at his beauty. Not that he didn't want Marcus more. But Frederic was exceptional, and very good at what he was doing. "Hands and knees," Wilhelm finally said, his voice rougher than usual.

Frederic complied immediately, gaze now on Marcus as he knelt, open to Wilhelm, awaiting the Prince's cock.

Marcus looked at them both as he slid his fingers inside his own body. He gasped at the look in Frederic's eyes. "May I touch him, Master?" he asked softly.

Wilhelm knelt behind Frederic, pressing the head of his cock against the slave's entrance. "Yes, I'd like that," he breathed, almost overwhelmed by desire. To Frederic he said, "Of course you may not climax until I give permission." He began to slide inside.

"Yes, Master," Frederic said, his voice going rough when the Prince entered him. He put his head down on the bed, surrendering to his Master, but at the same time he smiled at Marcus. His lips parted as he began to pant.

Marcus scooted closer after he'd finished prepping himself. He rolled onto his side and reached beneath Frederic, curling his fingers loosely around his cock. He watched both their faces in turn, stroking the other slave slowly as his Master fucked him.

Frederic's body was hot and tight, and Wilhelm drove deeply into him. He gripped the slave's hips as he thrust, going slowly so it would last. He scratched lightly down Frederic's back, and the slave beneath him arched up, whimpering softly. Wilhelm loved the way Frederic yielded, ass up and head down on the bed, taking every thrust. But his eyes kept going back to Marcus, his pretty face intent as he stroked Frederic.

Marcus watched Frederic's face. He knew that giving Frederic pleasure was giving his Master pleasure, so he concentrated on that for a moment. He leaned in and pressed

his lips to Frederic's neck, sucking gently as he continued to stroke him.

Frederic's moans increased, and he tightened around Wilhelm's cock. The prince thrust harder, moaning as he watched his two slaves. It was so erotic to see the two sexy young men touch; they were both clearly aroused by the situation. He wanted to make them both scream. But he wanted to finish deep inside his sweet Marcus. He pulled Frederic up, back against his chest, and told Marcus, "Suck him. Make him come hard, Marcus. Frederic, you may climax when you wish."

Marcus shifted on the bed quickly, moving partially in front of Frederic. He pressed his lips to Frederic's cock and sucked him in quickly. He concentrated all his skill on making the other slave come. He swallowed around him, feeling his cock stretching open his throat.

Frederic gasped and moaned, leaning back against Wilhelm as he drove into him. He didn't say a word, though, just opened his mouth as he began to pulse into Marcus' mouth. Wilhelm could feel Frederic's release, and he held himself back, just barely. He slowed his strokes as the slave climaxed.

Marcus pulled back, swallowing. He licked Frederic clean before letting his spent cock slide from his mouth. He lay back on the bed with a little pleased smile at them both.

Wilhelm pulled out of Frederic reluctantly. "Lie down, you were amazing," he whispered to Frederic, and helped the slave to lie down comfortably. He wiped himself clean with a soft cloth, then he turned to Marcus. "Are you ready for me?"

he asked, barely holding back. Frederic had been wonderful, but he craved Marcus.

Marcus nodded mutely. He was completely hard again and he wiped his mouth delicately with his fingers. "How do you want me, Master?" he asked softly.

"Just like that, on your back," Wilhelm breathed, looking down at the beautiful man. "Spread those legs for me." He used the time to get himself under control, though it wasn't easy. Not when he could look down at what awaited him.

Marcus lay back and lifted his knees high and wide. He licked his lips, waiting for his Master to climb on top of him. He couldn't even look at Frederic when the Master was about to make love to him.

Frederic lay on his side, panting and smiling. Wilhelm smiled back, then turned his full attention to Marcus. He positioned himself, kneeling between Marcus' long legs and pushing them further apart, gently. His heart ached inexplicably as he looked down at the younger man. But his cock ached as well, and he slid into Marcus as smoothly as he could manage.

Marcus whimpered as his Master took him. It was gentle and sweet and hot all at once. His body adjusted quickly, as they'd been together every day, and he slid his hands over his Master's shoulders, gazing into his eyes.

It wasn't that taking Frederic hadn't been pleasurable. It was that when he took Marcus, it was so far beyond anything he'd ever felt that nothing else could compare. Almost immediately he was close to the edge.

Marcus was gasping, his slim body tightening around his Master's cock as he, too, quickly neared his climax. He arched beneath him and whimpered loudly. "Ohhh ... I ... oh, Master..."

Wilhelm thrust hard, burying himself inside Marcus each time, as deeply as possible. He never took his eyes from the slave's as he moved inside him. "Marcus..."

The way his Master said his name made Marcus moan and pushed him to the very edge of his control. "Ohh M-Master ... can I ... please..." He was already trembling.

Wilhelm could deny Marcus nothing, especially now. He wanted it to be earth-shattering for the pretty young man. He reached down to stroke Marcus' cock as he drove into him. "Yes, sweet Marcus, you may come."

Marcus cried out for his Master as he came hard. His body shook and he came hard over the strong, soft fingers stroking him. He felt dizzy, like the building could collapse around them and he would be helpless to save himself. He wanted only the man above him. Nothing else mattered.

Wilhelm knew that this slave was what he needed. Marcus gave him everything, without reservation, and he needed it. He drank in every cry and moan, letting the pleasure take him over the edge of ecstasy.

Marcus found himself making ineloquent sobs, breathing unevenly, gulping air. He wasn't sure if he'd passed out or simply come, but he didn't feel the same. A new consciousness overtook him. The things he was feeling for his Master were bad things. Dangerous things. Things he couldn't think of or dream of. He swallowed hard and looked over at

Frederic. It stung too badly to look at his beautiful Master just then.

Wilhelm felt indescribably sad when Marcus wouldn't look at him. He wanted to drink in that beautiful face, see the sated look he'd put there. He pulled out and lay between the two slaves, muscles trembling. Frederic snuggled up immediately to the prince, gazing across his chest at Marcus.

Marcus moved to press up against his Master's side, too. He rested his head lightly on his shoulder. He didn't like sharing this time, the after part. But he knew he'd gotten more attention than Frederic, so he couldn't begrudge it. He gazed back at the other slave, and reached across his Master's chest, touching Frederic's hand almost shyly.

Wilhelm sighed contentedly. He felt drained and satisfied. Bringing Frederic in had been erotic and fun, but in the end, all he really needed was Marcus. He was glad that both slaves had seemed to enjoy it.

They drifted off to sleep that way, Marcus and Frederic holding hands and snuggled against the prince.

* * * *

The next few days returned to normal. Marcus was strangely relieved each evening when he didn't find Frederic in his Master's room. He knew it was probably disobedient of him to even think that way, but he couldn't help himself. Not that he hadn't enjoyed being with Frederic. The other slave was gorgeous, and had been nothing but sweet and giving to Marcus. He felt guilty about his jealousy, so when he ran into Frederic one afternoon in one of the more secluded corridors

of the castle, near the slave quarters, he resolved to be especially nice to him.

"Hello," he said with a smile.

"If it isn't the captivating Marcus," Frederic purred. "I've missed you." His voice held a sensuous familiarity, and he stood just a little too close.

Marcus smiled sweetly. "Have you? I am easy enough to find." He leaned back against the wall. Something in Frederic's manner made him want to flirt. It was nice to relate to someone on his own level.

"Indeed. But I know you are kept quite busy by His Majesty, and rightfully so," Frederic replied. He moved closer. "But, had you no pressing duties at the moment..."

Marcus gasped softly. "He is out riding with the king," he said. "Why?" He had an inkling why, but he wasn't completely sure how he felt about it. Frederic was attractive, certainly, but it seemed presumptuous somehow. He'd been with other fellow slaves in the past, but his situation was different now.

Frederic's smile increased in intensity. "Have you no idea why I might wish to spend more time with you, pretty Marcus?" he said, keeping his voice to a discreet level.

Marcus could feel his face growing warm. "I can think of a few reasons." He couldn't help but feel like he was betraying his Master, although it wasn't as if he was anything more than a slave to the handsome prince.

"So can I," Frederic said. "Perhaps we could find a private place to discuss those reasons?" He smiled enticingly at Marcus, gaze fixed on the other man's eyes.

Marcus swallowed hard. "All right," he said softly. He glanced around. His heart was hammering with arousal and anxiety. "Are you certain it's allowed?" he asked.

Frederic shrugged. "Sometimes things that are not allowed are all the better," he said, voice low. "Come with me. I know just the spot." He turned and walked quickly down the corridor.

Marcus followed after him. He was a little ambivalent. He liked Frederic, and he found him very attractive. But then, his Master didn't think of him as anything more than a possession. Why should it matter? He'd wanted Frederic, too, after all.

Frederic led him out the back of the castle, toward the stables. He didn't look to be in a hurry, but they covered the distance quickly. Marcus had to jog a few steps to keep up with Frederic's determined stride. There was no one about, and he was glad of it. It all seemed so clandestine. But then, he supposed it was. They reached a storage room on the far side of the building that housed the stables. It seemed deserted and unused.

Frederic opened the door for Marcus, and shut it quickly behind them. He turned to Marcus, smiling. "I've thought of you a lot," he offered breathlessly, stepping close.

Marcus gazed into his eyes. "Have you, really? What did you think about me?" he asked. No matter how wrong it felt, Marcus couldn't seem to stop himself from letting the events unwind before him. He was addicted to it.

"I thought about your sweet mouth," Frederic whispered, reaching out to gently touch Marcus' full lips. "And the way you watched the prince take me..."

Marcus swallowed hard. "Did you like it? When he took you? And I watched?" he asked haltingly. He was already panting, easily aroused as he always had been, but especially with someone as attractive as Frederic.

"Oh yes, very much," Frederic said, moving nearer. "I know you knew just what I was feeling, and you were going to get taken next. I loved the way you looked, so aroused, so needy..." He dropped a hand to rub at Marcus' obvious bulge. "Just like you are now..."

Marcus sucked in a sharp breath. He ran his hands up Frederic's arms. He felt helpless, trapped by the tiny space and the gorgeous slave and his own body's ache for him. "Should I ask my Master to include you again?" he whispered.

"I would like that a great deal," Frederic replied, not stopping his soft touches. "But there's no reason to wait, is there?" He wrapped his arms around Marcus, pulling him close, and he leaned in to kiss the other slave.

Marcus made a soft whimpering sound when Frederic kissed him. He wrapped his arms around the other slave's neck. Marcus loved to be kissed, even though he felt a nagging sense of guilt about it. But he was just a toy to his Master. Wasn't he?

Frederic kissed Marcus deeply and skillfully, his hand roaming all over him, touching him everywhere. He pressed their slim bodies together, cocks lining up.

Marcus melted in Frederic's embrace. It felt so good. Frederic was so good looking, and Marcus loved to be wanted. It filled something inside him. Slowly, Frederic guided them over to some bales of hay that were covered with a blanket. He never stopped kissing Marcus as he eased him down onto it.

Marcus felt himself being gently propelled downward. He lay back on the rough blanket, still sucking on Frederic's tongue, lost in the delicious wet heat. Thoughts of it being wrong were slowly fading in the face of the careful seduction. Frederic kissed Marcus thoroughly, slowly, and passionately. He ran his hand down the other man's body lightly, rocking against him.

Marcus moaned into the kiss, wriggling beneath Frederic's compact but solid body. He was so hard now he forgot everything but the present, shifting his knees apart a little. Frederic ground against Marcus more firmly, and one hand came up to push up the other slave's shirt.

Unthinkingly, Marcus leaned up, helping Frederic remove his shirt. The kiss broke for a moment as the garment was removed, then he lay back, tugging at Frederic's shirt. Frederic pulled off his shirt quickly, then reached down to untie the lacings of Marcus' trousers. Marcus panted hard, looking up at Frederic. He lifted his hips, struggling out of the confining fabric. The blanket beneath him felt scratchy on his smooth, bare skin, and he felt especially exposed in the strange setting.

Frederic smiled down at Marcus. "You're beautiful," he whispered, running his hand down Marcus' body slowly. He

unlaced his own trousers before wrapping his hand around Marcus' cock.

Marcus slid his hands inside Frederic's trousers, down over his perfect hips. He licked his full lips. "You're handsome," he whispered, moaning as the other man touched him.

* * * *

Wilhelm had had a good ride, but he hadn't been able to stop thinking about his sweet Marcus as he rode. He decided to call for him just as soon as he got back to the room. He wouldn't even wait for dinner, just call Marcus in to bathe with him, and make love to him. He smiled just thinking about it.

There was a mare about to foal, and the stable boys were busy, so Wilhelm offered to put his saddle away himself. He didn't quite know where it went, though, and he ducked inside one room, thinking it was the tack room.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, he realized with a start that this was not the tack room. There were two people, wrapped in an intimate embrace. He was about to apologize and back out when, with a gasp, he recognized the person on the bottom. "Marcus!" he cried out, mouth hanging open.

Marcus gasped and all but pushed Frederic off of him. He grabbed his pants and held them over himself, which he realized was completely silly. It was too late to cover up. "Master! I..."

Wilhelm could only stare. Marcus was naked. Frederic had been on top of him, touching him. It had been more than clear what they'd been about to do. Irrational tears pricked at

his eyes as he stared. "Sorry," he whispered, pale as a ghost. "I ... sorry." He turned and fled. He knew the slaves and staff dallied among themselves. There was no official rule about it, because people were human. They needed contact. But he'd thought it was different between him and Marcus. He stumbled back to his rooms, holding back tears.

Marcus could only watch him leave in horror. "Oh ... oh no..." He scrambled up from where he was half-pinned under Frederic and started to yank his clothes back on quickly. "I ... I'm sorry ... I have to go," he stuttered.

Frederic looked from the door to Marcus. "Was that the prince?" he asked, not sounding overly concerned.

"Yes. It was the prince." He laced up his trousers and straightened his shirt. "He looked so upset. I have to go apologize ... beg for forgiveness," he said breathlessly.

Frederic frowned. "Did he tell you that you could not be with anyone else?"

"No, but he was upset. I have to go to him. I'm sorry, Frederic." He leaned close and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm sorry."

And then he slipped out the door and sped towards the castle.

* * * *

Wilhelm didn't remember getting to his rooms. He did, remember, though, to tell the guard that was posted at the door that he wanted no visitors. He didn't want to see anyone at all.

He went in, throwing off his cloak and all but flung himself on his bed, face down. It smelled of Marcus, and all he could think of was the nights and days they'd spent here. He'd been fooling himself, though, that the slave felt anything for him. He felt like an idiot. All he could see was Marcus' gorgeous body, under another man, under Frederic, those hands on him, on his Marcus. He sobbed out loud, uncaring if anyone heard.

Marcus hurried to the prince's chambers. He needed to talk to him. He had to see him. He took the stairs two at a time, and he was panting by the time he got to his door. "Please, let me pass," he said to the huge guard.

The guard looked down at Marcus. "His Majesty is not seeing anyone," he said shortly.

Marcus gasped. "But ... I am his ... he ... I..." He stuttered. "I am his personal slave," he said softly, looking down.

"I know," the guard said, not unkindly. "But he said no one should enter. Unless you are the king, I cannot let you enter."

Tears sprang to Marcus' eyes. "Please, I need to speak to him. Can you not tell him that I am here? That I need to apologize? Please. I'm begging you," he said.

"He does not wish to be disturbed," the guard said. "I fear he has been dealt a serious blow, for he looked quite ashen."

Marcus felt like he'd been stabbed in the heart. And then he heard broken sobs through the door. He pressed up against it, laying his hands and cheek to the door. He squeezed his eyes shut and then withdrew, trembling. "If you see him, please tell him I ... I ... no. I will wait here." He

stepped across the corridor and sat against the opposite wall, pulling his knees up, curled in a ball.

The guard seemed about to speak, then shrugged. "It is your choice," he said. Then he went back to his alert stance.

Inside, Wilhelm cried himself to sleep on Marcus' pillow. He dreamed of his slave. He dreamed Marcus was running away from him.

Marcus hugged his arms around his knees, and eventually rested his head on his knees, and dozed off. He slept through the changing of the guards, and when he woke it was the middle of the night. He stood and stretched and asked after his Master, but he hadn't left his room. He paced for a while, then sat back down, resuming his previous position, sitting vigil at his Master's door.

* * * *

Wilhelm woke, groggy. It was still dark, and he felt as if he hadn't rested at all. He immediately thought of Marcus and felt despair. He couldn't imagine going on without him, but if the other man felt nothing more for him than a slave would feel toward a kind Master, he couldn't bear to see him again. He got up and walked toward the door, wondering if anyone had come to see him. He pulled the heavy drapery aside that covered the door, and pushed it open.

Marcus was staring mutely at the door as he had been for hours when it started to open. Instantly he rose, though his muscles ached from being too long in one position. He darted for the door. "Master! Please ... please, Master, I must speak to you..."

Wilhelm gasped when he saw it was Marcus; he'd been crouched in the hallway. The guard caught him before he got to Wilhelm, but he could only stare. He didn't want the slave to see him this way; he'd been crying all night. He backed away, but not so much that he couldn't see Marcus. He looked small and forlorn and right then, Wilhelm knew he was hopelessly in love.

Marcus could see that his Master's eyes were red from crying, and his throat tightened. The guard held him fast, though, twisting his arm behind his back. "Please, Master," he sobbed. At that moment he wished for punishment. Anything would be preferable to knowing that he'd hurt him so.

Wilhelm felt like a knife was twisting in his stomach as he watched. "Stop!" he called out to the guard. He hesitated. He wanted so badly to see Marcus. He made a decision. "Let him go. He may enter. But no one else." He turned quickly and walked back in the room, before the guard could see him crying.

Marcus scrambled after him, closing the door quickly before he changed his mind. He threw himself to his knees and bowed low to the ground. "Oh, please forgive me, Master. I did not know. Please ... I beg you to forgive me. Or beat me. Or ... Oh, god. Please ... I have shamed you. I am so sorry," he said, half-sobbing through it all.

Wilhelm kept his back turned. He couldn't bear to look at Marcus. He felt no anger, only despair. "Don't be sorry, you did nothing wrong," he whispered. Except break his heart unknowingly.

Marcus wanted to die. "If I did nothing wrong then why are you so distressed, Master? Please ... I did not mean to ... Oh, god, please, punish me, Master. I cannot go on knowing I've caused you pain," he said, still crouched on the ground, nearly sobbing.

Wilhelm shook his head, still not looking at Marcus. He desired this slave so much it frightened him. "I never told you that you could not..." His breath hitched, and he was unable to even voice it though the images were crystal clear in his head.

Slowly Marcus straightened up. "But, if you are not angry with me, why were you crying, Master? Why can you not look at me?" he asked.

"Because, when I saw you..." Wilhelm took a gulp of air, trying to get himself under control. "I did not know how much it would hurt."

Marcus rose to his feet. He took a step towards his Master. "It will never happen again. I swear to you, Master. I would never want to cause you pain. Please..." He put his hand lightly on his Master's back. "Let me help you forget," he whispered.

Wilhelm shivered at the touch. He wanted Marcus so badly he could taste it. "No," he said shakily. "I will never make you do anything you don't want to anymore." He'd been fooling himself that Marcus would voluntarily want him.

Marcus could only stare for a moment. "You have never made me do anything I did not want to do, Master," he said quietly. His heart ached for the handsome man that he'd hurt

and he leaned against his back, pressing his cheek against his shoulder.

He couldn't help it. He craved Marcus' touch. He moaned. "How could you really want me?" He asked softly. "You were only doing my bidding." To avoid being punished, of course. How could he have been so naïve?

"You know that I was as affected as you were, Master. How can you doubt it? I have never wanted anyone as much as you, Master. Please believe me." He slid his arms around the prince's waist, tears pricking his eyes. He had never felt so empty, so desperate. "I would want you even if I were free. But I would never have been so close to you if I were not your slave."

Wilhelm wanted to believe. But ... "Then why did you go with Frederic?" It was his fault. He had put them together.

Marcus bit his lip. "I ... He wanted me. And I didn't know it would hurt you. I thought I was just ... I am just a slave to you."

That made Wilhelm turn around finally. "You are so much more than that," he said, gazing into Marcus' eyes. "That is the problem."

Finally Marcus was looking into his Master's eyes. "Must that be a problem, Master?" he said softly. It certainly wasn't to him. It made him amazingly happy, in fact.

"It is a problem," Wilhelm whispered. "Because I cannot force you to be with me." He knew it was silly. Marcus was a slave. He was bound to do what Wilhelm told him. There was only one way around this.

"You do not need to force me. I am with you willingly, Master," he said sadly. "I wish I had never met Frederic. I wish..." He looked down. "I have hurt you and shamed you. I am not w-worthy of your kindness," he whispered.

Wilhelm shook his head. "It is I who is not worthy of a man so sweet and kind as you, Marcus. I was selfish and greedy. I thought only of myself." He felt miserable, because he knew what he had to do.

Marcus swallowed hard. "Don't, Master, of course you deserve me. You are a prince. I am just a slave," he said quietly. He reached up and touched his face lightly. "I am yours."

Wilhelm shook his head. He ached to take Marcus in his arms but he couldn't. "You are a slave no longer," he said, barely above a whisper. "You are free. I will let the steward know, and he will give you a stipend to live on. You are free to stay in the castle if you like, but it will be your choice." He turned away to hide his despair.

Marcus gasped. "But why?" He stepped towards him again. "Master, have I displeased you so much? Please, can't I have another chance? I swear to you ... I swear I shall never cause you pain again," he pleaded.

Wilhelm frowned and turned to look at Marcus. "Don't you understand?" he said more harshly than he intended. "You are free. No longer a slave. You don't have to serve me any more. You don't have to serve anyone." He would instruct the steward to give Marcus plenty to live on for a while.

To Marcus, it was as if he'd said he didn't want him anymore. He looked down. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "Your Majesty."

Wilhelm wanted to sob, to take it all back, to keep Marcus at his side forever. But he couldn't. Marcus didn't want him, not really. He needed a lover who was with him willingly, body and soul. "Good luck to you," he said, choking back tears. "You may go." He wanted him to go, to be away before he begged him to stay.

Marcus could barely see his way to the door. He didn't thank him. He didn't say anything. He just fled. He made his way down the back stairway, straight to the slave quarters. He didn't know where else to go. He climbed into the farthest corner pallet and curled up in a ball, sobbing brokenly. It hurt so much; he wasn't sure how he was going to carry on.

Wilhelm didn't move for long moments after Marcus left. He stood and stared at the door, feeling the emptiness of the room acutely. Finally, once he'd pulled himself together, he called for the steward to arrange for Marcus' freedom.

* * * *

"Were you punished badly?" Frederic said, crouching beside Marcus. He'd walked in the room looking for the source of the crying.

Marcus was startled when he heard Frederic's voice so close. "No," he mumbled. "I wish I was. He sent me away. He never wants to see me again," he said, covering his face with his hands as tears spilled down his cheeks and his slender shoulders shook.

Frederic looked stunned. "He wasn't angry, though? He didn't have you beaten?"

"No," he said sniffing. "He spent the whole day in his rooms and wouldn't let anyone inside. Finally he looked out and I begged him to let me apologize." He took a hiccupping breath. "He said I hadn't done anything wrong, and then he said I was a free man, then he sent me away." Saying the words brought a fresh round of broken sobs.

Frederic gasped. "He freed you? After he found us together? That doesn't make sense."

Marcus shrugged, wiping his nose on his sleeve. "He doesn't want to see me anymore. I wish he'd had me killed instead."

"Don't say that," Frederic said, rubbing Marcus' back. "I just don't know why he'd do that, unless..."

Marcus quieted, a lull in the torrent of emotion. "Unless what?" he asked, his voice hoarse. Not that it mattered. He would never see his handsome prince again. Nothing mattered at all.

After a moment, Frederic shook his head. "I don't know. Never mind, just rest for a little bit, all right? Don't leave or anything without telling me goodbye." He rubbed Marcus' back once more before standing up again.

Marcus nodded. He felt numb. "I'll probably go soon, though, so don't disappear," he said quietly. He wanted to run away, hide from the world. He hadn't given any thought to what he was going to do now that he had a choice.

"I won't be long," promised Frederic, and he slipped out.

* * * *

Wilhelm looked up when a slim figure appeared in his quarters. It wasn't Marcus, though, but Frederic. He frowned and sat up. "How did you get in?"

Frederic bowed his head. "Forgive me, Your Majesty. I needed to speak to you. About Marcus," he said.

Wilhelm pushed his hair out of his face. "Is he all right?" he asked in a worried tone. His stomach churned at the very mention of Marcus. He wanted to be angry with Frederic, but he couldn't.

"I guess that's a matter of opinion, Your Majesty. He's a free man, or so he said. But he's miserable about it, for some reason." He folded his arms behind his back. "He seems to believe you never wish to see him again."

Wilhelm felt odd discussing this with Frederic, but he was thirsty for information about Marcus. "He ... he's miserable? But he is free..."

"If I may speak plainly, your Majesty, he told me that he would have preferred that you'd had him executed than to send him away from you," he said, boldly meeting the prince's gaze.

Wilhelm gasped, eyes wide. "Why would he say such a thing? I thought he would want to be free of me. Unless, of course, he wishes to stay with you. I did tell him he didn't have to leave the castle."

"Your Majesty, 'twas obvious to me that it is *you* he wishes to be near, not me. You were all he could talk about. He kept saying that you didn't want to see him anymore. He was completely despondent."

Wilhelm wanted to believe it. But he couldn't, not yet. "Why would you tell me this?" he asked. "I do not intend to punish you, if that's what you're worried about."

Frederic frowned. "I thought that perhaps you freed him because you cared for him. And if that were true you would want to know that he is going to leave."

"I do care for him," Wilhelm answered immediately. "I love him, in fact. Which is why I had to let him go. Because I no longer wish to force him to be with me." He looked down. He felt awful about it all over again.

"Well, he does not know that. He is certain you never want to lay eyes on him again. I thought you would wish to know, your Majesty. He was in the slave quarters an hour past. I made him promise not to leave without saying goodbye."

Hope sprang up in Wilhelm's heart. Was it possible? He stood a little shakily. "I will go to him," he said softly but definitively. He looked at Frederic. "Thank you. For telling me."

* * * *

Wilhelm raced to the slaves' quarters, hoping he wasn't too late. He pushed his way in past several surprised slaves and guards. He asked where Marcus' cot was, and he was directed there. But it was too late. The guard told him that Marcus had gone.

Wilhelm stood, stunned for a moment. Then he did the only thing he could think of. He sought out the steward.

* * * *

The steward saw the prince walking briskly towards him, and he slowed his steps. He turned and waited for him. "Your Majesty," he said, bowing. "I have delivered the documents you requested. However," he held up a sizeable purse, "he refused the coin. I insisted, but he would have none of it."

Wilhelm blinked. "But where has he gone? If he refused the money he has nothing!" He looked around as if he might catch sight of his love.

The steward looked nonplussed. "He was leaving, Your Majesty. You granted him his freedom."

"I know!" Wilhelm exclaimed impatiently. He resisted the urge to stomp his foot. "Did he say where he was going?"

The steward stiffened a little. "I am sorry, Your Majesty. He did not tell me his plans. He did not leave long ago. I can send a guard to search for him if you wish."

Wilhelm thought about it for a moment. He didn't want to force Marcus to stay. "No, I shall look for him myself."

Marcus could have been long gone, but he'd waited, hoping to see Frederic again. Finally, he'd felt as if it was time to go. He'd pulled on the clothes he'd come to the castle with, and headed for the gates with a heavy heart. He had no destination in mind. He had no money. He was simply going to throw himself at fate.

Wilhelm didn't know where to look, but he thought he'd position himself by the gates so he could see everyone who left. He hoped it wasn't too late already. He'd borrowed a long cloak with which he could conceal his identity, and stationed himself to watch.

Marcus trudged towards the gates. It didn't matter what happened to him, anyway. He looked down, hair falling in his face. He wrapped his arms around himself as a cool breeze whipped around his arms.

Wilhelm watched each of the people that passed by, searching frantically for the man he knew he couldn't live without. If he was too late, if Marcus had already passed outside of these gates, he knew he would never find him. Every time he saw a young, slim man his heart leapt; but then they would get closer and he could see it wasn't Marcus.

Marcus was barely aware of where he was going. He knew where the gates were. They were large enough that he couldn't possibly miss them, even though he was staring at the ground, for the most part.

Wilhelm could barely believe his eyes when he spotted Marcus. He walked forward, needing to be sure. It had to be him, though he looked so small in his cloak. He almost lost his nerve, but he knew it was his last chance. He stepped into Marcus' path and said, "Marcus."

Marcus looked up, wide-eyed. He swallowed hard. "Mas ... I mean ... Your Majesty." He bowed his head. "I'm sorry. I am leaving," he whispered. His bottom lip trembled, and he fought to hold back the tears.

"No!" Wilhelm cried, a little too loudly. "I mean ... please. Wait, I wish to speak to you, Marcus. Can you not wait a moment?" He stared at Marcus, drinking him in.

Marcus raised his eyes to the prince's. "I would stand here for the rest of my life if you asked it of me."

Wilhelm felt the tears welling up in his eyes. "Then why, Marcus? Why would you leave? I set you free because I love you and I do not wish you to be with me only because I owned you." It was frightening to say the words.

Marcus gasped. He glanced around. They were almost surrounded by people. "Perhaps we should discuss this somewhere more private, Your Majesty?" he said quietly. He knew he wasn't going to get through this conversation without making a scene that would hurt the prince's reputation, even if it ultimately made him happy.

Wilhelm frowned. Marcus clearly did not even wish to be seen with him. "All right, if you promise not to run away this time," he whispered, trying not to sound as if his heart was breaking.

Marcus nodded and followed the prince back to his chambers. He could tell that the prince was not happy about his suggestion, but he hoped things would go better once he could speak freely. As soon as the door was closed behind him, he turned and looked at the prince. "I did not think it would serve you well if the king were to hear you declare your love for your former slave," he said softly. "And the only reason I was leaving was because I thought you wanted me to, your Majesty. I did not wish to cause you any further pain. If you want me to stay, nothing could make me depart."

"I do not care what the king thinks," Wilhelm said impetuously. He barely held back from kissing Marcus passionately. "I have loved you since the moment I laid eyes on you, my sweet Marcus. I should never have kept you as

my slave; I should have freed you long ago. But I was selfish and wanted you to never leave me."

"I ... I love you, too, my beautiful Master," he said softly. He reached out and touched the prince's face gently. "I am so sorry that I hurt you. If I had known, I would never have gone with Frederic. I swear to you. I don't want anyone but you."

Wilhelm looked down. "I am so ashamed that I took advantage of you like that. I never said you could not be with Frederic. But it just hurt so badly to see his hands on you." He didn't dare hope, though he had heard Marcus profess his love.

"And you shall never see it again. I thought I was just an object to you. A possession. And that it would not matter to you. But even so, I felt guilty going with him, like I was betraying you. Because I love you, and I wanted to be with you. I will never be your equal, but at least I am more than property now," he said quietly.

Wilhelm looked into Marcus' eyes. "I am sorry I made you feel like a possession," he whispered. Though the man had been just that. His property. He ached to take him in his arms, but he held back. He wanted no misunderstanding between them now. "I ... I love you. I cannot live without you, Marcus. Please stay with me. But I ask you as a lover, not a prince."

For the first time, Marcus felt bold enough to make a move. He stepped close and slid his arms around the prince's waist. "How should I address you, then, Your Majesty? When we are alone, I mean."

Wilhelm moaned at Marcus' touch. He almost couldn't believe he had him back, after thinking he'd lost him forever. "Call me ... call me Wilhelm," he whispered, wrapping his arms around him and pulling him close.

Marcus smiled. "Wilhelm is a lovely name," he said. He leaned in and kissed him on the lips, feeling brazen because Wilhelm seemed to like it.

Wilhelm whimpered for a moment, then began to kiss back eagerly. All his despair turned to desire, and suddenly he was achingly aroused. He pulled Marcus tighter against his body, and kissed him as if he would die without it.

Marcus let himself be pulled, melting against Wilhelm's body. It was strange to think of his Master by his real name, but it was nice, too. He wasn't used to being almost like an equal. He hoped he didn't overstep. He kissed his lover back, all the sadness and despair ebbing away in the feeling of being loved.

It was better than before, even. Wilhelm devoured Marcus, kissing him thoroughly, hands moving restlessly over the former slave's body. He needed to possess him. It felt like it had been years since he'd done so, and suddenly he was nearly frantic. He didn't want to force Marcus, though. He needed this to be mutual.

Marcus responded more than usual. Before he had done as he was told, though he enjoyed it as completely as his Master did. Now he felt that he had unspoken permission to participate actively. He slid his fingers up under the back of Wilhelm's fine soft shirt, feeling every ripple of muscle beneath the creamy smooth skin.

Slowly, everything in the past was dissolving, and all that mattered was the two of them. Marcus was in his arms at last, willingly, and they had all the time in the world. He was so hard for this beautiful young man, and he would take him soon. Over and over, all night and all day. He loved the feeling of Marcus' hands on him, and he returned the favor, pushing the other man's shirt up, caressing his bare skin.

Marcus leaned back and pulled his shirt off for his lover, then helped him with his shirt. He ran his hands all over Wilhelm's chest reverently. "I have always thought you the most beautiful man I have ever seen," he breathed.

Wilhelm smiled. "Funny, I thought the very same thing about you," he replied. He dropped his hands to Marcus' trousers. "I wish to touch you everywhere, my love." Calling Marcus his love was exciting and new, but it felt so right.

Marcus smiled. "You may touch me wherever you like, whenever you like," he said softly. He tugged loose the tie on his trousers and slid them off until he was standing naked before the Prince again. "I love you ... Wilhelm."

Wilhelm's breath hitched; no matter how many times he'd seen Marcus naked, he never failed to stun him with his beauty. And now that he knew his love was returned, it was even better. "'Tis a shame to cover that gorgeous body," he said, eyes roaming.

Marcus grinned. "I could say the same, Ma ... Wilhelm," he whispered, tugging at the Prince's trousers. "It was only two days past, but it feels like a lifetime," he murmured.

Wilhelm moaned and helped remove his trousers. "Any time away from you is too long," he said, and when they were

both naked he pulled Marcus into his arms again. "Much better." Their bodies fit together perfectly.

Marcus bent his head and nuzzled and suckled at the side of Wilhelm's neck. "I was miserable without you. I could not imagine what my life would be like, but it seemed dark and horrible."

"Life without you would not be worth living," Wilhelm said earnestly. "I wish you to stay with me forever. As my consort, or whatever my father will allow. But you *will* be with me."

"I will never leave so long as you want me, my love," he said. He raised his eyes to Wilhelm's and kissed him again.

"I will want you forever," Wilhelm replied, after the kiss broke, and he began to pull Marcus toward the bed. He didn't want Marcus to think he only wanted sex, but right now it was all he could think of.

Marcus tumbled back onto the broad bed with a happy smile. He could never have imagined such joy after such despair just a few hours before. He scooted over, making room for the prince. "Then you shall never be rid of me."

"Good," Wilhelm grinned, rolling on top of the former slave. He moaned as their bodies lined up perfectly. "I love you, sweet Marcus," he moaned. "Now you are truly mine."

Marcus was desperate for Wilhelm suddenly, and he raked his nails lightly up his back. He leaned up and kissed him deeply, plunging his tongue into the slick heat. Wilhelm's words set him on fire, and he wanted to show him the depth of his desire in his actions.

Wilhelm groaned into the kiss, undone by Marcus' passion. He'd never desired anyone this much, and he knew it was

because of their love as well as their lust. Marcus was his perfect lover. He moved against him, pressing him into the bed, because he knew Marcus liked it that way.

Marcus shifted beneath the other man, spreading his legs apart in obvious invitation. "Take me, please, Wilhelm. I need you so much." He was throbbing with desire as he gazed into the prince's warm brown eyes.

"My Marcus," Wilhelm breathed, reaching out for the oil, then slicking himself quickly. "Need you, all of you..." He was as desperate as he had been the first time.

"I'm yours, my beautiful Master," he breathed, using the word as an endearment. He was panting now, and it all seemed so much more real. "Yours forever."

Wilhelm's cock seemed to slip into position automatically and he pressed upward, entering Marcus' hot, tight body. "Mine," he groaned, drowning in sweet friction.

Marcus sucked in a deep breath. He remembered that he was free, and could do as he liked now. He moaned, tilting his head back. "So perfect," he whispered.

"You're perfect," Wilhelm growled, undone by the passion they shared. "Love you, my sweet Marcus, oh god..." He thrust deeply, precisely, wringing ecstasy from each slide in and out.

Marcus had thought he would never enjoy anything again, let alone making love with the most beautiful man in the world. He moaned Wilhelm's name with each thrust, gasping and trembling. He held onto his lover's strong arms, pushed to the edge of his control more quickly than ever.

Nothing existed outside the room, the bed, the beautiful man under him. Wilhelm was completely entranced, making love to Marcus more completely than he'd ever done. He'd never felt more connected to another person. It was even more intense because he'd almost lost him. He drove deep, striving to give Marcus the maximum pleasure, and he reached down to stroke him as well.

When Wilhelm's fingers curled around his cock, Marcus cried out and arched up. It only took a stroke or two before he was coming hard, nearly screaming Wilhelm's name as the edges of his vision grayed out.

Marcus was even more beautiful when he came, and Wilhelm followed helplessly, gasping as he emptied himself inside his lover. It felt even better than before.

Marcus smiled adoringly at Wilhelm. "I love you," he whispered.

"Oh, Marcus. I love you so much," Wilhelm declared, gazing back at him. He would never be away from Marcus more than necessary, no matter what. He couldn't live without him. "Stay with me forever."

When Wilhelm shifted off of him, Marcus instantly curled around his body. "Forever. You'll always be the Master of my heart."

Phaze Fantasies, Vol. III
by J Buchanan, Jade Falconer, Eliza Gayle

Dragon's Fate

by Eliza Gayle

Phaze Fantasies, Vol. III
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Also by Eliza Gayle

Taken By Tarot

Submissive Secrets

Prologue

The bones rattled together in the bag as she walked. Ancient dragon bones collected from the clan Seers over the centuries. For ages her family had walked this same path, helping the Dragon kind find their way during troubling times. The air in the cave, cold and damp, chilled her to the bone. The conditions perfect for the future.

Coming upon the clearing, she paused to feel the power surging through the cavern. Drops of moisture could be heard hitting the dirt floor. Her body trembled with a slight fear that was unavoidable in the face of such ancient power. The earthy scents filled her mind as she took a deep calming breath before proceeding.

Her hand reached into her pockets, withdrawing the four crystals. She swept across the room, staging the crystals in the four corners, balancing the power within the space. Providing the anchor and focus for a reading.

Pulling her black leather pouch from its spot on her hip, she rattled the bones by shaking the bag, listening to the scrape and rattle. Her nerves sizzled in anticipation. The time was upon her to determine the fate of a warrior who troubled her in dreams for far too long.

Crouching at the well-worn altar, she spilled the bones, watching them tumble from the bag, her breath catching in her throat. Looking down at the markings and pattern of the bones, her vision blurred as the prophecy formed in her mind.

The time had come for the blue dragon to learn and accept his fate. The clan was in dire need of new leadership and the challenge was upon them to find a new leader. One to teach the others their role in the clan. Faith was building in the rise of Kian, but the Oracle was less clear. Kian's path splintered, making it difficult to see but the one thing she was certain of...

Trouble was coming.

Chapter One

"Oh, hell no!" Garon raged, pacing away from his father's throne, body coiled tight. He watched the guards move a bit closer to his father's side. An offensive move that as a warrior he could appreciate, but it bristled him nonetheless. What did they think he was going to do? Attack his own father? He struggled to bank down his anger before he addressed him again. Too bad the sight of the Dragon standing in front of his father turned his stomach. He'd successfully avoided the Unseelie and it had been years since he'd even laid eyes on one of their kind. Forcing back memories of a different time and a different dragon, Garon looked back at his father.

"You know I won't do this. You will have to get someone else to do it." Thoughts of other trainers and their dumb luck traveled through him until he hit upon the perfect solution. "Sire, I believe Cirdan to be the man for this job." The thoughts of what his cousin would do to the likes of that Dragon gave him no pause whatsoever. Cirdan the sadist was just what any Dragon would deserve.

"Garon." His father's booming voice brought him back to their conversation abruptly. "That was not a request. It was an order. An order given by your king and one you will carry out without question." As always his father spoke with his trademark cold and lifeless tone when addressing with his eldest son. Never showing an ounce of emotion. "You will take young Kian of Levanti here and train him in the art of Dominance and Submission as your apprentice. His king has

specifically requested your services and I have agreed." Despite his father's calm demeanor, Garon felt his verbal blow as if he'd been struck by the handle of a sword to the side of his head.

His own father had infused his words with a push of power strong enough to knock him over. His vision blurred as he fought to stay upright. He refused to give the bastard the satisfaction of even flinching. His breath clogged in his throat at the crushing pressure of his windpipe. He fought the urge to claw at his throat while all eyes in the room watched for his reaction. Garon watched the amusement swimming in the king's eyes while he struggled, knowing full well the pleasure he would receive if he gave in and showed any sign of weakness. No matter, Garon's discipline, training, and sheer force of will would have him passing out, half dead, which he was dangerously close to doing, before he would move a muscle.

"Any more questions, son?" His emphasis on the word *son* chilled him to the bone. Unfortunately his own silence was understood by all present as an agreement. A sign of respect for the king. *What a load of shit.* He couldn't speak now if he tried. The Dragon turned and moved away from his place by the throne giving way to the next order of business. When he passed by Garon it was that instant the king decided to release his hold on his throat and an involuntary groan escaped his lips.

"Did you say something?" The arrogance dripped from every syllable.

"Don't push your luck, Dragon. You may be here at the wishes of my king, but I control you now." Garon eyed the male standing in front of him. His breast plate and leathers covered most of his large muscular frame, but the deep blue tint of his skin drew Garon's eye to his bulging arms and thick neck.

He sported the long hair that was expected from a warrior of his class, and for a moment an unwanted vision of Garon's beefy hands wrapped around those strands—pushing the Dragon to his knees—invaded his thoughts. How long would he have to wait before the man would beg for his cock? Unexpectedly his balls tightened and his dick lengthened in anticipation. He shook his head to clear the traitorous thoughts, hoping for some relief from the pressure in his pants.

He lifted his gaze to meet the Dragon, but the look in his eyes didn't show the proper respect Garon expected. In fact, the little shit looked like he was enjoying this whole thing. He snarled in response before swiveling, turning his back on him. His father knew how he felt about the dragons. He'd seen the damage Garon suffered first hand. But nonetheless, this is what his father wanted, and what that bastard wanted he got.

Garon wasn't sure how much more of this he would tolerate. His need for control was all consuming, which was why he was such a good submissive trainer. His brand of control was strict and demanding, and those who fought it were dealt with quickly and efficiently to bring them in line with their true submissive needs. Unfortunately, more times than not, his trainees grew too attached, and sending them

on their way usually became a sticky matter. Yet, he loved his work. Receiving the gift of submission, no matter how brief, always gave him powerful pleasure. A high like nothing else. Unfortunately he didn't want this assignment. With a quick stride he left the room without another word, daring the Dragon to follow.

* * * *

Kian watched Garon the "Mighty" walk away from him. He'd heard the stories about Garon for years and had looked forward to meeting him, feeling lucky that he would train under him. But now as he stomped from the room, Kian's second thoughts flared to life all over again. When the seer had come to him with her crystals and prophecies, he'd had no choice but to heed her words. He didn't feel like the chosen one. In fact, he preferred to go back to his life and just go where the fights were when he was needed and fuck when he felt like it. No strings. No responsibilities. Just do as he was told.

Instead he stood in the Seelie court, shunned by the prince who would train him. But the king's orders were law and he couldn't afford that kind of trouble so he reluctantly followed after Prince Garon as he led the way from the throne room.

The royal home was enormous, and Kian wondered what Garon's quarters would be like or where he would stay while here. So he was rather surprised when Garon led him out of the house and deep into the forest surrounding the palace. He followed the man through rough and rocky terrain, all the while wondering what the hell he was up to.

Finally after a couple of hours of following in silence he couldn't take it anymore. "Sir, err—Prince Garon, where are we going?" The stubborn Faery said nothing. Just kept moving. "You do realize, sir, that if we have a long way to travel, I could fly us there." He watched Garon's back as he kept going with nary a hesitation at any of Kian's words. The prince's torso was bare of clothing except for the leather strap he wore across his back. And sheathed in that strap were several knives of varying lengths and shapes, not to mention the other weapons that were probably strapped to his body that Kian couldn't see. He could picture those weapons clearly. With the size and stature of the man in front of him it didn't take much imagination to envision a leather strap wrapped around his brawny leg. There were probably a couple of spare weapons packed into the leather pouches of his breeches. Not to mention what else was hidden underneath the fabric.

Those unwelcome images stiffened his cock as he continued to think about sliding his hands inside those leathers discovering for himself what lies underneath. He'd never been with a Fae man and was curious about his wings that even now shimmered across his back in a tattoo like appearance. Would they emerge from his smooth skin when he was excited? Or would they burst forth at the moment he came, when he momentarily lost control?

Hmmm. Somehow I doubt this man knows what it feels like to lose control.

Lost in his thoughts of sex and control, Kian failed to notice that Garon had stopped moving until he plowed into his

back. It was like hitting a solid brick wall. The man was all hard muscle and bone covered in sleek skin. His musky essence permeated his nostrils causing the dragon to stir within him. Heat and power coiled in his belly as he fought to bank down his desires.

Garon surged away from him before he could catch his breath. When he turned to face Kian his dagger was drawn and coiled to strike.

"What the fuck is your problem, Dragon?" His brown eyes glittered with anger as the cold as ice statement cooled Kian's heated body.

"Whoa. Chill out. It was just an accident." Kian slowly backed away as the murderous look in the prince's face faded away.

"Unless you want to lose something important, I suggest you be more careful."

Garon's attitude with him was beginning to wear him down. They didn't know each other, so there was no cause for this treatment.

"Do you mind explaining what your problem is with me? You've treated me like shit since the moment we met. What the hell?"

Garon re-sheathed his weapon, rolling his shoulders and taking a few deep breaths. "I don't do dragons. In fact, I want nothing to do with your kind."

"Why the hell not? What did we ever do to you?" For a split second something flashed in Garon's eyes before it was replaced with his trademark cold glare. He stalked forward,

coming close. There was a lethal calmness in his eyes, but Kian didn't back down. He could fight if need be.

"What I like or don't like is no concern of yours. You need to learn now that I'm the one in control here and I will ask the questions." Garon's lowered voice rumbling near his ear skated along Kian's spine sending chills across his fiery skin. In that moment he wanted nothing more than to turn and feel the Fae's lips pressed against his own.

This is so not a good sign.

"Now, let's go. We've reached our destination." He led Kian through a final dense thicket of brush before pushing their way into a huge meadow. And he was right. There in the middle of nowhere stood a grand stone house with a couple of smaller out buildings off to the side and behind it. While it was no King's castle it was still quite impressive. Just the kind of place Kian would love for himself someday.

"You ready to get started, Dragon?"

"Right now?"

"Why not? The sooner we get started the sooner we get done." Together they walked into the house and Kian marveled at the simple beauty of it. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting, but the elegant surroundings weren't it. Hell, the man was known throughout the Otherworld as the ultimate warrior and submissive trainer, yet when walking into his home he was surrounded by comfortable and plush furnishings without a whip or weapon in sight.

"What's wrong, Dragon? You don't like my house?" Garon flopped down onto the couch, filling it up with his hulking presence. His bronzed skin blended with the leather of the

couch, presenting an inviting picture to Kian. Damn, he was here to become a stronger Dominant, yet right this instant he could only picture himself on his knees between the prince's legs, freeing his cock from the tight leathers so he could wrap his fingers around the stout base, slipping its head between his lips.

Oh, Goddess. He needed to get a grip. Garon couldn't stand the sight of him, let alone the idea of sharing their bodies together. Oh man, he should have gotten fucked before coming here. His balls ached to spill in release, and he was certain it wouldn't take Garon long to notice.

"No, sir, it's nothing like that."

"Then what is it? Tell me. Now."

"Given your position, er—reputation, I expected something a little more functional for our training." Garon's eyes sparkled, and for a moment Kian thought he might smile.

"We won't be doing any training in this part of the house, Dragon. But you have nothing to worry about, I have a full on dungeon downstairs." Garon's voice lowered as he continued. "It's an excellent facility for anything your imagination can conjure that you want to do to the perfect little subbie." Kian's cock tightened further at the sensual tone of Garon's voice, and it took every ounce of restraint not to cover himself when Garon's gaze traveled to his crotch. Something changed in the prince's eyes when he noticed his hard on, something sexual and aggressive emanated from the big man. His hands clenched into tight fists before extending each finger flexing his hand back open. When he stalked towards Kian, he backed away his jaw tightening.

"What's the matter, Dragon?"

"Sir, my name is Kian. It would be fine if you call me Kian." His words came out jilted and stiff, giving away his nervousness at the close proximity of the Fae Prince. *Fuck.*

"I know your name, I just prefer to call you Dragon, so get used to it." His words came out harsh but a devilish look came into his eyes as his words took on a more sensual tone as he edged closer to Kian. "Are you afraid of me, Dragon?"

"No." His answer came out fast and harsh. He felt like prey being stalked in the woods by a vicious predator.

"Get on your knees, boy."

Chapter Two

The dragon's head jerked up at the request, his eyes glowed with a savage inner fire when they met Garon's gaze. He could see the war going on inside. The bastard actually wanted to do it.

When he'd spied the massive erection in the man's pants his curiosity had bloomed, and he'd decided to intimidate the Dragon. Instead, his own heat built in his gut, and he had an overwhelming urge to push the Dragon himself down to his knees.

Despite his anger towards Dragons in general he couldn't help but admire the physique of the other man. The blue tint of his skin had darkened to a rich royal color when he'd become aroused, emphasizing the sinewy musculature of his exposed arms. He was certain the chest hidden underneath the warrior clothing would be nothing less than spectacular. The Dragon kind had always been known for impressive physiques and sexual prowess.

"You can take all that garb off if you want to. You won't be needing it here." Garon inclined his head towards the armor and weaponry strategically placed all over his form. "The only battle you're going to be in here is a mental one. A total power exchange, if you will, and your only weapons will be sexual in nature." Heat flared from the Dragon, enveloping Garon in a near scorching blast. His own cock twitched and strained against his leathers seeking more of that heat.

Garon didn't back off as Kian removed his breast plate and weapons, tossing them in the nearby chair, instead his back itched with a slight burn of his own as his wings threatened to burst forth from his skin.

When Garon caught sight of the bare blue chest of the Dragon he imagined the strength and power that would erupt between them when they fucked. Garon's erection lay long and heavy inside his breeches, and he struggled against his natural urge to push the man into submission. The Dragon's heat lured and seduced, but he maintained his discipline despite the musky scent of their lust, almost sending him over the edge. No one had ever triggered the heat he felt at this moment. *But why the hell is it coming from this Dragon?*

The power struggle continued as Garon stayed silent, waiting for Kian to comply with his wishes. He refused to waver from his original command, anxious to see what the Dragon would do. When the man sank to his knees with deliberate care, Garon's breath hitched in his throat as the familiar awareness of control washed over him. When the Dragon bowed his head in respect, Garon's keen perception told him something was not quite right about the whole situation.

"Dragon, tell me what you know about submission." Kian raised his head, confusion in his gaze. "If you wish to be a stronger Dominant and a future trainer, then you have to demonstrate a complete understanding of what submission is. It's a package deal, with the Dominant expected to be able to handle the unexpected."

"Submission to me is a man or woman's desire to obey and please his or her master." Garon waited for Kian to elaborate further. "In all aspects of their lives. Not just in a sexual relationship." Garon nodded, quite pleased with Kian's response. "And since I really don't like to take orders from someone else, the dominant role seems natural for me." Garon rolled his eyes, stifling a groan.

For a minute there he'd thought maybe this wouldn't be such a hard job after all. Then the cocky Dragon returned, "You say you don't like to take orders, yet you practically fell to your knees the minute I asked." Kian's head jerked and when his gaze met Garon's, his eyes flashed deep dark red instead of their normal violet hue. Anger simmered there, but that wasn't all. *Oh, no.* The spicy heat emanating from the Dragon wasn't caused by simple anger. There were layers there. Anger, attraction, and yes, probably some resentment. Garon was pleased.

"Sir, you misunderstand respect for servitude." When Kian spoke a small trickle of smoke escaped his lips, alerting Garon to the fact that he was about to shift. Garon moved quickly to take control of the situation. Grabbing a fistful of the Dragon's brown hair, he forced Kian's head up against his hard crotch.

"Are you seriously going to try and tell me that you don't want this?" When the fever of the Dragon's breath rushed over his clothed cock, Garon lost his ability to wait. It was time to see what this little Dragon was made of and how far he really wanted to go with this.

* * * *

Kian's head reeled, lust boiling in his blood as he fought his inner Dragon. His anger fueled the compulsion to change form. In Dragon form he would be forced to fight or fly. No Dragon could ever sit still.

Did he want this? Sure he was attracted to the Fae, but did he want to submit to him like this? Kian had never engaged in D/s play with another male, just sex.

Garon dragged Kian's face away from his throbbing sex and shoved him toward the ground hard. He tried to catch himself with his hands, but Garon's strength overpowered him and he landed face first onto the floor. Without words Garon demanded Kian's submission by tearing his pants from his waist and shoving them down to his knees. His rough fingers digging into the soft flesh of his buttocks, pulling them apart, exposing his anus. Humiliation mingled with unexpected sexual arousal.

A stab of fear sliced through Kian's consciousness as realization dawned on him that yes, he really did want to submit to Garon's demands. But it was even more than that. He wanted to be forced to submit. If he was forced then he wouldn't have to feel guilty about his family's expectations. He would be free to experience the satisfaction of obedience.

When Garon positioned his body behind Kian's he felt the hot, hard evidence of the Dominant's arousal pressing against his ass, and once again the Dragon flared to life. This couldn't be right for him. He wasn't a submissive. He tried to retreat but Garon held him fast.

"Simmer down, Dragon." Garon's words were firm but Kian fought it. He attempted to twist and turn from underneath

Garon's body without shifting. But Garon held him down in an iron tight grip. "Can you tell me this isn't what you want, Dragon? If you can I'll stop right now." Kian's breath came in shallow pants as he jerked and struggled to loosen Garon's grip. For all his fighting to get free he couldn't bring himself to say the simple words that would bring it all to a stop.

With a short hard thrust he felt Garon's heavy cock penetrate his tight anus. "No!" Shame ripped through him along with the pain of the entry. Kian bucked and twisted in a final attempt to get away. His breath was heavy and hot as the Dragon within fought to get out. Garon stilled, chuckling in his ear. Because with every movement Kian made, his cock worked in further and the muscles and tissues stretched and blazed.

Kian sensed the sudden change when the Dragon gave up the fight as lust and arousal overtook anger and resentment. A dark, spicy sensation overwhelmed his objections. Garon must have felt it as well as he picked up his thrusts, forcing his dick deep in Kian's ass. The pain burned as he was invaded by the enormous shaft, but as Kian gave in to the other man's dominance, the pain fed his arousal and his own cock swelled and wept for release.

The scent of sweat and pure male lust assaulted Kian's senses as Garon drove himself deeper and deeper into his body until his tight balls slapped against his ass. Kian's own balls ached, but when he tried to reach for some relief Garon knocked his arm away and retightened his restraining hold over his body.

"What do you think you are doing, Dragon?" Garon spoke through clenched teeth and his thrusts were harder than ever, but the menace in his voice rang through loud and clear.

"If you want to come then you have to ask me first." Kian balked. He'd never asked to come in his life, especially not at his own hand. "If you come without permission you will be punished. And I guarantee you won't like it." Garon's movements had slowed as if his now shallow teasing thrusts would emphasize his statement. The lighter movements were driving him crazy and he attempted to push back further onto Garon's cock. But he must have anticipated that move as he held Kian's body off only allowing his smooth round head to penetrate.

"Garon. Please." Kian continued to fight against the hold, desperate to be fucked harder.

"Please what? I want to hear you say it." Kian hesitated, unsure if he could say the words. Until Garon adjusted his position and his cock stroked a sensitive spot within. His violent need to come overcame the rest of his inhibitions.

"Please fuck me. Fuck me harder."

"Harder what?" Kian knew what he wanted and he was too far gone to deny it.

"Fuck me harder, sir." Kian felt Garon surge forward, his cock buried so deep he thought he might burst. When a hand grasped around the base of his own cock a roar burst forth from deep in his belly as heat exploded in his head and jets of white cream blasted from his slit.

From behind he felt Garon's body convulse forward and spill his hot come deep in his bowels. His cock pulsed and stretched him with each new spurt until finally he was done.

Spent from his own climax, Kian's arms shuddered and gave out no longer able to support him. He collapsed to the floor, forcing the air out of his lungs from his own weight as well as Garon's.

Thoughts of Garon's dominance raced through his mind. Never had sex with a man ever been so intense or satisfying. He trembled from the withdrawal when Garon slipped his cock from between his cheeks. He'd liked it. Hell, he'd needed it all along he just didn't realize. Would he be able to forget and continue his mission? His lids grew heavy as he wondered what would happen now.

What had they done?

Chapter Three

Goddess, what the fuck am I doing? As he eased himself from Kian's body, Garon was stricken by what he'd done. He peered down at the sleeping Dragon. His skin color was fading from the midnight blue of his lust to the normal tint of blue he'd seen earlier. *Mine*. For a fleeting moment the one word filled him with a sense of peace he was unfamiliar with. There were red marks along his wrists and shoulders where Garon had restrained him when he fought. That was nothing compared to what would be there if he'd had his flogger or whip to use. *Maybe next time*.

No. Garon shook his head clear of those images. Topping a Dragon was a really bad idea, and one he didn't want to repeat. He'd sworn the day he escaped the Black Dragon that he would never again touch or fall under the spell of another.

He'd been sent to learn from the legendary Dom when he was young and eager. Yes, his ego had been inflated and he'd deserved to be brought down a peg or two, but instead he'd become the Black Dragon's sexual and painful obsession. For weeks he'd been tortured by the sadistic creature, all manner of pain and destruction rained down on him. Since his body would heal every couple of days the bastard had sliced and diced him every way imaginable, bringing him to the brink of death more than once. Garon had thought himself broken when he begged for mercy or death night after night.

The night he'd escaped, the Dragon had broken one of his restraints with his tail without realizing it. A fluke. His wings

had been damaged that time and it was sheer will that got him out before he died.

It had taken him weeks to recover from the damage inflicted that last night and against his families orders he'd returned to the lair of the Black Dragon as soon as he was able, his plan to kill him. Garon hadn't cared about the probable war that he would start or that he would be shunned from the Seelie court. He'd been unable to see past the white hot rage coursing through his heart.

Unfortunately someone had beat him to it. He'd found the Dragon dead on the floor with a scabbard stabbed through his heart. Black blood pooled around his body. His need for retribution and closure thwarted by an unknown assailant. His control splintered as he raged throughout the cavern leaving a path of destruction and ash as he destroyed every inch of the Dragon's lair.

Even now, all these years later he felt the familiar itch and burn on his back as his wings shot from his skin. Adrenaline and anger a well-known companion.

"Holy Shit Garon, what's going on?" he shot up at the sound of Kian's voice, the warrior in him ready for a fight. Kian too was in an offensive pose ready to go. Garon backed down as he realized how caught up he'd been in his dark memories. Yet the sight of his new dragon lover gave him no comfort from the void. As his wings receded reforming the tattoo, he reminded himself that he'd broken the one rule he never thought he could.

"Nothing. Nothing is going on." Garon's voice came out husky and strained. "You should still be resting. It takes a lot

to recover from sub space." Kian started to open his mouth in response. "No! Don't even try it. You'll just piss me off. Let's go."

* * * *

Garon led Kian to the bedroom urging him to lie down more. He stayed in the doorway not planning to stay with him. He didn't trust himself. The lure of the blue Dragon threatened to consume him.

"Garon, I doubt I can sleep. I'm wired now. Itching to do something." Garon looked at Kian noticing the sculpted muscles beneath the blue skin moving and jumping with a restless energy. Once again the urge to claim reared in his mind.

When he looked down past the flat muscled stomach he saw the Dragon was fully erect again. Flushed red, the veins prominent along his steel length. Under his scrutiny the shaft jerked against his stomach and a drop of pre come appeared at the slit.

The boy's reaction brought a smile to Garon's lips before he spoke. "Then let's talk about your training." He leaned his hip against the door frame. "Do you still want to become a Dominant trainer?" Kian took a telling few seconds to answer.

"Yes."

"Why?" Their one session earlier didn't necessarily mean that Kian was meant to be a submissive but Garon's gut instinct told him otherwise. His responses and reactions had been incredible and it seemed likely that he would make a beautiful submissive under the right Owner.

Me.

No.

"It's what I am meant to do. My calling." Garon was taken aback by that. Kian's response wasn't what he'd been expecting. He assumed the Dragon would give him another arrogant macho response like he'd done earlier.

"Your calling? Where did you get that idea?"

"I'm a Dragon male. A warrior. Aggressive is my nature." Garon stifled a grin. Now there was the Dragon he'd been expecting. As the idea for his next training session formed in his mind, he considered the pleasure he would get from the lesson.

"Fine, if you don't want to rest anymore we might as well move on to the next lesson. We'll get cleaned up and meet back here in twenty minutes. I have a couple of things to gather up." An odd sensation flickered in his chest as he thought about showing the Dragon the true meaning of aggressive.

Chapter Four

"So, you think it takes an aggressive man to control a sub?" Kian felt Garon's intense scrutiny as he waited for Kian's answer. He shifted uncomfortably.

"Yes."

"Do you think a Dominant should allow his sub some freedom to make some of the decisions."

"No."

"Why not?" Kian got the distinct impression from Garon that this conversation was not going well.

"You give a girl some freedom and she will likely take too much and end up hurting the relationship." Garon's sigh was subtle, but Kian heard it and knew he wasn't happy with his answers.

"Let's come back to that later. Let's try something a bit less complex." Garon picked up his flogger from the bureau and brought it over to the bed where Kian sat.

"The first time you whip your sub, be it for discipline or pleasure, how do you handle it?" Garon flicked the leather strips along Kian's hand. The tiny sensations from the simple move had Kian squirming in his seat. Not to mention his already hard cock pulsed painfully. After his shower Garon had not allowed him to clothe his body. Nudity wasn't a new concept to him, but forced nudity was a different story. So here he sat on the bed on full display to Garon's knowing eyes. More than once Kian had caught a glimpse of longing when Garon thought he wasn't looking. And now his dick was

so hard it hurt. He didn't really want to listen to Garon talk about whipping a sub, he wanted to fuck. The bulge in Garon's loose pants was impossible to miss, and the thought of taking him into his mouth was driving him crazy. How would he taste? Would he—

"Dragon! Are you listening to me?" Garon's sharp words broke through Kian's lust filled thoughts, bringing him back to the reality of the training.

"Yeah, I'm listening."

Garon's frown let him know that he had his doubts. "Maybe you need a demonstration to keep you focused."

Kian wisely kept his mouth shut. Garon's thunderous look spelled trouble for him with a capital T.

"Lie face down on the bed and spread your arms and legs wide."

Kian hesitated.

"I can restrain you myself if you want, although I can guarantee I won't be gentle."

He really wasn't ready for that so he took the position of face down on the bed, spreading his legs and arms for Garon without wasting any more time.

"Now, the first time you whip a sub, be it man, woman, Fae or dragon, you need to understand what he needs and likes. And if you aren't sure of those answers then you have to test the waters." Kian closed his eyes and envisioned himself the Master, holding the flogger with one hand while stroking his cock with the other.

The sudden sting of the leather straps slapping the tops of his buttocks shocked him from his fantasy. He swiveled

around to look at Garon and was immediately forced back down against the bed.

"Last warning, Dragon. Move without my permission again and I will strap you down and beat your ass. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

Kian gritted his teeth and forced out the words Garon waited for. "Yes, Sir."

"Very good, Dragon." Garon flicked his wrist and Kian heard the whisper of the leather seconds before another stinging blow landed across his ass. It didn't just sting, though, a warm sensation was building under the skin. A pleasurable feeling he wanted more of. And Garon didn't make him wait long before the now familiar whisper sounded just before an even stronger blow landed. This time not only covering his buttocks, but a portion of his lower back. He continued the rhythm for a few more blows, each getting stronger than the last. With the next biting impact Kian couldn't stop from yelling out.

"Tell me how that feels, Dragon. Does it hurt? Kian's breath came in short shallow pants.

"Yes, it hurts." Kian felt Garon's heavy weight come down across his flaming skin, putting his lips right to his ear.

"Is pain all that you feel? Or if I turn you over right now will your dick be heavy and needy?" Without waiting for Kian's response, he rolled back off of him, taking his stance with the flogger once again.

"Tell me what you want, Dragon." Garon's hard hands with long fingers caressed his sore ass soothing some of the pain he'd inflicted. "Do you want me to stop?" Oh, goddess, this was all wrong. He shouldn't want the sensual beating Garon gave him, but goddess help him, he couldn't bear it if Garon stopped.

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, Sir, please don't stop." Garon's fingers dipped between his cheeks, searching out the soft, sensitive skin of his anus. Rubbing two fingers across his opening, but not entering. Kian bucked and cried out when Garon removed his hand from his cheeks.

"Dragon, this is my first time whipping you with my flogger. What should I do? Should I just keep beating you until I exhaust myself?" Kian tried to focus on Garon's words, but it was damn hard with his butt on fire, and his balls so tight and hard he thought he might come without any penetration.

"Dragon!" Garon's voice once again pulled Kian back to the here and now.

"Answer my question."

"Yes, the Dominant is in control and should continue the whipping until he is done."

Garon's sigh was loud and long. "Wrong." He whipped the flogger hard and fast against Kian's red skin, causing him to howl with the pleasure pain that came with every strike. "If I keep this up there will come a time, probably sooner than later, that pain will become all you feel and you will become

scared and frightened." Garon once again touched him with his bare hand along his hip this time. Kian sighed and arched into the touch.

"You have to test their response by touching various points of the body for a reaction. Ass, back, shoulders, arms." Garon's hands traversed his body in the pattern of his words, igniting all of his skin. He trembled under the sensual manipulation, driving his hips into the mattress, trying to stimulate his painfully engorged cock.

"Look at you, Dragon. You want this. You need it." His fingers reached under him to cup his balls, and Kian nearly shot off the bed. "You are not a Dominant." Kian arched his hips, pushing his ball sac tighter into Garon's caressing hand. "You are a good little submissive dragon."

Kian's passion soaked brain fought those words. "No. I'm—I'm just horny and desperate, desperate to come."

"Oh yeah, that's all? Huh." Garon's beefy hands reached underneath Kian and flipped him over, exposing his sensitive flesh to the chill in the air. "Raise your legs for me now."

Kian didn't even hesitate, automatically raising his legs eager to expose his entry hole to the Dom. A subtle rumble of laughter bubbled up from Garon's chest as Kian realized how easily he'd done as told. When he would have protested Garon plunged two fingers deep into his body setting off every nerve ending he had. His entire being trembled with lust and a greedy need.

"Come for me, Dragon. Come for me now!" At Garon's command Kian could no longer hold back and howled as his release spurted out of his cock, thick and creamy, coating his

belly and chest. Stream after stream of proof that he indeed was a good little Dragon more than willing to submit.

* * * *

Kian awoke to the sun shining brightly on an empty bed. He twisted his head, searching the room for Garon but found himself completely alone. Swinging his legs off the edge of the bed, he winced as lingering pain from the night's activities reminded him of the many lessons that Garon had taught him the night before.

Over and over he'd spanked, fucked, and whipped him into submission. And with a chilling clarity Kian realized that not once after their first time did Garon let himself come. No matter how much Kian had begged for come, Garon refused to allow it. A constant reminder through the experience who was the Dominant and who the submissive.

"Oh, and what do we have here?" Kian jerked at the unfamiliar voice. *Oh, crap.* Prince Cirdan, cousin to Garon and second in line for the throne, stood in the doorway, observing Kian and the scene from the night before.

Like all of the Seelie males, he towered well over six feet and filled the doorway with the breadth of his build. His waist length black hair framed one of the most handsome faces Kian had ever seen except for the eyes. His fierce green eyes appeared downright scary and went along well with the rumors surrounding the prince. The Fae was a sadist, one who took all his pleasure in the infliction of pain, consensual or not.

Despite being found in the nude in Garon's bed, Kian would not cower or hide. "I've been assigned to the prince for training Sir."

"Yes, I'd heard Garon was training a Dominant Dragon and I had to come and see for myself." His cold gaze raked across Kian's body. "But from the look of you I would say a different kind of training is going on here."

Kian looked down at himself, realizing that he had many red marks and bruises from the flogging he'd received. Under different circumstances he'd be remembering them all fondly, but under the disdainful eye of Cirdan he was embarrassed by them.

"Did he turn you into a whimpering little Dragon boy?" The malice skittered down Kian's spine as heat flared in his belly. "I'm not surprised really. He's been looking for some kind of payback for years against your kind. Looks like he's finally found it. By tricking you into becoming his submissive, he gets to fuck you until he's done with you and then drop you back to your clan like the worthless trash dragons are."

Kian's skin tightened as anger and humiliation warred within him. "You don't know what you're talking about, Cirdan. What the fuck is your problem?"

"You think not? Maybe you should ask him what happened to the Black Dragon that toyed with him last. Looks like you're just the latest novelty." Sensitive to fury and violence, Kian looked down to see his skin had already darkened to a shade close black. His shift was imminent and there was no way to stop it.

Blood of a bitch.

Cirdan glared at him with burning, reproachful eyes. Kian's teeth lengthened to sharp points as the familiar pain of the shift engulfed him. The texture of his skin hardened as bones crackled and stretched to accommodate the Dragon. Talons erupted from his fingers as the blaze of his heat burned in his eyes. Shift complete, he turned to face Cirdan with murderous intent.

"It would be a fatal mistake on your part, Dragon." The Fae warrior stood ready for combat, weapons in hand, prepared to do battle.

Kian hesitated to give one last thought to the consequence of his actions when a sudden pain sensation burned through the length of his arm from the sword of the Prince. The warmth of his blood covering his slick scales set him off. Instinct kicked in and all ability for reason was lost.

Kian launched himself into the prince, knocking him back into the far wall. He sprang back onto his feet. "You think it's going to be that easy, Dragon? You are already dead, but I on the other hand will be the one walking away from this. Was it worth it? Was becoming a dragon bitch to a stupid prince worth dying for?" Kian roared in anguish, flames licking the nearby surfaces in the room. The frantic pace of his wings propelled him towards Cirdan for another attack. The prince anticipated his move and escaped his grasp, but not before Kian knocked his sword across the room.

Left with only his small hand sword, Cirdan circled the Dragon. The triumphant glow in the prince's eyes was the final blow to Kian as he unleashed the full power of his fury towards Cirdan. He sank his fangs into the prince's shoulder,

feeling the rush of Fae blood down his parched throat as he crushed the arm, holding the sword pushing him to the ground. Cirdan's anguished roar of pain fed his natural impulses as his vision grew from brick red to black as the impulse to kill overtook him. Cirdan laughed, a wicked thunderous noise as the Dragon raised his claws to the neck of the prince.

"Kian, stop!" Garon's voice bellowed through the room seconds before he appeared next to the fallen prince. "Kill him now and I will run you through with this sword as you do. A slow death will be your immediate punishment." Kian looked towards Garon while keeping a tight hold on Cirdan. He wasn't about to release the prince only to die anyway.

Betrayal washed through him as he watched Garon advance with his sword. The pain unbearable as he watched his lover prepare to kill him. The tentative bond between Dominant and submissive snapped and he roared in the direction of Garon.

"Kian, let him go. Please. Don't make me do this." The plea from Garon's lips broke his will to kill and he released the prince, quickly shifting back to human form.

Cirdan surged to his feet. "Garon, I demand this Dragon's life right here and right now by your hand." Kian sank to his knees to await his fate. Cirdan was right. By attacking the warrior he had signed his own death warrant. With ice spreading through his stomach, all he could hope for now was a swift death. He raised his head to face his assassin and was shocked by the naked pain and despair visible in Garon's eyes.

"No, I won't do it." Garon faced Cirdan with a violent and defiant stare.

"You must. By law of decree, any creature who threatens the life of a member of the royal family is to be exterminated swiftly and without repercussion." Cirdan's face was alight with a satisfaction and eagerness Kian did not understand.

"There is another way." Garon said. Kian knew of no other outcome in a situation like this. If he did not pay for this act of defiance here on the spot his entire clan would be shunned from both the Seelie and the Unseelie. And he would become a hunted man.

Cirdan shook his head violently. "No, there is no other way."

"A trade could be made."

"No, the Dragon has nothing that could appease me."

"But I do."

"What? What could you possibly give me that would be worth a Dragon's life?"

"Me." Kian leapt to his feet, uncaring that the sword at his chest sliced into his skin.

"No. I won't allow that. A warrior does not trade his life for another."

"Simmer down, Dragon. You didn't let me finish." He gripped Kian's arms to hold him down. "Not my life. Something more important to Cirdan and less important to me. My crown."

"What?" Both Cirdan and Kian questioned in unison.

"I will trade you his life for my place as future king."

"You value the life of this Dragon over your crown? What the hell has happened to you? No dragon is worth that."

Garon lifted his sword pressing the sharp point into Cirdan's throat. "This is a one time offer cousin. Take it or leave it.

"I'll take it, you fool."

"Wait. No. Garon you can't do this. It's not right."

"Watch yourself, Dragon. Did you not learn your place last night?" Kian hissed in protest but wisely shut up. His confusion swelled as the implications of Garon's sacrifice unfolded. He watched in awe as blood oaths were exchanged between the Fae, forever revoking Garon's status of heir to the throne.

The fragile bonds that Kian had thought were earlier broken were now forged in steel. He owed Garon his life and even more important, he realized with a sense of pride, he was now owned by Garon.

Chapter Five

Relief coursed through Kian when Garon finally exited the council doors. He and Cirdan had entered the chamber more than sixteen hours prior. Shortly thereafter he'd been called in to give his testimony to the events that had transpired. After that, nothing. His nerves had stretched to the breaking point, waiting for the results.

The king and the court had been in an uproar when they'd found out about the exchange. Although, if truth be told, the king had seemed disingenuous with his concerns. And Garon of all people had seemed relieved by the transfer.

"Don't look so sad, Dragon. I wasn't joking when I said I was glad to transfer the crown to my cousin. He may be a little bastard, but he loves the kingdom in his own way. Besides, the old coot isn't going anywhere anytime soon. Cirdan has hundreds of years to wait for his time to rule. With any luck his mate will come along and put him in his place. Fate has an interesting way of weaving her plan in the least expected ways." Kian smiled at the thought of what fate had done to him.

Garon grabbed his shoulder and steered him towards the door. "Let's go home. I think we've got some more training to do."

* * * *

"How are you doing in there, Dragon?" Garon's voice shot through him with a wave of desire as the water from the

shower sluiced over his chest and groin. After all the hours of waiting and thinking over their situation, he'd grown more nervous than aroused. A rush of cold air blew across his heated cock when Garon opened the shower door stepping in behind him.

"What's wrong, Kian?" Garon smoothed his hand across his shoulders and back. "What are you feeling?"

"A little nervous."

"Why nervous?"

"You sacrificed everything for me. That's a lot to live up to."

Garon massaged the tense muscles in Kian's neck. The color and texture a dream under his hands. "What I did wasn't a sacrifice, Kian. I got exactly what I wanted. What I needed."

"But—"

"Enough. Quit thinking about it and just feel. My cock is hard for you." He rocked his hips forward, pressing himself tight against Kian's buttocks.

"Mmmmm."

"I need you, Kian. Need your gift. Your gift of submission." Kian shivered in his hands bringing a satisfied smile to his face. He didn't need Kian's words to know how he felt. It was obvious in each of his reactions. With every quiver and sigh, Kian communicated his pleasure and need.

Garon brought his lips to Kian's ear, placing gentle kisses along the sensitive skin. "Masturbate for me, Dragon." Kian groaned, a wild longing sound. Garon loosely gripped Kian's

hips, pulling his heated body tighter against his own. "Do it. Now."

Garon watched over Kian's shoulder as the Dragon wrapped his longer fingers around his rock hard staff, pushing his hand the full length before caressing it back. He repeated the process several times, taking his time as pre come leaked from the purpled head. Kian's moans grew louder as his head dropped back against Garon's shoulder. Garon pumped his own hard cock between the dragon's ass cheeks. Teasing his entrance without breaching it. The hot water of the shower enflamed the need to control the Dragon. As Kian's breathing grew labored his moans turned to needy little whimpers.

"Garon, please—"

"No! Stop!" He pulled Kian's hands away from his cock and replaced them with his own. But instead of jerking him to completion, he simply gripped his balls in a tight vise.

"I can't."

"Tell me what you want," Garon demanded.

"I want to come, Sir." Kian's voice came out in a choked whisper.

"Beg for it."

"Please, Sir. Please. Please, may I come?"

"Again."

"Oh Goddess, please. Please, I can't hold it."

"Come, Kian. Come now." Garon reveled in the moans and struggles of his lover as his cock burst and jets of cum rushed from his cock. Knowing that he owned Kian heart and soul struck him deeply as his own feelings of love and pride slipped into place.

Kian turned in Garon's arms to face him hip to hip, chest to chest. His legs were weak from his incredible controlled orgasm, so he gripped Garon's arms to steady himself. Garon was only a couple of inches taller than himself, but being wrapped up in his embrace, warm water coating their bodies was comforting as he recovered himself from their loving.

When Garon's cock pulsed and nudged up against his own, it reminded Kian that Garon had not come since the first time they'd been together. *Well, now is the time to take matters in my own hands.* He couldn't hide a huge grin when he looked at Garon.

"What?"

Kian shook his head. "Let me show you." He knelt down in front of Garon placing his mouth at the perfect angle to take him in, waiting for permission.

"No hands." Garon said. Kian put his hands down to his side, taking care to follow Garon's directions. Garon's cock jerked and prodded his lips demanding entry.

Holy Hell. The reality of having Garon in his mouth was to die for. All that soft skin over solid steel, how would it all fit? Swirling his tongue along the length his taste buds exploded over the unique salty flavor. He couldn't get enough, fast enough. He relaxed his throat to accommodate more.

"Ohhh. Yes. Like that."

Kian moaned along the length vibrating his mouth in his attempt to get Garon to lose control. *I need you to feel a little bit of what I do when you drive me wild.* Breathing was difficult with the length of him encased in his mouth and the shower water spraying around his head and shoulders. But

everything became secondary as Garon pumped his hips, picking up speed. When Garon grabbed his head pulling him even further onto his dick he suckled frantically. The sample of salty essence leaking from Garon's tip drove him mad.

"Kian. Kian. Kian I'm going to ... come." No sooner than the word was out and a roar of release came from Garon as he tasted the explosion of Garon's unique flavor. Still, he didn't stop stroking Garon with his tongue and mouth until Garon pushed him on his shoulder to stop him. Kian looked up to see him leaning against the shower wall, body quivering from the release.

Kian stood to turn off the now cool water they hadn't even noticed during the heated exchange. His own body overwhelmed from the ache of unspoken feelings. He turned with a start when Garon touched his arm.

"Mine." The emotion in Garon's eyes was clear and startling.

"Yes, yours." Kian said.

* * * *

That night Kian dreamt of the woman cloaked in gray. She carried a bag that rattled with every step. She had the face of a beautiful young woman, but her eyes appeared wise beyond her years. He couldn't tell where they were, it was too dark. A chill worked over him raising goose bumps on his skin. With every step she drew closer, and Kian involuntarily stepped back unable to explain his clammy hands and hesitation.

"Fear not, Dragon." An old woman's hand clenched in a tight fist appeared from within the cloak and reached out to

him. She opened her fingers to reveal some bones laid out in a symmetrical pattern. "You are where you're supposed to be." The Oracle is still not clear, but one thing is for certain...
"Your journey is not done."

Phaze Fantasies, Vol. III
by J Buchanan, Jade Falconer, Eliza Gayle

Heads Or Tails

by Jamie Hill

Chapter One

It wasn't the best sex he'd ever had, but it was decent. *Any sex is good sex*, his friends would say, and Jeff Roberts tended to agree. But lately, something was different. He rolled away from his fiancée, pretending to be asleep.

When he heard her steady, rhythmic breathing, he rolled back over. Lana Birdwell looked peaceful in slumber, and much quieter than she ever was when she was awake. Long, blond curls framed her face, giving her a deceivingly angelic appearance. He bit back a chuckle at the thought—no one who knew Lana would ever confuse her with an angel.

A 'bubbly personality' was how her father described her, and that was putting it mildly in Jeff's estimation. She was an outgoing, opinionated girl who liked to hear her own voice. Her slight stature might indicate frailty or shyness, but he knew she was tough as nails—a real saleswoman without a shy bone in her body.

But what a body, he thought, glancing at her round, perfectly formed breasts. They sat high atop her slender torso, which also sported bikini-worthy abs. Her legs were long and shapely, converging at a neatly trimmed apex of soft blond hair. Jeff looked at the V-shaped patch of fuzz and wondered why the sight didn't arouse him as much as it used to.

With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the sheet and covered her body. Lana sighed and snuggled into her pillow without

waking. Jeff rolled over and tugged the sheet up to his neck, willing sleep to overtake him.

* * * *

"Rise and shine," Lana murmured in his ear, planting a kiss on his temple.

Jeff opened his eyes, unsure of when he actually fell asleep. The last time he noticed the clock it was three a.m. He'd tossed and turned half the night, and now felt like hell. "Ugh," he grunted.

"Didn't sleep well?" She stood, fastening a large earring on her left lobe. "Seemed like you were up a lot."

"Yeah." He threw one arm across his forehead.

She went to the dresser and picked up her other earring. Looking in the bureau mirror, she put the hoop on and glanced at him. "You always stress out about month's end. Running all the paperwork, making sure everything balances—which it always does, by the way. I don't know why you worry so much."

He started to say it wasn't month's end bothering him, but then she'd want to know what was. Jeff wasn't sure he could answer that question, so it was better to let her believe it was work. "Yeah," he answered noncommittally.

Lana double-checked her appearance in the mirror one last time before turning to face him. "I've got to go. I have a seven-thirty appointment to go over some real estate listings, and I want to pick up coffee and rolls first."

"See you later." He waved one hand in the air, and she grabbed it and squeezed.

"You bet you will. Want a bearclaw? I can leave it on your desk."

"Sure." Jeff tried to muster enthusiasm he didn't feel.

She was in too much of a hurry to notice. Placing a light kiss on his forehead, she murmured "Goodbye," and left the bedroom. He heard the front door to their condo open and close, and he exhaled. He hadn't even realized he'd been holding his breath.

Jeff showered and dressed in his normal workday attire: Khaki Dockers and a white shirt, with a black necktie and shiny black loafers. He brushed his short blond hair to the side and noticed it reached the top of his ear again—time for a trim. He'd stop by the barbershop in the next couple days after work.

He locked the house and exited through the garage. When the weather was bad, he let Lana park there, but the fall had been mild, so whoever arrived home first claimed the inside parking spot. It didn't matter that much to him, but winter was coming and Lana had begun nagging about finding a bigger place to live—one with a double garage. Backing out, he pushed the remote button and made sure the garage door closed before heading to work.

The offices for Birdwell Development were located in a sprawling complex in suburban Kansas City, Kansas. Myron Birdwell, Lana's father, formed and ran both divisions of the organization—the construction company and the real estate agency. Lana was his brightest star, an up and coming Realtor who made deals frequently, and with little apparent

effort. Her father couldn't speak highly enough about her, sometimes to the disdain of other employees.

Jeff was one of three who worked in the finance department. He was also held in fairly high esteem, and it was common knowledge when the chief financial officer retired in a few years, Jeff was next in line for his job.

Myron was fifty-seven, and the way Lana had it figured, by the time he was ready to retire, Jeff would be there to step into his shoes. The elder Birdwell had never spoken to him about it, but Jeff knew Lana got whatever Lana wanted when it came to her father. Her mother was a quiet, mousy woman who conceded to her husband in all matters. Myron's pride and joy, besides his company, was Lana. The two were destined to go hand in hand.

Jeff was content to go along for the ride. He'd graduated from college with a degree in business finance, and hoped to work himself up in a company such as this one. Meeting Lana and falling in love had apparently put him on the fast track to achieving his goals, which he didn't mind one bit.

Entering the building, he greeted the receptionist with a smile. "Hey, Sara."

"Good morning, Jeff. How's it going?"

He liked his coworkers in the front office. Cindy and Diane worked with him in finance, and Sara covered the secretarial and reception duties. Lana didn't get along with any of them. She said Sara shoved her size sixteen ass into size twelve slacks, and it showed. He didn't notice, and didn't care. The woman was nice to him and competent in her job, which was

all he cared about. "Pretty good so far today. Anything going on?" He glanced around. The office appeared quiet.

"Nothing yet. A real estate meeting going on in the back, but I guess you knew about that."

"I did, thanks." He smiled and headed to the cubicle where he worked. A glazed bearclaw sat on a napkin on the edge of his desk. His stomach rumbled, but the sweet roll wasn't what he wanted.

"Hey, how'd you rate?" Cindy glanced in his cubicle at the bearclaw.

"Good morning, Cindy." He smiled and ignored the question.

"Oh," she nodded with understanding, snapping her gum and pushing her black framed glasses up her nose.

"Would you like it? I'm honestly not hungry this morning."

"No, it's for you," she replied without much conviction.

He picked up the napkin and roll, and passed them to her. "You take it, or give it to Sara. I'm not going to eat it, really."

Cindy smiled. "Thanks, Jeff. You're too good for her, you know."

"Don't be saying that," he admonished lightly. It was no secret he treated his co-workers far better than Lana did, but that was his manner. He wasn't apt to change, whether he was in management or on the lowest rung. It was simply the way he was, and people seemed to like that about him.

She stepped around the corner to her desk and raised her voice. "Let me know when you want to start running month's end."

"I need to enter a few more figures and then I'll get with you," he replied, and heard her acknowledge him with a full mouth. Jeff smiled, then the humor faded. It wouldn't kill Lana to bring donuts for everyone, but she never did. If he'd mention it, she'd react with surprise, like the thought never occurred to her. He was quite sure it hadn't. She was just that way.

He rinsed his coffee mug out in the break room and poured himself a fresh cup. There were the usual crackers and other snacks on the counter, and he grabbed a pack of saltines before heading to his desk. He needed something in his stomach. It felt unsettled; he wasn't sure why.

The end of month computer reports took hours to run and print. Either he or Cindy had to stay near the printer to make sure it didn't jam and wreak havoc. Once they were done, it was his responsibility to give the various copies to different people in the office. Max, the real estate broker, needed sales figures, and Joe, the construction manager, wanted payroll reports. Myron Birdwell got the computer generated payroll checks along with copies of *everything*. If there was the slightest error, he'd find it. It was Jeff's responsibility to catch mistakes before the boss did.

"Real estate is done," Cindy stated a little later, stacking the lengthy report on his desk.

"Excellent. I'll start going over it."

"They had a good month." The report was impressively bulky.

"I know." He smiled at her. Lana kept him updated on their daily activities, plus the sales paperwork now landed in his office with their co-worker Diane on maternity leave.

"Two more weeks and Diane's back. I feel bad that you've taken most of the burden," Cindy told him, her eyes on the computer printer as it clicked away.

"Nah, it's fine. I want to learn all aspects, and doing is the best way to learn."

Before she could reply, a man in a t-shirt and blue jeans stepped into their office. He had thick, wavy brown hair that touched his collar and a three-day growth of beard. Dark brown eyes glanced at Cindy but settled on Jeff. "I'm supposed to fill out form number four or some such thing to get paid," he said.

Cindy spoke up. "It's a W-4, and you should have filled it out before you started working. Payroll checks come out today, but you won't get paid without your paperwork."

"Joe hired me and put me right to work. He said there'd be time for paperwork later." He spoke in a slow, leisurely drawl.

"Joe knows better," Cindy insisted.

The man simply looked at her, and Jeff spotted a hint of amusement in his eyes. Cindy crossed her arms and stared back, all business and matter-of-fact.

He didn't plan to do it, but Jeff found himself speaking up. "I'll take care of it, Cindy." Against his better judgment, he motioned to the chair beside his desk and said, "Have a seat," to the handsome new employee.

"You're busy," she protested. "I suppose I can do it. But it's too late to get paid this month." She cast a haughty glance at the construction worker.

"Thanks Cindy," Jeff told her. "But he's been working a couple weeks and probably needs his check. I can float him an advance that'll be pretty close to his paycheck amount." He winked at her. "You learn how to sidestep the system, sometimes."

"Thanks." The man dropped into the chair by Jeff's desk.

Cindy made a face behind his back and told Jeff, "I'll keep an eye on the printer."

"Great." He swiveled his chair and yanked open a file cabinet, removing the new employee paperwork the man needed to fill out.

"How'd you know I've worked here a couple weeks?"

"Joe sent in your time sheet. We couldn't authorize payment without the signed paperwork, though. Sorry, you know how it is." It was a good story, but it was a lie. Jeff had spotted the new guy his first day on the job. He was impossible to miss.

The development company offices were attached to a big garage and warehouse where the construction workers kept supplies. Most days the workers were in and out of the warehouse, picking up things for their various jobs.

Jeff's office had windows facing that side of the building. He usually paid little notice to the comings and goings, but the new guy captured his attention. A firm, muscular physique was common for construction workers, but this guy was in really great shape. Tight abs bulged through his thin t-

shirts as he worked. He walked with a self-confident swagger, and Jeff was mesmerized watching him. When he found himself checking out the other man's tight ass, he became worried.

He admired the man's build, was envious of his obviously excellent physical condition. That's what he told himself, but deep down Jeff realized there was more to it. When he caught himself checking out the bulge in the other man's denims, he had to face facts. Like it or not, this guy turned him on.

The erection that tented his Dockers whenever he spotted the man was difficult to ignore. At first, he tried keeping his blinds closed, but that only made it worse. He found himself peeking out between the slats, hoping for a glimpse of his unknowing subject. Searching for him became all-consuming, with Jeff giving the man far more thought than he should have.

He'd felt this way a couple times before. The first was as a senior in high school when a new student entered his class. That situation ended painfully and wound up humiliating Jeff. He'd graduated and moved two hundred miles away for college, hoping for a fresh start.

The man who captured his attention in college made the first move, so there were no mortifying misinterpretations to deal with. Jeff cared for the man, but felt a constant sense of something being wrong in the pit of his stomach. Finally, determining he needed to straighten his life out, both figuratively and literally, he broke off the relationship. When college ended, once again he moved hundreds of miles away.

He liked Kansas City and enjoyed his job at Birdwell Development. Lana was an unexpected bonus. They became friendly when she began working for her father, about a year after Jeff did. Six months later, they were sleeping together, and after another year he moved into her spacious condo.

He scraped together enough for a decent diamond ring and proposed. They hadn't set a date, at the time neither felt rushed to do so. But another half year had passed, and she began pressuring him, dropping little hints that they needed to pick a date. Then Kurt Lacey appeared at Birdwell Construction, and suddenly Jeff was dragging his feet again.

He looked across the desk at the dark-haired man, and slid the paperwork his way. "I just need you to fill these out ... Kurt, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Brown eyes locked onto his and held. "Kurt Lacey."

Jeff forced his gaze away and searched for a pen. He shoved it over. "Here you go. While you do that, I'll add up your time sheet and see how much you were supposed to get paid."

"Thanks." He drew the word out into two syllables.

His cowboy drawl had Jeff's erection throbbing again, and he rolled his chair under the desk to make sure the bulge was hidden. He cleared his throat, trying desperately to clear his mind. "Where you from?"

"San Antonio, Texas." His eyes still watched Jeff, even as he picked up the pen and began filling out the forms.

"Texas, wow. How'd you end up in Kansas City?"

Kurt signed the last paper and smiled, shoving them in front of Jeff. "Fate, I guess. Looking for something different."

"Fate, huh?" Jeff chuckled nervously. "Well, I don't know how different things are here, but they're pretty interesting sometimes."

"Oh, I definitely agree." He glanced at the desk and picked up the pen. "Here you go. Thanks." Handing it over, Kurt let his fingers scrape across Jeff's palm.

His palm tingled at the contact, and it took him a moment to form a coherent sentence. He finally managed, "I've estimated your wages and did a quick tax calculation. I think I can get you five hundred dollars in pay. If we go ahead and deduct the taxes now, it won't be such a hit from your next check."

"Sounds fine. Should I wait, or stop back by after work?"

Jeff nodded. "If you could come back, that'd be great. I can write the check, but Mr. Birdwell has to sign it, and he's out until about three."

Kurt stood, and Jeff forced himself to look at the man's face, rather than stare at his eye-level crotch. It wasn't easy, but Kurt got his attention when he asked, "Being as it's Friday night and I'm getting my first paycheck, I was thinking about grabbing a beer after work. Care to join me?"

"Oh," Jeff mumbled, surprised. As appealing as the offer sounded, he knew he couldn't. "I—uh, sorry. I've got to get home. Thanks, though."

"Too bad." Kurt's eyes twinkled.

Jeff's stomach clutched. *It was too bad.* "Yeah, well, like I said, sorry ... and thanks."

"Catch you later," he drawled, giving a quick nod before leaving the office.

Jeff breathed deeply a few times, trying to compose himself. There was no mistaking the other man's meaning, that much was clear. For a moment his cock throbbed, and the idea of going with Kurt seemed wildly exciting. Then Cindy reentered the room and reality came back into focus.

"The last of the payroll reports and checks printed off fine. The invoices are printing now."

"Great, thanks. Put everything on my desk. I'll sort it all out after lunch."

"You bet. See you later."

"Right." Jeff hurried to the men's room and washed his face with cold water. He needed to find Lana. Maybe she'd want to have lunch with him. Maybe she'd want to skip lunch, and they'd go somewhere and fuck like they did when they first started dating. He went into a private stall to pee, and squeezed his half-erect cock a few times after he was finished. He really hoped Lana was free for lunch—or something.

With that thought in mind, he strolled to the back of the building. She wasn't in her office, so he used her desk phone to call her cell.

"Lana Birdwell," she answered.

"Hello, Lana Birdwell. This is an obscene phone call."

She chuckled. "Oh, goodie! If I'd have known it was you, I would have answered differently. But the first time I do that and it's daddy on the line, I'm screwed."

He glanced around and saw the office was empty.

"Actually, screwing you was what I had in mind. Where can I meet you, and how long will it take to yank your skirt up?"

She gave another throaty chuckle. "What's gotten into you? Last night when I was hot and bothered, I practically had to beg you. Now you're looking for a nooner?"

"Just trying to keep things interesting. So what about it? You game?"

"I'm sorry, sweetie. I have an appointment in ten minutes and another at two. But I'm done early today, and should be home about the same time as you. Maybe I can meet you in the shower for a game of drop the soap? I know how much you like that."

He bit back a groan. She was right, he loved anal sex. She just didn't know why. He'd never shared his past with her. Somehow he sensed she wouldn't understand. "I guess I can wait."

"I thought so. Gotta go, sugar. See you later." Lana disconnected the call.

Jeff clutched the phone tightly before returning it to the cradle. Not as sure as she was that he could wait, he thought about returning to the bathroom for some privacy and relief.

The sound of laughter permeated the air. People were gathered in the break room for lunch. The break room and the bathroom were side by side. He'd never be able to get off with noisy people on the other side of the wall. Adjusting his slacks around his deflated erection, he wandered into the break room and grabbed his sack lunch from the fridge. Might as well join them, he decided, and found a place to sit.

* * * *

Just past four-thirty, Jeff kept an eye out for Kurt. He'd be back at anytime to pick up his check. It was in an envelope with his name on it, but Jeff kept it at his desk so he'd have to give it to the man, personally.

His phone buzzed and he picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Lana's on line two," Sara told him.

"Thank you." He punched the second line and said, "Hi there."

"Don't kill me," she began. "I just got a call from a couple who are only in town for the day. They've been looking at houses with another agent but haven't found anything. They spotted one of my listings, and if I can get them in to see it tonight, I might have a sale on my hands. They're very motivated."

"Tonight?" He pouted. The only thing that got him through the afternoon was thinking about what waited for him at home. Now, apparently, that was nothing. "It has to be tonight?"

"They're only in town for one day."

He knew she wasn't really asking, but waited for his approval anyway. "Okay, sure," he replied, and heard her sigh of relief.

Her words tumbled out in one long sentence. "Thank you, sweetheart! You're such a wonderful man! I'll make it up to you, I promise! Don't wait up. I have no way of knowing how late I'll be."

"Okay, yeah, all right. Bye." He heard her click, and knew she'd already hung up. So much for their evening plans. Her 'don't wait up' sealed it.

"Excuse me?" Kurt stepped around the corner in front of his desk.

"Oh, hey." Jeff glanced at him. The man had been working in the sun and wind all day, and still looked fucking incredible—and sexy as hell. It was almost more than he could bear.

Kurt smiled. "Were you able to get my check?"

"Oh! Yeah." Jeff came back to reality. He picked up the envelope and started to hand it over, then pulled it back. "I was wondering..."

Kurt reached for the check and stopped mid-grab. "Uh huh?"

"Were you still thinking about that beer? My evening just opened up."

A warm smile spread across his face. "Absolutely! I should probably clean up real quick first—"

Jeff waved his hand. "Don't bother on my account. Whatever's easiest."

"Okay." Kurt nodded, still smiling. "I know a great place, not too crowded. You want to follow me?"

"Sure. I just need to finish a couple things here."

"Take your time. Meet me in the parking lot whenever you're ready."

"Will do." Jeff watched him turn to leave, wondering just what he'd gotten himself into. He saw the slightest shake of Kurt's sculpted ass, and he smiled.

Chapter Two

Kurt sat astride a motorcycle in the parking lot when Jeff got there. "Oh, Jesus, that's yours?" He walked around the big black Harley, admiring it.

"Yep. Do you ride?"

Shaking his head, Jeff replied, "I have a little in the past. Not for a long time."

"We might just have to change that." Kurt smiled at him, fastening a black helmet on his head by the chin strap. "So, are you going to follow me?"

"Don't go too fast." He pulled the keys to his Accord from his pocket.

"Only as fast as you can handle." Kurt grinned, revved the engine, and zipped from the parking lot.

Laughing, Jeff hurried to get in his car and catch up. He found Kurt waiting for him a half block away, and laughed as the man shot him another wicked grin before again speeding off.

The motorcycle slowed to a reasonable pace, and he was able to follow with no problem. Jeff didn't recognize the bar they parked in front of, but it looked like a decent place. "I've never been here," he commented when they met on the sidewalk.

"It's a nice place. I think you'll like it. Say, can I stick my helmet in your car? I won't have to hang onto it inside that way."

"Sure." Jeff unlocked his car door and Kurt set his helmet on the seat. Securing the lock, he followed the other man to the front door of the bar called *Quincy's*.

Kurt held the door open for him and Jeff entered. The bar was dark but obviously clean and nicely kept up. "This is nice."

"Yeah. Somebody recommended it to me, and I've been coming here ever since." Stepping up to the bar, he glanced at Jeff. "I'm drinking Miller in a bottle. What's your pleasure?"

"The same," Jeff agreed. He didn't drink much beer anymore, and wasn't choosy about it. Lana preferred wine, or even champagne for celebrations.

"So." Kurt settled onto a barstool and reached for his beer. "You're not from around here, either?"

Jeff picked at the label on his beer bottle, something he used to do when he was nervous. "Closer than you. I grew up in St. Louis."

"How'd you end up in K.C.?" Kurt took a swig of his beer.

"Looking for something different," he replied, quoting the line Kurt gave him earlier. He shrugged.

Kurt smiled. "Fate. So, I have a question for you. I heard a nasty rumor about you at work."

Jeff was surprised. He got along well with everyone at Birdwell, what kind of rumor could there be? "Really?"

"Yeah." Kurt took another sip and then smiled almost shyly. "I heard you were engaged to the boss's daughter ... what's her name, Laura?"

Jeff breathed a sigh of relief. He hated being the subject of gossip, and went out of his way to avoid it. "Lana. Yeah, I am. We got engaged about six months ago."

"Is that so?" Kurt asked thoughtfully and took a long, slow drink.

"Yep. I've worked at Birdwell about three years. She's a year younger, so she graduated from college a year after me. She's been there about two years..." he trailed off. Kurt watched him with amusement as he rambled. "You don't care about all this."

"Sure I do. It's very interesting. Perplexing, too."

"What do you mean?" Jeff took a sip of his beer, suddenly feeling nervous.

Kurt gestured with his hands as he spoke. "See, I pride myself on being a good judge of people. I had you sized up the first time I saw you—or so I thought. Apparently my 'gay-dar' was off track this time."

"*Gay-dar?*" Jeff repeated slowly, glancing around. For the first time he realized there were other couples in the bar, talking quietly like they were, and all of them were men. They were in a gay bar. "Oh, Jesus." He took another quick drink.

Kurt grinned. "I'm really sorry, man. Didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I just assumed—well, never mind. Then I heard a couple people talking about you and Laura today, and I discovered I might have made a mistake."

"Lana," Jeff said slowly.

"Whatever." Kurt tossed his head back and polished off his beer. "Let's have one more before we hit the road. Two's my limit when I'm driving." He glanced around. "I need

something to eat. Where's that popcorn?" There was a bowl farther down the bar, and he stood and reached across Jeff to get it. "Two more beers over here!" he called.

Kurt's thighs and ass were practically in Jeff's face, and he stifled a groan. His cock stiffened for about the tenth time that day. It'd happened once when he thought about Lana, and about nine times thinking of Kurt. He watched the good-looking man settle back onto his stool and grab a handful of popcorn. "I ... uh, you weren't completely wrong."

"Hmm?" Kurt raised an eyebrow. They paused as the bartender placed two new bottles of beer before them.

Jeff watched the man walk away before stating, "It's just that—well, I'm not gay." He wanted to make that perfectly clear. Putting the rest of his thoughts into words wasn't as easy. "I've had a couple encounters—with guys, that is—but I'm really straight. I'm marrying Laura. I mean ... Lana!" The other man had him totally flustered.

"Is that so?" Kurt appeared thoughtful as he took a pull on his beer. "Really straight, you say? I wonder about that."

Jeff was embarrassed, but had to try and explain. "I had this relationship ... in college ... but it never felt quite right. I mean, it felt good—" He was flustered again. If his face wasn't beet red before, it had to be now.

Kurt simply looked at him, an amused half-smile on his face.

"Shit. I don't know what I mean anymore." Jeff took a long drink, finishing off his beer. He shoved the bottle aside and reached for the fresh one.

"Don't be embarrassed." Kurt nudged elbows with him. "There's always some awkwardness at the beginning of a new relationship, whether men or women are involved. Personally, I think it's more complicated with women."

"You've dated women?" Jeff was surprised. He figured guys were either gay or straight, and he was the only one sitting on the fence.

Kurt shrugged. "A couple. It's not really my thing. Had to give it a shot, though, to see what I might be missing out on." He chuckled and Jeff laughed.

"That's funny."

With another shrug, Kurt added, "Pretty common. Most people struggle with their sexuality at some point. I finally decided to stop struggling. I know what I like, and I go after it." He gave Jeff the once-over with his eyes.

It caused another flush, and he felt the heat not only in his face but also lower. His cock twitched when he saw the look of desire on Kurt's face. His emotions tugged at him. "I wasn't really looking for a new relationship. I was thinking—"

Kurt spun to face him, planting his hands on Jeff's knees. "In the immortal words of some great country singer, *'This ain't no thinkin' thing'.*"

Surprised, Jeff looked at him. Conflicted emotions raced through him, and all he could think to say was, "Oh, God. You like country music? Could we be any more different?"

Leaning in, Kurt said softly, "We're alike in ways that count. I'm attracted to you, man. I have been since the first time I saw you."

With a muffled groan, Jeff's words rushed forth. "I feel the same way! I couldn't keep from staring out my window, hoping to get a glimpse of you every day."

Kurt smiled and moved his face closer for a kiss. Jeff's mind screamed protest, but remembered they were in a gay bar, and realized it was probably commonplace behavior there. He stopped thinking when Kurt's face drew closer and his eyes closed. His lips pressed against Jeff's and both men sighed.

He parted his lips and Kurt's tongue slid in, exploring new territory. It ran across his teeth before batting against his tongue, wanting to play. Kurt tasted masculine, like beer and popcorn with a hint of something minty, and Jeff groaned with pleasure. He'd forgotten how much he enjoyed kissing another man. The rough scrape of the unshaven chin felt heavenly against his softer face, and he raised one hand to cup and caress a cheek.

Kurt pulled back a little and whispered, "Come home with me."

Home. Thoughts of Lana zipped through his mind and he fought for breath. He finally said, "We can't go home."

With a smile, Kurt curled a finger under Jeff's chin. "Not your home, my home. I have an apartment close by."

"I—" He was utterly conflicted. He knew he needed to leave, but he wanted this more than anything he could remember wanting for a long time. "I can't. Lana..."

"Shhh." Kurt pulled his face closer and nuzzled his neck. "Don't think about her. Don't think at all. This doesn't have to be serious. How about just a little bit of fun?"

His breathing was labored as Kurt continued kissing his neck. When the man's hand slid up his thigh and squeezed, he knew he was lost. "I like fun," he murmured.

Kurt allowed his hand to brush over Jeff's rampant hard-on before standing. "Wait right here." He adjusted the bulge in his own jeans before moving to speak with the bartender. He handed the man some money. When he returned, he reached for Jeff's hand and said, "Come on. I know a place we can go."

Jeff stood and allowed himself to be led toward the back of the bar. They passed restrooms and a room with a pool table before coming to what appeared to be an office. Kurt drew him through the small space into a larger room with a sofa and two chairs. He locked the door and turned so they faced each other.

"What is this place?" He looked around quickly.

"You don't want to know." Kurt grinned. "I wouldn't get too comfortable on the sofa." He glanced down. "The chairs don't look bad, though."

"Oh, God," he muttered. It was a room men used to have sex in the bar. He'd heard of such places, but never seen one up close. "That's gross."

Kurt looked into his eyes as he unfastened Jeff's belt and unzipped his pants. "You're thinking again. What do I have to do to get you to stop thinking?"

"Whatever you want to do," Jeff breathed, and inhaled as his trousers and briefs were shoved to the floor. His cock bounced free, hard and firm, and to his pleasure he heard Kurt groan.

"Oh, yeah." The other man dropped to his knees, cupping Jeff's balls in one hand and his stiff rod in the other. "This is nice. This is what I want."

"I want it, too," he mumbled, barely able to speak. He grabbed the wall behind him for support.

"You want to sit? We could move to the chair." Kurt buried his nose in the coarse blond hair that surrounded Jeff's cock.

"No, I'm fine." He pressed his back into the wall, relishing the feeling. Standing felt right, somehow. "Oh, God, I'm more than fine." His ball sac disappeared into Kurt's hungry mouth, and he gasped.

"You taste so good," the handsome man on his knees murmured when he released the heavy load. "I want to taste your cock." His tongue dipped into the slit at the tip, lapping up the first traces of pre-come. The strokes grew larger, wetter, until his mouth engulfed the swaying staff and drew it in.

Jeff panted for air and thrust his hips forward. "That's it, yeah. Suck it. Oh, damn..." His insides churned as hot seed rumbled up, already preparing to gush forth.

"Not so fast." Kurt removed his mouth and clamped his hand firmly at the base of Jeff's cock. "Shit, buddy, you're ready to explode here. How long's it been since you had a good blow job?"

"Forever," he sighed, leaning back against the wall. It felt that way, at least. Kurt's strong hands and stubbled face turned him on quicker and more strongly than anything ever had. He still felt ready to shoot, even with pressure holding him back.

"Well, in that case..." Kurt chuckled sensuously, and released his grip. "You deserve it. You taste so good, I'm going to savor every drop."

"I'm clean, by the way," Jeff said, glancing down.

With an amused snort, Kurt nipped at the head of his cock. "Can't say much for your timing, but that's good to know. So am I. Always use condoms and have myself tested regularly."

"Me—too—" he gasped as Kurt's mouth enveloped him again. This time there was no holding back. The suction was too great, and felt too fabulous. Combined with a few firm strokes of his shaft and feather-light fingers dusting over his balls—he shattered. Waves of pleasure flooded through him as he filled the man's willing mouth and throat. It seemed to take forever before his shuddering and quaking subsided, and he could focus his eyes again. Glancing down, he saw warm brown eyes watching him affectionately.

Kurt pulled back, lathing his cock with a few last licks. "Hope that felt as good as it tasted."

"That felt..." Words escaped him. There wasn't an adjective big enough to describe how great it felt. He settled on, "fantastic," adding emphasis to his voice to convey exactly *how* fantastic he meant.

"Great." Kurt kissed the area around the flaccid cock and worked his hands up to Jeff's stomach. Kissing his way up, he lingered on the belly button, dipping in with his tongue a few times. Shoving his shirt up, the man placed soft kisses in a trail up to each flat nipple, and sucked them until they puckered.

Back on his feet, he pressed his clothed body against Jeff's almost naked one.

Jeff felt the other man's hard cock nudging his thigh, and groaned. Kurt's tongue invaded his mouth, the salty taste of his own come still prevalent. Pleasant memories of hot college sex filled his mind, and he kissed the other man hungrily. Their tongues batted back and forth, mouths pressed tight, until they were forced to come up for air.

"I want you," he murmured, his thigh pressing into the hard cock.

"I want you, too." Kurt dry humped his leg. "If we were at my place, I'd grease my cock up and shove it inside you." He pressed harder. "Damn, that sounds good."

"It's okay. Let me reciprocate." He tried to drop to his knees but Kurt held him up.

"I'm sweaty from working outside all day. That's the other thing we're missing, not being at my place, a shower."

"I don't mind."

Kurt turned his back to him, unfastening his jeans and shoving them down. "I mind. Just use your hand. Leave your mouth up here where I can enjoy it." He leaned against a chair for support.

Jeff pressed against the man's ass, slipping his hands around to grab his cock and balls. The rigid staff was about the same size as his, with a similar bend to the left. It felt natural and comfortable to grab it and squeeze, then stroke it up and down slowly. His other hand caressed Kurt's ball sac, already swollen with desire.

"Jesus," Kurt breathed, and turned his face sideways.
"That feels fucking incredible."

"Your body is incredible," Jeff breathed in his ear, and began kissing around the lobe. He murmured as he made a trail to the man's neck, "I can imagine myself fucking you for hours." His limp cock had firmed up, and he forced it between Kurt's ass cheeks.

"Next time," Kurt panted. "We'll plan better. We'll have more time ... and the right supplies."

"Oh yeah," he agreed, vaguely realizing there shouldn't be a next time. *Couldn't be a next time.* He was marrying Laura—Lana! *Shit!*

"Kiss me," Kurt urged, looking back at him.

Thoughts of Lana—Laura—whatever—left his mind. "Oh, yeah." He drove his tongue into the open and waiting mouth. His hand found a rhythm, stroking and pulling the throbbing cock. Pre-come leaked from the tip, and using his other hand, he scooped the drops from it. He brought a sticky finger to their mouths for both of them to taste.

"Fuck!" Kurt muttered into his mouth, and he chuckled.

He knew the other man was close, and enjoyed the look on his face as he frantically tried to kiss, lick, and breathe all at one time. "That's it, baby," he encouraged. "Come for me." He moved his mouth to Kurt's ear and whispered, "Come on. This time in my hand. Next time in my ass." He thrust his cock into the quivering ass cheeks before him, and heard a low growl.

Kurt began to shake and his cock erupted. Streams of milky liquid spurted, filling his hand and overflowing to the

floor. Kurt jerked forward, but he grabbed him and pulled his body close. "That's it," he murmured softly into one ear. "You got it. There you go."

When the obviously intense orgasm ended, Kurt glanced back at him. "Oh. My. God."

"Yeah," Jeff chuckled, "Damn, that was hot." He straightened, and Kurt did the same. Raising his briefs and trousers, he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his hands. He turned to Kurt and attempted to clean up the man's drooping prick.

"Thanks." Kurt smiled and got dressed. He grabbed some tissues from a box on the table and wiped up a puddle on the floor. "This is a little gross."

Jeff laughed, wondering how many other people had made deposits there. "Just a little," he agreed. He tucked in his shirt and watched Kurt compose himself similarly.

"Next time it'll be better."

With his senses back intact, reality again took hold. Jeff sighed and looked in the other man's eyes. "There can't be a *next time*, you know."

A flicker of unhappiness clouded his dark eyes as Kurt answered, "Sure there can. We just have to be careful."

Jeff shook his head. "This was great, but I can't cheat on Lana."

Kurt chuckled. "That ship has sailed, buddy."

"Not the way I've rationalized it in my mind. This was a one-time thing. I needed to get it out of my system."

"Is that so?" Kurt left the sitting room and entered the outer office. Grabbing a pen and paper from the desk, he

wrote something down and tucked the sheet in Jeff's palm. "My address. Just in case you have anything else to get out of your system. If I'm not working, I'll be there."

With hesitation, he shoved the paper in his pocket. "I shouldn't do that to her, or you. You should be free to see other people. If I dropped in, you might be with someone—"

Kurt leaned forward and squeezed his cheeks with one hand. "There's no one else I want to see. You're the only one I'm interested in ... make that *infatuated with*. I want more—of you." He planted a light kiss on his mouth, and Jeff groaned and returned it.

When they separated, he said, "I can't promise—"

"No promises," Kurt agreed. "Keep my address and use it anytime."

Kurt exited the bar with him in tow, stopping by the Honda to retrieve his motorcycle helmet. He strapped it on and glanced at Jeff, offering one last smile.

He watched Kurt toss a leg over the large bike and mount it. The simple gesture aroused him unbelievably, imagining the taut thigh naked and straddling *him*, mounting *him*. He shivered as the bike roared away, realizing how much he wanted there to be a next time. The thought of being alone and naked with Kurt was almost more than he could bear.

Patting his pocket to make sure the address was still there, he got in his car and headed home. He hoped Lana hadn't arrived from work yet. He needed time to shower and think. Jeff hadn't sorted out his feelings, but he already knew—the thought of *not* being with Kurt again cut him painfully, like a knife. He'd find a way to make it work. He had to.

Chapter Three

Jeff had time to shower and grab a sandwich before Lana arrived. The couple she'd pandered to all evening hadn't made a decision, and she was in a rotten mood. He feigned interest in a football game, causing her great irritation, and she stomped around for awhile before going to bed. With a sigh of relief, he turned off the game and focused on his memories of Kurt, and their time together in the bar.

It bothered him how easily he'd slipped back into that lifestyle. Five years had passed since he'd broken up with Scott in college, but in a matter of minutes he'd fallen back into old habits, and the whole thing scared him. He'd convinced himself that he was straight. *Wanting to be straight, acting straight, made a guy straight, didn't it?*

He wasn't sure anymore. All he knew was once he caught a glimpse of Kurt, things between him and Lana hadn't been the same. He even looked at her differently, but he didn't know what to do about it.

If he slept on the sofa, she'd be suspicious. At midnight, he dragged himself to bed, quietly, so as not to wake her. He fell asleep hugging his edge of the bed and thinking about the dark haired man who'd turned his world upside down.

* * * *

He woke to someone sucking his dick. He was drowsy, and the tongue lathing over his erection was wet and persistent. "Kurt..." he mumbled, half-awake.

"Hmm?" Lana's head popped up from between his legs.

He woke fully and stared at her. "I said 'good'," he backpedaled, and jerked his hips. "That feels good."

She smiled. "I thought it might. We were both so tired last night." Pressing one last kiss on his cock head, she squirmed her way up his body, kissing skin as she tugged off his t-shirt. She spent a brief moment at his chest, then continued up until her thighs straddled his head. "Wonder how good you can make me feel?"

Before he could speak, Lana pressed her pussy into his face. He could do nothing but open his mouth and begin licking. He wished he'd had more time to wake up, but she was a person who knew what she wanted, and *when* she wanted it. Most things in their relationship were ruled under her thumb, their sex life included.

Eating pussy had never been Jeff's favorite, but he did it regularly, and pretended to enjoy it. It never took long. He was skillful with his tongue and knew just the spots to concentrate on. Long, slow strides through her folds, followed by quick flicks over her clit, and finally a deep tongue-fucking of her pussy. Lana came explosively, spewing sticky juices over his mouth and face.

As soon as her orgasm abated, she climbed back down his body and impaled herself on his shaft. She clutched her bobbing tits while she rode him fiercely, bouncing up and down, until another climax carried her away.

He merely watched, thrusting his hips at appropriate times, and allowed her to do all the work. When she tugged each of her nipples out, twisting and extending them to inch-

long pegs, she came a third time and collapsed on his chest. Jeff rubbed her back lightly, thinking suddenly how predictable their sex life had become. There were two or three scenarios they played out repeatedly and, watching her just now, he realized how boring they were, how bored he was.

He was as much to blame as she was, maybe more. If he tried, he could come up some new games for them. Maybe that's what he needed, something different to spice things up. His hand drew down to her butt, where he cupped one cheek before spreading them open.

"What are you doing?" Lana asked, rolling off him.

"Nothing." He dropped his hands. She put up with his penchant for anal sex, but preferred it in the shower where it wasn't so 'dirty'.

She glanced at his rock hard cock. "You didn't come!"

"It's okay." He rolled away and sat up.

"What happened? That was so great."

Glancing back over his shoulder, Jeff said, "My fault. I held back too long. Now I can't come."

She cuddled against his back. "Want me to use my hand, or try something else?"

He thought briefly about suggesting she get on her hands and knees so he could fuck her ass like a dog. Burying her face in the pillow, asshole greased and gaping open. That's what it would take to get his rocks off. Of course, it was an impossible fantasy.

"You remember we're going to Mama and Daddy's this afternoon."

His erection fell with a thud. "This afternoon? I thought it was for dinner tonight?"

"Daddy wants to play croquet in the backyard. He's invited a bunch of friends. I think Mr. Walters beat him the last time they played, so Daddy has it in for him. He wants the two of you to be a team, and wipe up the lawn with that guy."

Closing his eyes, Jeff imagined an afternoon of hitting colored balls with mallets around the make-shift playing field Myron created in his enormous backyard. Sixty-year-old men in polyester pants, drinking gin and tonics and cursing up a storm until the last man staked out. He cringed. "I didn't know we were playing croquet. I thought it was just dinner."

Lana rubbed the back of his neck. "You know how much Daddy loves croquet."

"I do. I also know with you working on Sundays, we only have one day off a week together. Do you really want to spend it playing croquet?"

He heard her chuckle and felt her nuzzle his shoulder. "We've already had amazing sex. Mama will make a great meal. The day sounds just about perfect, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm going to hop in the shower." He rose and made his way to the bathroom, turning the water to steaming hot. He intended to stay in there until the hot water was exhausted, then tell Lana the shower was all hers.

Stepping inside and yanking the plastic curtain closed, Jeff stroked his cock and tried to conjure an image of Kurt to help him beat off. All he could manage was an image of Myron Birdwell in yellow polyester pants and a wild Hawaiian print

shirt. He waved his mallet like a madman as Jack Walters tapped his croquet ball out of bounds.

Releasing his cock, Jeff stood under the stream of water dejectedly, determined to stay there until the spray turned cold.

* * * *

It was exactly as bad as he'd pictured it. Myron wore green shiny polyester pants, but the crazy print Hawaiian shirt was just as Jeff imagined. The weather was beautiful, not a cloud in the sky nor sprinkle one to keep them from playing croquet from two p.m., well into the blessed evening.

Around the festive picnic tables Davna Birdwell had set up on the patio, Myron regaled his guests with stories that even Jeff had heard repeatedly. During a particularly boring tale about fly fishing in the Canadian wilderness, Jeff did mental calculations. He'd worked for Myron for three years, and had been close with Lana about two and a half. So for approximately two years he'd been listening to the same stories over and over again. He knew some of the other couples present had been friends with Myron and Davna for ages—the Walters well over thirty years.

Jeff guessed he heard the same stories repeated every couple months, so probably six times a year. If Jack Walters was as fortunate, he might have heard the tales, give or take, 180 times. He smiled to himself, wondering if he'd listen that many times, or eventually speak up and say, "I've heard this one a zillion, you old fart. Got any new material?"

"What are you smiling about?" Lana snuggled into his shoulder.

He glanced down at her. "I just love that story."

Her eyes widened in horror. "When Daddy fell out of the raft and almost drowned?"

Jeff gulped. "Not that part, exactly. But he was rescued, and reunited with your mother. It has a happy, romantic ending."

"I guess it does," she agreed, cuddling again.

"Don't they make a cute couple?" Myron said to Jack, loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Didn't he give her a ring?"

"A nice one," Davna added.

"Then what's the hold-up, boy?" Jack Walters said loudly. He was a short, balding man with a big mouth. Jeff hadn't minded grinding him into the dirt that afternoon as they beat him at croquet.

"We're waiting for the perfect time," he replied, placing an arm around Lana's shoulder.

"Well, it's not going to pop up in front of you. *You* have to call the shots. Pick a date, go for it. What about Christmas?"

"Oh, Christmas weddings are lovely!" the man's wife agreed, and other women murmured assent.

"Christmas is in a few months!" Davna snorted. "There'd never be time to pull off a respectable wedding in that short time. We'll be pushing it to get it in by next fall."

"Oh, Mama!" Lana protested. "That's a year! I don't want to wait a year."

"We might be able to do July. I'd have to call the Country Club, of course, and make sure they're available for the reception."

"July in Kansas?" Jeff chuckled. "I don't think so, if you want me to wear a tuxedo. I'll melt."

"Of course you'll wear a tuxedo," Davna chided. "Haven't you heard of air conditioning? Lana, if you're seriously thinking July, we need to pick some prospective dates." She stood and the other women stood with her. "Let's go in and look at the calendar, and see what we've got to work with."

"Yes, Mama." Lana cast a smile at Jeff, and followed the group of women into the large house.

"I don't want to get married in July!" he called after her, only half joking.

"Never mind what you want." Jack waved a hand. "That's the first thing you have to learn. The women rule the roost."

"Or think they do." Myron nudged his friend, and the older men all laughed.

He suddenly felt ill. Things were happening quickly. This whole day felt out of his control, and he wasn't sure what to think about that.

"It's going to be great having another man in the family," Myron spoke up. "I won't have to worry about these weekend croquet tournaments with you on my team. We'll mop these guys up every week." He raised his glass in a toast to Jeff, then drank.

Jeff smiled, reached for his glass, and emptied it. "Do you think I could get another one of these?" He needed to get

drunk and turn off his whirring brain. Tonight, it hurt too much to think.

* * * *

It hurt even more the next morning, Jeff discovered, as he sat up and reeled from a ferocious hangover. Lana rose early and dressed, meeting some friends for brunch before going to the first of two open houses she was hosting that day. He knew she'd be gone until at least five p.m.

He glanced at the clock and saw it was barely eleven. With the first jolt of enthusiasm he'd felt all day, he jumped in the shower and let the pulsing water ease his headache. That, plus the aspirin he swallowed earlier, did the trick.

Dressing in jeans and a button down shirt, his excitement took control and he forgot about feeling bad. He felt nothing but exhilaration, and didn't stop to think too much about what he was doing.

Looking at the address Kurt had written on the piece of paper, he wished he'd gotten a phone number. If he showed up and the other man was gone, he'd be in for a major letdown. Sliding into some loafers and grabbing his keys, he headed out the door.

The apartment was in a small, old complex not far from their office. He saw Kurt's motorcycle parked in front, and breathed a sigh of relief. *At least he's home.* Now, if he was receptive to a visitor.

The look on Kurt's face when he opened the door answered that question. Cautious optimism, tinged with pure lust, was evident in his wide smile. "Hey! You're here."

"Yeah." Jeff was self conscious all of a sudden. He'd never made a booty call before, and this certainly felt like one. "Lana's working until five. I didn't know what you were doing—"

"Nothing all that interesting. At least, not as interesting as what I'm *going* to be doing." He grabbed Jeff by the arm. "Get in here."

With a yank, he found himself in the other man's arms. Kurt kicked the door shut and shoved him up against it, his body pressed close. "Oh!" Jeff exclaimed.

Kurt grinned before his mouth grazed across his lightly. "You have no idea how happy I am to see you."

Jeff felt a hard erection straining against the top of his thigh. He returned the smile as he jiggled his leg. "I have *some* idea."

Kurt's mouth pressed his firmly, and they kissed. Lips still touching, he whispered, "I've done nothing but think about you all weekend. After Friday, I knew I had to see you again. I only hoped you felt the same way." He stuck his tongue in Jeff's mouth and they both groaned.

The kiss seemed to last forever. Jeff vaguely realized his shirt was being unbuttoned and dragged off, and that was fine with him. Between kisses he yanked Kurt's t-shirt over his head and tossed it aside.

"Come on." Kurt fumbled with the button on Jeff's jeans as he led him into the other room.

He saw a bed, messy and unmade, but it looked good to him. He glanced at Kurt, and they locked gazes as each tugged off his own jeans and briefs. He got a good look at

Kurt naked for the first time, and licked his lips. The darker haired man had a lightly furred chest, with a thin line of hair—which he'd heard called affectionately the 'happy trail'—leading from his navel to his pubic hair. It was an appropriate name. Looking at it certainly made him happy, and he grinned.

Kurt reached for him and they tumbled onto the bed laughing. "I can't believe you're here. I've dreamed about this moment."

"What happened in your dream?" Jeff faced him, kneeling.

"First I laid you back and tasted every inch of you."

"Sounds good." Jeff held his hands up on either side of him, and they lightly touched palms. He leaned in for a kiss, and they pressed back and forth for a few moments, only mouths and hands touching. It was erotic and arousing; both their cocks were stiff and waving as they moved.

"Then I laid you back," Kurt continued, "greased your ass, and stuck my fingers in, one at a time."

"How many did you get in?" He stared in the man's eyes as they tormented each other.

"Three, before I couldn't stand it anymore and I had to fuck you. I greased my cock and pressed it in to you, a slow inch at a time."

Pressing his palms harder, he caught Kurt off balance, and they almost fell. Smiling as they righted themselves, Jeff replied, "That sounds perfect. I had a few dreams of my own, too."

"Tell me." Kurt's face was inches away from his.

"How about I show you?" He grabbed him, tossing him on his stomach, face down on the bed. He covered the tanned body with his own, cupping one hand over Kurt's firm ass. He spoke directly into his ear, murmuring, "I want you on all fours, kneeling before me. I'm going to open your hole with my tongue and then my fingers. When you're gaping open, I'm going to grab your hips with my hands and force my cock inside you. Not slow and easy, but hard and fast. I'm going to fuck you like you've never been fucked before."

Kurt groaned, writhing beneath him, as if trying to break free.

"Got anything to say about that?" Jeff asked, still speaking firmly into his ear.

"Yeah," the other man spouted back, struggling.

"And that would be—?"

Kurt froze, acquiescing. "Please," he gasped. "Do it."

Jeff grinned and rolled him over so they faced each other. "We'll do it all. We have all afternoon, and I want to spend every minute of it in your arms." He pressed a kiss on Kurt's mouth, forcing his lips open so tongues could meet. It was becoming normal again, kissing someone with a scratchier beard than his. He loved the feeling of Kurt's beard growth, and raked his hands over it and through the head of dark, shaggy hair.

"Oh, yeah," Kurt murmured into his mouth. "I want you so bad. I need to touch you, explore you everywhere."

"Be my guest." Jeff sighed and dropped back into the pillow.

Kurt leaned over him, touching gingerly, starting at the top of his head. Hands feathered through his short hair, across his temples, and cradled his face tenderly. "You're so gorgeous," the man whispered, looking into his eyes.

"Sweet talker." He thrust out his chest, desiring more contact. "Tell me more."

With a lusty grin, Kurt continued running hands over his body, stopping every so often to plant tiny kisses in various spots. "Your eyes are like clear blue marbles. I could gaze into them all day." He kneaded Jeff's shoulders and continued, "Your body is perfect. Strong pecs, tight abs..."

"Not as perfect as yours." He squirmed as his nipples were plucked and sucked. He loved the attention that Kurt lavished there. Lana never seemed to think his nipples were erogenous, but *damn!* They were. It felt heavenly as the other man sucked them into tight pearls. "Ooh, that's good!"

"Mmm," Kurt sighed, placing small bites on each nipple before moving downward. "Totally perfect." He massaged and caressed his way over stomach muscles, quivering at the exquisite sensations.

He inhaled when the other man reached his groin, but it seemed Kurt had other ideas. Passing the area without so much as a touch, he kneaded thigh flesh, then licked the inside of his knees.

Jeff groaned, his cock and balls swelling, desiring attention. "Please," he murmured, thrusting his hips.

"All in good time," Kurt teased, and moved down to massage toes and feet. He slowly climbed back toward his

upper torso, allowing his bulging cock to rub against Jeff's foot.

He wiggled his toes, caressing the firm member.

"Ah," Kurt murmured, and allowed the contact for several moments. Then he straddled a leg, pressed his prick firmly into the knee, and breathed hot air on Jeff's cock and balls.

"The main course."

"Oh, Jesus, yes," he gasped. He was highly agitated from the intense exploration of his body, and ready for some serious action. "Suck it."

"I intend to." Kurt took his time, feathering soft kisses around the rigid staff and over the swollen sac. He spread Jeff's legs wider for better access, and he groaned again.

He buried his face in his pubic hair, mouthing and tonguing the whole area. When the warm tongue traced a trail from balls down to anus, he jerked his ass in consent. A slow circling of the dark hole was followed by tongue thrusts that caused his anus to pucker. "Jesus, yes," he moaned.

"Damn, you're beautiful," Kurt sighed, and thrust his tongue deep.

Jeff felt it prodding his sphincter, and willed the muscle to open. He wanted any or all of this man inside him.

The tongue went deep, and suddenly Jeff felt a finger join it. "Yes," he encouraged, ready for more.

"Want my finger inside you?" Kurt murmured in a lusty, gravelly voice.

"Is that a rhetorical question?"

With a laugh, Kurt sat up and reached for the nightstand drawer. He removed a couple foil packets and a tube of

lubricant. With precision he opened the tube, squeezing a glob onto his finger. "Yeah, it doesn't require an answer. I know you want as much of me inside you as possible. I'll start with one finger and see how far I get."

Jeff bucked his hips in agreement, needing no words at this point. Kurt's index finger slid easily into his ass, and the man pulled it in and out slowly. "Good?"

"Mmm."

Kurt chuckled, and added a second finger. It was sucked into Jeff's hot hole quickly, and he squirmed as he was plundered by two digits. He felt Kurt add another finger—or two—he lost count. All he knew was the fantastic sensations were only getting better, and he was nearly wild with desire. "Oh, yeah!" he cried out. "That's great! Fuck me!"

A few forceful thrusts were followed by a sudden emptiness. He opened his eyes to see Kurt kneeling between his legs, rolling a rubber onto his own protruding staff. He stroked his cock back and forth, liberally greasing it. "I'm going to fuck you. I'm going to spread you wide open and fuck your gaping hole."

"Want me to roll over?" Jeff asked, in a state of drowsy delirium.

"Nope. I like it this way. I can play with your cock while I'm fucking you."

Jeff groaned and allowed both knees to be pushed to his chest and then spread. He felt a finger circle his anus again, darting in and out quickly. Then a larger appendage nudged his hole, and he moaned with delight. "Yes..."

"You're open and ready for me," Kurt told him, sliding his cock in as he'd promised, a slow inch at a time. "Your ass is such a slut for my cock. You want it bad. Damn, your body is sucking me in. Can you feel it?" He propped himself on one knee for better purchase.

"I feel it." Jeff's head flailed from side to side. "I've never felt anything better in my life. Fuck me! Give me all you've got!"

Kurt obliged, clutching Jeff's hip with one hand and his prick with the other. Thrusting deep into his ass, Kurt let his hand match the rhythm as he stroked his bulging cock. "You're so tight. I'm going to fill you up."

"Do it!" Jeff urged, loving the fullness of a man in his ass again—especially this man, who seemed more concerned with his pleasure than his own. He bucked his hips in a matching tempo, and felt the seed bubbling up within him. He was going to come, and it was going to be fucking fantastic.

"Fill me up!" Jeff cried, an explosive orgasm bursting forth. He lost control of his thoughts as glorious sensations overwhelmed him. His own cock pulsed, shooting copious amounts of spunk onto his chest. Kurt's throbbing member pounded him, filling his ass with warm heat. Waves of pleasure washed through him until he had to clutch the bed sheets, for fear he might float away.

When he dared open his eyes, he found Kurt sprawled across his chest, gasping for breath. "Oh my God," he panted. "I've never—it's never—" He shuddered.

"I know." Jeff wrapped his arms around the other man, cradling him close, kissing everywhere he could reach. When

they both stretched they could join mouths, and spent the next few minutes savoring sweet kisses.

"I need to pull out," Kurt finally said.

"I don't want you to go." Jeff held him firmly. "I want you to stay in me forever."

"Ah," the other man grinned. "But then we wouldn't be able to fulfill your fantasy. If we hop in the shower and suds each other up, I'll bet by the time we're done we'll be hard again. I believe you said you wanted to fuck me like a wild dog?"

Jeff laughed. "Not my exact words, but yeah."

"I like it." Kurt nuzzled his neck. "Ride me like a crazed animal. Slap my ass, give me the works. Lordy, I'm getting a woody just thinking about it."

"Then we'd better hop in the shower and get cleaned up."

"At some point, we might think about lunch. I could eat," Kurt suggested.

"I could eat, too." Jeff relaxed his legs allowing the other man to pull out. It plopped out with a slick *thump*, and Jeff felt his sphincter flutter and shrink to normal size. It felt great, and he stopped to enjoy it for just a moment. Then, glancing at the gorgeous hunk in front of him, he couldn't resist saying, "I could eat *you*, that is..." Jumping from the bed, he chased his twinkle-eyed lover, both laughing, to the shower.

Chapter Four

The two men washed, rubbed, and caressed each other until both were in frenzied states of arousal. They pitched forward from the shower, straight into the tousled bed. Kurt shoved the top covers onto the floor and fell flat, spread-eagled.

Jeff climbed on top of him, kissing his neck, making his way down the wet skin. He reached the taut ass cheeks and couldn't resist nipping the fleshiest part of one.

"Ouch!" Kurt hollered.

"I'm sorry," he replied, without conviction.

"No you're not, you prick. You bit me!"

He rubbed the red mark, and kissed around it. "Is that better?"

"Yeah," Kurt replied, mellowing.

"Want me to do it again?"

"Yeah," he repeated, shaking his ass.

Jeff laughed, and dragged the ass into the air. "Up on all fours, man. I've got things to do, and I need you accessible."

Kurt groaned as he positioned him the way he wanted—on his knees, thighs spread wide. Jeff flipped to his back and scooted up between the powerful legs. Running his hands over the fleshy thighs, he marveled in the feel of their bulk, and the crisp hair that covered them. "Mmm," he murmured, both at the legs he grasped and at the cock dangling before him. He opened his mouth and leaned up, allowing it to slide down his throat.

"Oh, yeah." Kurt shook his dick back and forth, causing it to sway.

Jeff chuckled, following the swinging appendage with his mouth and tongue. When he could, he clamped down and sucked with vigor. The other man stopped moving and pressed into the suction.

"That feels so good," Kurt muttered, looking down to watch the action.

"It's only going to get better, my friend." Jeff dragged himself out from underneath and stood, claiming a condom and the lube from the nightstand. He ripped open the packet and rolled the Latex sheath over his prick. He squirted a handful of lube into his palm and greased his cock and fingers.

Tugging Kurt by the ankles, he positioned the man's ass near the edge of the bed. "That might be too far," he decided. "Don't want you to fall off. Move forward a bit."

Kurt crawled forward until his knees were securely on the bed.

"That's better. Now spread 'em. You're about to get fucked, and I want to make damn sure you feel it."

The man on the bed widened his stance.

"Wider!" Jeff slapped his ass, hard.

"Hey!" he protested.

"Got something to say?" Jeff wrapped one hand around the dangling balls in front of him.

"Nope." Kurt replied meekly, his voice strangled.

With a low chuckle, he rubbed the red spot on Kurt's ass. "I really don't want to hurt you. I just get carried away sometimes."

Kurt glanced over his shoulder, locking his eyes on him. "Hurt me. I want it. Part of the fun is protesting a little."

"Gotcha." He placed both hands on the other man's butt cheeks and spread them. "Mmm, I believe I need a taste before I get started."

"Oh, please..." Kurt's voice was tight.

"And you called my ass a slut." He chuckled. "You want it bad. Maybe worse than I did. Well, I'm going to give it to you, baby. You best hang on." He pressed his nose against Kurt's tailbone, and let his tongue circle the dark rosebud beneath it. "Mmm," he murmured, as the soft ring quivered and accepted his tongue.

The dark hole tasted musky and was wonderfully tight when he pressed his way in. It'd been years since he'd eaten ass, and Jeff forgot exactly how much he enjoyed it. With just enough pressure, the sphincter relaxed and blossomed open. When it happened, his tongue was sucked in as far as it would reach.

He pressed his face against the man's ass to get deeper. Kurt squirmed and bucked, but Jeff held firm and tongued the nether hole, until he couldn't take any more. He needed to fuck this man, *now*. His tongue resisted releasing its treasure, but he backed off. "Damn," he muttered, so horny he hoped he'd last long enough to satisfy Kurt.

"Oh, my God, I can't believe how good that feels," Kurt sighed, now on his elbows with his face pressed into a pillow.

"Raise your ass up!" Jeff slapped one cheek, and the supine man obliged quickly.

He rose back up to hands and knees, and Jeff inserted a greased finger into the dark hole. It went in easily, so he thrust in and out twice and added another digit. It slipped in without the slightest hesitation. He and Kurt both groaned at the same time. He knew how good the stimulation felt, but this end of it was arousing, too. Watching a third finger disappear into his lover's ass was exquisite, and he couldn't resist adding a fourth.

"Oh yeah, oh yeah!" Kurt repeated, bucking back against the hand. "Give it to me. Give me all you got."

Jeff formed all five fingers on his right hand into a cone and eased them into the yawning chasm. Kurt cried out at first, then returned to gyrating his ass in rhythm with the hand. "Oh." he groaned, and Jeff stopped.

"Don't you come yet!" He backed his hand from the opening, and watched the sphincter flutter and twitch. It would take a minute to close after that abuse, but he wasn't about to let that happen. "I'm going to fuck your ass now. It's so huge, I think I could get two dicks in you."

"Fuck me!" Kurt sobbed, his face dropping to the pillow again.

Jeff stood at the foot of the bed, nudging his greasy cock to the well-used hole. It entered without hesitation, and he sank balls-deep in one quick thrust. "Oh yeah, you're ready for me all right. Your ass is hot, almost burning up."

"Do it harder!" Kurt's voice was unnatural, a twisted, garbled growl.

"Damn straight!" He clutched Kurt's hips and rammed his cock repeatedly up the man's ass. He knew he wouldn't last much longer, but he could tell that wasn't a problem. Kurt was spewing spunk over the bed with no stimulation to his cock whatsoever. "Oh yeah, come on, baby!"

"I'm coming," Kurt mumbled into the pillow, exhausted. "I'm coming..."

"Yeah!" His own climax bubbled, and he thrust his cock deep and hard. Kurt groaned and he slapped his ass sharply. Another load of come lurched from the bottom man, whose orgasm seemed endless.

Jeff lost track of time as his body shattered into a thousand beams of light and being. He gripped Kurt's hips and drove himself in tightly to keep grounded. He floated anyway, and eventually found himself lying atop a panting, gasping Kurt. "Sorry," he started to rise, knowing he was suffocating the man.

"Don't move! Lie still for a minute. I feel so fucking fantastic. I don't want it to end."

"Can you breathe?"

"I'm okay. Just don't move. Hold me."

He kissed his lover's neck and shoulders, and Kurt turned his face to accept a full mouth buss. They kissed and snuggled until Jeff knew he needed to pull out. The condom was loosening from his flaccid penis, and he needed to take care of it. "Relax for me," he murmured, and as Kurt tried, he grabbed the top of the rubber and eased his cock out. "Let me go flush this. Want a towel or anything?"

"Yeah. Bring a couple towels from the rack, will you? I don't want to move."

"Don't you dare move." Jeff smiled at him, and went to the bathroom. He cleaned himself up and returned to the bed with two towels, one to wipe up Kurt and the other to throw over the wet spot.

Sufficiently clean, they wrapped their arms and legs around one another and lay cuddling on the bed. "I swear to God," Kurt began, brushing a lock of hair from Jeff's face. "I've never had sex this good in my life. I'm not just saying that. Something is right with you and me. We mesh, somehow."

"I believe you. I felt it, too. Yesterday, Lana was trying to seduce me. She wiggled her tits in my face, stuck her pussy there, too, but I never felt more than a passing interest." He gazed into Kurt's deep, understanding eyes. "Since I met you, there's only one person who excites me."

"I know the feeling," Kurt agreed. "I just have to think about you, and my cock is like a brick. I tried shooting off in the shower, and still came out hard. I needed you." He touched Jeff's cheek. "I *need* you."

Somewhere, a clock chimed three bells, and Jeff's thoughts returned to reality. "We can't get used to this. I'm marrying Lana, and I need to—"

"To hell with Lana!" Kurt stormed, his eyes flashing. "After what we just experienced, you're telling me you're still going to marry that frigid bitch?"

"She's not frigid. She's just stuck in a routine, sexually. We need to experiment more."

"She makes *you* frigid. She's *not* what you need or want, and no amount of experimentation is going to change that! Until she grows a cock and a beard, she's not the one for you." He reached for Jeff's hand and pressed it against his bristly cheek. "See, I know what you like, already. You like the feel of my scratchy face, my calloused hands, my masculine thighs. I *felt* you, Jeff. I watched your face when you felt me. We were made for each other."

"No!" Jeff insisted, a tear threatening. "I'm not gay. I'm going to marry Lana, and we'll live happily ever after, running her father's business and playing fucking croquet every weekend." He couldn't stop the flow of tears, so he flipped over, his back to Kurt.

Grabbing a towel, Kurt brought it around to swipe at Jeff's tears. He spooned his body against him and wrapped his arms around him tightly. "I understand you don't want to admit you're gay. I'm not sure why—"

"I can't talk about it." His tears had finally stopped, if he had to tell the story he knew the flood gates would reopen.

"Okay," Kurt agreed, caressing Jeff's upper arm. "I also understand about marrying Lana and running her father's business. That's a fantastic opportunity for you. I don't get the croquet bit, though."

He explained about the previous evening at Lana's parent's house, the endless stories and nonstop rounds of croquet. By the time he'd finished, they were both laughing themselves into more tears.

"I told them I didn't want a fucking July wedding, but there they were, setting the date anyway."

"Hotter than hell in July," Kurt agreed. "I suppose you'll be wearing a monkey suit and all that?"

"Oh, you bet." Jeff rolled on his back, staring up at the ceiling. Kurt did the same, and they continued to talk quietly.

"So if you marry Lana, your life is pretty well planned out for you."

"Completely planned out for me. I won't have much say in anything, far as I can tell."

Kurt glanced at him. "It's no wonder you come over here, wanting to slap my ass and fuck me senseless. It's the only control you get in life."

Jeff stared into his eyes, realizing it was true. He rebelled against Lana by dominating Kurt. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize that's what I was doing—"

"Shhh." Kurt touched Jeff's mouth gently. "It's okay. I loved it. I think I might love *you*, which I'm sure is going to scare the hell out of you."

Jeff was shocked and tried to respond, but Kurt pressed fingers against his lips. "Don't say anything. I know you need some time to process this. But I'm telling you, I want you. I'd rather have you outright, without Lana in the picture. I know we could make each other very happy. But if I have to be the other woman, I will. We need each other, Jeff. Don't try to tell me we don't. After today, after what we shared ... experienced ... together, don't *even* try to tell me you can live without me. Because I know I can't live without you."

"I don't want to live without you," he sobbed, and sank into Kurt's arms. He didn't try to quell the tears, just let them

flow until there was nothing left. When he was exhausted, Kurt dried his eyes and kissed the last of the drops away.

He glanced up into his eyes. "You'll be my other woman?"

Chuckling, Kurt growled, "Hell yeah. I can play that role. You slip over here whenever you can for a quick fuck, and I'll bitch at you that it's not enough. I'll always want more than you can give me, remember that. But as long as I can have you part time, I'll take it."

Jeff sniffed, not believing his ears. "Part time works for you?"

"Sure, until I can convince you to choose me."

He chuckled. "Maybe I should flip a coin or something. Heads or tails."

Kurt pressed his burgeoning cock into Jeff's thigh. "Someday you'll have to choose—my head versus her piece of tail. But not today. Today, just let me love you." He ran his hands over Jeff's chest.

"It's almost four," Jeff protested.

"Which gives me an hour. Lay there, and let me make love to you. I can show you selfless, unconditional love."

"You think so?" He smiled, delighted at the prospect.

"I know so." Kurt nodded slowly, a smooth smile crossing his face. "Lay back, lover. This time is all about you."

"Mmm," he groaned, and did as instructed.

* * * *

It was an unconventional situation, and one Jeff knew couldn't last. One or two nights a week when Lana worked late, he went to Kurt's apartment for the most mind-blowing

sex he'd ever experienced. The man knew a thousand ways to aid the coupling of two males, and Jeff delighted in learning them all. Sundays, when Lana worked all day, he spent the whole day with Kurt. They had time to do more than fuck—they cooked together, or watched a game on TV. It was casual, sensual, and some of the best times Jeff ever had.

His time with Lana improved by his happier disposition. She stayed busy enough that she was usually tired when she got home. Quick sex, a couple times a week, had her feeling like they were back on track. She didn't seem to notice if Jeff came or not. As long as he pleased her, she was satisfied. Sometimes he'd think about Kurt while making love with Lana, and just because he knew she hated it, he'd pull out and climax all over her stomach. It was the little bits of happiness that got him through their time together.

Occasionally she let him screw her ass in the shower, and he made a point of being forceful and rough as he did it. Later, he blamed it on the throes of passion, and she forgave him. Those nights, he fell asleep a happy man.

He knew it couldn't last, but he refused to face that fact until he was forced to. Something would happen to shift the tides, and he'd be required to choose. Deep down, Jeff knew what the choice would be. He'd worked too hard for Birdwell Development to throw it all away. He and Lana would be married, and spend weekends teaching their children to play croquet.

Kurt—well, Kurt was a survivor. He'd find a man worthy of his loyalty and all the other delightful traits he had to offer,

and they'd be happy together. That man just wasn't him, and Kurt would eventually face that fact. Jeff wasn't gay.

* * * *

A month later, Jeff was in the hallway by his office, filing some reports. He had one eye on the break room door. Kurt made a habit of stopping in the office after work, ostensibly getting a drink of water from the break room. When Jeff sought him out and gave a small nod from across the room, they knew a rendezvous was possible that night. It was a system that worked well for both of them, and Jeff was comfortable in their routine.

He spotted Kurt come in and his heart fluttered. The man looked sexier than should be legal after working outside all day. Jeff was thrilled that Lana had to work late. He was anxious to get to the apartment and have his way with his gorgeous hunk of man-meat.

"That guy is totally hot," Cindy told him wistfully. "Too bad, I heard he's gay."

"No kidding?" Jeff replied nervously, looking at her quickly. "I never heard that."

"He doesn't hide it. I guess everyone knows."

"Really?" Jeff felt suddenly uncomfortable. He wanted to file the last of the reports he held and shut down his computer to leave.

"It's no big deal." Cindy shrugged, handing him a notebook.

"What's no big deal?" Sara, the receptionist, joined them.

"I told Jeff that hunky construction guy—Kurt—is gay."

"Oh, yeah." Sara nodded. "Too bad. He's hot."

Jeff chuckled. "You two are horrible. Isn't it the construction workers who're supposed to be ogling the women? Here you are, ogling the construction worker."

"You can say that, because you're engaged," Sara replied. "We're still looking."

"You should still be looking, too," Cindy said under her breath, and both women laughed.

"Watch it, or you won't be invited to our engagement party on Friday." Jeff smiled. He knew how they felt about Lana. She was still as rude to them as ever, and he suspected that would never change.

"Tough luck, buddy, we're already invited. Mr. Birdwell invited everyone in the office—" Cindy said.

Sara added, "Plus a couple hundred more people. I know, I sent out the invitations. It's going to be a real shindig. Country Club and everything."

"Two hundred more?" He winced. He knew the Birdwells were going all out, but that was crazy. It was an *engagement party*, for crissakes. He couldn't imagine what the guest list for the wedding might look like.

"Get used to it," Sara commented. "The Birdwells do everything in a big way. That's what you have to look forward to."

"I know." He sighed with resignation. Kurt stepped back in the office after getting his drink and glanced Jeff's way. Jeff nodded ever-so-slightly, and the other man offered the tiniest hint of a smile before walking out.

"Too damn bad," Cindy muttered, watching the sculpted, blue-jeaned ass walk away. "Hate to see him go, but love to watch him leave."

Jeff laughed and shoved the notebook back at her. "You said he's gay, remember? Move along."

"A girl can dream, can't she?" She gave a wicked grin and added, "When you first started, we thought you might be gay."

"What?" Jeff almost hollered. "Why the devil would you think that?"

Sara smiled. "You're so neat and clean. Your hair is always just so. You've got to admit, you have that metro-sexual thing going for you."

"I like to be neat, that makes me gay?" he protested.

"Nah, we learned differently when you started dating Lana. No gay man would subject himself to that torture."

The roar of Kurt's motorcycle zooming past the window caught their attention. Cindy looked at the window and added wistfully, "Especially when there are better things out there."

"No kidding." Sara glanced at the window, then back at Jeff. "Being gay is no big deal, you know. Tons of people are."

"I know." Jeff filed the last report and closed the cabinet. "It's no big deal."

"Did I ever tell you my sister's friend Lenny is gay?" Cindy said to Sara, and Jeff took that moment to escape. He slipped into his cubicle, shut down his computer, and straightened his desk. He had some place to go, and had heard enough talk about being gay. Personally, he didn't know any gay people. That was his story, and he was sticking to it.

* * * *

Kurt greeted him with open arms, and they fell into bed doing very little talking for the first hour together. When they were both sated and exhausted, they lay sprawled on the bed, limbs intertwined, speaking quietly.

"I can't believe you're having an engagement party. Am I invited to the festivities?" Kurt teased. Jeff knew he was only half joking. It was becoming a sore subject.

"Please don't come. I couldn't stand seeing you there. I'd want to drag you into the bushes for a quickie."

"Oh! But then people might discover you're—how shall I put this? I know how much you hate the 'G' word. Let's just say, *not straight*."

"Don't." Jeff pulled one of Kurt's hands to his mouth and kissed the knuckles. "I don't want to get into this tonight."

"You never want to get into it." Kurt rolled on his side to face him. "Tell me why you're so scared of being labeled '*gay*'."

"I'm not scared," he scoffed, but Kurt squeezed his face with one hand.

"Tell me. There's nothing that's going to shock or surprise me. Just let it out."

Jeff didn't speak.

"Was it something about that college relationship? You said it didn't feel quite right."

"No, that wasn't it. But it's true—the guy I was with in college, well, that whole thing never felt right."

"Did you ever stop to think that perhaps it was the man who wasn't right for you, not the being gay part?"

Jeff sighed, staring at the ceiling. "I don't know. I guess not. This other thing happened in high school. I've really never talked about it."

"I'm a good listener," was all Kurt said.

Jeff glanced at him, then back at the ceiling. "I was a senior. I'd never been interested in girls—I dated a few for appearances, I guess. Went to proms and all that. But in the last semester of my senior year, a new kid moved in. Jeremy Buddig." He took a shuddering breath.

"What happened with Jeremy?" Kurt prodded softly.

"I felt something instantly, but it was hard knowing what to do, you know?"

Kurt nodded, and Jeff realized he did know. He was one of the few people who *would* understand. "He was a junior, but we had a couple of the same classes. I offered to help him with homework, so we started spending lots of time together. One night we were studying and he touched my hand. I remember looking at him, surprised, you know. We were just inches apart. I don't know who kissed who, but we kissed. Pretty soon we were jacking each other off. It was scary ... incredible ... thrilling. I don't know how else to explain it."

"I understand."

"You do, don't you?" He looked into his eyes, and Kurt smiled.

"What happened?"

"We made out like that for a few weeks, and finally made plans to go all the way. His folks were going to be gone one

Saturday night, and we got condoms, lube, the works. We were just getting to the good part." Jeff chuckled bitterly. "I had my cock halfway in his ass, when his old man walks in. He starts yelling, Jeremy starts crying and screaming that I raped him."

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," Kurt said with disbelief.

He shook his head sadly. "Nope. His old man really let me have it. Jeremy was on the football team, so no way he was queer. He was going to be the team's star player that next fall. I was some sick, perverted fuck, preying on his kid. He called my old man and sent me packing, with a warning if I ever came near his kid again, he'd kill me."

"Oh, my God. What did your father do?"

"Before or after he beat the shit out of me? Before, he yelled at me for about an hour. After, he grounded me until graduation. Wanted to make sure I didn't have the chance to meet up with any other fags and perform perverted acts against nature."

Kurt groaned and pulled Jeff into his arms. "Oh, my God." He repeated. "No wonder you're fighting it so bad. Your father was a homophobic asshole."

"Maybe just a little," Jeff agreed.

"So, what happened?"

"Nothing. I kept my head down, finished school, and applied to college two hundred miles away. They were happy to see me go. When I graduated, they sent a check. I talk to my mom regularly, but not to him very often. He's sick now, so it's hard to stay mad at him. But I don't see them much."

"What did your mom think about it?"

"She was a good wife. She let her husband make all the decisions. Deep down, I don't think she cared one way or the other, but she always stood by him."

Kurt cradled him gently, kissing the top of his head. "I'm so sorry. I can't imagine a family like that."

Jeff smiled up at him. "How about you? What's your family think about your—lifestyle?"

"About the fact that I'm gay, Jeff? That's what I am—gay."

"Stop it." Jeff closed his eyes.

Kurt nuzzled him again. "They put a 'Hot Fireman of San Antonio' calendar in my Christmas stocking last year. They're cool with it."

"You're fucking kidding me."

"Nope!" He grinned. "I have a married sister and brother, and they each have a pack of kids. They all think I'm a cool uncle. It's fun spending time with them, that's the one thing I miss about Texas." His doorbell sounded. "Who the hell is that? Maybe I won't answer it. I'm not finished with you yet." He kissed Jeff's neck, and the bell sounded twice more.

"Sounds like an impatient Girl Scout selling cookies."

Kurt stood and grabbed a towel, tossing it around his waist. "If it is, I'll make her sorry she rang my bell."

"Put some clothes on!" Jeff called after him, laughing.

"No way! I'm coming right back to bed. I told you, I'm not finished with you yet."

Jeff lay back, smiling. It felt good to have someone to talk to. Really talk, about serious things. He and Lana hadn't discussed anything but wedding plans for a month.

"Where is he?" A female screech came from the living room.

Jeff gasped. "What the fuck?" He sat up quickly.

"I know he's here. I saw his car!" Lana stomped into the bedroom and came face to face with him, reaching for his pants. "You god-damned son-of-a-bitch!" She swung her purse and whacked him in the side of the head.

Chapter Five

"Lana, I can explain!" Jeff fended off her crazed attack.

"Explain what? Two naked men in an apartment? Am I supposed to believe you were playing poker?"

"Maybe strip poker," Kurt said, stepping up behind her.

She whirled to face him, her finger shaking angrily in his face. "Don't you dare speak to me! You're the cause of all this. I want you out of here! You can either quit, or I'll see that you're fired. Either way, I want you gone by Friday."

"You didn't hire me," Kurt replied coolly.

"But I can damn sure see that you're fired! So you can go quietly, or I can spread the word that you got caught fucking the wrong man, and make your life hell. Your choice."

"Seems like that might make *your* life hell, Mizz Birdwell. See, I've never hidden the fact that I'm gay. You're the one who can't seem to satisfy her man."

"Kurt!" Jeff interjected, his stomach a bundle of nerves. This was not going to end well. It couldn't.

"It's the truth!" The other man told him. With a flick of his wrist, he dropped the towel which covered his groin and he was naked before them. "See, Mizz Birdwell, this is what Jeff wants. A cock, and a man who knows how to use it."

"Not much of a cock!" she spouted back angrily. "Christ, I can barely see it!" She turned to face Jeff. "I can buy a strap-on bigger than that and fuck you with it, if that's what you want. But you are not leaving me for this pathetic, hammer-wielding faggot. I've got too much invested in you, Jeffrey

Roberts. Now put your god-damned clothes on. You're coming home with me."

She spun back around to Kurt. "And you, you sick, fucking cock-sucker, stay out of our way. Don't give notice, just get the hell out of town. I never want to see you again."

"We don't take orders from you, you frigid bitch." Kurt replied, but Jeff began dressing quickly. "Jeff, stop. You don't have to do what she says. You're in control of your own life. Be a man."

"He is a man. He's my man. I promise you, if you don't do as I say, my father will see that you never work in this town again. Maybe the state. Maybe the tri-state area, you freak."

"Lana, stop." Jeff slid into his loafers. "I'm going with you. Just leave him alone."

Kurt stepped in front of him. "Jeff, no. Don't do this."

Jeff's heart sank. He knew this day would come. He'd never imagined it like this, but somehow he knew it would end messily. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "I've got to go."

"No, you've got to pull your balls out of her hand and stand up for yourself. Think about what you want for a change, not what she wants, not what is expected of you."

He shrugged. "It's all decided. Everything's arranged."

"No, it's not! You have a choice, Jeff. The coin is in your hands. Flip it. Heads or tails."

Lana grabbed Jeff's arm and shoved him toward the front door. He glanced back at Kurt helplessly. "I'm sorry."

"Heads or tails, Jeff!" Kurt yelled at him, tears streaming down his face.

The door closed between them.

* * * *

Memories of high school flooded back to him as Lana berated him half the night. She was right; he could have messed up their lives by his foolish behavior. He'd been thinking only of himself. By the next morning, it'd been drilled into his head—she was right, and he was wrong.

He went to work dejectedly. The joy had been stripped from him, and it felt like drudgery putting one foot in front of another. He barely had a moment alone. She drove him to work and drove him home again.

He heard Kurt quit his job, and wondered when he might get a chance to talk to him. He had to find a way to explain. Lana, possibly suspecting as much, made sure he wasn't alone for the rest of the week.

Friday night, they prepared for their engagement party, and he barely dredged up the energy to change clothes. She finally faced him, hands on hips, and snarled, "You'd damn well better snap out of it. You've been fucking mopey all week long, and I've had it. My parents invited over two hundred people tonight, and they want to see 'happy'. So put a smile on your god-damned face, and fucking *get happy*."

"Yes, dear," he replied meekly, wondering if he'd ever be truly happy again.

She drove them to the Country Club, where they greeted their guests and sipped cocktails before dinner. It was a warm fall evening, and the party filtered out into the courtyard.

Lana didn't allow him out of her sight, but when he found a group of his coworkers and stopped to talk to them, she

sauntered over to some of her parents' friends. Jeff grinned for the first time that night, realizing he'd finally found sanctuary. If he stayed with Cindy and Sara, Lana would keep a safe distance. She wouldn't waste her evening chatting with 'the help'.

"That's the first smile I've seen from you all week," Cindy nudged his arm.

"It's been a shitty week," he agreed.

A waiter walked by with a tray of champagne-filled glasses, and Jeff grabbed one. As an afterthought, he grabbed two, and held them both.

Sara laughed. "A two-fisted drinker! This might be a fun night after all."

"Sure," he gulped one drink. "Watch Jeff get drunk and do something stupid."

"I hear he already did." Cindy sipped her drink, watching him over the rim.

"What did you hear?" He looked at her.

"Just office gossip," she replied, and looked around. "This really is a beautiful place. I guess that's the golf course, right over there."

"Yes, it is," he agreed. "Now, what did you hear?"

"Kurt quit," Sara spoke up. "Didn't give notice or anything. I saw him and Joe arguing in the parking lot. Neither one looked happy."

"That's a shame." Jeff looked around, then shrugged. "Construction workers come and go all the time. So?"

"Seemed to coincide with someone's bad mood," Cindy said to Sara.

"And with someone else lurking about the finance office. All of a sudden, Lana's hanging around like a vulture. What's up with that?"

"I don't know what you mean." Jeff looked around again. "Where's that waiter with the drinks?"

"Look." Cindy faced him. "We're your friends, have been for several years now. We spend all day with you, five days a week. Believe me when I tell you we're sensitive to your moods."

"And we notice things." Sara added. "Like Kurt all of a sudden stopping by the office every day for a drink of water. What, they don't have water on the job sites any more?"

He felt his face redden. Perhaps they hadn't been as discreet as he'd thought.

Cindy took a step closer and spoke quietly. "The looks you two exchanged were scorching hot. You were subtle, not many people noticed, but we did. And do you know what we thought?"

Jeff dropped his face into one hand.

Sara said, "We thought, '*Good for them!*' We were happy for you. We tried to tell you that the other day, but it's a difficult thing to bring up."

"Yeah, it is." He glanced from one woman to the next. "Thanks for your support. But it's over. Kurt's leaving, or has already left, and Lana and I are getting married ... in July."

"That's a stupid month for a Kansas wedding!" Sara snapped.

"And you're a stupid man, if you chose her between the two of them," Cindy said.

"It's not that simple." He shook his head.

The sound of an engine revving had heads turning toward the golf course. Jeff gasped when he spotted Kurt on his motorcycle, sans helmet, zipping across the fairway. "Oh, shit!"

"Oh, my God!" Sara squealed, and both women laughed.

"What the fuck?" Myron Birdwell could be heard spouting. Jeff watched the man storm to the edge of the courtyard. Lana was hot on his heels, Jeff, Cindy, and Sara not far behind.

"This is private property, young man!" Birdwell hollered over the noisy engine. "You better get that vehicle off the grass!"

"I'm here for the party!" Kurt raised a beer bottle and took a swig, then tossed the empty across the lawn.

"I'm calling the police!" Lana stormed.

"Don't get your panties in a wad." He grinned at her. "I'm not staying. In fact, I'm leaving town."

"Then you best get going," Birdwell growled through gritted teeth. Not all of the two hundred guests were listening, but the crowd grew bigger by the minute.

Kurt looked at Jeff. "I'm giving you one more chance. Catch." He flipped something in the air, and Jeff caught it. It was a quarter, and it landed on heads. "Heads or tails, man. Last chance to choose."

Jeff was dumbfounded. He glanced at the growing crowd, and knew the scene would soon be out of hand. He looked at the anger-distorted faces of Lana and her father. The future flashed before him, with images of snotty, spoiled children

making that same face at him when he tried to deny them something one of the Birdwells wanted to bestow. It was a stark, unwelcome image, and Jeff closed his eyes.

"Go on," Cindy whispered, nudging him. "You're a smart man. You can get a job anywhere. Do what your heart tells you."

"My heart?" he repeated. He hadn't listened to his heart in years.

"Look at that face," Sara said, nudging him toward Kurt. "Look at what you see in those eyes! Do you see that in any other eyes around here?"

Jeff opened his eyes and glanced at Kurt. There was definitely something there that was missing from Lana's stern frown. He was torn.

"You need to shut up!" Lana stepped toward him, speaking to Cindy and Sara. "Or you'll be the next ones looking for jobs!"

"Damn," Jeff muttered softly, and cast smiles at both of his coworkers. He reached for Lana and pulled her into his embrace. "Lana, sweetheart. Leave the girls alone. The office needs them." He planted a firm kiss on her forehead, and she snuggled into him.

"If you think so," she agreed.

"I do. Cindy's the only one who knows how to do my job, and you'll really need her, because I'm quitting."

Lana pulled back and gazed up at him, mouth agape.

He smiled at her, and over her head he smiled at her father. "Sorry, Mr. B. I've discovered what I have to do, and that's follow my heart. You see, I'm gay."

"You stupid son-of-a-bitch!" Lana took a swing at him, but he was already moving.

He jogged toward Kurt, both grinning like fools, and threw his leg over the back of the bike.

"Hang on!" Kurt told him, and revved the engine, pulling out in a big circle.

Jeff waved to the smiling Cindy and Sara, and caught a glimpse of Lana stomping her feet in anger. He closed his eyes and said, "Let's get the hell out of here."

The motorcycle pitched forward, and Jeff grabbed Kurt's waist tightly.

"I told you to hang on!"

"Are you drunk?" Jeff hollered in his ear.

"No! Are you?"

"Nope. I was determined to get there, though. Until you showed up."

"I couldn't let you make the wrong choice." Kurt called over his shoulder. When they'd gone several blocks away from the Country Club, he slowed so they could talk easier.

Jeff hugged the other man's waist. "When you tossed me that quarter, it landed on 'heads'."

"Do you still have that coin?" Kurt asked.

"Yeah." Jeff opened his palm, exposing the quarter.

"Look closer at it."

He studied the first side, heads. Flipping it over, Jeff found heads on the back side as well. He laughed out loud. "It's a trick coin! Both sides are heads!"

Kurt grinned back at him. "Like I said, I couldn't let you make the wrong choice. I had to hedge my bet."

"You're crazy!" Jeff hugged him tightly, and Kurt pressed back into him.

"It's been said before. I hope you're ready for a little crazy in your life."

"I am." Jeff sighed, and rested his head on the shoulder before him. When he finally glanced around, he didn't recognize the neighborhood. "Where we going?"

"To a motel, tonight. I wanted to make sure our reunion wouldn't be disturbed. Then tomorrow, we have some decisions to make. The world is open to us—we can go wherever we like."

"I was thinking San Antonio sounded good. It might be nice being close to family."

"Are you serious?" Kurt glanced back again.

"It's up to you. I want you to be happy." They locked eyes and Jeff said, "I love you."

Kurt grinned in delight. "I love you, too! We're both going to be happy—very, very happy."

"Watch the road!" Jeff nudged him, and Kurt straightened quickly, veering back into his lane.

"Ah, where's your spirit of adventure?" he joked.

"I think I just found it, today," Jeff replied, and squeezed Kurt's waist again.

With another wide grin, Kurt hollered, "Hang on, baby! It's going to be a wild ride!" He revved the engine loudly, and the bike zipped down the road.

Phaze Fantasies, Vol. III
by J Buchanan, Jade Falconer, Eliza Gayle

Hardcore

by Selah March

Phaze Fantasies, Vol. III
by J Buchanan, Jade Falconer, Eliza Gayle

Also By Selah March

Moondance

To Have and Have Not

Fortune's Fool

Dedication

To my ever-patient crit partners, Barb, Don and Eva,
and my ever-loving husband and children,
who will never read this story.

Chapter One

Jesse Bonham didn't know when he'd lost sight of the difference between right and wrong. He was pretty sure it'd been a gradual kind of thing. But when the hooker's eyes got big with fear, staring at him like he was evil incarnate, he caught a clue that maybe it was time to chill. Step back a little. Take stock of his methods, maybe.

Yeah. Just as soon as he found out what he wanted to know.

"Sanchez. Paco Sanchez. I need to know where to find him, LaNay." He tightened his grip on the whore's hair and leaned in, pinning her to the dirty brick wall with his hip. He was close enough to smell the tang of fear in her sweat, but he made a point of not touching her skin—not violating her that way. He wouldn't go there unless she gave him no other choice. Which proved he still had some scruples, didn't he?

"Don't know," LaNay rasped. "Wouldn't tell you if I did, cocksucker."

"You sure about that?"

"Yeah, 'cause unlike *some* people, I ain't got no death wish."

Fuck it. He didn't have time for this shit. He brought his hand up quick and wrapped it around her throat. "You think I won't kill you? Try me."

He squeezed, just a little, and the full thrust of her terror hit him square in the chest. Underneath it, he sensed defiance ... desperation ... but it was jumbled, and he couldn't filter

out the truth from all the fear. Was she more scared of him? Or of what might happen if she spilled what she knew about Paco?

"Listen, man," she said. "Don't know where Paco's at, but I can tell you where you'll find his latest piece of ass."

"I'm listening."

She rolled her eyes, flashing the whites and looking more like a spooked mare than a woman. Her dangling, chandelier-like earrings winked in the dim light. "Paco finds out this come from me, my blood's on your hands, Bonham."

"He won't."

He felt her disbelief bleeding through her skin into his, fucking up anything he might try to read. But he couldn't blame her. Why should she trust the guy with his fingers wrapped around her windpipe?

They glared at one another through the murky light of the alley. Jesse shifted and felt the solid weight of his .45 pressing into the small of his back. If he took it out ... if he stuck it in her ear ... would she talk then? But what the fuck was the use of being able to touch people and feel what they felt if he had to flash the hardware to get a simple piece of information?

A tear leaked from the corner of her eye and left a long trail of saltwater and cheap mascara in the layer of makeup that covered her cheek. "You know that new place on Gilmore? Where the Hotel California used to be, before it burned up?"

"You mean Heliotrope? The gay club?"

"I thought you might know it." She bared her teeth at him in a sneer. "You'll find Paco's new boy behind the bar."

"His new *boy*? You mean—"

"I mean Paco's flavor of the month happens to be dick. Maybe you and Paco got more in common than you think."

He closed his eyes and tried to hang on to his temper.

"You got a name to go with that address?"

She shook her head. Her earrings did the rhumba. "White boy, dark hair. Taller than you, and built like a brick shithouse. Pretty face, too."

Jesse eased up, letting her take a deep breath. Before she could step away, he twisted his fingers in her hair. "Give Sanchez a message when you see him. Tell him I'm coming for him, and if he doesn't give me what I need, he's a dead man." He released her.

She laughed, hoarse and raspy. "Looks who's talkin'."

She straightened the bits and pieces that made up her work uniform and sidled out from between him and the dirty brick wall. The red print of his hand on her throat was obvious, even in the shadows. Not the only mark on her, but this one was *his*. When had he lowered himself to roughing up women?

"You won't last a week if Paco hears you callin' him out, Bonham. You'd best get your fine ass outta town." LaNay turned and walked away, her stilettos striking the pavement in a weirdly cheerful rhythm. In another moment, she was gone.

And he was left to wonder where he'd misplaced his conscience.

* * * *

"Uh oh. Here comes trouble."

When Frankie nudged him and pointed toward the door, Sean looked up from polishing the bar long enough to check out Heliotrope's most recent patron—a tough-looking guy in his early thirties, his bristly, dark blond hair and beat-up leather coat damp with the night's mist. A newcomer? Not a regular, even if Frankie did seem to know him. Sean would've remembered that face. Those eyelashes? That perfect, Cupid's bow mouth, so at odds with the line of his square jaw? Yeah, he'd definitely remember.

Sean watched the guy make his way through the Friday night crowd of men, taking in his slow, deliberate stride, the set of his broad shoulders and the glint in his eyes.

"What can I get you?"

The man flipped a hundred dollar bill onto the shiny surface of the bar, focusing on Sean and ignoring everyone else in the place. Quite a trick, if only because Frankie's outfit was damned hard to miss.

"Jack, rocks. And a little conversation?" He phrased it as a question, but there was no mistaking the demand for a request.

"What kind of conversation?" If this chuckle-head thought a hundred bucks would buy him a blowjob in the men's room, he'd better think again. "I'm working a long shift, and the management doesn't—"

"The kind of conversation that doesn't involve you getting your knees dusty, kid. Don't sweat it."

Sean felt a flush of heat rise to his face. He was tempted to tell the guy where he could shove his cash along with his attitude. But he needed the money. "I have a break in five minutes."

"Good enough."

Sean served the man his drink, then watched as he sauntered away and took a seat in a booth in the far corner of the room. When he was out of earshot, Sean leaned over and asked Frankie, "Who the hell is that?"

His friend shrugged, making his long, black wig bounce on his shoulders and his rhinestone earrings twinkle in the low light. "Name's Jesse Bonham. Used to be a cop, 'til he got busted for manslaughter a while back. Did eighteen months hard time, then his lawyer got it kicked on a technicality."

"And now?"

"And now he's just mad, bad, and dangerous to know." Frankie snapped his fingers in the air like the diva he was.

Sean stared at Bonham through the murky air of the barroom. "What's he want with me?"

"Don't know, but you'd make a hell of a couple." Frankie's voice took on a dreamy quality even as he leered at Sean. "You all dark, and him all fair like he is. Angels, man—Lucifer and Michael. I'd pay good money to watch that action."

Sean felt heat rise in his face a second time. "Dude, you need to brush up on your theology. Lucifer was the fair one. The Angel of Light, remember? And Michael was the warrior. I'm no Michael, that's for damn sure."

His friend looked at him sideways from beneath his fake eyelashes. "If you say so, college boy."

"Whatever. Don't you have a set coming up in a few minutes, Countess Francesca?"

"Yeah. And you've got a date with the Devil." Frankie clapped him on the shoulder and slid off his stool. "Tell Bonham I'll do a number just for him. He'll know it when he hears it." He walked away laughing.

Sean checked his watch. Time to meet the mystery man. He poured himself a soda and handed his rag to the bartender next to him, saying, "I'll be back in twenty." Then he wove his way through the crowd.

As he reached his destination, Bonham shot him a look from hooded eyes that hit him square in the gut and settled somewhere a few inches further south. The jolt made him stumble as he slid into the booth. He frowned and cleared his throat. "What's this about?"

Bonham smiled at him. It didn't look too friendly, even with the way his hazel eyes crinkled at the corners. "I'd tell you I'm a sucker for a pretty face, but I guess you've heard that before."

Sean nodded. "I could say the same for you."

"Right. Just a couple of pretty boys, shootin' the shit." Bonham rolled his glass between his well-shaped hands in a way that made Sean stare a little too long. Then he said, "What's your name, kid?"

"Sean Carr. And you're Jesse Bonham. Now that we've been properly introduced, can we cut to the chase?"

"Pushy little bitch, aren't you?" Bonham quirked an eyebrow at him and smiled wider.

Sean slapped his palm on the table. "That's it." He reached into his front pocket, dug out the hundred and tossed it down. "You have yourself a good night." As he stood, Bonham reached out quick as a snake and grabbed his wrist. His fingers felt warm. Firm. Determined. When Sean looked into his face, the older man's eyes had widened and dilated—the only sign that Sean didn't imagine the hot current that arced between them.

"Sit down, kid. I promise to be nice." His voice sounded smooth, like a swallow of single malt whiskey, with a burn that was more of a glow.

Sean knew he should walk away. He knew it in his brain, and he knew it in his gut. But his dick had a different idea. He stood there, staring down at the older man, wondering why the air felt electrified all of a sudden. Thick and hot and full of anticipation, like those minutes just before a storm. He kept staring, noting how Bonham had a dimple in his chin and another at the corner of his mouth. Wondering what the man's reddish-gold stubble would feel like against his face. Sean licked his lower lip and watched the pupils of Bonham's eyes dilate further as he tracked the swipe of his tongue.

"Please. Sit."

Sean shrugged and slid back into the booth just as a drum roll announced Frankie's set. He twisted in his seat to better see the stage, and grinned when he caught his friend's signature flash of skin through a costume made mostly of sequins and mesh.

"Could I maybe get your attention?" Now Bonham sounded pissed off.

Sean glanced at him. "So much for nice."

The older man sighed and inclined his head in the direction of the stage. "That your buddy up there?"

"Yeah. You should give him a listen. He said he'd do a number just for you."

Bonham sat back in his seat and crossed his arms over his chest as the band launched into a disco version of "Just Like Jesse James" that only Frankie, in full Cher-mode, could pull off.

Sean stole a peek at his companion and found him glaring at the tabletop. "You don't have much of a sense of humor, do you?" Now Bonham turned the glare on *him*, somehow managing to make Sean's mouth go dry with the intensity of it. He coughed into his fist and said, "Ease up, dude. Frankie doesn't mean anything by it."

"Yeah? And what about you? Do you mean anything, or am I wasting my time?"

Sean put his hands flat on the tabletop. "I guess that depends on what it is you want. Which I'm still waiting to hear, by the way."

Bonham scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed. "Right. It's like this, ki—Sean." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I need to set up a meeting with your boyfriend. I've got four more bills in my pocket as big as that one," he said and pointed at the hundred on the table. "You tell me where I can find Paco Sanchez, and they're yours."

Sean let the offer hang in the air between them and tried not to gag on the nasty brew of confusion and fear that welled up in his throat. When he finally spoke, his voice

sounded strangled in his own ears. "First of all, what makes you think Paco Sanchez is my boyfriend?"

Bonham rolled his eyes. "Is that how you wanna play it? Really?" He sighed again and looked like he wanted to bang his head on the table. "Fine. A whore told me."

"A whore?" Sean looked around wildly, searching the bar for ... he wasn't even sure what. "I don't even..." He turned back to Bonham. "There are whores in Santa Rosa?"

Bonham laughed. "Kid. You're killing me here." Then he took a closer look at Sean's face, and whatever he saw there made him lean in further. "You're serious? You really thought there weren't any..." He shook his head and laughed again.

"I'm glad you find my stupidity so amusing." Sean fought the urge to take a swing at Bonham's jaw. "I'm new in town. I guess I didn't realize ... I mean, it seems like a nice place."

Bonham reached for his drink. "Santa Rosa? Sure. Great little town, unless you make the mistake of looking under the surface." He lifted the glass to his lips and stopped. "You know what this bar used to be, right? Before it burned and was rebuilt? They told you?"

Sean shook his head.

"It was an alternative club for people who like whips and chains. All very legal, except that the lady who owned it was kidnapping men and torturing them to death for shits and giggles."

Yeah, he remembered something on the news about that, from a year or more ago. "That was here?"

Bonham nodded. "Where're you from?"

"Smithville, Texas. Can we get back to the part where you think I'm gonna tell you how to find Paco Sanchez?"

"I don't just think, kid." Bonham tipped his glass up, draining it, and signaled to a passing server for another. "I know."

"You do, huh?"

"Yep. You wanna know how?"

Sean felt his face crease into a grimace, even as he tried to remain expressionless. "No, but you're gonna tell me."

Bonham shrugged. "I saw how scared you looked when I mentioned his name. Which means one of two things—either you're afraid of me, or you're afraid of Paco. And I'm not that intimidating."

Sean snorted. "Don't underestimate yourself. You're straight-up scary." He found himself smiling at the man. More shocking still—Bonham smiled back, and this time it looked genuine. Friendly, even. Sean felt a flare of need, tight and hot and lowdown deep. And completely inappropriate, given the situation.

"All right," Bonham said. "So you've got trouble with Paco. I'm not gonna ask what kind—that's your business. But tell me where to find him, and maybe he won't be a problem for you anymore."

So much for friendly. Sean brushed his hair out of his eyes. "I don't know. Haven't seen him in a week." He looked at a spot just past Bonham's shoulder and prayed the man would believe the half-truth. True, he'd seen Paco only four nights ago—as the bruises hidden beneath his shirt proved—

but he didn't have a clue where to find him now. Not that he wanted to.

Bonham reached across the table and grabbed his wrist again, pressing his thumb into the pulse-point. "Look, kid. I understand you're in a tough spot. But I promise—"

"You promise what?" Sean swallowed and tried to tug his arm away. "You promise Paco won't know who told? Look around, genius. We've been sitting together in public for twenty minutes. Speaking of which, my break is over." He yanked hard on his arm, and Bonham released him.

He stared into Sean's eyes, an obvious expression of surprise on his face. "You're really that scared of Sanchez?"

"You're the one who said I was scared, not me."

Bonham's brow quirked again. "Right. Loyal then, like a puppy."

Sean tried to keep his face blank as he stood and prepared to walk away. To keep the rage and shame out of his eyes. But when Bonham smirked, he knew he'd failed.

For the rest of the night he ignored the other man, who kept his seat in the far corner booth and seemed to watch his every move. About thirty minutes before last call, he looked up and Bonham was gone. He told himself the hollow feeling in his chest was relief.

Two hours later, when every glass was sparkling and the bar was polished to a high, glossy sheen, Sean stepped out into the small employee parking lot behind the Heliotrope and inhaled deeply. The mist was heavier now, edging into rain.

He heard a sound to his right, like a stone hitting the pavement. He turned, and that's when Bonham came at him

from the left, hooking one booted foot around the back of his knee and shoving. Sean went down hard. The blacktop skinned his hands, but Bonham caught him before his head made contact. The next thing he felt was the unmistakable chill of a muzzle against his jaw.

"Sorry it has to be like this, kid." Bonham moved the gun so that it pressed into his ribs, grazing the bruises Paco had left behind, and making Sean flinch. Then he took Sean by one arm and half-dragged him across the lot.

Sean didn't bother to struggle until he saw the truck. By the glow of the streetlight, the navy blue, vintage Chevy pick-up looked to be in an excellent state of repair. But more to the point, Sean knew if he allowed himself to be forced into the truck, he'd likely not live to see morning. So when Bonham reached out to open the passenger-side door, he pivoted and brought his fist up fast.

Bonham dodged the blow neatly, caught a handful of Sean's six-inch-long curls, and yanked his head backward. "Don't," he whispered into Sean's ear. "I'm not gonna hurt you unless you make this harder than it has to be."

"Fuck you."

Bonham laughed. "That's the spirit."

He let go of Sean's hair and opened the cab of the truck, gesturing with the .45. Sean got in. He watched the older man walk around the front end of the vehicle and thought about bolting. Something told him he wouldn't get far. And something else—something he didn't want to acknowledge because it disgusted him—told him he didn't really want to try.

Bonham slammed the door, stuck the key in the ignition, and fired up the engine. It roared, like a dragon come to life. Then he turned slightly in his seat and said, "You're bait. You get that, right?"

Sean nodded. He'd figured that out the moment he felt the muzzle of the gun against his jaw.

Bonham watched him with careful eyes. "I like you, kid. I don't want to see anything bad happen to you. But you gotta trust me."

"Trust you? You're kidding, right?"

"You're the one who said I lack a sense of humor. You remember that about me, and we'll do fine."

He pulled out of the parking lot. A few minutes later, they were headed southeast on the Sonoma Highway.

"You mind if I ask where you're taking me?"

"Not at all. A place called the Valley of the Moon. Ever hear of it?"

Sean nodded. "It's a novel by Jack London."

Bonham glanced at him and smirked. "College boy, huh?"

"Go fuck yourself."

"I thought you were gonna do that for me." The smirk widened, morphing into a full grin.

Sean felt his ears burn and was glad of the dark in the truck's cab.

Chapter Two

They were well out of Santa Rosa before the kid spoke again. "So what's so special about this place? The Valley of the Moon?" His soft drawl was nearly lost beneath the pound of the rain on the roof.

Jesse forced his gaze to stay on the road in front of them. He'd already caught himself staring at Sanchez's boy a few too many times for comfort. At all that long, lean muscle that should've looked wrong with his baby-boy curls and innocent face, but didn't.

He concentrated on the back and forth dance of the wipers as he answered. "Just a place. Got a friend who's got a cabin he lets me borrow from time to time, out near Yulupa Creek."

"A cabin? Is it ... does it have—"

"Don't sweat it. There's indoor plumbing. But if you don't watch yourself, I'll make you take a bath in the creek. Might be cold this time of year."

The kid huffed, sounding annoyed. "Man, are you always such a toppy son of a bitch? Or is it all a front?"

Well, that was unexpected. Jesse tightened his grip on the steering wheel and tried to keep his voice even. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm asking if you're a top or a bottom. Because you seem like a top, mostly, but then ... I don't know. That could be an act. I've seen it before."

"I think you want to shut up now."

"Why? Am I making you uncomfortable?"

Yeah, he was, as a matter of fact. One minute Jesse'd been in control of the situation and the conversation, and the next this ... *boy* ... felt free to ask him personal questions.

They were passing through the unincorporated village of Kenwood—the kind of place that closed up shop at eight on a Friday night. Jesse slowed down to thirty and watched his rearview mirror for any sign of county law enforcement.

"You couldn't make me uncomfortable if you tried." He punctuated the statement by making a hard right turn that overbalanced the kid, toppling him onto the center of the bench seat. When he righted himself, he shot Jesse a dirty look, folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the doorframe.

They'd left the highway behind. All back roads from here on out, and the rain didn't make them any more passable. Silence took over the cab of the truck as Jesse negotiated the muddy twists and turns. Just as he'd begun to consider flipping on the radio and searching for an oldies station, the kid piped up again.

"You know, it's nothing to be ashamed of. Being a bottom, I mean. It doesn't make you weak, or less of a man."

There was another pause while Jesse tried to formulate an answer that didn't involve reaching over and putting his fist through the little cocksucker's face. He settled on repeating, "I don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"Look, I'm just saying—"

And that, right there, was Jesse's limit. He didn't bother to pull off the road—no place to go even if he'd wanted to. He slammed on the brakes, threw the truck into park and turned

in his seat. "Are you looking for me to shut your mouth for you?"

"Would that make you feel better? Beatin' me up?" Now the kid's drawl was more pronounced, and there was heat in his eyes. Just like back at the Heliotrope, when he'd first joined Jesse at his table. And when he'd grabbed the boy's wrist that first time, he'd definitely felt ... something...

No. This was about Sanchez—flushing him out into the open. Using his new boy as bait was one thing, but Jesse'd never intended to lay a hand on the kid. Not in any way, shape or form, no matter how much he might...

"Why can't you leave this alone?" Jesse hated the tiny tremor that showed up in his voice. It was enough to make him want to punch *himself* in the face.

The kid shrugged, not backing down. Plainly not intimidated. "Why can't you answer a simple question?"

"I ... *fuck* ... I don't..." Why was he letting this arrogant little—*all right, not so little*—son of a bitch get to him? He had nothing to prove. Not to Sanchez's fuck-toy, that was for damn sure. That's what he told himself, even as he opened his mouth to say, "I hate that shit. Those words, they're ... they don't mean anything. It's just another game."

The kid stared at him, his brow low over his dark eyes. Cat's eyes, long and tilted at the corners. "All right," he said, nodding. "I get it. You're a switch."

Jesse did the only thing he could do. He punched the steering wheel hard enough to bruise his hand.

And now the kid was talking fast, like maybe he realized he'd gone too far. "Hey, it's cool. So am I. More of us out

there than you'd think. Like I said, it's nothing to be ashamed of—"

"Not ashamed." Jesse threw the truck into drive and hit the gas. "That's one thing I'm not, kid. So long as I've got a willing partner, I don't do shame."

"I bet finding willing partners isn't too hard, with a face like that ... a body like yours."

Jesse felt his mouth open and close, like a landed trout. He couldn't think of an answer, but it didn't matter because the kid wasn't done with him. "I just paid you a compliment. Say 'thank you,' and don't call me 'kid.' My name is Sean."

Without thinking too long or too deeply about it, Jesse looked at him and said, "Thanks." He cleared his throat and turned his gaze back to the road. "Sean."

"You're welcome," the kid replied, sounding more smug than gracious. "You sure you're not a bottom?"

They drove the rest of the way to the cabin in perfect silence.

* * * *

Sean was relieved when the cabin turned out to be more like a small, rustic house than the glorified lean-to he'd feared. Though the fact that there must've been at least ten miles of mud between them and a paved road sort of ruined it. How the fuck was he getting out of this? Nobody would even realize he was missing until Tuesday night, when his next shift at the bar was scheduled. He'd told Frankie was going to lie low and hide out from Paco, and if anybody asked, he'd left town for the weekend. Frank might wonder

when he saw his beat up punch-buggy sitting in the lot behind the bar, but not enough to do anything about it.

He was so screwed.

The interior of the cabin was just as rustic as the exterior, but fully furnished in a hunting-lodge-meets-barracks kind of way. The floor was naked pine planks, the fireplace was black with soot, the stove and refrigerator had a century of use between them, and there was only one bed Sean could see—a double with tall, brass posts at the head and footboards. He blinked when he saw it and tried not to imagine things. His cock was doing that enough for both of them.

"You need to use the john?" Bonham asked him, his voice gruff but subdued. "Maybe take a shower?"

Sean shook his head. "I'm good." He slid out of his damp jacket and shivered as the cool air struck his bare arms and neck.

Bonham began rummaging around in the oversized duffel he'd carried in from the truck. A few seconds later, he came up with a fresh set of clothes. "I'll be twenty minutes or so. Then we'll see what Chico left us to eat, and maybe start a fire."

Before he could think, Sean heard himself saying, "You're not gonna tie me up?"

Bonham shot a glance over his left shoulder. "I thought we'd save the kinky shit for when we know each other better."

"Funny. You're a real comedian for a convicted killer."

Bonham was next to him in under a second, his fingers digging into Sean's bicep. He stared up into Sean's face, his

lip curled into a snarl, and said, "Watch your mouth, kid. You know nothing about me, so don't pretend you do. You won't like the results."

Sean knew he should let it drop. He knew it like he knew he wanted to feel Bonham's hands on more than his arm or his wrist. Which was probably why he said, "You mean like the Incredible Hulk? I won't like you when you're angry?"

The pupils of Bonham's eyes dilated, just like they'd done back at the bar, the first time he'd touched Sean. The corner of his mouth twitched. "Something like that, yeah." He let go of Sean's arm and stepped back. "It's an eight-mile hike to the highway. With the rain like it is, you'd drown before you made it, and that's without me chasing you down and knocking your dick in the dirt."

"And you're so sure I can't hotwire that piece of shit you parked out front?"

Bonham stepped back again, far enough to make a show of looking Sean up and down. He snorted. "Yeah, I'm sure." Then he went into the bathroom and shut the door.

Sean listened to the creak and thud of the pipes as the shower came on, and considered his options. He could make a run for it, but Bonham was right—an eight-mile hike in the dark and mud and pouring rain didn't exactly appeal to him, especially since he'd likely get lost. And he couldn't, in fact, hotwire a truck or any other kind of vehicle. So that left two choices: seduce Bonham and disarm him that way, or try to get the jump on him using good old-fashioned violence.

Everything being equal, the first option was a lot more attractive. But for all his jabber during the drive to the cabin,

Sean didn't have the first clue how to handle a guy like Bonham, who was plainly a hell of a lot more complex than Paco Sanchez. He suspected Bonham wouldn't be taken in by a submissive pose and a blowjob, and Sean wasn't sure he was willing to go any further with a stranger.

Even a beautiful stranger? Even if it might save him from eventually being murdered by said beautiful stranger? Yeah, okay. That was the reality here—Bonham was a killer, and he'd do well to remember it.

He heard the shower turn off and looked around the room with rising panic, searching for a weapon. There, by the fireplace. A poker. He grabbed it, positioned himself to the left of the bathroom door, and waited.

The door opened, letting out a rolling wave of steam that smelled like soap and freshly-scrubbed male. Sean watched Bonham step through the doorway and counted ... one ... two ... thr—

He felt it all before he saw anything ... mostly because he'd shut his eyes, which only proved he'd never make much of a ninja. Bonham's hand came out of nowhere, grasping his wrist and twisting until he released the poker. Bonham's body, in nothing but jeans, pressed full-length against his. The older man's wet hair dripped cold on his chest, the water seeping through his t-shirt. Sean took a deep breath, opened his eyes and looked down.

"See," Bonham said, smirking up at him yet again in a way that made Sean want to bite right through that pretty lower lip, "See, now ... that was a mistake."

Chapter Three

Jesse used the weight of his whole body to press Sean into the wall and quell his struggles. The last thing he wanted to do was to hurt the kid, but he would if he had to. Then, all at once, Sean quit fighting and relaxed against him, his eyes falling half-shut and his mouth softening. Jesse turned his attention to his grip on Sean's wrist. Through the minimal skin-to-skin contact he read an equal mix of fear and lust.

"Doesn't feel like a mistake to me," Sean murmured and licked his lower lip.

"Don't. You won't like where it ends up."

"Says you."

"Yeah, says me." Jesse eased off him, but kept his hand clamped around his wrist. "You think you can ... what? Seduce me, because killing me didn't quite work out like you hoped?"

Sean shook his head. "Didn't want to kill you."

"Sorry, guess I got confused by how you tried to split my skull." He caught himself staring at the way the younger man's throat worked as he swallowed, and moved his gaze to the wall just over his shoulder. "You're pretty, kid, but in case you didn't notice, I'm prettier."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means I know every trick in the book, plus a few nobody's bothered to write down. It means maybe you can play Paco Sanchez with that shit, but you can't play me."

Sean's face flushed to nearly purple. "Not trying to play you." The feelings bleeding through his skin morphed to desperation and anger, and maybe a little guilt. But the lust remained, and it was damned hard to ignore. Not the only thing getting hard in the equation, either.

Jesse shifted so his groin was no longer riding Sean's thigh and said, "Tell it to your sugar daddy when he comes for you."

"Sanchez's not my sugar daddy. I don't even..." He looked away, and his prism of emotions turned again, this time to anger and humiliation.

"You don't even what?"

"Never mind."

"Well, there must be some reason you ... uh ... tolerate his affections, right? Come on, spill. What's he got on you?"

"Fuck you. I don't have to tell you anything."

He was right. By now he must've figured out Jesse wouldn't beat it out of him unless backed into a corner. Jesse didn't have to—he was "special" and "gifted" and could tell what Sean was feeling just by laying his hands on his skin. Yeah, some gift. Talk about a mixed blessing ... forced to feel everything the kid was feeling, when all Jesse wanted to do was press him harder into the wall and make him do something productive with that choirboy pout.

"So you weren't trying to play me, huh? Does that mean you want this? For real?"

He didn't wait for an answer. Just grabbed Sean by his shirt and tossed him on the mattress, and yeah, maybe he had three inches and twenty pounds on Jesse, but he tumbled

like any other guy taken by surprise. He landed on his back and lay there, his cheeks red, his eyes wide, and his mouth open.

Jesse took a step toward the bed. "Well? You want this or not? Last chance."

The kid nodded.

"You'll have to do better than that," Jesse said. "I'm in 'toppy son of a bitch' mode tonight." He let himself smirk.

Sean answered it with a half-smile. "Yes. I want it."

Jesse nodded. "How?"

"What d'you mean?"

"I mean how do you want it?" Jesse moved around the room, never letting his gaze stray from Sean's face. He turned on the lamp next to the bed, and flicked off the overhead light. "Sanchez gives it to you rough? And you like that?" It was a shot in the dark, but he knew he'd hit the target when Sean flushed again and looked away.

"No, I'm not into pain. At least..." His voice faded, and he looked at the ceiling.

Jesse finished the thought for him. "At least not like Sanchez deals it out." He nodded, and moved toward the bed to thread a hand through Sean's long curls. He pulled his head backward—not hard, but determined—and leaned in to plant one on his mouth.

Sean twisted away, forcing Jesse to release his hair or risk scalping him. "Quit it."

"Quit what?"

"That kissin' stuff." His drawl had deepened, plainly aggravated by his confusion. "You've got me, okay? For Christ's sake, quit treatin' me like a ... like a..."

"Like what?" Okay, now Jesse was honestly puzzled. He didn't like kissing? Did he have a rule against it, like a whore who didn't kiss on the lips? He reached out and cupped the back of Sean's neck. The jolt of bitter self-loathing that seeped through the touch made him pull back again. Somebody had fucked with the kid's head big time.

"You don't have to pretend you like me. That's all I'm sayin'."

Jesse stepped back and crossed his arms over his chest. "Whatever. Me? I like a little foreplay, but if you're not into it..." He shrugged. "Take off your clothes, cowboy."

Sean reached for his belt buckle, then stopped. "What about you?"

"What about me?" An open challenge—if the kid thought he liked being manhandled, told what to do and how to do it—well, Jesse could oblige. He'd be easier to control later if Jesse broke him now, and that might save both their lives if things went south with Sanchez. "You said you wanted this. Said you weren't playing me. These are the rules: you do as I say, when I say it. And I say take off your fucking clothes." He kept his voice even and steady. Almost pleasant. But he didn't smile, and when Sean reached again for his buckle, he moved away from the bed, pulled a spindly-legged chair from the corner of the room, and straddled it backwards.

He watched as Sean stood and stripped, right down to his baby-blue boxer briefs.

"Those, too. All the way. And lose the watch."

Sean stared at the floor as he shucked the briefs. Jesse took the opportunity to check him out. He looked even taller naked, if that was possible, but not as thin and lanky as he'd appeared beneath his baggy jeans and too-big t-shirt. Definitely athletic. And Christ Jesus ... he was packing. Enough to make a lesser man than Jesse feel inadequate.

But what caught and held his attention were the deep purple bruises that marred Sean's left side, spreading over his ribs and down over his hip. When he turned to fold his briefs and set them on the floor with his other clothes, Jesse saw a matching set of marks on his lower back.

"Get on the bed." He fought to keep that same placid tone, though the sight of the bruises made him want to drive his fist through the nearest wall. But there was no need to spook the kid with a show of pointless violence. When Sean climbed up on all fours—apparently assuming "the position"—Jesse said, "No. On your back."

Sean shot a glance over his shoulder, a question plain on his face, but he turned and spread out without a word. His dick was half-hard, lying long and heavy against his own thigh. He folded his arms behind his head and looked at Jesse. "Now what?"

"Now you touch yourself. You do it just like I tell you, and you don't stop 'til I say."

"What the...?" Sean's eyes widened again. "I thought you wanted—"

"No. *You* wanted. What I want is for you to follow instructions."

"You said you didn't like games. What the fuck is this, if not a game?"

Jesse inclined his head, considering him. "Good point, kid. You don't wanna play? Then let's call it a night." He stood and moved to swing his leg around the chair.

"Wait." Sean swallowed. "What do you ... how do you want me to..." He bit his lip.

Jesse squinted at him, making his face as hard as he knew how. "If we start this, we're going all the way. No backing out."

The kid nodded, still chewing on his lip, and *Goddamn* if that didn't make Jesse want to join him on that bed. But then he looked again at all those bruises, all that marked up skin, and let himself settle again onto the chair. "Nothing fancy to start. Just do what you do when you're all by your lonesome."

Sean closed his eyes, wrapped his hand around his own cock and pulled once, gently. The younger man's face twisted in an obvious expression of discomfort, and he stopped.

Jesse sighed. "I'm waiting. Don't make me come over there." He watched as Sean's hand moved again, stroking slow and long, and had to consciously ease his grip on the back of the chair for fear of cracking the old, dry wood.

Sean picked up the pace, setting a rhythm Jesse could feel in the back of his throat and low in his belly, reaching all the way into his balls. He shifted in the chair and winced at the increasingly tight fit of his jeans. The yellowish glow from the bedside lamp caught and hung on the sharp angles of the kid's body—the line of a collarbone, the curve of a shoulder, the sharp jut of a hip. It made Jesse want to trace every

shadow with his fingertips, dip his tongue into every little hollow.

Sean made a muffled noise, and Jesse looked at his face. His color was high, all sunset-red and golden tan, and still sucking on that Goddamned lip, making it blush and swell. Jesse bit back a curse and rose off the chair to shed the clothes he'd put on in the bathroom. Moving silently, he fished a condom and a bottle of lube from his duffel, and set them on the bedside table.

Sean's eyes opened to slits when Jesse pressed his knee into the bed. The hand on his cock faltered.

"Don't stop. Just keep doing like you're doing." He touched Sean's arm and heard his breathing accelerate. The younger man's skin seemed to bleed heat, and with it that same raw need Jesse'd picked up before. "Just like that, keep going. But don't you come 'til I say, you hear me?"

Sean groaned. "Come on, Bonham, I can't—"

Jesse cut him off by wrapping his own hand around Sean's, where it gripped his cock, and forcing him to keep his rhythm. "You can, and you will. And I think I want you to call me—"

The kid freaked, yanking his entire body away from Jesse and falling half-off the bed. "Sir? You want me to call you sir? Because I won't. You can't make me, you motherfuckin'—"

"Whoa!" It was the first time Jesse'd raised his voice. He hated how loud it sounded in the small cabin. "Settle down. Get back on the bed."

Sean eyed him, tension twisting his face, but slid his long frame onto the mattress. His cock bobbed in the air, but neither of them moved to touch it.

Jesse sighed. "Not sir. Just Jesse. I want you to call me Jesse." He lifted his hand, palm up, as he would to a fear-biting dog. "Okay, Sean?"

The kid narrowed his eyes. "I don't think so."

Jesse felt a pang of disappointment, but he sure as hell wouldn't let *that* show on his face. The kid was well within his rights to refuse to call him by name. They weren't buddies, after all. "Whatever. I'm gonna touch you know. And you're gonna let me."

This time Sean nodded, but the muscles in his abdomen rippled with tension as Jesse reached for his cock. It felt hot and heavy with blood in his hand. He ghosted his thumb over the head, barely touching, collecting the moisture that beaded at the tip. Sean made a low, helpless sound, like a cross between a grunt and a sob.

All that need bubbling up through the younger man's skin hit Jesse deep in his gut and held on tight. He fisted Sean's cock and stroked, imitating what he'd seen the younger man do.

"Yeah, just like that. Fast and hard—that how you like it?"

Sean closed his eyes and nodded, then threw an arm over his face. Jesse grabbed his elbow and tugged. "No hiding. You wanted this, remember?"

The kid looked at him, his pupils blown wide and his mouth soft and wet. Jesse's hips flexed without his permission. His cock brushed Sean's thigh, and he froze. The younger man didn't seem to notice.

Sean's breathing had disintegrated to quick, shallow panting. He was close. Jesse gave him three more good

strokes, then gripped the base of his cock hard and leaned in to whisper, "Tell me."

"Huh?" Sean stared at him. Confusion seeped through his skin into Jesse's palm. "Tell you what?"

"Tell me what Sanchez has on you. Tell me why you let him..." Jesse swallowed the profanity that rose to his lips. "Why you let him hurt you. I know you don't like it." He stroked his cock again—longer, slower—and Sean writhed on the bed. "Tell me."

"It's..." Sean licked his lips. His breath whistled in his throat. "It's not important. Just ... come on, Bonham—"

Jesse fisted him again and squeezed. Hard, vicious, digging his nails into the tender spot just under the crown.

Sean yelped. "Jesus Christ ... *fuck* ... get me off and I'll tell you."

"No. Tell me and maybe ... *maybe* ... I'll let you get off."

The kid let loose with a string of obscenities, cussing Jesse from one end to the other. When he'd finished, he levered himself up onto his elbows and said, "My brother, all right? My brother's in the county lock-up and Sanchez ... he..." Sean let his head drop backward with a groan.

"Sanchez threatened him? Said he'd have him ... what? Hurt? Killed?"

Sean nodded. "Said he had lots of friends on the inside, and Bobby's as good as dead if I don't do what he wants."

"And what he wants is to beat crap out of you?"

"Among other things."

Son. Of. A. *Bitch*. Reason number eight-thousand-four-hundred-sixty-seven for Sanchez to die. Preferably slow and

screaming in pain. Rage made Jesse's vision gray out at the edges for a second or two. Then he sensed a change in the kid's emotions to go along with the way his dick had begun to soften in Jesse's hand.

"He's gonna kill me, you know. When you let me go? He'll kill me for being any part of this, and then he'll go after my brother." Sean's face had paled. His mouth was tight around the words.

Jesse shook his head. "Not gonna happen." The younger man started to protest, and Jesse squeezed his cock, hard. "You can believe me or not. I don't give a rat's ass. But it's not gonna happen, because Sanchez's gonna be dead." He looked into the kid's face as he said it, meeting his gaze head-on. "We're not done here, cowboy. Concentrate."

He jacked the kid again, a little rougher than before, and pressed his other hand against his belly, just below his naval. The skin was hot, as if something smoldered just beneath. Jesse slid his hand upward. Under the thud and stutter of Sean's heartbeat, he picked up a dark swirl of helpless arousal. Something that went deeper than the physical.

Sean fell back onto the mattress, his eyes slipping shut, and bucked into Jesse's hand. "Yeah, like that. God ... just like that." His voice sounded stressed, as if it were ready to crack. As if he, himself, might shatter.

Jesse leaned in and whispered, "Now take back what you said about my truck."

The way Sean's eyes popped open again—the outraged expression on his face—it was almost enough to make Jesse laugh. He struggled to keep his face stern when the kid said,

"Dude, have you ever got a chip on your shoulder. I'm sorry I suggested you were a bottom, okay? You're not. You're a big, strong he-man, and you're totally in charge."

"Damn straight, cowboy." He slowed his stroke. Gentled it, 'til it was nothing but a tease that made Sean squirm. "Now take it back."

"I ... you..." The kid shuddered when he ran his thumb over the slit, smearing the slippery wet down over the underside. "What the *fuck* do you want me to say?"

"How about 'you've got a real cool ride, Jesse, and I'm sorry I called it a piece of shit,' for starters." He let his hand slide down the base of Sean's cock and clamped down. His fingers splayed out over the kid's sac, testing its tightness and weight. Yeah, he was ready to blow.

Sean slammed his head back into the mattress repeatedly. "I hate you."

Jesse smiled. "You shouldn't. I'm trying to teach you something here, cowboy. Because, see ... there's pain, like when some asshole likes to use you for his personal punching bag..." He gave Sean's dick a yank and watched the kid's eyes roll back in his head. "And then there's pain, like when you want something so bad you think you're gonna die, and it's just ... outta ... reach."

Through clenched jaws, Sean said, "You sound like you know from experience."

Jesse nodded. "Been there a time or two."

"So I wasn't wrong about you. You really are a switch."

"You wanna get off tonight, kid? That's not the way." Jesse readjusted his grip, enjoying the way Sean flinched. "Now tell me what I want to hear."

Sean sucked in a breath, wheezy and deep, and parroted back, "You've got a cool ride, and I'm sorry I called it a piece of shit."

Jesse thought about nailing him again for refusing to say his name, but there was just so long you could play this game before it got old. "It's a forty-eight Chevy, Series 3600. Original interior. Belonged to my granddad." He heard the stupid pride in his own voice and didn't care.

"Right," Sean said, sounding pained. "Forty-eight, Series 3600. Got it." He shifted on the bed, and a jolt of pure frustration traveled through Jesse's hand from where it connected to Sean's cock and balls.

"Real good, kid. Now I'm gonna make you come, but here's the thing—you can't make any noise." Jesse moved 'til his lips brushed over the kid's ear. He went back to the slow, light strokes, but now he added a wicked twist of his wrist at the end, up and over the head, that made Sean gasp and cant his hips high off the mattress. "Not ... a ... sound. Think you can do that for me?"

Sean turned his head so his mouth nearly touched Jesse's. Too close for Jesse to focus on his face, but the kid's breath felt hot and damp, and tasted sweet, somehow. "Yeah," he whispered. "Yeah, I can do that."

"Good." Jesse watched as Sean's eyes fell shut again and resisted the urge to kiss him. The kid sucked that lower lip back into his mouth, and furrowed his brow. Anyone else

might read the expression as agony, but Jesse knew different. Through the hand still resting on Sean's chest he read relief, and then a soul-deep exhilaration as Jesse stroked harder, bringing him fast up to the edge and forcing him over. His cock jerked in Jesse's grip and jetted white up his belly, all the way to his chest. Jesse pulled back to watch his face. He saw Sean straining to keep his moans in check and knew he'd won this round.

He ran his hand through Sean's hair as the kid floated back to earth, limp and breathing like he'd run the four-minute mile. When he judged Sean was firing on all cylinders again, he murmured, "You ready for me?"

A tiny line appeared between Sean's eyes, and through the wash of satisfaction glowing from his skin, Jesse again read fear. But what Sean said was, "Yeah, okay."

Jesse frowned. "Don't do me any favors. You don't want this, just say—"

"No, I do." Sean struggled to sit. "I want it. It's good, it's ... I really want it."

"Uh huh. Don't sprain anything trying to convince yourself, either."

"Bonham..."

Jesse grunted, noncommittal.

"Listen," Sean said, "I'm not trying to convince anybody. I want it. It's the truth." He grabbed for Jesse's hand, and through his skin Jesse picked up the strong desire to make peace ... but no real yearning to be fucked.

And yet Jesse let himself want it. And the kid was *saying* he wanted it. So that didn't make it wrong ... right? Sean's

insides might be whispering 'no,' but yes mouth was saying 'yes,' and that made it okay ... didn't it?

He twisted his head around and laid a kiss on the kid's mouth before he could pull away. Sean's body stiffened against him, then went limp again. Jesse pulled away and manhandled the younger man to his knees. "You sure? Don't start something you can't finish, boy."

"Yes, for the last time, I'm sure," Sean said, "and quit callin' me boy." But there was no real heat in his words, and when he smiled that way—like he meant what he said and said what he meant—Jesse's cock got interested again real fast. All the desire he'd been sitting on, clamping down inside him while he showed the kid that "toppy" didn't have to mean "sadistic bastard," surged up and damn near overflowed.

"How do you want it, cowboy?"

"Oh, I get a choice this time?"

"Watch your mouth." Jesse watched as Sean flipped onto his stomach and flexed his hips, pushing his ass in the air. Christ almighty, this kid was gonna be the death of him yet.

He reached for the lube with one hand and used the other to rub circles on the back of Sean's thigh. The fear was still there. Muted, and covered over with a curtain of obligation and maybe just the barest hint of anticipation ... but definitely there. Jesse closed his eyes, took a deep breath and ignored it.

He squirted the lube onto his fingers and ran them lightly down the crease of Sean's ass. The kid gave a full-body shudder at the touch, then stilled and seemed to steel

himself. Just as gently, Jesse used his thumbs to spread him apart and ... holy mother of *fuck*.

More bruising, multi-colored and painful looking. Maybe five days old, if Jesse was any judge. No swelling, and no signs of tearing, but still—not anything Jesse had any intention of making worse just for the hell of it.

"What's wrong?" Sean twisted his head to look at him over his shoulder. As if he didn't know. As if it didn't hurt to bounce around the cab of a truck, much less ... *damn* it. Sanchez'd used him wrong, abused him, and he acted like he didn't even know it. Maybe he even thought he *liked* it.

"Tell me something, kid."

Sean made a huffing sound and glared at him. "Not this again. What the fuck is with you? Can't you think of anything better to do?" He flexed his hips again, pushing his ass at Jesse, and Jesse backed off.

"Just answer me, okay?" He put his hand on the kid's hip. "Was Sanchez your first?"

"My first ... guy?" Sean twisted his upper body further, but Jesse held fast to his hip, not letting him turn all the way around. "No."

"But he was the first one to ... you know." Jesse sneered at his own cowardice. Christ, if he couldn't even say it out loud...

"Fuck me?"

"Yeah."

Sean looked at him, his eyes narrow and his mouth thinned down to a crooked line. He nodded.

Christ, no wonder all the fear, even after Jesse'd gone out of his way to show he meant no harm. The kid thought Jesse was about to rip him up like some Goddamn caveman, but he was braced for it, because he thought that's how it was supposed to go.

Jesse released his grip on Sean's hip, slid off the bed and bent to grab his clothes. "We're done here."

"What? But I thought—"

"You thought wrong."

"What the hell, Bonham? Can't you keep it up?" There was more of that college-boy arrogance in Sean's voice. He turned and looked at Jesse, letting his eyes travel the whole length of his body. Jesse imagined his hard-on—which had no conscience to speak of and hadn't wilted at all—was tough to miss. Sean scowled. "What the fuck's wrong with you? Do I disgust you or something? Because I'm used goods?"

"Leave it, kid. Just let it alone, okay?" Jesse went into the bathroom and shut the door.

Through the cheap plywood he heard Sean shout, "Fuck you! And don't call me *kid*."

Jesse stood there, back against the door, waiting. For what, he wasn't sure. He couldn't even bring himself to jerk off, relieve a little of the tension. Because he didn't want his own right hand, he wanted...

He wanted what he couldn't have, and since when was that news? Just a little release that involved another human being, and maybe the chance to sleep with a clear, unburdened mind. So how ironic was it that he not only had to deal with

his own emotions, but those of everybody he had the misfortune to touch?

Fucking family curse. And yeah, he knew it wasn't his grandmother's fault, just like he knew he couldn't call her up and say, "Hey, Gram, how's the weather back east, did you know you screwed my sex life to hell and back with your lousy psychic DNA?"

He looked into the tiny, square mirror over the sink, checking out the lines in his forehead. The creases at the corners of his eyes that ran too deep for his thirty-three years. He looked weary. He felt old ... and self-pity was for suckers. He made a disgusted face at his reflection and tore open the shower curtain, cranked on the cold water and stepped inside the rusty stall. The shock made him stifle a groan. He braced himself against the wall, rested his forehead on his arm, and stood there 'til long after his hard-on was a memory. Long after his teeth ceased to chatter and his jaws locked up against the frigid pain. Long after the skin on his shoulders and chest and face had gone numb and then begun to burn. 'Til he was sure he wouldn't be tempted to so much as look at the kid again.

When he emerged, he found Sean tangled in the blankets and either comatose or doing one hell of an imitation. Jesse dressed, grabbed the spare blanket off the top shelf of tiny closet, and curled up in the decrepit armchair in the corner. He turned his face into the dusty upholstery so he wouldn't catch himself watching Sean sleep, and waited for sunrise.

Chapter Four

Sean awoke shivering and disoriented. The room was dim, and the bed and its blankets smelled like a musty nest around him. He lay very still, waiting to see if all of what he remembered was a dream.

"Mornin', starshine." Bonham stood in the doorway of the bathroom, dressed in jeans, a towel slung over one shoulder, and a buzzing electric razor in his hand. His hair was dark with water, his shoulders wide in his black t-shirt.

All right, not a dream. But how did he feel about that? Not as freaked as he should, that's for certain. He rolled over and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. The sudden rush of cool air over his lower body reminded him he was naked. What's more, his usual morning wood had sprouted with something more than its customary persistence. He moved his hands from his eyes and grabbed the corner of the blanket to cover himself. When he glanced up, he caught Bonham staring, the hand that held the razor frozen a fraction of an inch from his jaw.

Sean yanked on the blanket again and said, "Careful. Don't wanna mess up that pretty face."

Bonham snorted and retreated into the bathroom. Sean lay there and stared at the water-stained ceiling, listening to the rain fall against the windows. Fucking February in the Bay area—nothing like it for gray, dismal and wet. He thought about what had gone down the previous night, and the sour flavor of rejection swamped his mouth. Not that he gave a

shit. Bonham was a thug. An ex-con, for Christ's sake. He needed that kind of trouble like ... like ... well, not at all. He just *didn't*.

When the older man reappeared, Sean slid off the bed, wrapping the scratchy gray blanket around his hips. Bonham looked him up and down and quirked an eyebrow at him, but said nothing. A few seconds after he closed the bathroom door, Sean heard the front door of the cabin slam shut.

He emerged freshly showered a half-hour later. Bonham was sitting at the small table in the kitchenette, cleaning his gun. Sean turned his back while he dressed in the clothes he'd discarded the night before. When he finally looked, he found Bonham staring at the floor. The depth of the scowl on his face was awe-inspiring. The .45 rested on the table within easy reach.

"I used your toothbrush. I really hope that's okay." He loaded the words with as much sarcasm as he could.

The older man looked up. "So long as you didn't drop it in the toilet."

"Don't think it didn't cross my mind." Sean padded barefoot toward the fridge. "What's for breakfast?"

"Not much, unless you're into beer before noon." Bonham stood and shoved his hands into the pockets of his leather coat. "We're driving back into Kenwood for supplies, and to make a call. There's no cell reception out here."

"Who're you calling?"

"Not me. You're calling Sanchez and telling him where to meet me for a little conversation."

Sean stared at him, knowing his amazement must show on his face. "What makes you think I'll do that?"

"You're pretty good at doing what you're told, kid. Thought we proved that already."

"Cocksucker."

Bonham smirked. "Is that a request? 'Cause you already owe me—"

Sean cut him off with a wave of his hand, tripping over himself to avoid any mention of what had happened between them just a few hours before. "Sanchez won't care. He won't give you what you want just because you've got me."

"Don't sell yourself short, kid." Bonham's voice dropped half an octave, dirty and deep. "I'm betting your tight ass is worth a little conversation to the man."

"Jesus, do you have to be so—"

"So what? Crude? I thought you liked the rough stuff."

Sean swung away from him and grabbed the edge of the rickety oak table. "Sanchez hates to lose. He'll kill us both first."

"We'll see. Be in the truck in five minutes."

The drive back into Kenwood was rougher than the drive out, mostly due to the metric shit-load of mud that had accumulated overnight. Sean curled his fingers under the edge of the seat and watched Bonham struggle with the wheel of the truck.

"What do you want me to say to him, exactly?"

Bonham shot him a quick look. "The truth."

"Which is...?"

Bonham sighed. "You tell him I took you and I'm keeping you 'til he sets up a meeting. That's it."

"So I should skip the part where you kissed me like a Goddamn girl? Or the part where you couldn't bring yourself to fuck me—because, really, I don't think he'll be impressed."

The truck swerved sharply, sliding at an angle through the mud. Bonham fought to keep it on the narrow road, cursing long and vividly. When he got the vehicle under control, he glanced at Sean and said, "You're asking for it, kid. I won't tell you to watch your mouth again."

Sean stifled the urge to make a face—maybe stick out his tongue and cross his eyes. Because he wasn't five years old, damn it, no matter how young and stupid Bonham made him feel. He turned and stared out the window at the passing scenery.

They pulled into Kenwood a little before nine o'clock. Bonham parked on the street in front of what looked to be the only market in town, pulled his cell phone out of his coat pocket and handed it to Sean. "I assume you know his number?"

Sean nodded. Was he really doing this? Bonham hadn't given him enough time to think through all the possible consequences. "I ... this might be..." He brushed his hair out of his face, struggling to find the right words. "This could be a mistake. Sanchez, he's a bad guy. Very bad."

Bonham squinted at him. "And you think I'm ... what? A nice guy? A *good* guy?"

The truth came blurting out before Sean could stop it. "Yeah kind of."

Sean saw surprise and maybe something else flit across Bonham's face. They stared at each other as the seconds ticked over. Sean clutched the cell phone in his hand and waited for Bonham's next move. In the silence that seemed ready to stretch on into eternity, Sean's stomach's growled.

Sean couldn't keep from grinning. Bonham barely cracked a smile, but the corners of his eyes crinkled, and Sean wished he was some other guy. Some guy who hadn't killed anybody. Who hadn't kidnapped him. Who wasn't bound and determined to tangle with Sanchez and get both of them maimed, or worse.

Bonham leaned across the seat and pressed the button on the phone. "Try to sound scared. Like you think I'm gonna hurt you."

"I'm not that good an actor."

Bonham's fist flashed out. He pulled the punch at the last second, catching Sean just over his left nipple in a sharp jab that left a sting. As Sean sucked in air, Bonham said, "Try anyway."

Sean dialed the phone. It dumped immediately into Sanchez's voicemail, which wasn't a surprise. Paco was a busy man. Grand larceny, extortion, and pimping didn't leave him with a lot of downtime.

"Uh, hi. This is Sean." He swallowed against his rising gorge, feeling in his bones the stupidity of going along with Bonham's plan. "Sean Carr?"

Bonham grunted at him and whispered, "He knows who you are, moron. Get on with it."

Sean rolled his eyes and pressed the phone closer to his ear. "It's like this, Paco—this guy named Jesse Bonham sort of ... kidnapped me." Shit, that made him sound so fucking lame. Like he was some defenseless loser who'd let himself get snatched off the street. "Anyway, he says he'll let me go if you set up a meeting with him. He says—"

Bonham grabbed the phone out of his hand. "Sanchez, listen up. You'd better come prepared to talk about the Mordero bullshit. I want a name, and you *do* know what I'm talking about, so don't play dumb and don't blow me off, or your pretty fuck-toy won't be so pretty next time you see him."

Sean bit his lip and looked out the passenger-side window at the foot traffic on the sidewalk. He knew Bonham was bluffing. How he knew, he wasn't sure, but he'd always been a pretty good judge of character, and this guy ... he'd had so many opportunities to do real damage. But he hadn't. Not even when Sean felt compelled to practically beg for it.

He listened as Bonham told Sanchez to meet him the following morning and gave an address he recognized as an industrial park on the outskirts of Santa Rosa. He turned to watch Bonham close the phone, stick it in his coat pocket and cut the truck's engine.

"You wanna shop or stay in the truck?"

Sean blinked at him. "You'd leave me here? What makes you think I'd still be here when you got back?"

Bonham inclined his head in a considering sort of way. "Just optimistic, I guess."

And Sean knew instantly what he meant. Bonham knew he wasn't going anywhere. Knew that after last night Sean was, essentially, his to keep and control for as long as he wanted. His bitch, so to speak.

Sean closed his eyes and swallowed, searching inside himself for the part that gave a shit. It appeared to be taking an extended vacation. "I'll come in with you. Just ... can we leave the gun in the truck?"

Bonham's brows shot toward his hairline. He hesitated maybe five seconds. Then he pulled the .45 from inside his coat, reached across Sean and opened the glove box. He slid the gun inside. Before he slammed the cover, Sean caught sight of a silver flask.

Bonham looked at Sean, his mouth tight and his hands fisted in his lap. "All right?"

Sean nodded. "All right."

* * * *

Sean set the sack of groceries on the table and wiped his wet, dirty fingers on his jeans. "I call first shower."

"The hell you do."

"Hey man, you're the one who drove off the road."

"And you're the one who *made* me drive off the fucking road."

Sean grinned. The memory of Bonham's face when Sean opened the glove box and pulled out the .45 was priceless. He'd only been reaching for the flask, but when he realized he'd grabbed the gun instead ... well, it's hard to resist that

kind of temptation. Almost worth the filthy bath he'd taken when Bonham made him help push the truck out of the ditch.

And even with the feel of grit in his teeth from when the back wheels spun and threw mud in his face, he couldn't help but be pleased with himself. "You're just mad because you let your guard down and I got the jump on you."

Bonham was instantly in his face, with a glare that lost some of its impact due to the layer of grime covering his features. "You? Will never get the jump on me."

Sean smirked and cocked his thumb and forefinger in the shape of a pistol. "And yet..."

"You ever held a gun before, kid?" Now Bonham was smiling too, but his eyes glittered in a way that made Sean take one giant step back. "Because you weren't gonna do much damage with the safety on."

"Right. That's why we ended up in the ditch, because you were so sure I didn't know how to use your gun." Sean could hear the defensive note in his own voice, but he kept on smiling.

Bonham advanced on him. This time Sean stood his ground. When the other man was close enough that Sean could smell the rank odor of mud rising from his body, he stopped and said, "We ended up in the ditch because I wanted you to drop the gun. And you did, didn't you?"

Sean felt his smile evaporate. He nodded once, a quick jerk of his head, but only because he didn't have much choice.

Bonham said, "You're just lucky it didn't leave any dents or scratches. *Very* lucky. Now get outta my way before I lose my temper and—"

"And what? You gonna hit me?" Sean moved closer, 'til his chest brushed Bonham's. "What would it take to make you haul off and—"

"Are you really that into pain?" Bonham wasn't smiling anymore either.

Sean held his gaze for a long three seconds. Then he looked away. "No."

"Then quit trying to provoke me." The other man stepped to the right and brushed past him. Sean heard the bathroom door slam a second later.

He swiped a muddy hand through his hair. What the hell was he doing? Wasn't it bad enough that he was in this situation? Did he really need to make it worse by taunting Bonham? The guy who'd let him off—out of the goodness of his heart, apparently—when Sean had practically begged him to fuck him?

And that was the problem, wasn't it? Bonham had gotten the upper hand and kept it, even when it came to sex. Sean had been shown up—shown to have no control over his own desires, and shown to be willing to take direction, right down to how much noise he made when he came. Right down to having a gun in his hand and not using it to escape. Like a puppy, waiting on his master's voice.

Fuck *that*.

He pulled open the bathroom door and stomped inside, shedding his mud-caked clothes as he went. Through the

steam, he could make out Bonham's silhouette through the white shower curtain. When Sean was finally naked, he yanked back the shower curtain and stood looking at Bonham's dripping form.

The cold, white light from the tiny window in the corner highlighted the impossible breadth of the man's shoulders, bouncing off the curve of every muscle in his upper body and fading away into interesting shadows below his waist.

Sean caught himself licking his lips. "Move over."

Bonham stared at him, his face running with water, his lips parted as if to speak and his stupidly long eyelashes beaded with tiny droplets. The most physically perfect man Sean had ever seen outside of an airbrushed photo spread.

"You can try to stop me," Sean said, his hands fisted at his sides, "but I think we'll both regret it."

Bonham's eyes narrowed. The muscles in his jaw bunched. Sean squared his shoulders, ready to take the punch he knew was coming. But then Bonham stepped back, out of the spray, and made way for him.

The stall was tiny. Barely big enough for one large man, and now it contained two. Not a lot of room to move, and certainly no kind of personal space. Sean stuck his head beneath the spray. The water tasted of iron and sulfur. He could hear Bonham breathing behind him, deep and slow.

When he'd managed to rinse most of the grit out of his hair and off his face and torso, Sean said, "Wash my back?"

Bonham snorted. "You must watch some seriously bad porn." But Sean could feel his hands hovering above the skin

on his shoulder blades. When Bonham finally touched him, Sean let out the breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

Bonham worked the soap in circles over his skin. There was nothing tender in his touch, or particularly arousing, but Sean felt his cock respond anyway and tried not to be ashamed. This was what he was here for, wasn't it? He hadn't climbed into the shower because he couldn't stand to be dirty another five minutes. He was there because he wanted to be fucked. By Bonham. And this time, he was going to get what he wanted.

"Thanks," he whispered, barely above the sound of the water.

Bonham hummed, sounding distracted. As if he had better things to think about. Sean stepped back once, and then again, 'til he felt the other man exhale in a rush against his shoulder. He felt something poking just beneath the left cheek of his ass, and he smiled.

"Guess I'm not the only who watches bad porn."

Bonham's hands coasted over his hips and stopped.

"You're playing with fire, kid."

"Yeah, you're real scary. I think we covered this."

The soapy hands dropped away, and he felt Bonham trying to slide past him and out of the shower. He stepped back again, pinning the other man to the wall.

Bonham grunted, aggravation coming through loud and clear in his voice when he said, "Ever hear of personal space, cowboy?"

"Ever hear of shutting up and fucking me, tough guy?"

"Not gonna happen."

"Why is that, exactly?" There wasn't enough space to turn around, so Sean directed his remarks over his shoulder. "You seemed interested enough last night."

"That was before..." Bonham let the rest of that comment fade and cleared his throat. "Move aside, kid. I'm clean enough."

"Before what? Tell me and I'll let you out."

The other man huffed a sigh against his shoulder. "Before I saw what Sanchez did to you. Now move."

"What Sanchez did ... you mean these?" Sean waved a hand at the bruises that marked his ribs. "What's that got to do with—"

"Not just there. Now move or I'll move you."

"Tell me what you mean." Sean swallowed and went for broke. "Tell me, Jesse. Please."

The spray had gone lukewarm, and gooseflesh rose all along Sean's side where the water flowed over him, but he didn't move. And Bonham didn't seem inclined to shove him aside, for all his threats. After a few seconds of strained silence, the other man sighed again and said, "I'm not gonna fuck you after Sanchez used your ass like a knothole in a Goddamn oak tree. I'm not that guy, kid. I don't inflict pain where I don't have to."

Sudden heat suffused Sean's face like a third-degree sunburn. "I ... didn't realize. Is it ... does it look bad?" Christ, this was humiliating.

"You didn't realize? How could you not—" Bonham cut this line of question short to say, "Look, kid, I don't know what

kind of bastards you've been letting in your back door, but this 'victim of love' shit? It's gonna get you killed."

"Huh?" Yeah, real smooth. But Sean's brain felt as fried as his face—shame and embarrassment so sharp it made him dizzy.

Bonham made a growling noise low in his chest. "I swear to fucking God, if you don't get outta my way..."

Sean moved to the right and allowed him to pass. He turned off the shower and watched as Bonham grabbed a clean towel from the rack and dried himself. When Bonham glanced up and met Sean's stare, his lips were thin and his eyes were narrow. He said, "You really didn't know?"

Sean blinked at him, feeling slow and stupid. "Didn't know Sanchez's a bastard? Yeah, I knew that." He reached up and flicked a handful of wet hair off his forehead. "But no, I didn't know you could ... see."

Bonham nodded. "You ... uh..." He looked away, then looked back again, determination at war with discomfort right there on his face. "You hurting bad? 'Cause after tomorrow, maybe you should see a doctor."

It suddenly occurred to Sean that this man—this masculine angel out of a Renaissance master's painting, and damn Frankie for being right about that—had spent a year and a half in prison. A place where no guy as pretty as Bonham ever slept easy, or walked without watching his back.

Sean pulled the shower curtain open the rest of the way and stepped out onto the wet tile. He reached for the other towel that hung on the rack and rubbed it through his hair. "Listen, I appreciate ... I mean, I get that you're trying to

be..." Hell, he could do better than this, couldn't he? "Thank you for giving a shit whether you hurt me or not, but I'm okay."

"You mean you're used to it." Bonham didn't phrase it as a question.

Sean shook his head. "I mean I'm not in any pain right now." He didn't feel the need to mention the three days he'd had trouble walking after his last "date" with Sanchez. At least the bastard hadn't used a lit cigar on him this time. He turned to face Bonham full-on and said, "I bruise easy, and they look worse than they are. So you don't have to worry about—" He stopped talking abruptly when he saw Bonham's face change, closing down even more. Shutting him out. Sean sighed. "You know what? Never mind. I get it. You don't want sloppy seconds no matter how they're served. Can't blame you for that."

He pivoted and grabbed for the doorknob, but he wasn't quick enough, and Bonham had him by the wrist before he could move forward.

"Tell me the truth, kid. Tell me ... is this some kind of fucked up Stockholm syndrome bullshit?"

Sean laughed and twisted around 'til he could see Bonham's face. "You know, for a kidnapper, you've got way too many scruples."

"Answer the question." Bonham wasn't even looking at him. His eyes were closed, the long, damp lashes lying against his cheeks like open fans. The line between his lowered brows spoke of ... concentration? Or determination?

Sean felt the hand gripping his wrist tighten. He said, "No, this isn't some kind of fucked up Stockholm syndrome bullshit. I..." He stopped and licked his lips. "It's been a while since I've been with anybody other than Sanchez. I just wanted..." Embarrassment got the better of him, nearly choking him on his own words. "You gonna make me say it, Bonham? Fine, I'll say it." He turned and swayed into the other man. Let his skin brush against him, all damp and hot and sticky. "I want it. From you. Now."

Bonham opened his eyes and lifted his face. Something like the barest hint of a smile touched his lips. He shook his head. "Pushy bitch."

Sean laughed. "Yeah, well, the subtle seduction routine didn't work for me last night."

"That's because I don't like being played."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"You do that." Bonham reached up, hooked a hand around Sean's neck and pulled him down into a kiss that went from soft-and-easy to hard-and-hot in the space of a breath shared between them. Bonham nipped at Sean's lower lip, then swiped his tongue over and into his mouth. Sean could taste whiskey on his breath, which meant he must've had a drink before he came into the cabin. Somehow, the image of Bonham sitting in the front seat of his truck, covered in mud and sipping from the flask, made Sean's heart pound.

He didn't recall precisely how they got from the bathroom to the bed. In the next few seconds, his sense of his surroundings compressed to knowing the touch of callused fingers, the scent of clean male, and the rough feel of the thin

cotton sheets beneath his elbows and ass as Bonham lowered him to the mattress and worked his mouth over his jaw. When he bit Sean's earlobe and scraped his teeth down the length of his neck, Sean groaned. Because apparently that set of nerves were hotwired to Sean's cock, and why the hell didn't *Sean* know that? Not like he was a virgin.

Then Bonham was reaching for the bedside table, where he'd left the bottle of lubricant the night before—right next to his .45. Sean let his head fall back against the pillows and waited, anticipation coursing through him. He wasn't nervous, damn it. He *wasn't*.

He heard rather than saw the bottle land on the pillow next to his head, then Bonham was whispering in his ear, starting with, "Easy, kid, easy. Won't hurt you, promise," and moving pretty much instantly into kissing him again.

Sean had been a passive recipient up to this point, but now he gave as good as he got. Yeah, maybe he was out of practice—maybe he hadn't really kissed anybody since Cindy McBeetry in the eleventh grade—but he had lips, didn't he? And a tongue and teeth, and by the sudden little grunt Bonham made when Sean kissed him back, he hadn't lost all his skills in the intervening seven years since somebody told him that kissing was for girls.

All too soon, Bonham was working his way down again, sliding his hands beneath Sean's thighs and lifting. Sean prepared himself for the initial discomfort, the sharp burn and the sensation of being torn in two. The price you paid for wanting this.

So when Bonham touched him with just one cool, lube-slicked fingertip, lightly circling and barely pressing, Sean leaned up on his elbows again and frowned at him. "What—"

"Shut up." The words were curt, but neither Bonham's face nor his voice matched them. "Just lie back and ... I dunno. Think of England. And try to fucking relax, would you? Christ, you could split atoms in there."

Sean felt that sunburn blush crawl down from his hairline to his chest. "You don't need to do that. I'm not ... fragile, damn it."

"Did I say you were fragile?" Bonham gripped his thigh with his free hand and squeezed, digging his fingers into the muscle. "Now, unless you wanna forget the whole thing—"

"No. That's okay, just ... hurry up." Sean dropped down on the mattress again and stared at the ceiling, trying to slow his breathing.

Bonham pressed his fingertip into him and held it there. "Pushy. Bitch." He pressed further, slow but deliberate, and Sean could feel him watching his face. Analyzing his reactions.

"Quit *looking* at me."

Bonham laughed, and was still laughing when he sucked the head of Sean's cock into his mouth. Sean yelled, more surprised than anything, and jerked down onto Bonham's hand. Bonham gave a few quick sucks and pulled off.

"That's the way. You ready for more?"

Sean groaned. "I swear to *fuck*, if you don't get on with it..."

"Yeah, all right. Flip over."

Sean flopped over onto his belly with a sigh of relief. He was about to rise to his knees when he felt Bonham's hand on his lower back. "Stay put." And then the firm, careful touch returned, re-slicked and a little less gentle, and joined by a second finger pushing in and making a slow exploration. When Bonham added a third and crooked them ... *just ... so* ... Sean cried out, his voice cracking down the middle like a cheap plate.

"Oh, *God*," he muttered into the pillow and rocked back against Bonham's hand, then forward against the mattress, needing friction on his poor, aching cock.

"That's it ... just like that." Bonham's voice was filthy-deep, gritty as the mud they'd washed out of their hair, but sweeter somehow. He stroked in and out, long and smooth, hitting every nerve ending and all the good ones twice. Opening Sean up. And Sean was falling apart. Fucking Bonham's hand. Moaning and yowling like a cat in heat.

When Bonham pulled away a few seconds later, Sean twisted around to look at him. The older man's skin gleamed with sweat, and Sean could see a very slight tremor in his hands as he rolled a condom down his own cock, swollen and nearly purple in his hand. When he was sheathed and slicked with lube, he leaned over Sean's shoulder and muttered, "Bend your knee up a little."

Sean complied, half-turning onto one hip and giving Bonham room to fit himself between his legs. Then Bonham's body blanketed him, and it was all hard pressure, pushing and prodding. He tried to stay relaxed and open, but Bonham was no kind of small man. Not anywhere. Sean clamped down

all over, his muscles and refusing to obey the direct orders coming from his brain.

"Shh ... easy. Breathe, kid."

"Please ... *fuck*, please..."

"What? Anything you want, just—"

"Please quit calling me *kid*." He spat it over his shoulder, knowing the irony of sounding like a petulant five-year-old at that moment. But it broke the tension wide-open—made Bonham laugh, even—and everything got a little easier. Sean sighed, slumping into the mattress. "All right. Go."

And Bonham obliged, slow at first and careful, which Sean tried to find annoying and couldn't. Not quite. Not when every thrust lit him up like the San Antone Riverwalk at Christmastime. Bonham rolled his hips, digging in deep and keeping an angle that hit the sweet spot each time. Sean's cock dragged along the sheet with each stroke, a cruel tease that wouldn't get him off but kept him humping the mattress just the same. He heard himself moaning again, and didn't care.

After a few excruciating minutes, the other man grabbed Sean's hips and tugged him up and back until he sat hard on Bonham's lap, impaled on his cock. He could feel Bonham's hands gripping his hips—shifting him, guiding him—and knew the man must be strong if he could lift Sean's long, heavy body again and again.

"Fuck yourself on me. Lemme see you ride."

Sean reached back, grabbed Bonham's thighs for leverage and worked himself up and down, looking for that perfect angle again and finding it. Bonham's hand slid over his hip

and curled around his shaft. He thumbed the head, where it was slick and weepy, and jacked him slow and hard. Sean felt liquid heat build in his belly and coil up his spine, like Mercury rising, and ground himself down with an endless circle of his hips.

Bonham grunted and let loose with a stream of obscenities in Sean's ear—a blow-by-blow narration of their every move, with an added description of what he'd like to do next time and the time after that. Phrases so filthy Sean blushed again at the images they conjured. He felt his control slipping.

"Come on. Shoot for me." Bonham's voice had gone thready, shot through with strain. "Come on. Know you want to. Know you need to."

Sean's body seized up tight. He felt his inner muscles close down again, holding Bonham balls-deep. So far inside Sean swore he felt him in his chest.

"Holy *fuck*." Bonham's voice sounded breathy in his ear. He bit down on the spot where Sean's neck met his shoulder, and Sean came, spurting like a hot-spring geyser over Bonham's fingers and shaking hard enough to rattle the bed-frame against the wall. Bonham whispered something. He didn't catch it, too busy trying to stay upright as the shivery aftershocks assaulted him with every brush of Bonham's hand against his cock, every flex of his hips against his ass.

The overload of sensation made his teeth chatter, but he forced the words past them. "Y-your turn, Jesse." He sucked in a breath that hitched in his chest and said, "Let it go. Wanna feel it."

Sean felt the other man smile against the skin of his shoulder. "Still with the ... pushy," Jesse said, panting between the words. "Have to ... break you of that."

Sean grinned. "You can try."

Chapter Five

Hearing his name out of Sean's mouth for the first time didn't make the difference. Didn't break him—didn't make him quake or bite his tongue to keep from letting go with some girly little noise that would damage his sense of his own identity forever. Because he knew it could be a ploy. Just another move in the game they'd been playing since he'd walked into Heliotrope and saw Sean standing behind the bar.

It was only when Jesse closed his eyes and drank in the emotion pouring off Sean's skin—a warm glow of satisfaction twisted 'round a rising spike of renewed desire that sounded like *yes-please-more* in Jesse's head—that he nearly lost it.

It made him want to bury himself in Sean's body—in his scent, in the *tight-hot-so-good* feel of him—and never come out. Set up housekeeping. Sign a lease, even. And that was all sorts of wrong.

The muscles in Jesse's thighs screamed under the strain of lifting what had suddenly become the younger man's dead weight. He grabbed Sean's hips and shoved forward, dumping him flat onto the mattress again and following, his cock still deep inside. Jesse could feel his own pulse pounding in random parts of his anatomy—his earlobes, his tongue, his toes. He lifted a bit, changing the angle of entry, and felt more than heard Sean's muffled keen into the pillow.

He froze. "Need me to stop?"

No answer, unless you counted the way Sean arched his lower back, taut as a bowstring, and practically served himself on a platter.

Jesse kept a careful tether on his self-control at all times, like fine wire made of strongest steel. Now it snapped as if it were made of cheap twine. He heard himself give a roar that bruised his chest and flayed his throat. But it was far away and not nearly as important as the way he was pounding Sean's ass like a buck in rut, or the way Sean was flexing-rocking-Goddamn-*bouncing* up to meet him every time.

It rushed through him 'til he was blind with it, boiling up from his balls with that sharp, mind-bending sensation of *way-too-much-more-more-more*. Like maybe his cock wanted to turn itself inside out.

When it was over, he found himself lying with his chest and belly pressed to Sean's back, heaving air in a way that made him think he'd quit breathing at some earlier point.

"Dude. You're heavy."

"Mmmhmm."

"Seriously. Move."

"Yeah. All right." Jesse stuck his nose in Sean's shaggy curls and inhaled. The scent of clean sweat and something sweeter instantly coated his face. "Gimme a second."

Sean wriggled under him. "Are you, like ... sniffing me?"

Jesse pushed himself up to balance with his arms at either side of Sean's body. "Just trying to catch my breath." He carefully disengaged the lower halves of their bodies, watching the muscles in Sean's back for any telltale flinching

or signs of pain. Then he disposed of the condom and flopped down on this back next to the younger man.

He felt the mattress shift as Sean rolled over on his side to face him, and waited to see what would happen next. Jesse wasn't much of a cuddler. Not under normal circumstances. But he was starting to feel like nothing about these current circumstances was normal.

After a few seconds, he turned his head and found Sean watching him, his eyes brighter and more alert than made sense for a guy who'd just gotten righteously laid. It was ... disturbing.

Jesse cleared his throat. "You ... uh ... you all right?"

"Oh, yeah." Sean smiled, wide and open. "That was—"

"Yeah. It was." Jesse cleared his throat again and looked away. "So ... tell me this, ki—Sean."

"What?"

Jesse let his gaze travel over the stained ceiling and tried to put his words together in a non-threatening way. He didn't have a lot of practice with thinking before he spoke. It was a novel sensation. "You said you were a switch, right? That means you've fucked other guys?" He glanced at Sean.

"Yes, that's right. Why? You want me to—"

"No! I mean ... no, that's not what I..." He fisted his hands at his sides and forced himself through the next part. "So when you fucked these other guys, did you beat the shit out of 'em? Tear 'em up, make 'em bleed?"

The grin slipped off Sean's face, and his dark eyes got wide. "No, of course not."

"Then why d'you assume that's how it's supposed to go? Because one motherfucking prick like Sanchez plays it that way?"

Sean glanced away. "I don't know."

"You're not as bright as you look, are you? I mean, for a college boy."

"I guess not."

Jesse sighed. "Tell me about your brother."

There was silence between them for what felt like a long time. Jesse counted the seconds, telling himself that if the younger man didn't answer by the one-minute mark, he'd get up and take a shower.

At fifty-seven seconds, Sean said, "His name is Bobby. He's doing eight months in county for possession. I figured ... I don't know. I figured I could do it—be with Sanchez, I mean—for that long. Until Bobby gets out, and then—"

"And then what? You think Paco's gonna let you walk away if he's not done with you?" Jesse couldn't help the note of disbelief in his voice. "Do you know who he is, Sean?" He looked at him, turning on his side to do it.

"He's a criminal. A thug, like a gangster. I know that."

"He's also the nephew of Santa Rosa's Chief of Police, Gus Sanchez, and pretty much untouchable. He takes what he wants, and he doesn't let go 'til he has to." Jesse scrubbed a hand through his hair and down over his face. "And he never has to."

Sean stared at him for a few seconds, then shrugged. "I guess I'll deal with that when I have to. Now how 'bout I ask you some questions?"

"You can ask. Can't promise I'll answer."

Sean rolled his eyes. "Okay, fair enough. First ... what is it you want from Paco, anyway? What's the Mordero case?"

Jesse shook his head. "It's better you don't know."

Sean frowned, making a deep crease between his eyes. "Don't patronize me. I'm in this now."

"You are?"

"Aren't I? Or am I still a hostage? Is that how you're thinking about me?"

Jesse flinched. "I told you I wouldn't let you get hurt."

"I'm not asking to get hurt. I'm asking to know what you want from Paco. Why you kidnapped me. Why I'm here." Sean swallowed. It was loud in the quiet room. "Unless you think I don't have a right to that information. Unless it doesn't matter because none of this—" He gestured, waving his hand between himself and Jesse. "—means anything beyond a quick fuck between strangers."

Oh *Christ*. "You know, for somebody who thinks kissing is for girls, you sure know how to sound like a—"

"Don't. Just ... don't." Sean sat up, turned away from him and slumped on the edge of the mattress. "Gonna take a shower. If that's okay with you, I mean." His voice was dull.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

Sean shrugged. "You're the one with the gun."

For *fuck's* sake. "Sean."

He didn't respond other than a twitch of his shoulder blade.

"*Sean*. Don't play games. It's not in your best interest."

That got him a glare directed over the younger man's shoulder. "What's in my best interest is knowing what the hell is going on, Jesse. I'm not a Goddamn child."

"You wanna know? Really?"

"I wouldn't ask if I didn't."

"Okay, fine."

"*Fine.*"

Jesse slapped his palm against his face. He was two seconds away from tackling Sean to the bed and either fucking him senseless a second time or giving him the mother of all noogies. He took a moment to regain his composure. Then he said, "About three years ago, I was working vice. I was new—not a rookie, but green enough to think I could actually clean up the streets of sweet Santa Rosa."

Sean turned to sit on one hip. "Go on."

"I'd heard about Paco. About how he ran the show when it came to the streets, and how he got away with it because of his family connections. I wanted to do something about it. Started busting some of Paco's boys for possession with intent to distribute, solicitation, anything I could make stick."

"And he came after you?"

Jesse nodded. "Set me up. Had somebody place a nine-one-one call about a pimp roughing up a girl in a house down on Goldwin Avenue. I heard the call and headed out, expecting a squad car to beat me there."

"But it didn't?"

Jesse shrugged. "I figured it was right behind me, so I went in. The pimp—a guy named Tommy Mordero—was already dead. Two bullets to the head, execution style. The

girl was a mess, but still alive. I was doing CPR when the uniforms busted in. Next thing I knew, they were pulling me off her and placing me under arrest. Took my service revolver, cuffed me, threw me in the car."

"How? I mean ... why?"

"They had their orders, I guess. Two days later, they were telling me my service piece was missing two bullets, and the two in Mordero matched the rest of the ones in my gun."

Sean's face had paled. "What did you do?"

"Got myself a lawyer. Waited for the girl to wake up and tell them it wasn't me. Let them test my hands and clothes for gunpowder residue."

"And?"

"And what? You know how it went down. My lawyer said I was lucky to get man-one instead of murder, especially after the girl died."

"Jesus Christ, Jesse."

"Yeah. So then I got another lawyer—a better one. And he found some ... discrepancies in police procedure. Took a while, though." He closed his eyes and tried not to picture the cellblock at Folsom. Tried not to hear the rattle and clank of barred doors, or smell the sweet, stomach-churning fragrance of old urine soaked into cement. "And it did nothing to clear my name. Far as the department is concerned, I killed that pimp and his hooker."

Sean made a humming sound in the back of his throat.

"And you think Paco can help clear your name?"

"I know he can."

"How?"

Jesse opened his eyes and looked at Sean. "When I got there, the girl was still conscious, but ... it was bad. If she'd lived, she would've been disfigured. He'd cut off her..." Jesse pressed his lips together. "Anyway, when I was leaning over her, trying to clear out the blood and broken teeth so she could breathe, she started fighting me. Like she thought I was ... the guy."

Sean was silent for a few seconds, like maybe he didn't even want to know the rest of it. Then he coughed and ran a hand through his hair. "She said his name, didn't she?"

Jesse nodded. "She did." He didn't feel the need to clarify. The younger man knew Paco at least as well as he did.

Sean got up and crossed to the window. The yellow light from the lamp made the endless stretch of his skin glow. "It's getting dark. You hungry?"

"More like sleepy. Didn't get much rest last night."

Sean turned his head to smile at him, then moved to Jesse's side of the bed. "Shove over. I don't sleep on the wet spot for anybody, dude."

Jesse rolled his eyes, fighting the grin that threatened to ambush his face. "Pushy bitch." He reached up and turned out the light.

* * * *

Sean sat straight up in bed, just in time to see Jesse reach for the gun on the bedside table. The banging on the front door got louder. He watched Jesse yank on his jeans with one hand and cross the room barefoot. When he tried to speak, the older man held up a hand to silence him. Sean slid out of

bed and stood, dragging the sheet with him, his heart pounding in his ears.

The banging stopped. The shouting began. "Bonham, you miserable, cocksucking *hijo de puta*, open the fucking door before I get fucking pneumonia." An accented voice—almost like Paco's, but deeper. Less sharp. Still, it could be him.

Jesse moved from the window, lowering the .45 as he went. Sean could see the dim light from the risen moon glint off his teeth as he smiled. He opened the door.

"Manuel, you crazy fucker. Get in here." And then Jesse was hugging a big, shaggy man in army fatigues, with black hair held back in a long ponytail and a beard that reached halfway down his chest. "Why the hell didn't you use your key, man?" Jesse reached out and flicked on the overhead light.

"Didn't want you to go all commando and shoot my ass. Speaking of commando..." The man gestured in the general direction of Jesse's gaping fly. "Cover it up, man. Nobody wants to see that."

Sean licked his lips and swallowed. "Uh ... hi?"

Both men turned to look at him. Jesse's friend—Manuel, and apparently the owner of the cabin, if Sean was reading the situation correctly—looked only faintly surprised to a nude man standing by the bed with only a sheet wrapped around his hips.

Jesse looked as if he'd forgotten Sean existed. He glanced from Manuel to Sean and back again. "Manny, this is ... uh..."

"Sean Carr. Nice to meet you. I'd shake your hand, but—"

"No, no, stay right where you are, *chico*." Manny turned to Jesse and said, "I see you still like 'em tall."

And Jesse blushed. An honest-to-God blush that crept up from his chest to turn his fair face a deep, vibrant pink.

Sean coughed to hide his smile and said, "I'll just ... go on in the bathroom and leave you guys alone to—"

"Nah, don't bother," said Manuel. "I'm just passin' through. Stopped by to give Jesse these." He stretched out a big, brown paw and dropped a set of keys and what looked like a map into Jesse's hands. "You'll need plenty of supplies. Water especially, *amigo*. It's winter, but it's still the Goddamn desert, you know what I'm sayin'?"

Jesse nodded. "Thanks, Manny. As soon as things settle down, I'll send some cash."

"Don't sweat it, man. Just don't get caught, huh? And don't get dead."

Sean watched the two men from the other side of the room. He tried to make sense of their murmured conversation—something about Jesse having enough clips for the nine-millimeter, or was he planning on taking the assault rifle to the meeting, and did he have enough money to make it to the border. But his attention kept getting waylaid by how the dim, orangey overhead light played across Jesse's features, painting them in fluid, ruddy shadows. Outlining the muscles in his torso, in his arms. Alternately hiding and revealing the quicksilver shift of expression in his face.

"Sean?"

"Huh?" He grasped the sheet a little tighter and shook his head to clear it. "Yeah?"

"Manny's leaving."

"Oh, uh ... right. Sorry." He ran a hand over his face, digging his short nails into his own cheek to wake himself up. "Nice meeting you, Mr...."

Manuel laughed. "Just call me 'Manny,' *chico*." To Jesse, he said, "Nice manners on this one. You should see if you can't keep him."

This time it was Sean who flushed and shuffled his feet. He watched the two men embrace yet again—a manly clapping of large hands on backs, complete with grunts of encouragement. And then Manny was gone.

Jesse went to the window, apparently to watch his friend depart. "Raining again." He turned to look at Sean. "You should go back to bed. You'll need the rest later." His tone was curt, and face was a closed book.

Sean stared at him, trying to read some clue to his thoughts in his body language. "What's the deal with you and Manuel? Are you and he...?" He let the unspoken question hang in the air.

Jesse laughed. "Nah. We shared a cell at Folsom. Kept an eye on each other's backs." He crossed from the window, grabbed his duffel bag from the easy chair and began sorting through whatever was inside it. "Manny's got a lady in San Rafael, which is where he's headed now, if I don't miss my guess."

Sean nodded. "He said don't get caught. What did he mean by that?"

Jesse didn't look up from the duffel. "Nothing, kid. It's not your problem."

"Oh, we're back to 'kid' now? And I told you—it became my problem when you stuck your gun in my face and made me get in your stupid truck."

No answer. Sean let mind sift through what he'd heard—what Jesse'd told him and what Manny said. It added up all too neatly. "You're going to kill Paco, aren't you? That's why you need a place to go." Manny had mentioned the desert and money enough to make it to the border. "Mexico? Is that the plan?"

Jesse stilled his hands within the duffel and looked at Sean over his shoulder. "What if it is? You gonna rat me out?"

"Why would you ask that?" Sean hated the bad soap opera dialogue spewing from his own mouth, but he couldn't seem to control it. "Why would you even think it?"

The older man shrugged and removed what Sean recognized as several boxes of automatic cartridges from his bag. He crossed the room and set them on the table. Then he returned to his duffel and pulled out the pieces of a rifle. Sean watched as his large, square hands made quick work of assembling the weapon.

Sean twisted the hem of the sheet more securely around his hips and crossed the room to stand at Jesse's shoulder. "It doesn't have to go down like this. Maybe you can talk Paco into giving himself up. Making a full confession about Mordero and the hooker." Even as he said the words, he knew how stupid they were.

Jesse snorted. He didn't look up from the rifle.

"Yeah, all right, maybe not. But d'you have to kill him? Why not just let it go? Your conviction was overturned. You

can do anything you want with your life. You can be a cop again."

Now Jesse turned on him, the rifle still in his hand. "That's not how it works. The court system may have spit me back out onto the street with a clean slate, but Internal Affairs feels differently. I'll never be a cop again."

"And? So?" Sean wanted to vent his frustration by punching something. Jesse's face was a mighty tempting target. "You think that's all there is in life? Being a big shot with a gun and a badge?"

Jesse's face twisted, then settled again into cold, hard lines.

Sean sighed. "Look, I'm sorry. I bet you were a good cop. But—"

"But nothing. This isn't about me. It's about taking out a sadistic bastard who won't stop until someone stops him. You, of all people—"

"Yeah. Me, of all people, should want to see him dead. But I don't." Sean reached out, wanting to lay a hand on Jesse's shoulder and not quite daring to make contact. "Not at this price. What does that tell you?"

Jesse smiled. "It tells me you're a good guy. The kind of guy you wanna meet, you hope to meet, and almost never do. But it's too late. I'm doing this." The finality in the statement was tangible.

Sean took a deep breath. "All right. Then I'm going with you."

Jesse's smile turned sour. "I'm not even going to dignify that with an answer."

"Jesse—"

"No. No way. You're gonna stay here. You're gonna spend one more night here. Alone. In the morning, you can start hiking back to Kenwood. Shouldn't take more than a few hours."

"And that's it? I never ... we never..." He was going to say "see each other again," but it sounded so Goddamn lame in his head. He couldn't make his lips shape the words.

"No, Sean. You never, and we never." Jesse didn't quite meet his eyes. "I didn't promise that. Now ... go back to bed."

Sean opened his mouth to argue. Jesse cut him off with a look sharp enough to slice through bone. So instead he said, "What about you?"

"It'll be light in a few hours. I need to get ready."

Sean watched him line up his weapons on the table. Jesse didn't look at him again, or acknowledge his presence in any way. After about five minutes, Sean stretched out on the bed with his back to the older man. He fell asleep to the sound of the falling rain.

He was roused from a deep sleep by the *basso profundo* snarl of Jesse's truck pulling away from the cabin. Gray light spilled through the blinds on the window. He tried to sit up, with every intention of grabbing his clothes and following as best he could on foot. Jesse couldn't go more than a few miles an hour on the back roads in this weather. He could catch up—maybe jump into the bed of the truck and hide. It was worth a shot.

But his right wrist refused to follow him into a sitting position. He yanked on it without thinking, and heard the

rattle of metal against the brass headboard. He looked. He swore, long and loud.

He was handcuffed to the bed.

On the pillow next to him lay a torn scrap of yellowed newspaper. Scrawled across it, in what looked like black grease, was one word.

Sorry.

Chapter Six

Jesse cursed the mud. He cursed the rain that made the mud, and he cursed the clouds that produced the rain. And he fought the wheel of the truck while he cursed, trying to keep the fucking thing on the road, because he couldn't push it out of a ditch all by himself, could he? And that? Would *suck*.

He glanced at the shoebox on the seat beside him, wishing for the tenth time he'd put the damn thing in the bed of the truck. Or not brought it back at all. But he'd felt such gut-ripping guilt when he looked inside and realized...

Carefully, keeping his eyes on the road, he lifted the box and eased it beneath the seat for safekeeping. Then he checked his watch. Two hours since the planned meeting time. Two hours since Sanchez stood him up, leaving the box as a message of intent. A pretty large window as these things went, and if Paco had somehow figured out where Jesse'd stashed Sean...

Another ten minutes to the cabin. Five minutes more to get Sean and the non-perishable supplies into the back of the truck. An hour to make it to a major highway headed east, and the window for Paco and his little army of thugs would only get bigger with every passing minute.

He gunned the motor as he pulled up next to the cabin, hoping to alert Sean to his presence. The younger man was likely to be seriously unhappy with him for leaving him cuffed to the bed, but he could talk himself out of that. Jesse'd faced down angry men before and come out smiling. He jumped out

of the truck, unlocked the door of the cabin, and stepped inside.

The lamp missed his head by maybe an inch.

All right. So Sean was more than just seriously unhappy.

"You bastard. You filthy, lying piece of shit."

"Sean—"

"Don't run your mouth at me. Just get over here and unlock these cuffs so I can beat the ever-loving shit out you, Bonham."

Jesse sighed and ran his hand over his face. "We don't have time for this. We have to—"

"Shut up and get over here."

Jesse approached the bed, fishing the key to the cuffs from his pocket as he moved. "You need to back off on the freak-out for now. I promise I'll explain everything—"

The younger man's bare, size fourteen foot caught him just below his sternum, knocking the air out of his lungs and making him double up in pain.

"You promise me? You're kidding, right?" Sean rattled the handcuffs and snarled at him. "Let me go, and then get outta my way, or I swear I'll beat you bloody."

Jesse lifted his hands in surrender. "Whatever you say." He leaned over and unlocked the cuff attached to the bed, allowing Sean to sit up. Then he opened the one still affixed to Sean's wrist. He stepped away fast, pocketing the cuffs and the key.

Sean was off the bed and dressed in a blur of motion. He'd turned and was headed for the door without a backward glance when Jesse tackled him, bringing him down hard on

the pine floorboards. Jesse knotted his fingers in his curls and yanked his head backward. "Listen to me, you little prick. This isn't a game. The meeting didn't happen, and we need get out of here before—"

"Before what? Are the cops coming? Because have I got a story for—"

Jesse cut him off by tightening his fist around Sean's hair and knocking the side of his head against the floor. "I wish it was the cops, believe me. But I've got every reason to believe Paco either knows where we are or is within hours of finding out."

"And you're going to run? And here I thought you were such a tough guy."

Jesse's entire body felt knotted with frustration. He closed his eyes, took a breath and let his hand slide from Sean's hair to the back of his neck. His pressed his palm against the skin and opened himself to what Sean was feeling.

Anger-betrayal-anger-betrayal blinked like a beacon. Beneath it Jesse could sense *hurt-shame-hurt* pulsing in counterpoint, and under that a weariness bordering on exhaustion. He could appreciate that. He was pretty damned tired himself.

"Sean," he said, keeping his voice soft, "I really thought I was protecting you by keeping you here. I was wrong. It was a boneheaded move. I'm sorry." He didn't add that if everything had gone according to plan, Manny would've shown up before nightfall to let Sean loose and drive him back to Santa Rosa.

Sean's body continued to vibrate with emotion. Jesse worked his fingers into the muscles at the back of Sean's neck and whispered, "I'll drive. You sleep. And you can beat the shit out of me later. But we need to go now."

The younger man remained silent another few seconds. Then he shoved backward, dislodging Jesse's hold on him. "Get off me."

They stood and faced each other. Jesse knew the next move was his to make. He reached out to lay a hand on Sean's shoulder.

Sean flinched away. "No. Don't touch me. You don't get to do that, not after..."

Jesse let it go with a quick nod. They were alive, and he intended to see they stayed that way. If whatever had been building between them was the price he had to pay, then so be it.

"Use the bathroom before you get in the truck, kid. We don't have time for pit-stops."

* * * *

They were fifty miles east of Kenwood and headed for the California-Nevada border when Sean felt calm enough to speak again.

"What's our destination?"

Jesse shrugged. "Someplace out-of-the-way."

"Not Mexico?"

"Not yet. Sanchez isn't stupid. He'll expect me to head south or go north to Canada. And he'll have people looking for the truck."

Sean turned in the seat to face the older man. "They why not ditch the truck? And while we're at it, why the hell are we running in the first place?"

Jesse glanced at him, quick and cold. "Paco didn't show up for the meeting. I waited a good hour."

"Yeah? So?"

Jesse looked at him again, longer this time. "I've got a buddy who works at the plant—"

"Let me guess—another ex-con?"

Jesse smirked, but didn't answer the question. "I set it up with him so I could take Paco out from a rooftop across the street as he entered through a side door of the main building."

Sean nodded. "Right, the rifle. It was never really a meeting at all. It was an assassination."

"Whatever you wanna call it, kid. The point is, he didn't show, but one of his employees did. I watched him go inside carrying something. He came out about two minutes later, empty handed."

Sean frowned. This shouldn't be so hard to follow. "And?"

"And I went inside and found what he'd left." Jesse leaned down, keeping one hand on the steering wheel, and produced a shoebox from beneath the seat. He set it between himself and Sean. "What's in this box proves Paco's got a better set of informants than I gave him credit for. He probably knew I was gunning for him long before you and I met."

Sean reached for the lid of the box. Jesse's hand came down on his. "I wouldn't."

"Why?"

"Because you're a nice kid. Still got some shine left on you. There's no reason to knock it off before you have to."

Sean felt the anger returning. "Don't patronize me, you son of a—"

Jesse lifted his hand in apparent surrender. "Fine, go ahead. But you'd better not mess up my truck."

What the hell did that mean? Sean curled his fingers around the edge of the box's lid and lifted.

Inside, arranged on a bed of smudged white tissue paper, lay an ear. It was a pale, waxy brown—like the petals of a dying flower—and attached to the lobe was a long, dangly silver earring encrusted with blood.

Sean returned the lid to the box and shoved it toward Jesse. "How ... who...?" He closed his mouth and ground his teeth together against the sudden churning of his stomach.

"It belongs to a woman named LaNay. She's the one who told me where to find you."

"You mean the whore?"

Jesse looked at him from the corner of his eye. "You might wanna watch your mouth, considering she's probably dead."

Sean banged his head against the window-glass. "We are so fucked."

Jesse laughed, short and sharp. "Have a little faith, kid. He has to catch us first." He sat up straight in his seat, the confidence in his voice belied by his white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. The truck picked up speed, heading toward the desert.

Five hours later, they stopped for gas. Sean felt groggy and sick. He stepped out of the truck to stretch his legs.

"Where are we?"

"Winnemucca, Nevada. About four hundred miles east of Santa Rosa." Jesse didn't look at him.

"How much further?"

"Not very. I want the truck gassed up and ready to go, in case we need to haul ass on short notice."

Sean nodded and pushed off from the fender of the truck, intending to head for the restroom.

"Where're you going?"

"I need to..." He made a vague gesture, suddenly—stupidly—embarrassed.

"Not here. It's bad enough anybody who's seen us is gonna remember the truck. We don't need them giving a description of a six-foot-four giant wandering around the place." Jesse glanced at him for the first time in hours. "We'll stop alongside the road in a while. I promise not to peek."

"Great. Just beautiful." Sean got back into the truck and slammed the door behind him.

Jesse joined him a few seconds later. "Look, kid—"

"No, *you* look. I didn't ask for this. I don't want to be here." He scrubbed a sweaty hand over his face and sighed. "In fact, I don't understand why I'm here at all. You could've gone without me—that was the plan. You didn't have to take me with you. I would've been fine."

"You think so, huh?"

"Yeah, I do."

"All right. Tell you what ... here's my phone." Jesse held the cell out across the seat. "You go on ahead and call Paco. Tell him to come and get you. I'll even give you some cash so you can get cleaned up and have a meal while you wait for him to show."

Sean swallowed, his throat suddenly dry and sticky. "I don't have to call Paco. I could call—"

"Who? Your buddy Frankie? Because what Frankie really needs in his life is this kind of excitement, right?" Jesse's tone had an edge sharp enough to flay Sean's face. "And when you get back to Santa Rosa, you can tell Paco all about how you escaped big, bad Bonham, and how you're so happy to be back in his loving arms. And Paco? He'll throw you a party. Because he's a trusting, good-natured guy like that."

As much as Sean hated to admit it, even to himself, the man had a point. The chances of Paco believing Sean hadn't been in on Jesse's planned execution were fifty-fifty at best. He'd be taking his life in his hands if he returned to Santa Rosa now. And his brother ... God only knew what would happen to Bobby, whether Sean went back or not.

"Man, you really screwed me over good." He'd meant for it to sound cold and angry, but it came out scared and a little awed by the sheer misery of his current position.

Jesse's mouth thinned to a grim line. "Tell me something I don't know."

They didn't speak again 'til they were twenty miles outside of Winnemucca, on Route 80. Jesse pulled over onto the shoulder of the highway and cut the engine. He didn't look at or speak to Sean.

Sean took this as his cue to get out and relieve himself. The pale, flat sky made him squint, and the late-winter wind blew the dust of the Great Basin desert in swirls around him. He shut his eyes and tried to remember how to breathe.

Jesse joined him on the passenger-side of the truck a few seconds later. The older man leaned against the fender and passed Sean a bottle of lukewarm water without comment. They stood together, sipping the water and staring out at the stark terrain.

After a few minutes, Sean looked at him and said, "I know you didn't mean to screw up my life. I know you only meant to—"

Jesse cut him off with a glare. "You don't know shit. Don't pretend you do. It only makes both of us look stupid." He pushed off the fender and circled around to the driver-side door without waiting for a reply.

Sean barely refrained from punching the truck's side-view mirror.

Jesse drove another ten miles, 'til the outline of a cluster of small buildings appeared on the horizon. As they got closer, Sean made out a sign: *Great Basin Stop 'N' Stay*. Beneath the faded lettering was a half-lit neon blinking *VACANCY*.

Jesse pulled around back to park in the empty lot. "Stay here while I check it out."

Sean shrugged. "You're the boss, Mr. Bonham, sir."

Jesse rolled his eyes, his expression sour. He got out of the truck.

Sean waited five minutes, then another ten. He felt his breathing accelerate, along with his heart rate, as the seconds trickled down to pile on top of one another. What if Paco had been waiting for them? What if, even now, he had a gun to Jesse's head?

"Fuck this." He opened the glove box. The .45 was in its accustomed place, along with the flask. He chose the latter, twisting off the cap and chugging before he could think better of it. Then he reached for the gun.

It was forty steps around the far end of the building, then another twenty to the motel office. He held the gun behind him, wondering in the back of his mind if he'd even have the balls to use it.

Jesse quirked an eyebrow at Sean when he opened the office door and found the older man waiting patiently for his credit card to be approved.

"You get bored, buddy?" Jesse narrowed his eyes, his gaze plainly caught by the way Sean kept one hand concealed behind him. Then he turned to smile at the gray-haired, wizened woman behind the counter. "My brother. No patience, you know? Comes from watching too much TV."

The woman had no reaction other than to hand Jesse his card along with a key to the room. Jesse nodded and wished her a good day. The next instant he was hustling Sean out of the office double-time, swearing a long, filthy streak beneath his breath.

They were around the other side of the building before he grabbed Sean by the front of his jacket and glared up into his

face. "What the *fuck* is the matter with you? I told you to stay in the truck."

"Who the hell takes fifteen minutes to get a room? I thought you were in trouble."

Jesse blinked at him as if he were startled by Sean's words. Then he smirked. "And you were gonna do what? Save me? That's real sweet, kid."

"Yeah, laugh it up, asshole." He dropped the .45 into Jesse's outstretched hand and tried to ignore the way his own fingers trembled.

"You left the safety on again." Jesse held up the gun and showed him. "See? Off. On. Like that."

Sean nodded and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

Once they'd unloaded truck and filled the motel room's single closet with the supplies—bottled water, various kinds of beef jerky, several large bags of off-brand chips and a box of assorted cupcakes—Sean sat on the end of one of the two beds and looked around. Nicer than Manuel's cabin, but not by much. And no TV. Yeah, this was gonna suck.

"How long are we here for?"

Jesse shrugged. "That depends."

"On what?"

"On what Manny tells me when I call him next week."

"Next week?" Sean bolted off the bed and paced a circle around the room. "You're kidding me, right? I have a job, I have classes—"

"What d'you want me to say? I'm sorry." There was a note in Jesse's voice that Sean didn't quite recognize. Pain? Shame? Guilt?

Sean watched him as he rummaged in the duffel bag and came up with clean socks and underwear. "If you don't want the first shower—"

"No, go ahead," Sean said. "But answer one question first, will you?"

Jesse frowned. "Well?"

Sean took a breath, unsure how to phrase it. "I just want to know ... why. Why you'd risk going back to prison. Why you'd risk dying. And why you'd ruin a stranger's life—*my* life—just to take out Paco."

The older man shrugged. "Just crazy, I guess." Then he disappeared into the bathroom without another word.

Sean resisted the urge to pick up a lamp and throw it at the closing door. He made another circuit around the room. The frustration that churned in his gut took all his attention, and he barely noticed his surroundings. Until...

There, on top of Jesse's duffel. He'd left the .45, just lying there. Like he didn't have the slightest fear Sean would pick it up and blast him full of holes. Part of him wanted to be happy about that—it meant the older man trusted him, right? But a larger part thought maybe it had less to do with trust, and more to do with Jesse not seeing him as any kind of threat. Not even with a loaded gun within easy reach.

He walked over and picked up the weapon. Practiced flicking the safety on and off. Held it out in front of him, in imitation of how he'd seen a thousand cops on a hundred cop shows do it. Then he opened the duffel and picked through it until he found the handcuffs.

He had time to figure out the best place to stand. Minutes to come up with something to say that didn't sound stupid, but left no doubt he was serious. And he wasn't crazy-scared, like he'd been the first night in the cabin, either. Plus, he didn't want to hurt Jesse this time. Just wanted to take him by surprise, catch him off-guard. Let him know what it felt like.

He was positioned between the bed and the bathroom door when Jesse emerged, clutching a towel around his hips.

"Stop. Don't move."

Jesse's eyes widened. In a way that looked almost like a reflex, a smirk curled the corner of his mouth.

Before he could say anything, Sean spoke again. "You'll notice the safety's off this time. You really shouldn't've underestimated me, you know?"

He watched Jesse's throat work as he swallowed. "Sean—"

"Shut up. Drop the towel and get on the bed." It wasn't easy to keep his voice and the gun steady at the same time. "On your stomach."

Jesse's brow crumpled in a look that screamed "confusion." Like a swimmer pulled out too far by a riptide and unsure for the first few seconds exactly what's happening. "What're you planning to—"

"I said shut up. Drop the towel. Get on the bed." Sean stepped forward and motioned with the muzzle of the .45. "Do it now."

Jesse hesitated another second, then moved in the direction Sean indicated, to the bed on the other side of the

room. Sean stayed close to him, but not too close, in case he decided to pull some tricky move out of a ninja movie.

Sean watched as he dropped the towel at the last possible second, but stopped before actually stretching out on the bed. "I don't know what you've got planned, but if it's what I think—"

"Oh, I think we're on the same page. Down on your stomach, and grab the headboard."

Jesse's eyes flickered once, a glint of golden-hazel from beneath long, thick lashes. Then he did as he was told. Sean almost let himself be surprised. He never thought it would be this easy.

He pulled the handcuffs from his pocket. Now came the hard part—cuffing Jesse to the bed without fumbling the gun. Sean could hear his heart pounding in his ears. If he screwed this up ... let Jesse get the better of him one more time...

Again, it turned out easier than he anticipated. Jesse lay with his head on one of the two pillows, his face turned away from Sean. There was tension in every curve and plane of his body—every muscle appeared coiled and ready to spring. But he stayed still, his hands fisted around the spindles of the headboard, knuckles white with the effort. Sean slid a cuff on one wrist, wove the second one between the headboard and the wall, and slipped it onto the other wrist. With each metallic click, Jesse's body jerked.

Sean cleared his throat. "This bed's pretty cheap-looking. You can probably break it if you try." He wasn't sure why he said it. Maybe just to have something to say.

Jesse turned his head on the pillow. Sean saw how the contours of his face matched the tortured lines of his body. He set the gun on the bedside table, and settled his hand on Jesse's shoulder.

The transformation wasn't immediate. It took a good ten seconds for Jesse to relax—for his brow to unknot, for the muscles in his back and ass and legs to let go of what looked like their involuntary clench. Sean watched it all, amazed at how just the single touch of his hand seemed to be enough to communicate what he intended.

Which was no kind of harm. He didn't play that way, any more than Jesse apparently did. Not ever.

He leaned over to speak into Jesse's ear. "I know you want this. You can pretend later that you didn't, if it makes you feel better ... but I know. I could tell the moment I met you. The second I saw you."

Jesse made a noise—not quite a groan, not quite a sigh. Like honey poured over a bowl of gravel. It went straight to Sean's cock, the sudden redirection of blood flow nearly knocking him sideways off the bed.

He waited and watched Jesse's face. The older man didn't look at him, but he nodded. Once. Quick and easy to miss, but then he lifted his gaze to meet Sean's, and the yes was right there.

"Good," Sean whispered, and leaned in further to kiss him. Jesse twisted his head to meet him, his lips parting easy to let him inside. It was sweet like nothing Sean had ever tasted—the flavor of Jesse giving in.

Chapter Seven

Jesse let himself fall into the kiss, drinking in all the bright, shiny anticipation bleeding off Sean's lips and hands. He'd be lying if he said it wasn't a relief to do it. To let someone else be in charge, even for a little while. Even if it was just sex.

Just sex...

Was it? Really? Then why was his heart racing like a Goddamn freight train? Couldn't be just the kinky thrill of the cuffs biting into his wrists. No, there was something else ... different ... *more*.

He shied away from the thought. It couldn't afford to be anything more. *Sean* couldn't afford it to be anything more. Not after what Jesse'd already taken from him.

"Hey," Sean whispered. "Quit thinking so much." He moved his hand down in a slow glide 'til it reached the base of Jesse's spine.

Jesse tried not to tense up. Tried to avoid reading what the younger man was feeling. He wanted only his own sensations now, and only those that came courtesy of nerve endings in muscle and skin. Emotion? Could go fuck itself.

But it was hard not to notice the conflict in Sean as he rubbed his huge paw in a circle over his skin. "You've done this before, right? I mean, I don't ... I wouldn't want to—"

"Pop my cherry?" Jesse couldn't resist twisting his head around to grin at him any more than he could resist being charmed by the way Sean's cheeks reddened. "No worries. Haven't been a virgin for a long time."

"But it's been a while, right?"

Jesse glanced at him in surprise. Who the hell was the psychic here, anyway?

"Yeah, it's been a while. Not since..." He stopped speaking and cleared his throat. No need to go there.

But Sean wasn't stupid, which was brought home again when he said, "Not since prison?" His tone was sympathetic, but not pitying. Or was that what Jesse felt through the touch of his hand?

"I don't wanna talk about that."

Sean nodded. Then he stood and began stripping out of his clothes. As he shucked off his jeans, he said, "I'd stop to take a shower, but I'd feel bad about leaving you here like this." The note of sarcasm in his voice made Jesse flinch.

"Said I was sorry about that."

"Dude, you left me handcuffed to a bed. For *hours*."

Jesses swallowed. "So this is what? Payback?"

"Yeah. A little bit ... yeah."

"Bring it, cowboy." Jesse winked, and watched with satisfaction as the younger man blushed deeper.

A second later, he found himself pressed into the mattress by the length of Sean's body. He felt teeth skim the place where his neck joined his shoulders, and then hot breath as Sean spoke again, his lips grazing skin with every word.

"Still need you to answer that question, man. Why?"

Jesse didn't have to ask him to clarify, but he'd be damned if he'd cave that easy. "Told you, I'm crazy. A real psycho. Thought a smart kid like you would get that by now."

Sean thrust his hips, rubbing what felt like a solid steel bar against Jesse's hip. "You wanna play games, huh? Maybe you want me to get up and walk away after all? Leave you here, just like you did to me?"

"Nah, you're bluffing. You want my ass too bad."

Sean laughed, sending a puff of hot hair down Jesse's spine. A line of gooseflesh followed it, and he had to chew on the inside of his cheek to keep from shivering. When Sean bit him again—directly on the back of the neck this time—he did everything but swallow his tongue to keep from making a seriously unmanly noise. Who knew getting topped by a college boy would turn him on so hard?

And then Sean was moving—sliding to the foot of the bed, dragging sloppy kisses down Jesse's spine as he went. He forced Jesse's legs apart, settled between them, and laid more kisses across the small of his back and the top of his ass. At the last possible second, when Sean's long fingers were already spreading him wide, Jesse caught on to his intention and ... and...

"Whoa. What're you—" *Holy-mother-of-God-hot-wet-slick-fuck*. This time, Jesse did make a noise, and it wasn't quiet or dignified or manly. As for the way his body closed up and clamped down, to the point where the muscles in his thighs were in danger of twisting themselves out of his skin ... well. You don't do *that* to a man without warning.

"Take it easy," Sean whispered, and went back to lapping at him, teasing his tongue in circles around the twitching rim.

"Sean." It came out like the cry of a half-strangled cat.

Sean paused. "I can stop if you want." He waited a beat and feathered his tongue up and down the crease of Jesse's ass, then pulled back and blew a stream of cool air against the wet skin. "Should I stop?"

Jesse said something that started out as English but disintegrated into a garbled mess of vowels and consonants by the time it made it past his lips.

"Right." With no warning, Sean stabbed his tongue into Jesse and proceeded to lick him open. His fingers pressed hard into Jesse's glutes, fighting the way they clenched against the invasion.

Jesse turned his head on the pillow and did his damndest to focus on the lame painting of a mama duck and her six yellow babies that decorated the far wall of the motel room. He tried just as hard not to hump the mattress beneath him. But then Sean started humming in the back of his throat, the vibrations traveling up through his tongue and straight into Jesse, and yeah ... the not-humping was pretty much a lost cause. At least the dry burn of the cheap bedspread against his dick meant he likely wouldn't embarrass himself by coming too soon.

He could feel himself opening for Sean—relaxing with each sharp thrust. The glow of arousal seeping off Sean's hands and mouth added a mind-bending dimension to his own, like an endless feedback loop of *fuck-yes-more*.

Finally, the younger man seemed satisfied with what he'd accomplished and pulled away. Cool air moved over the lower half of Jesse's body as Sean reached over the side of the bed

for the duffel and retrieved a condom and the bottle of lubricant.

"Gonna fuck you real good," he said, his voice just a note or two above a bass-line growl.

Again without warning, something touched Jesse's ass. Cool this time, and solid. The tiny part of his brain still functioning told him it was a lube-slicked finger, and not to jump or freeze up again. He inhaled and let the breath out slowly.

"Can you turn on your side?" Sean said and slid the finger deep, past the initial resistance.

Jesse kept breathing, slow and measured. He clutched the spindles of the headboard and used them as a pivot-point to turn his body.

Sean moved behind him, never losing contact. "Gonna try another one now."

Jesse ground his teeth together in frustration. Topped by a college boy was one thing, but now he felt awkward. Inexperienced even, as if he'd somehow regained the status of virgin after all. Then Sean pressed in that second finger, careful but relentless, and Jesse got busy trying not to bite through his bottom lip.

"Come on, Jess, ease up. Breathe."

Jesse closed his eyes and concentrated on giving in. On letting down the defenses eighteen months in Folsom would trigger in any man. The burn of two fingers inside him and a third angling for entry made him want to kick and fight. He resisted the urge and worked at keeping the inhales deep and exhales long and steady.

Why was he doing this again? Why had he allowed himself to be put in this position? Oh yeah ... because he owed this kid. He owed him *big*. If there was another reason lurking somewhere under his sense of obligation, he didn't want to know about it.

Sean curled his long body around Jesse's and hooked his chin over Jesse's shoulder. He reached for Jesse's cock, which was still hard even with all the resistance his body was putting up against Sean's invasion.

Then Sean twisted the fingers on his other hand, skating them over the sweet spot that made Jesse jerk and twitch and grunt. He did it again, and Jesse could feel him grinning against this shoulder. Could feel the satisfaction—not quite smug, but maybe a little arrogant—pouring off his skin. He crooked his fingers a third time and held them there, pulsing them as he jacked Jesse's dick. Jesse felt himself open like a Goddamn rose for the press and push and swirl of those fingers. For the hot coil of need spiraling up his spine.

He flinched a little when Sean pulled away. Listened to the rip of the condom wrapper, then the squishy sound of lube being applied over Latex. He licked his lips. The air in the small room tasted stale. The bedspread felt scratchy under his hip and shoulder, and the cuffs bit into his wrists when he tried to shift his hands. He catalogued it all—every mundane detail. Struggled to ignore the way Sean panted in his ear and nuzzled the side of his neck, finding a pulse-point and licking over it again and again. Refused to acknowledge the bone-deep need rising off Sean's skin like steam from a newly roused volcano. Because if Jesse thought about that stuff—if

he let it inside, let it distract him from the business at hand, which was getting fucked and definitely *not* feeling anything about it one way or the other—then they'd both be in the deep weeds.

Sean wrapped a hand around Jesse's thigh and lifted. Jesse took the cue and angled his leg backward over the younger man's hip, flexing his lower spine and bracing himself. Then Sean's hand was on Jesse's cock again, and the kid sure as hell knew what he was doing—lots of circling and dragging and friction, and the tip of his thumb working the head like he'd known the geography for years. Not enough to make Jesse come, but enough to take his mind off the way Sean had begun seeking entry. Pressing ... prodding ... sliding in, then backing off again. A little more each time.

Jesse dug his heel into Sean's calf and said, "Who's treatin' who like a girl, cowboy?"

Sean slid his hand off Jesse's cock and delivered his answer in a gutter-filthy murmur. "Shut up before I gag you with your own dirty shorts."

Which shouldn't have sent a punch of arousal to Jesse's groin. But nothing about this was what it should've been, right down to Jesse's sudden hunger to be held down by the huge hand now splayed across his stomach and fucked wide open.

That image—coupled with the spikes of desire he could feel jumping off Sean's skin—made him arch his back in a tighter curve, right into that motherfucking burn. Painful, but not enough to make him want to do anything more than...

"Take it ... yeah, come on, *take it*," Sean whispered, thready and broken and holy *fuck*, this was too easy. It shouldn't have been so easy. It shouldn't have felt so good or hurt so much at the same time. He shouldn't've been pinging back and forth between pleasure and pain like a Goddamn hockey puck, and he *sure as hell* shouldn't've loved it like he did.

Sean readjusted the angle of his thrust, and all at once *too-much* and *too-full* gave way to *just-right*, and Goldilocks was willing to let Papa Bear pound his ass into eternity so long as he kept hitting that spot ... right ... *there*.

Jesse heard himself moan, "Just like that," or some lame bullshit to that effect, and didn't even care. His cock was in Sean's hand again, and all was right with the world. But now Sean was struggling to say something.

"Why, Jesse? Tell me why. Need to know."

"Not now." To his own ears, Jesse's voice sounded more like the croak of a dying frog than anything human. "Ask me later."

"You'll just lie again."

Jesse cringed a little. But screw that—he wasn't here to search his soul. He was here to get fucked. He clutched the headboard's fat wooden spindles in his fists and worked his hips back against Sean's, lost in the hot, fast build of his own climax and the sounds Sean made as he rocked into him. Lost in the purely carnal joy pouring off Sean's skin. He could taste it, combined with the flavor of the sweat that dripped off the younger man's face and splashed on his own. He thought maybe he could live on it, if he had to.

And then he wasn't thinking anymore, not at all. He was just coming, like somebody was knocking it out of him with a wrecking ball, over and over. Coming so hard it fucking *hurt*. Stole his breath and made his heart skip too many beats all at once. He thought maybe this was it—the end ... and some part of him knew that was stupid. But he felt a little surprised just the same when he opened his eyes a minute later and didn't see the gates of hell creaking open, or feel the heat of eternal flames ready to eat him alive.

Instead, he felt Sean's hand fall away from his still-twitching cock to dig its fingers into his hip. Sean's dick—that same hot, hard bar of steel wedged inside him—kept right on working his ass for all it was worth. Jesse pressed his head back against the younger man's shoulder, trying for eye contact. All he got for his trouble was an up-close-and-personal view of Sean's face twisted in what looked like agony. And now other emotions were bleeding through the syrupy-slick flow of pleasure running off Sean's skin.

Disappointment ... frustration ... anger...

What the *fuck*? What more did this kid want from him?

Sean's voice came back to him, the plaintive tone of his question echoing in Jesse's head. *"I just want to know ... why. Why you'd risk going back to prison. Why you'd risk dying. And why you'd ruin a stranger's life—my life—just to take out Paco."*

The speed and force of Sean's thrusts diminished, as if he were running out of steam. Couldn't finish what he started because of all the noise in his own head. Jesse knew what that felt like. *Goddamn* it.

He turned his head so his lips were less than an inch from the younger man's ear and said the first thing that came into his head. "I did it because sometimes doing the right thing calls for sacrifice. And I'm expendable." He paused to breathe, his heart storming against the wall of his chest. Then he said, "But you're not, and for that I'm honestly sorry."

Sean froze. A jagged bolt of surprise burst off his skin as his fingers dug deeper into the thin flesh at Jesse's hip. He made a sound, low in his throat, as if he were trying to come up with some kind of answer to Jesse's declaration. Well fuck that. Bad enough Jesse'd been forced into making sense at a moment like this.

He flexed his lower back again, feeling the muscles protest and not caring. What mattered was the way Sean gasped. The way his eyes rolled back in his head, and his thrusts picked up tempo and depth again.

Jesse knew when Sean came by the way he bit down again on the back of his neck and held the flesh in his teeth, like a warning. Like a claiming. Jesse'd seen mating dogs do the same. The thought of it was almost enough to get his dick interested again, if he hadn't been fucked to exhaustion.

Sean held him a solid ten minutes, endless arms wrapped around him as if Jesse had a chance in hell of going somewhere. Then he peeled his damp skin away from Jesse's, disposed of the condom in the nearby trashcan, and moved off the bed.

"You..." Jesse cringed at the weak sound of his own voice. He cleared his throat and tried again. "You gonna uncuff me?"

Sean shrugged. "Thought I'd shower first."

Jesse nodded, working to keep his face expressionless. Sean looked at him—looked at *all* of him—as if he hadn't seen him before. Jesse tried not to feel self-conscious. Not like he wasn't used to being gaped at. Prison showers were great for that kind of thing. He lifted his chin and held Sean's gaze for ten long seconds.

The younger man broke first. He swore, low and barely intelligible, and reached for Jesse's discarded jeans.

"Front left-hand pocket," Jesse said. He made sure he didn't sound smug. He sure as hell didn't *feel* smug.

Sean retrieved the key, moved to the bed, and leaned over him. He didn't look at Jesse as he unlocked the cuffs, and seemed to be trying to touch him as little as possible. When Jesse's right hand was free, he reached up and grabbed Sean's wrist. He closed his eyes and tried to read...

Disappointment ... fading ... nearly gone now. *Frustration* and *anger* ... present and accounted for.

"Sean. What d'you want me to say? Tell me, and I'll say it."

Sean stared at him, his expression unreadable. But through the skin of his wrist, Jesse sensed more surprise, and uncertainty bordering on fear.

Shit. Jesse let the kid go and waited 'til both his hands were free. Then he sat up and swung his legs over the bed, trying to keep his instinctive wince of discomfort to himself.

Sean coughed behind him. "There's nothing you can say. It's all just really fucked up."

Jesse nodded, but didn't turn. "I know. And that's my fault. I'd say I'll make it up to you, but—"

"No. I don't want that. You..." He coughed again. It sounded dry and nervous. "Your intentions were good. I'm not crazy about the violence part of it, but..."

Now Jesse did turn. "Sometimes there's no other way. You know Paco. D'you think he'd ever turn himself in? Or even just ... stop?"

Sean shook his head, his black curls falling into his eyes. "No. I just wish it didn't have to be—"

"You. I know, and I'm—"

"No. Not just me," Sean said. "Both of us. But so long as we're in it, I guess we should stick together." He looked down at the bedspread. "I mean, you probably think you don't need a partner, and I might be a liability at first, but—"

Jesse was already on his feet and rounding the end of the bed. "You know what you're saying? You have any idea?"

Sean looked at him without answering. Jesse wanted to take him by the throat and choke him. It was one thing to be taken hostage—maybe even to enjoy a little extracurricular downtime with your kidnapper—but signing up for a full-time gig as a fugitive? Assuming they could even get close enough to take Paco out a second time. As it was, Sean was stuck with Jesse for the foreseeable future, unless they could find someplace safe to send him. Preferably Europe. Asia wouldn't be bad, either.

"Listen, kid," he began, and saw how the younger man's eyes got steely. "Sean," he amended. "I don't know what you're thinking, but let me make a few things clear. I've got almost no money. Everything I own is in that duffel over there, plus the truck outside—and you weren't so wrong when

you called it a piece of shit. It's gonna let me down someday soon, probably when I need it most."

Sean's eyes softened a bit, but he said nothing.

"And then there's Paco. I made a major mistake when I pissed him off and let him live. That crazy bastard *will* hunt me down, and he'll use whatever he can to do it. There's no percentage in hanging around with me. You need to get away just as fast as we can manage it. Seriously."

Sean inclined his head, as if he were considering Jesse's words. But still he said nothing.

"Look, I ... I snore. And I drink too much. I've got a bad temper, and sometimes? I do the dumbest shit. Ask Manny. He could tell you stories..." He let the words trail off, since all they were doing was putting a smile on Sean's face.

Why would anyone choose to throw in with him, much less the guy whose life he'd ruined? It made no kind of sense. So Jesse did the only thing he knew to do with people who made no sense. He ran his hand over Sean's jaw and down his neck to the center of his chest. Then he closed his eyes and...

Shit. No way. Not possible. He *had* to be reading it wrong.

He snatched his hand away and turned, intending to move to the other side of the room as quickly as possible and stay there. But Sean apparently had other ideas, because he used one of his big feet to trip Jesse and send him sprawling on the bed once more.

His long, tanned body landed next to Jesse's with a thud and a squeak of old springs. "Okay, what's the deal with you touching me and getting that weird look on your face, dude? Because frankly, it's starting to creep me out."

Chapter Eight

"So you're telling me you're ... what? An empath?" Sean's face was fixed in a funny kind of expression—the bastard child of a smirk and a scowl, maybe. He plainly didn't believe what he was hearing. Jesse couldn't exactly blame him.

"Yeah, I've heard that word used for it." Jesse wanted another shower and something to eat, but first he had to see this conversation through to its natural conclusion. Whatever that was. He sat on the bed and watched the younger man pace around the room.

"And how long have you known this about yourself, exactly?" Now Sean was sounding just a little too "let's humor the lunatic" for comfort. Not that Jesse could blame him for *that*, either.

"Since I was a kid. It's a family thing."

"A family thing," Sean repeated. "Like ... genetic?"

Jesse nodded. "From my grandmother on my dad's side."

"You mean your relatives are all mind-readers, too?"

"It's not mind-reading." Jesse sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. "There's just me and my grandmother and my cousin, Leah. She's a professor at the college in Santa Rosa." He hesitated, wishing he'd never let himself be lured into this conversation. "Leah has visions."

Sean snorted. "Visions. Of what? Angels? Or does she talk to dead people?"

Okay, now the kid was pushing him. "I don't know. Haven't seen her in years." Jesse leaned back on his elbows and let

his gaze travel over Sean's naked body, trying to distract himself from how close he was to saying something he'd regret. "My family doesn't like me much. Black sheep and all that shit."

"Yeah, there's a shock." Sean came to a stop in front of him. "You really expect me to believe this shit?"

"You asked and I answered. You can believe me or not—no skin off my ass either way."

Sean looked at him, his eyes sharp. "Prove it."

"What? That it's no skin off my ass? You'll have to take my word on—"

"No, idiot. Prove you're an empath."

"I'm not a circus act. I don't do tricks on command."

Sean cocked one hip, crossed his arms over his bare chest, and glared.

Jesse almost laughed. He'd let Sean have the upper hand too long if the kid thought a pissy look could get to him. But, what the hell? Maybe it was better if Sean had his come-to-Jesus moment now. Maybe it would finally convince him that Jesse was a bad bet as a friend, a lover, and a traveling companion, since the whole kidnapping him and fucking up his life thing didn't seem do the trick.

Jesse slid off the bed and moved to stand directly in front of Sean. "Close your eyes."

"Why?" Sean looked wary.

"You wanted proof. Close your eyes and remember something that happened when you were a rugrat. Something that still makes you feel ... you know ... *something*."

Sean watched him for another second or two, then let his eyes fall shut. Jesse counted to five and placed his palm over the center of the younger man's chest. He sucked in a lungful Sean's scent—sweat and male musk and something else he didn't have words to name. A glow rose off the younger man's skin, and he breathed that in, too. *Lazy ... warm ... content.*

Jesse licked his lips before he spoke. "Wherever you were, things were easy. Comfortable. You were happy."

Sean's eyes popped open. "How..." He stumbled backward, breaking the contact between his skin and Jesse's hand.

"Freaky, dude."

Jesse stiffened. "That's me. Just another freak."

"Hey, man, I didn't mean it like that. It's just a lot to take in all at once."

"Whatever. I've been called worse." Jesse forced a smile.

"What were you remembering?"

Sean bit his lip and looked away. When he spoke, his voice fell into the deep ditch of his Texas drawl. "Saturday mornings when I was a kid. Me and Bobby, gettin' up early and watchin' cartoons, eatin' crappy cereal right outta the box." He shot Jesse a glance that looked full to the brim with pain. "It was good, y'know? We were free."

Jesse nodded. "How'd you and your brother end up so far from home, anyway?"

"I was at Berkeley," Sean said. "Bobby followed me out here, was waitin' tables and parkin' cars. He liked the city life. Smithville's small." He shrugged. "Too small for him, I guess, but San Francisco turned out to be way too big."

"Bobby's younger than you?"

"Older by four minutes. He's my twin."

Sean's answer hit Jesse like a lit cigarette punched into his solar plexus. No wonder the kid had caved to Paco's threats. "Sean, I..." He'd been about to say he was sorry, but Jesus Christ ... it didn't mean anything. He could spend the rest of his Goddamn life apologizing, and if Paco had Bobby hurt or killed, it was all a lot of worthless air. He turned away and reached for his duffel. "I'm gonna get that shower now."

"Wait." Sean dropped a hand on his shoulder. Through the skin-to-skin contact, Jesse read a mix of emotions—none of them good. *Pain ... fear ... loneliness.*

"What d'you need, Sean?"

Silence. Jesse could feel the younger man wrestling with pride and uncertainty. Finally, Sean said, "There room in that shower for two?"

"Not when one of 'em's the Jolly Green Giant."

"Fuck you," Sean said with a smile in his voice Jesse could hear loud and clear.

Jesse turned to look at him. "Been there, done that, got the sore ass to prove it. Not up for a second round just yet."

Sean shrugged. "I have other skills."

"Yeah? Prove it. Or maybe you don't do tricks on command either."

"Depends on the audience." Sean's tongue darted out and over his bottom lip.

It took them better than an hour, but they managed to use up every drop of hot water in the whole damn place. They landed flat on the bed, wet and gasping like a pair of fish on the deck of trawler. Jesse felt his eyes go heavy as Sean

pulled the sheet and scratchy hotel blanket over the two of them. Before he drifted off, he glanced at Sean and caught him smiling.

"What?"

Sean's grin deepened. "I guess that'll teach you to leave a loaded gun where I can get it."

Jesse reached out and flicked a sloppy strand of hair off Sean's cheek. He let his hand fall to rest on the other man's chest. "Said I was crazy, kid, not stupid."

Sean's eyes widened as he let the words sink in. "It wasn't loaded? You son of a bitch."

Jesse fell asleep to the sound of his laughter.

* * * *

Later, when Sean thought about the five days and nights that followed, he had a hard time putting events in their correct sequence. Did they spend the first two days eating bad food and sleeping, only to wake up and fuck each other into hunger and near-exhaustion again? Or was it three days?

He remembered letting Jesse cuff him to the headboard. He remembered sweating the sheets nearly transparent while Jesse used his mouth and hands and cock on him for hours at a time, a full-body experience that left him wrung out and shaking, as if he'd suffered a high fever. He remembered returning the favor, and loving the way Jesse's voice broke when he finally gave in and begged.

He knew it was the morning of the fourth day that he woke with an urgent need to get out of the room and into the cold

winter sunshine. "I'm gonna go apeshit if I don't get some fresh scenery." His voice felt thick in his throat.

Jesse nodded. "We can go for a drive. Stretch our legs a little."

They ended up taking a side road off the main highway and following it 'til the desert swallowed them whole. Out to a small cluster of sandblasted buildings that might once have been ... what? A town? Not likely. Two falling-down houses and a shed did not a town make.

Jesse'd brought his guns—the rifle and both pistols. "Need to get in some target practice. Hanging with you is making me soft, kid."

Sean laughed and stuck his hand down the front of Jesse's jeans. "I can fix the soft part."

"Pushy bitch." Jesse shoved at him, but his grin made him look closer to sixteen than the thirty-three he admitted. "You know how to shoot?"

Sean shrugged. "I know how to use a deer rifle. I think we've already covered how useless I am with the .45."

"Aw, that's just 'cause nobody ever bothered to teach you. Here..." Jesse fished around inside the duffel and pulled out the nine-millimeter. "A SIG Sauer P226. Made in Germany. Wrap your big-ass paw around it and see how it feels." He passed the gun to Sean, and spent the next twenty minutes explaining its mechanics. Then he showed him how to load it. An hour later, Sean was shooting windowpanes out of the shed from twenty yards away.

"What about that?" He pointed to the rifle.

Jesse squinted at him. "It's an M24. The military version of the Remington 700. A little out of your league just now, but maybe in a few months..." He looked away and cleared his throat. "We should get moving."

Back at the motel, Sean watched Jesse take all three guns apart, clean them, and put them back together again. The way his hands moved, sure and confident, over every rise and dip of cold steel ... it made Sean's blood pump hard and hot. But it was when Jesse dug the knife from the bottom of the duffel, big and scary-sharp, and started running the blade back and forth over the black whetstone that Sean began to lose control. He managed to wait—barely—'til Jesse finished sharpening the knife and stuck it back into its sheath. Then he pounced.

"What the *fuck*?" Jesse's words sounded muffled. Lying facedown on the carpet tended to do that.

"Got you now," Sean whispered against the back of his neck.

"You think?" Jesse said, and a second later Sean was on his back, the older man's forearm pressed lightly on his throat. "I think it's the other way around."

"Tough guy, huh?"

"You know it." Jesse pressed his hips against him, and Sean bucked up, already hard and desperate and leaking like a damn twelve-year-old who'd just figured out what his dick was for.

"Yeah? I think you're all talk."

Jesse laughed and slid a hand between them. He went after the button and zipper on Sean's jeans like they'd said

something dirty about his mama. Then his hand was on Sean's cock and sliding down to cup his balls.

"Oh-Jesus-fuck-yes."

"Pretty eloquent there, college boy."

"Fuck you."

Jesse laughed again. "Maybe next time." He took Sean's mouth, sloppy and hard, and Sean pretended to tolerate it when, in fact, he never wanted it to end...

...unless an end to the kissing meant the start of the blow job, and apparently it did. Jesse worked Sean's jeans over his hips and slid down his body to nuzzle at the place where his thigh met his hip.

"Christ, Jesse, please." His body felt tight, like a bowstring stretched to near the point of snapping, and Jesse played him like the bastard he was. Swiped his tongue in patterns over the skin of Sean's belly, stopping to bite and suck heat to the surface. Sean shivered and tried not to moan like a girl.

Then Jesse's mouth was on him—right where he needed it to be—melting his brain out through his cock. Hard, slow pulls and the rough of his tongue catching underneath, working the nerve endings 'til Sean curled his hand into a fist and pounded it against the carpet once ... twice ... three times...

Later, with the bed a rumpled nest around them, Sean gave as good as he got. And after that he lay sprawled, half covering Jesse's limp body, mapping out the terrain of his chest with his mouth. He found a spot between Jesse's third and fourth ribs that made the older man twitch with every breath against it. He made that spot his own.

"Tryin' to sleep, here," Jesse said and laid his hand over Sean's flank.

"So sleep." Sean nibbled and watched Jesse's abdominal muscles ripple.

"You're like a kid with a new toy, y'know that?"

Sean grinned and rested his chin on Jesse's chest, the better to see his face. "Yeah? You gonna spank me?"

Jesse smiled, just this side of wicked. "Ask me again later." His eyes slid closed, and Sean watched him as he dozed.

* * * *

On the fifth day, they ran out of food.

"I'm coming with you."

"No." Jesse said it like it was the end of the conversation. Like he had the right to say where Sean went and what he did.

Sean on purpose kept the hostility out of his voice when he said, "Well, unless you're gonna cuff me to the bed again—"

"Don't give me ideas." Jesse wasn't smiling. He was checking the .45, checking the SIG—which he said he'd leave for Sean, "just in case."

"Jesse—"

"No." He looked Sean for the first time in ten minutes. "Please. I'm asking you ... please." Every line of his body looked pulled tight with tension.

"You act like you think something's gonna happen. What d'you know that I don't?"

The older man shrugged. "Just a feeling. I get them sometimes. Saved my ass more than once."

"All the more reason for me to come with you. I'll have your back. Unless you don't think I'm up to it."

And then Jesse was in his face, grabbing the front of his shirt and gripping his hair with hard fingers. "Don't screw with my head, kid. Not today."

Sean looked down into his eyes and saw raw fear. He swallowed. "All right, I'll stay. But I swear to God, if anything happens to you..." He let it go, because what threat could he possibly make that would trump Paco's thugs catching Jesse with his guard down? He leaned in and kissed him, and felt the other man relax maybe a fraction under the weight of his mouth. "Don't forget the root beer, okay? And more toothpaste. My mouth tastes like ass."

Jesse grinned. "Imagine that." And then he was out the door.

Sean slid the deadbolt home and listened to the roar of the truck as it started. He heard it fade away.

He sat down to wait, his hand on the gun Jesse'd left on the table.

Chapter Nine

Five miles from the Winnemucca city limits, Jesse met a black Escalade headed east, back toward the motel. He felt a ping in the back of his brain. A twinge of ... something. He shook it off, remembering how Sean had laughed at him and called him an anxious old man every time he got up in the middle of the night to double-check the guns on the table and the locks on the door.

They were okay. Better than that—they were good. All they had to do was wait a few more days. Or weeks. A month at most. Paco would get bored. Distracted. His coke and crystal meth habits meant he had the attention span of a Goddamn gnat. He'd find someone else to fuck. Someone else to blackmail and abuse in Sean's place, and then Jesse and Sean could head out for Mexico, knowing Paco had abandoned the hunt.

Question: Why didn't that make him feel better?

Answer: Paco needed to be dead, not just making some other poor slob miserable and running roughshod over the less fortunate population of Santa Rosa and the whole North Bay Area.

And Jesse would've taken care of it. Would've gone to his death a satisfied man, if that's what it took. But now he had Sean to consider. For the first time in years, something more important than vengeance, or even ridding the planet of scum like Paco Sanchez.

Worst-case scenario: Jesse went after Paco now, killed the nasty bastard, and died doing it. Sean had a good heart. He might grieve a little, but he'd get over it. Hell, even if Jesse lived, the kid would end up leaving him eventually for some suit with an IRA and a late-model convertible eventually.

Except that wasn't the worst-case, was it? The worst-case was if Jesse failed at killing Paco and died anyway. Left that cocksucker alive, with Sean in his sights...

No. Couldn't take that chance. He already had enough blood on his hands to turn the Bay red. He wouldn't add Sean's. And how he felt about the younger man had nothing to do with it, damn it. Because feelings weren't real. They didn't stick around. Nobody knew that better than he did.

Bullets and blades? Those were as real as it got.

Jesse let his mind race back and forth along the same path while he filled a shopping cart with supplies and pumped the truck full of gas. Then he sat behind the wheel and checked the duffel on the seat next to him. Knowing he was being obsessive about the weapons. Wishing vaguely he'd let Sean come with him after all. He pulled out his cell and dialed.

Manuel answered on the second ring. "Bonham, you fucker, you left a hell of a mess in my cabin. Where the fuck are you?"

"Sorry about that. Had to leave in a hurry. We're taking a little vacation, if you know what I mean."

"Down south?"

"Nah. East."

"Right. Who's 'we?'" Manny lowered his voice. "You and your boy?"

"He's not my boy."

Manny laughed like that was a joke. "What do you need, *amigo*?"

"Just a little information. How're things in town? Still hot?"

"Sizzlin'. Paco's looking high and low for your pale ass. Got all his people on the job. They put up fuckin' flyers, man."

"Shit. Seriously?"

"Seriously. You'd better lie low a while longer."

"Got it. Thanks, Manny. I'll call again soon."

"You do that. And tell your boy I said hello."

Jesse heard the click in his ear that signaled the end of the conversation. He climbed into the truck and drove out of Winnemucca, feeling oddly at peace. Almost happy, in fact. A month, maybe two, holed up in that musty little motel room with Sean. They'd kill each other before it was over.

He smiled.

And then he frowned, because here came that Escalade again. Tinted windows and California plates—he'd noticed them the first time, too—and moving faster now. Like it had someplace to be.

He squinted at the vehicle as it passed in the other lane, doing an easy eighty into the outskirts of Winnemucca. Part of him wanted to turn around and follow it. But the bigger part wanted to get back to Sean with the root beer and the toothpaste, and three different flavors of licorice to go with the beef jerky he'd bought.

He flicked on the radio and looked for an oldies station.

* * * *

Sean watched Jesse's truck zoom past from the back seat of the Escalade. He heard the thug in front seat mumble something to the driver, who answered in the negative. Something about "later" and "Paco wants to be in on the kill" and "gotta get the little faggot tucked in first." Sean felt his heart race, and it hurt like a bitch, thudding against his bruised ribs where he'd taken the driver's boot. He licked his lips, running the tip of his tongue over the place where the lower one was split and still bleeding.

"Go, Jesse. Go and keep on going." Sean mouthed the words, not wanting to draw attention to himself. Then he let his head drop back on the seat and made his mind go blank.

* * * *

Jesse knew he should've listened to that little ping in his brain. Even before he saw how the motel room door was standing ajar. Before he pushed it open and saw the wreck of the room and the spatter of blood on the table. Before he called Sean's name and got no answer.

Long, long before he sprinted to the office and found the wizened little crone who'd rented them their room lying behind the counter with a dime-sized hole between her dead eyes, and a pool of blood beneath the back of her head.

He went back to the room, still sprinting. He searched, because he knew there had to be something ... *something* that would explain how this had happened. The door had been locked. He'd heard Sean throw the deadbolt after he'd closed it behind him. And Sean had the SIG, and he knew how to use it—Jesse'd made sure—which meant...

Sean must've let them in. Must've gone with them willingly. Except there was the blood on the table, and a chair knocked over and the bed torn apart. They'd disarmed him? The kid was green, but not that green—and he was big and fast. Strong. But if there'd been more than two...

Jesse kicked at the tangle of sheets that lay half off the bed, and his boot struck something solid. He reached down and pulled the SIG from under the pile.

Why hadn't Paco's boys taken the gun? Why leave it here for Jesse to find?

Unless they hadn't. Unless it was Sean who'd hidden it, quick and sneaky, after they were already in the room ... or before he let them in?

None of it made any sense, and the tide of panic rising in Jesse's chest and up into his throat started to choke him. He couldn't give in to it. He needed to get a grip.

He sat down on the edge of the mattress and tried to think. His cell got no reception out here, but there was a phone in the office. He was pretty sure the old lady wouldn't charge him for the long distance call.

* * * *

In the back of the Escalade, Sean was dreaming. In his dream, he stood on a footbridge stretched over a canyon. He could see Jesse on one end of the bridge, watching. Not moving. From the other end, Bobby called to him, shouting his name over and over. The bridge swayed in the cool, damp wind. Sean lost his balance. Stumbled forward and back,

looking for something to grab. He knew he was dreaming. But as bad as it was, he knew waking would be worse.

* * * *

"I don't know what to do, man." Jesse gripped the office phone and tried to keep from staring at the dead woman lying behind the counter.

"Take it easy, Jess. We'll get him back. I'll call in some favors—"

"I hate to ask you to do that—"

"Shut your big mouth. You'd do the same for me."

Jesse felt a burning behind his eyes. "Thank you. Seriously."

"No sweat, *amigo*. Call me when you know something. I'll do the same." Manny disconnected.

Jesse stood in the silent office and felt that same rise of helpless panic trying to flood him again. He wanted to run for the truck, drive as fast as he could back to Santa Rosa. Find Sean. *Find* him.

Yeah, as haystacks went, the North Bay Area was a fucking huge one, and Sean ... well, a six-foot-four needle was still just a needle. Jesse needed something to go on—something more than whatever Manny could squeeze from the local street element. They'd all be scared to talk after what happened to LaNay.

He thought about it another second or two, then pulled out his wallet and searched for the tiny slip of paper he kept tucked in the back. Thirty seconds later, he was listening to

the phone ring through to a small house in a small town in Massachusetts.

"Jesse?" His grandmother's voice sounded surprised. "To what do I owe this honor?"

God, he hated when she did that. She could at least *pretend* to not know who was calling every fucking time.

"Hi, Gram. I, uh..." He cleared his throat. "How are you?"

"Please, child. This is no time for play-acting familial affection. You're in trouble?"

Jesse scrubbed a hand over his face and through his hair. "Yeah. I need—"

"What you need is to stop playing cops and robbers, find a nice young man and settle down. Oh..." Gram's voice sharpened. "But I see you've already found the young man ... and lost him again. Careless of you."

Jesse gripped the edge of the counter and tried not to think bad thoughts about one of his only living relatives. "Gram. Please."

"Yes, all right, let me see. Your young man—Sean, is it? He's been taken. I see a black vehicle headed west through the desert. But I get no sense of its destination."

"That doesn't help me much."

"Well, give me a moment. I'm not as spry as once I was, which you'd know if you ever came to visit. Your cousin Leah came just last month, and brought her new husband with her. We had a lovely time. You should call Leah and—"

"Gram, Jesus Christ, they're going to *kill* him." Jesse cringed as soon as the words left his mouth. No use in pissing her off. Not when he needed her.

But when she spoke again, his grandmother's voice had softened. "All right, son. You have an object the young man has touched recently?"

Jesse cast a quick glance around the office, as if something of Sean's might be lying on the floor or hanging on the wall. "I ... shit. The SIG." He pulled the gun out of the inner pocket of his coat and put it on the counter.

"What's a SIG?" his grandmother asked. "No, don't tell me. I don't need to know. Just put your hands on it and picture the young man in your head. A memory. Something recent."

"Right." Jesse cradled the phone between his ear and shoulder, and placed both hands over the gun. He called up an image of Sean in his head, standing straight and tall against the backdrop of the winter desert. "Okay, I'm doing it."

"Good. Now you need to clear your mind of everything but that image, and let it change. Let yourself into the picture. Remember what you were doing."

Jesse saw himself next to Sean, showing him how to hold the SIG. How to stand, how to brace himself for the kickback. "Got it."

"Excellent. Now imagine you're seeing through Sean's eyes. Feeling as he felt in that moment."

"What? How the fuck is that going to—"

"Don't use that foul language with me, Jesse. I have no patience for it. Do as you're told." Gram's voice softened again. "I'll help you. I don't know what I can do from this distance, but I'll try."

Jesse sighed and closed his eyes. He sucked in a breath and blew it out again, remembering. When he'd been teaching Sean how to use the SIG, touching his hands to position them properly on the butt of the gun, the kid had felt ... *safe ... comfortable ... happy.*

He smiled a little as he thought about that. Then the emotions changed, shading darker at a speed that made his breath hitch. *Afraid* ... wherever Sean was now, he was scared shitless and miserable...

Jesse opened his eyes. Instead of seeing the office wall, splattered with the old lady's blood, he saw a highway whizzing by as if from the back seat of a moving vehicle. Up ahead was a sign: *Petaluma, 100 Miles.*

"Petaluma," he said into the phone. "That's where they're taking him. But where in Petaluma?"

When his grandmother answered, she sounded weak. Exhausted, even. "As you get closer to the young man, you'll see more details. Just keep his image in your head, front and center, and don't lose the open channel between you."

Jesse swallowed. "Thanks, Gram. I don't know how to—"

"Don't waste time. Just call me and let me know how it turns out."

"Will do. I ... I really..."

"No time for nonsense now, child. I need a nap." And she hung up the phone.

Jesse dialed Manuel's number again. He told him what he knew—definitely headed for Petaluma, at least for now. Manny didn't ask how he'd come by this information, and Jesse said a little prayer of thanks for that.

Before he left, he grabbed the sheet off the bed in the motel room and covered the old lady behind the counter. He wished it was a clean sheet, but it was better than nothing, right? Then he got back into his truck and pointed it west on Route 80.

Every few minutes, he rested his hand on the SIG, where he'd placed it on the seat next to him. Each time, he saw that same flash of highway. Felt the surge of Sean's misery and fear. Hated it with everything inside him.

He tried not to think about what it would mean if the pictures and feelings dried up and blew away.

Chapter Ten

Jesse met Manuel in the same alley where he'd interrogated LaNay the week before.

Interrogated, sure ... except what he'd really done was roughed her up, threatened her, and got her killed. The best he could hope for was that Paco had cut her throat before he sliced off her ear, and maybe she hadn't died cursing Jesse's name. A faint hope, at best.

And then he'd gone on to take some poor kid he didn't know or care about hostage, and fuck up *his* life to hell and back. Would likely get him killed, too.

Yeah. Not this time.

"I don't care, Manuel. If I have to search every house in the fucking county—"

"Easy, man. We'll get your boy back. I got the skinny on a spot Paco uses to stash shit he doesn't want found. Fits in with the whole 'smoky' thing you called about earlier."

Somewhere around the Nevada-California border, Jesse'd laid his hand on the SIG and smelled smoke and damp rot—the distinctive scent of burnt grass spread out, scorched and ugly, under a wet North Bay winter. And the sensation of a moving vehicle beneath and around him was gone, which meant...

Well, he didn't like to think about what it meant. At best, Paco's thugs were keeping Sean somewhere warm and safe. At worst, he was lying in a ditch. But he was alive. Jesse was

pretty sure of that, though he didn't know for how much longer.

He looked at Manny. "How much did that info cost you?"

Manny shrugged. "Why aren't you askin' me where they've got your boy?"

Good point. "Tell me."

"A few miles past Petaluma, on Route 101, there's a dirt road headed east. Doesn't have a name. You take that and go back into the hills about a mile or so. Deserted farmhouse. No close neighbors. About thirty acres worth of burnt grass all around it."

"Got it." Jesse clapped Manuel on the shoulder and turned to go. Manuel's voice stopped him.

"You think you're goin' in there alone?"

Jesse spoke without looking back. "I don't think it, I know it. Don't argue this one with me, Manny. I got the kid into this, I'll get him out."

"He's a big strong boy, Jesse. I'm betting he can hold his own."

"He won't have to. I've got his back."

"And who the fuck's got yours?"

But Jesse was halfway out of the alley already, and he pretended not to hear.

* * * *

When it came right down to it, Sean decided he preferred being cuffed to a bed over being tied to a chair. For one thing, a single pair of police-issue handcuffs didn't cut off the circulation in both legs like a length of rope pulled way too

tight. On the other hand, cuffs were pretty much indestructible. The rope they'd use to tie him had been employed before—he could tell by the dark, rusty stains that looked a little too much like blood to be anything else—and there was a frayed spot just where his left wrist was bound to the arm of the chair. When he wriggled his arm, the hard edge of his cheap, expandable watchband rubbed that spot, fraying it further.

None of this would mean anything in the end, he was sure. Paco would come, and after torturing him for a while, Paco would kill him. But it made Sean feel better to try. He knew Jesse would expect at least that much.

He could hear Paco's men in the other room. Not particularly big guys. Not one of them was as tall as Jesse, or as quick or strong. They let their guns be strong for them.

So far, Sean had played meek and mild, cursing them only inside the confines of his own head. Every time they called him "faggot," he thought about how he'd love to watch them bleed. Which made him consider how much he'd changed over the past several days. Jesse was a bad influence on his general sense of decency and good will toward men. Funny how he didn't care, only wishing Jesse would have the chance to finish corrupting him.

Sean knew he wouldn't hold onto his temper much longer, though. Every man had his breaking point. And he was going to die anyway. No sense in keeping his smart mouth to himself.

In his head he heard Jesse call him a pushy bitch, and he smiled.

They were playing cards in the other room. Poker, it sounded like. They'd taken the only lamp and left him alone in the dark, behind a closed door. The air smelled like smoke—not like Paco's ever-present cigar, which Sean had come to hate, but like burnt vegetation. There was a pile of garbage in one corner of the room. Old rags and what looked like aerosol cans. Kids must've used this place to fry their brains huffing spray paint and cleanser.

A mattress rested on the floor in the opposite corner. Sean could see bloodstains on that, too—just like the rope. No illusions about how they got there, or how up close and personal he would soon be with those very stains. He'd leave a few of his own before the night was through, no doubt.

But Jesse would get away. He'd find the SIG where Sean had stuck it under the sheet before letting Paco's men in the room, and he'd know what it meant. He'd know to take his chance. Make his run for the border. North, south ... it didn't matter, so long as he got himself gone.

Sean went back to working his watchband back and forth under the frayed spot on the rope.

* * * *

They weren't expecting him—that much was clear. Jesse was almost disappointed. To be underestimated that badly ... his rep must've been in worse shape than he thought.

The farmhouse sat just where Manny'd said to look, down a nameless dirty road off Route 101. He parked the truck on the side of the highway, got out and hiked in, trying to keep from breathing too deeply of the damp, scorched-smelling air.

The hillside looked like just so much charcoal even by the sliver of waning moon that hung low in the sky.

He went in low and quiet, the SIG tucked into the back of his jeans. The Escalade sat next to the farmhouse like a fat, poisonous beetle. He thought about slashing the tires, then decided against it. He might have use for it later.

He crouched at a window and peeked over the sill. The pane was cracked and filthy, but he could see well enough to note two men playing cards at a small, round table. In the center of the table sat a pile of cash. The kerosene lamp in the corner threw long shadows on the walls.

He moved around the house to what used to be the back porch and was now a rotted death trap waiting to happen. He crouched lower, practically crawling to the far southern corner of the building, where the windows were empty of glass entirely. He heard voices.

"Listen, faggot. You eat this. Paco says we're supposed to keep you healthy."

"Paco pay you big money to baby-sit, dude? You gonna read me a bedtime story?" Sean's voice, loud and clear.

Jesse grinned big 'til he heard the sound of a fist hitting solid flesh, followed instantly by a painful grunt, heavy footsteps, and the slamming of a door. *Motherfuck*. Asshole was gonna die for that. Slow, if Jesse had the time to make it happen that way. Which was unlikely.

He stretched up a few inches and peered in through the window, catching sight of Sean tied to a chair in the center of the room, barely visible in the dark. His head hung low, and

Jesse could hear his breathing—shallow and raspy, like it hurt.

Yeah. Asshole was gonna die bloody.

Headlights splashed over the side of the house, followed by the rumble of another vehicle approaching.

Paco. Had to be.

Jesse's fingers itched, wanting to grab the SIG and take the bastard out as he left the protection of his car. But so long as Paco's men were only a few feet away from Sean, and Sean was incapacitated...

He heard Paco enter the house. Listened to muffled conversation from the other room. And then the door slammed open, and there was the man himself—all five-foot-three of him—dressed in a dark, expensive-looking suit and shoes far too shiny for his present location. Two bodyguards stood behind him, one of them carrying the kerosene lamp. Paco had an unlit cigar in his hand and a shit-eating grin on his face. The itch in Jesse's fingers deepened.

"Sean! You crazy bastard, how are you?"

Jesse watched Paco cross the room and take Sean's chin in his hand. He leaned over him, pushing his face into Sean's, and Jesse knew he was kissing the kid. He ground his teeth together and forced himself to hold still.

Paco pulled away, smacking his lips. Then he lifted his hand and landed a ringing slap across Sean's jaw. Jesse saw Sean's head fly back at the blow.

"That's for getting mixed up with that *chingón*, Bonham. Nutty son of a bitch wants to kill me, you believe that?"

Sean said nothing. Good boy. *Smart* boy.

Paco turned to the two bulky shadows near the door and gestured with the still-unlit cigar. "Leave us alone, boys. And leave the lamp. I like to see what I'm doing."

The bodyguards did as they were told, setting the lamp in the corner of the room before they went. That made five men in the other room, plus Paco, against Jesse and Sean, who was unarmed and tied to a chair. Crappy odds.

Paco was talking again. "You been a bad boy, Sean-baby. Running off with that Bonham shit—that's bad. You let him fuck you? Huh?" He grabbed a handful of Sean's hair and yanked sideways. "You let him fuck your mouth? Your ass?" He slapped Sean on the other side of his face. "I guess maybe I'll have to punish you, huh? Guess maybe we'll have to see about making you sorry." He leaned in and kissed Sean again.

Jesse rose to a standing position, stepped back maybe ten feet, and ran straight for the window. He dove headfirst through the frame, hearing the wooden slats meant to hold the nonexistent glass break around him as he cleared the sill. He landed in a roll and was up on his feet before Paco could react.

He pointed the SIG at Paco's face and smiled. "Let go of him. Keep your hands where I can see 'em and your back to the wall."

Paco froze just an instant. Then he moved, quick and slippery, around Sean's chair to stand behind him. "Bonham, what a surprise. I have men looking all over Nevada for you. Never thought you'd be stupid enough to come back here. So glad to see I was wrong." He reached into the pocket of his

suit jacket, pulled out a gold lighter, and flicked it open. "I assume you don't mind if I smoke."

The door opened with a bang, allowing one of the bodyguards to enter. Jesse kept his gun trained on Paco, just ten feet in front of him, and said, "Tell him to stand down, Sanchez, or I'll take your left knee and your right nut, in that order."

"You'll die before you get a single round off, *chico*." Paco lit the cigar and puffed a ring of smoke into the already rank air of the room.

"Oh," Jesse said, "we're all gonna die. Take that on faith, Sanchez. Nobody walks outta here alive tonight." He hadn't looked directly at Sean yet, needing to keep his focus on Paco, but he glanced at the younger man now and saw his eyes widen. *Trust me, kid. One last time.*

The bodyguard took this opportunity to speak up. "Don't worry, boss. I got this faggot. He makes a move, he's dead before he hits the floor."

Sean laughed. The sound was sharp, like the bark of an angry dog. As he drew in breath to speak, Jesse tightened his grip on the SIG, because this was the moment. The few seconds when everything counted. He could feel it, like the slow beat of good music thumping through his blood, getting faster and louder as it approached the climax of the piece. Almost like sex, but with more guts dripping off the walls in the afterglow.

Sean was looking at the bodyguard. When he spoke, his voice was even and deep and sort of thoughtful, like he'd given real consideration to the question at hand. "Tell me,

asswipe—if I'm a faggot, and he's a faggot, what does that make Paco?"

The bodyguard shot a look at Sean, then at Paco, and opened his mouth to answer. Nothing came out but a grunt that sounded more confused than angry. The gun in the man's hand dropped a fraction of an inch as he plainly struggled to hold up his end of the conversation.

Jesse glanced away from him just in time to see the piece of rope binding Sean's wrist to the arm of the chair fall away. Sean reached up and snatched Paco's cigar from his hand, swung his long arm down and around the back of the chair, and pushed the lit tip into Paco's groin.

Paco screamed. Sean threw himself sideways, taking the chair with him. He hit the floor with a crash. Jesse started shooting.

He took out the bodyguard first, who'd never seemed to recover from Sean's question. Two rounds to the temple. He went down hard against the door, just as someone hit that same door from the other side. Men shouted in Spanish and English, a noise as loud as the gunshot that put a bullet in Paco's left knee, just like Jesse'd promised. The little man screamed a second time and writhed on the floor a few feet from where Sean lay, struggling with the ropes that bound him to the chair.

Jesse put four bullets through the door and heard a shout of pain and another crash. Two down, three to go, not counting Paco. The remaining men returned his fire, apparently forgetting their boss was in the room. Lucky for Paco, he wouldn't be standing upright anytime soon. Jesse

rolled to the right, crouched over Paco and stuck the muzzle of the SIG in his ear.

"Tell 'em to back off, Paco, or you die."

Paco grinned up at him, his face a mask of twisted agony. "You said we *all* die, Bonham. I'll hold you to that, *chingón*." He lifted his hand from the floor, near the pocket of his jacket. In it he held small pistol. A .22 by the look of it. Hardly enough to swat a mosquito—except up close like this, where it would take out Jesse's eye and bounce around in his brain a while before making him dead.

And that would be fine, but if he and Paco killed each other now, there was no way Sean would get out of here alive.

He pressed the SIG deeper into Paco's ear.

Paco cocked the .22 and held it, trembling, in Jesse's face. Stalemate.

The door opened, pushing the dead bodyguard out of the way. The three remaining men charged in and froze when they saw Jesse and Paco, looking like big, stupid statues in the middle of the room.

"They shoot and it's over, Paco. You tell 'em to back off and maybe you live. I need you to get the kid outta here alive and in one piece. You do that, you can have me."

Sweat glistened on the little man's face. His lip curled as he looked at Jesse and said, "Man, he's some fine ass, ain't he? Tight, every time. And those noises he makes when you ram him just right—music, baby. You got good taste, Bonham, I'll give you that."

Jesse dug in with the muzzle of the SIG and had the satisfaction of seeing Paco wince. "We got a deal or not,

Sanchez? Sean goes free, everybody left alive gets to keep on living—except me."

Sanchez smiled. "You got yourself a deal."

Sean made a noise then. Something like a sigh. Jesse almost didn't catch it, but he looked and saw how the kid had managed to free himself from the chair and was reaching for something shiny on the floor near Paco's feet. Then Sean rolled in the direction of the corner, and when he came up again to kneel with his back to the wall, he held an aerosol can in one hand, and Paco's shiny gold lighter in the other. He pointed the can at Paco's legs, maybe five feet from where he was kneeling.

Jesse yanked the gun out of Paco's ear and scrambled backwards along the floor. He opened his mouth to yell.

The room exploded.

Chapter Eleven

"You stupid, stupid *fuck!*"

Jesse shouted it like maybe Sean wasn't sitting two feet away, hanging onto the inside handle of the truck's passenger-side door for dear life and trying not to puke from the pain in his legs and face.

"I'm sorry," he said for what felt like the millionth time.

"You were gonna let them kill you. I couldn't—"

"Shut up. Don't talk to me. You shouldn't even be alive."

Jesse glared at him through the dim light in the cab. "Because you, cowboy, are too *stupid to live.*"

Sean said, "Watch the road, Einstein," and Jesse swerved to miss oncoming traffic. Sean could hear the fading whoop of sirens—police, fire department, who the hell knew? So long as they weren't coming after Jesse's truck, it didn't matter.

"Where're we going?" It hurt to talk due to the burn across the left side of his jaw. The burns on his legs hurt worse, though. Much worse.

Jesse didn't answer. They blew past a sign that said *San Rafael, 2 Miles*. Manny and his girlfriend. All right then. So long as Jesse wasn't going to do anything stupid like take him to a hospital where they'd ask a lot of damn questions nobody could answer, it was fine. He could afford to pass out in peace.

The next thing Sean knew, he was being moved from the cab of the truck. He knew this because his legs screamed at him in the voices of a thousand angry demons.

Manny said, "Shit, Jesse, what'd you do to him?"

Sean licked his blistered lips and said, "Didn't do nothin'. My fault. Leave him alone."

Manny laughed. Sean felt the gray coming for him again, trying to drag him down. Before it could get him, he reached out and snagged the sleeve of Jesse's coat. "Don't you leave me here, Jesse. Don't you do that."

"I won't, kid. I'll be here."

"Jesse," Manny said, "they'll be looking for you. The Chief of fucking Police. You need to get gone, man."

As the gray pulled him under, Sean gripped Jesse's jacket and held on tight. He wouldn't leave. He'd said so, and Jesse hardly ever lied.

Next time he came to, he was in a medium-sized room with striped blue wallpaper, lying on a bed. Manny and a woman he assumed was Manny's girlfriend were wrapping his legs in long, white bandages. The pain was better. Sean kept his eyes to slits and listened to them talk.

"I'm telling you, Jesse, it's not that bad. Mostly second degree, a couple third, but not full-thickness. Probably won't even scar ... except maybe that one on his face."

"I don't care, Manny. He needs a real doctor—"

"You doubting my abilities, *amigo*? This old army medic was good enough when you got the shit kicked outta you a few months back." He paused. "Seriously, Jess, all they're gonna do in the ER is slap some Silvadene on him and bandage him up. And ask a lotta fuckin' questions. I got the meds and the bandages covered. We're good."

Jesse didn't answer for a long time. When he did, his voice was quiet. Shattered, like Sean had never heard it before. "I don't know what to do, Manuel. What do I do?"

Sean watched as Manny stood and laid a hand on Jesse's shoulder. "You go. Head for the border and don't come back 'til I call you and tell you it's cool."

"That could be a while."

Manny nodded.

Jesse rubbed a soot-blackened hand through his hair and over his face. Sean could see the shadows around his eyes. He looked haunted.

"When he wakes up, tell him ... I dunno. Tell him I'll be back. But tell him..." He paused and wiped at his face again, leaving clean smudges in the black grit across his cheeks. "Tell him he doesn't have to wait. I don't expect that. Don't want it."

Manny nodded again. Jesse stood, shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned over the bed. "Stupid fuck," he whispered. Sean smiled, and Jesse's eyes got big. "You're awake?"

"Sort of." Sean's voice snapped like a dry twig in his throat. He coughed and said, "Just for the record, I didn't mean to burn the joint down. Forgot about the kerosene lamp." He looked hard at Jesse. "What about you? You hurt anywhere?"

Manny appeared over Jesse's shoulder. "He's fine, *chico*. Can't damage this shit-head. He's indestructible."

Sean smiled again, and his jaw hollered at him to quit it. He didn't listen. "You should go. Put some miles between yourself and the Santa Rosa P.D. before morning."

"Sean, I—"

"It's okay, Jesse. And I'm sorry—"

"You've got nothing to be sorry for, kid. They threatened your brother. That's why you let 'em in the room. Why you went with 'em. But after the barbecue number you did on Paco, Bobby's as safe as he's gonna get. It's over."

Sean stared at Jesse. "That's what you think? You think I went with Paco's boys because they said they'd hurt my brother?"

Jesse squinted at him. "Yeah?"

"And you call me a stupid fuck. They threatened *you*, moron. Said they'd shot out your tires ten miles from the motel and had snipers pinning you down by the side of the road. Said they'd let you go if I went with them."

Jesse's squint turned into a scowl. "And you believed that load of shit? Jesus Christ, Sean—"

"I believed it 'til we got all the way to Winnemucca, and there was no sign of you. Which is why I'm sorry..." He let his words trail off as a coughing fit overtook him. Son of a *bitch*, that hurt. "I should've used the SIG and killed all three of 'em on the spot."

"All right," Manny said. "That's enough conversation. Jesse, you need to go. Kid, you need to rest."

Sean looked at Manny and said, "Fuck you. I'll rest when I'm ready."

Manny laughed, a big rolling sound that filled the room.
"You're right, he really is a pushy bitch."

Jesse smirked. "You mind giving us some privacy?"

"No problem." Manuel and his girlfriend, who hadn't said a word throughout the exchange, left the room and shut the door behind them.

"I gotta go."

"I know."

"I'll come back, but it might be a while. Maybe months."

"I know that, too."

Jesse glanced away from him, to a spot on the floor. "You should go on and live your life. Find another guy. Somebody with more money, less trouble."

Sean just looked at him.

"I'm not gonna kiss you goodbye. I know how you feel about that kissing shit."

Sean shrugged. "It's a special occasion. I'll make an exception."

When the door closed behind Jesse two minutes later, Sean shut his eyes and listened for the sound of the truck starting up. Then he lay there and stared at the ceiling, and told himself crying was for girls.

Chapter Twelve

Jesse leaned against the wall and waited. Around him, tourists made their separate ways through the Puerto Vallarta airport baggage claim. The general air of the place was happy. Relaxed, but brimming with anticipation of good times in the near future. Jesse stuffed his hands in his pockets and tried not to fidget.

Sean's flight was late. A storm off the Pacific coast, forcing incoming planes to circle the tower. No big deal. Except Jesse wasn't a hundred percent sure Sean was even on the plane. They'd not spoken—not directly—in four months. The ongoing investigation into the murder of Chief of Police Gus Sanchez's nephew made it too dangerous for even a quick conversation, especially after they'd brought Sean in for questioning. But even with the kid's obvious burns, Sanchez couldn't prove he'd been at the farmhouse where they'd found what little was left of Paco.

Hard to take fingerprints from ashes.

Jesse stuck his right hand deeper into his pocket and touched the only thing that might've connected Sean to that farmhouse—Paco's shiny gold lighter. No fingerprints there, either. He'd made damn sure of that. He probably should've tossed the thing in the ocean, but ... well. Call it a souvenir. Or something.

He glanced up and saw a shaggy dark head topped by an ugly straw hat moving above the crowd. Jesse smiled when

he saw the kid wore shades, too. As if they'd make him less conspicuous.

Sean stopped directly in front of him and set his carry-on bag on the floor. "Well?"

Jesse could see the mark—a pale pink spider web of scar tissue—that spread over the left side of the kid's jaw. He resisted the urge to reach up and touch it. "What's with the disguise, cowboy?"

Sean shrugged. "Trying to look like a tourist."

Jesse glanced around the baggage claim, at all the happy people of non-freak-of-nature height. "Try harder."

"Sure, Mr. Leather-Jacket-in-the-Tropics. Because you *blend*."

Jesse reached up and hooked a hand behind Sean's neck. He pulled him down into a kiss that turned into something like mutual assault and battery about two seconds in. Felt a strong jolt of emotion jump off the kid's lips, but didn't stick around long enough to analyze it. Let him go, and Sean was breathing funny, and the people milling in their general area were giving them a wide berth.

"You got a suitcase?"

"Nah. Left it all behind."

Jesse squinted at him. "It's not forever. You can go back."

"Maybe," Sean said. "Manny told you about the ... thing?"

The *thing*. What Sean meant was the incident with the pair of uniformed cops who delivered a carefully worded death threat while holding a gun to Sean's head in the parking lot behind Heliotrope. That was three days ago.

Jesse nodded. "Still doesn't have to be forever."

"I guess that depends on you."

Jesse looked away, toward the morning sunshine flooding through the sliding glass doors on the other side of the baggage claim. "We're burning daylight. Let's go."

* * * *

Lo de Marcos, Mexico. Small, simple ... Sean guessed you'd call it "quaint," in the way of tiny Mexican beachside towns that hadn't yet been overrun by the tourist industry. But at just an hour's drive north of Puerto Vallarta, that quaint thing wouldn't last much longer. Sean had learned all this from one hour's worth of online research at a pay-by-the-minute airport computer while waiting on his flight from San Francisco to points south.

He glanced at Jesse, who was watching the road like it might jump up and try to bite the truck. "You say you're working security down here?"

Jesse nodded. "There's a hotel going up a ways down the beach from me. They've had some trouble on the construction site. Hired me to keep the peace."

"Locals resisting development?"

"Nah. Locals love development." Jesse glanced at Sean. "Or they love the new school and hospital that'll come with it, one of these days."

"So what's the trouble?"

Jesse shrugged. "Same old shit. Drugs, which leads to theft, which leads to knife fights and the occasional bashed head."

"And you put a stop to that."

"I do what I can." Jesse pulled the truck up alongside a massive palm tree at the mouth of a sandy trail. "We hike it from here."

Sean slid out, grabbed his bag and followed the other man down the trail. He watched Jesse trudge on ahead of him, still wearing the boots and jeans Sean remembered from the rainy streets of Santa Rosa. He'd taken off the jacket, dragging it behind him in the sand. His hair was lighter than Sean recalled. Bleached from the sun. His arms and the back of his neck were brown against the black of his t-shirt.

Jesse looked back over his shoulder at him. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Sean said and wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his hand. The inside of his jeans felt like his own private sauna, and his head was baking under the straw hat. Christ, he was from Texas. He should be used to this climate.

The reached the bottom of the trail and stepped out onto the beach. Sean saw the shack to his left, but his attention was caught by the water—a clear turquoise that dazzled his eyes.

"Nice, huh?" Jesse said, and he was smiling. Open and bright. Like Sean had never seen him look before. The sparkly lure of the Pacific never stood a chance against that smile.

He followed Jesse into the shack. Hardly more than a lean-to, wide open on the side that faced the water, it still felt like home the moment he dropped his bag in the corner and stretched, his fingertips brushing the ceiling.

"No plumbing," Jesse said, "but there's an outhouse thirty yards into the brush. I drive over to San Pancho once a week for supplies—fresh water to drink and wash, and whatever

else I need. And I've got a generator to keep the meat and beer cold." Something in his tone said "please don't hate it," and Sean was so surprised he turned and nearly fell over himself in the small space. This would take some getting used to.

"You hungry?" Jesse's eyes were on his mouth, but now his voice was steady. Friendly, even. As if Sean were a casual guest.

"Starved. Only got peanuts on the plane."

"We'll have to do something about that, won't we?" The words themselves sounded vaguely suggestive, but again ... Jesse's voice. Even and quiet, with no real heat behind it. Like the kiss back at the airport hadn't ever happened. "Make yourself at home. I'm gonna..." He made a vague gesture in the direction of his jeans and boots.

Sean tried not to stare as Jesse stripped down to nothing, then pulled on a pair of frayed denim cut-offs over his naked ass.

"What're you looking at?" Not so friendly anymore. Defensive. A little hostile, even.

"Nothing, I just ... you're different."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"I didn't say that." Sean wiped at the sweat running down his face.

Jesse frowned, lowering his brow over eyes that were looking more green than hazel in the clean, late-morning light. "You'd better change before you keel over."

Sean nodded and turned away, not entirely sure why he kept his back to Jesse as he slid out of his jeans and into a

pair of baggy board shorts. The scars on his legs were almost gone, and they'd never been that bad anyway. If he was going to be self-conscious about something, it should be the mark on his face, which would never leave him. Not without plastic surgery, at least.

He found Jesse outside, firing up the grill. Sean stood back and watched as the other man brushed two large steaks with oil, sprinkled them with something green and laid them over the flames.

Jesse, cooking. Yes, okay, grilling, but Sean never pictured him this way. All the images of Jesse he'd stored had to do with denim and leather, guns and knives, handcuffs and the best, dirtiest sex ever in the history of the planet. Those were the pictures he'd carried in his brain for weeks and months—for what he'd thought would be forever.

"You want corn?"

"Huh?" Sean snapped to as if coming out of a deep sleep. "Corn? Yeah, sure."

"Go grab some from the basket by the water jugs."

"Sure." All right then. Some things hadn't changed. Jesse still played it large and in charge, and while Sean could see how a steady diet of barked orders might get annoying eventually, he couldn't help but grin at the way he followed along without question.

"Bring the salt while you're at it." Jesse's voice carried over the sound of crashing waves and the wind in the palms, and Sean grinned bigger.

* * * *

Twilight over the Pacific—Jesse's favorite time of day. Time to shut down, turn off, let his brain drift into "idle." Except not tonight. Tonight, there was Sean. And every night for the next little while, Jesse guessed.

Not that it was a bad thing. It was just ... different. Not part of the program. Not a piece of the puzzle he'd carved so carefully from what little he'd had left when he got down here.

His days were simple: get up, go to work, come back, eat something, lie around listening to his transistor radio—when he could get a signal—and sleep. On Friday nights, he drove into San Pancho and got drunk. Slept in the truck, woke up and shopped for perishables, drove back. Walked along the beach. Looked at the sky. Thought about ... nothing. Not about Sean, that was for Goddamn sure.

Except now he was here, standing down by the water, watching the stars flick on. Jesse lay in his hammock, drinking a beer and watching Sean watch the stars. Enjoying the view of his endless legs splashing against the incoming tide. Liking the memory of Sean smiling at him through a mouthful of steak and corn. And what the fuck was Jesse supposed to *do* with all that shit?

He'd meant it when he told Sean he'd be back in Santa Rosa eventually. Meant it when he left, and meant it all through the first month he lived in Lo de Marcos. But after that, when he got the job working security—a fancy name for a hired thug, and he knew it—and then had trouble getting through to Manny for a few weeks, it just seemed best to let it go. Let Sean go.

Best for Sean, anyway.

But now—

"Hey, man, what's wrong?"

Jesse glanced up to find Sean towering over him. Jesus Christ, the kid was stealthy for a guy his size. "Nothin'. You have a good time down there?"

Sean shrugged. "You don't like the water?"

"I like it fine. Was watching you." Goddamn, he needed a better filter between his mouth and his brain. The kid always did that to him. Another reason having him here was a bad idea. Probably.

Sean looked away. Looked back again. "I don't have a sleeping bag."

"What?" Jesse squinted up at him. "Oh. No, you take the hammock. Here..." He moved to swing his legs over side, and stopped when Sean put a hand on his knee.

"It's a big hammock, Jesse. Nice and wide and long."

Jesse swallowed. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Looks like it's well made, too. Sturdy. Could hold two full-grown men—"

"Not if one of 'em's the Jolly Green—"

Sean pressed three fingers against Jesse's lips. "Don't," he said.

Jesse closed his eyes and let his mouth fall open, like it wanted to. Like it practically was made to do. Sean slipped his fingertips inside, sliding them against Jesse's tongue. He tasted salt.

Then Sean was shucking off his shorts, climbing aboard the hammock and straddling Jesse's hips. Jesse looked up at

him. Hard to make out his face in the shadows. Hard to see what he might be thinking. But through the skin of his hands where they coasted over his chest Jesse felt nothing but *good*. Nothing but *yes*. Clear as the stars, impossible to miss.

Sean leaned in and kissed him, and Jesse remembered everything he'd forced himself to forget. He ran his hands up Sean's arms, over his shoulders, and back down again. When the younger man pulled away, Jesse saw the flush on his cheeks, even in the dark. Saw how his cock was rising toward his flat belly, blushing as red as his face. Felt an answering pulse from his own dick.

Sean tore at the buttons on Jesse's cut-offs and yanked the denim off his hips, rising up to pull the shorts all the way off. He leaned in close and wrapped his big hand around both their cocks, and he stroked. Once, slow, root to tip, and Jesse heard himself groan. He bucked up into the touch, familiar but new.

Sean pushed against him, smearing his damp chest against Jesse's, sliding his mouth along Jesse's cheek, and Jesse had to push back. Like call and response, like the back and forth swing of the hammock. And every time Sean grazed the sweet spot under the head of his cock, Jesse shook, helpless and maybe about to have an aneurysm from the pressure building up inside. Like a bass note, thrumming deep against his nerves, and he could hear not a thing but Sean's *want* and *need* and *please* and *God, now, yes*.

He pressed his face into Sean's hair and whispered, "Easy, go easy."

"Can't. Don't want to. Been too damn long." Sean's drawl was back. He sounded seventeen and fresh outta Smithville, and that shouldn't have made Jesse's cock jerk like it did.

"Jesse, please. Fuck me."

Damned hard to hold back. Damned hard to do anything but give in to a request like that. "Yeah, I'll do that," Jesse said, "but slow. Real slow. Want you to feel it."

He felt Sean shudder against him. He tugged at his hair, making him lean up and look into his face. The kid was glassy-eyed, his mouth all slack and soft, and it was a near thing, but Jesse kept hold of his control.

"Can you reach the oil? The bottle, right there on the ground." He pointed, and Sean looked, and for a minute Jesse thought he'd dump them both out on the sand. But then Sean had the bottle in his hand and was smiling like he'd won the grand prize.

Jesse slicked up his fingers and reached around Sean's hip to work him open, reminding himself the whole time: *slow ... no, slower than that, you idiot...*

Sean rocked down onto his hand, mumbling some nonsense about nobody else and just Jesse. Just him.

"Nobody since you, Jess, I swear it."

Jesse froze for a second. Nobody since him? Okay, he could say the same thing, but he was living in a shack in fucking Lo de Marcos, not tending bar in the North Bay.

Screw it. He'd deal with what it meant later. He curled his fingers, and Sean's body bent like a bow. "Ah, *fuck*, Jesse."

Sean rose up over him, dislodging his fingers, and reached for the bottle of corn oil lying on the hammock next to Jesse's head. "Slow," he said.

Jesse nodded. "Slow."

He ran an oily hand up and down Jesse's cock, and Jesse clenched his jaw and held on. Then Sean pushed himself down, letting Jesse breach him. Letting him inside, a millimeter at a time, and it was almost too much, like he'd scraped Jesse's every nerve-ending raw. Jesse bit his lip to keep from groaning again as Sean settled down on him. "Slow," he said again, and Jesse was afraid to open his mouth to answer. Afraid what might come out. Something stupid, maybe. Something about how he can feel Sean *needing* him, and how he wanted Sean to need him, and maybe even—

Sean put a stop to all conscious thought—stupid or not—by flexing his hips and pushing up with his thighs, sliding and rocking and yes, *slow*, but *Goddamn* so fucking hot and good. Jesse reached for Sean's cock and Sean cried out, all sharp and painful, but Jesse wasn't fooled. He jacked him lazy and loose, his hand still slicked with oil. He worked his thumb against the head, played his fingers over the shaft. Watched as Sean broke above him, spurting and spilling up Jesse's chest to splash on his neck. Going tight like a seizure inside, closing down on Jesse, slurring over his cock so Jesse couldn't rock or thrust but just push and push, as far in as he could get and still farther, grinding and rubbing 'til he was crazy with it. Crazy and coming and maybe letting his mouth run a little bit. Telling Sean stuff he shouldn't.

"Jesse." Sean said it like he couldn't find him in the dark, even with his face buried in Jesse's neck and Jesse's dick still throbbing in his ass.

"Right here." He turned his face into Sean's hair and whispered, "I'm right here."

After, they lay quiet together in the hammock for all of maybe ten minutes before Sean said, "These people you work for—they don't care that you're a fugitive?"

Jesse sighed. Where the fuck had that come from? "They didn't ask. More interested in whether I can do the job, I guess."

He felt Sean nod against his shoulder. "Manuel says you're the real deal. He says you're a straight-up force of nature, and not to be messed with."

Jesse laughed. "How much tequila did he drink before he spouted that bullshit?"

Sean twisted around to look at him, making the hammock swing. "Seriously, dude. You're hardcore. Just like ... I dunno. Like Jesse James." And then he grinned, and Jesse knew he was being mocked.

He reached up and pushed Sean's head back down onto his shoulder. "Jesse James worked alone. I was thinking more like Butch and Sundance."

"But less with the dying in a hail of gunfire, and more with the fucking, right?"

Jesse smiled. "For a college boy, you catch on quick." He closed his eyes and let the splash of the waves and the rhythm of Sean's breathing pull him under.

Phaze Fantasies, Vol. III
by J Buchanan, Jade Falconer, Eliza Gayle

Behind the Beard

by Yeva Wiest

Phaze Fantasies, Vol. III
by J Buchanan, Jade Falconer, Eliza Gayle

Also by Yeva Wiest

Paybacks Are Hell

Chapter One

That day in court began much like any other. Byron had over-stepped his bounds with the landlady once again, but other than that no real harm had befallen, and none was expected. Yet, there was a faint chill in the air that gave rise to an ominous feeling of dread, sort of. Still, Byron hummed as he set about readying the courtroom for the day's block of cases.

First up was Mrs. Hargrave, a spitfire if there ever was one. She had a beef with her neighbor. Seemed the neighbor's cat, Tidbit, was always rooting through her garbage tin, and Mrs. Hargrave had seen fit to yank up the poor dear and strangle him half to death. The cat, though it had survived, was completely yonkers; he had taken to spitting at complete strangers and, worse yet, developed an intense liking to Mrs. Hargrave. The darling's desire for the missus knew no limits, and his constant, unwarranted, displays of affection against said missus' left leg, had been given notice by all in the neighborhood. Some said that it served her right, the old biddy, but others took the side of Mrs. Hargrave. It was, after all, the safest side to take.

Quite a cacophony of catcalls and hisses introduced the missus, and the Lord Barrister himself had to shut it down. Mrs. Hargrave's suit against her neighbor, Mrs. Fubby, lasted only minutes. The barrister was right pissed, and damned he should be, that the entire matter had come before his court. A

solicitor was summoned, and the whole affair was dispatched summarily.

His Lordship was full of fire and vigor that morning. Quite a figure he cut. Long and lean in his robes, which belied the splendid hulk of his body. Byron watched in rapt fascination, hoping for a glimpse of his Lord's firm thigh, thrust from the confines of his robes. On most men, the wig, so heavily powdered, looked an added oddity, but on Lord Richard Kincade it only added to his brutish charisma. Byron's longing for his Lord took on an added luster when he imagined the barrister unrobed but still adorned with the hairy *accoutrement* of his profession. Better still, Byron's erotic daydreams saw the barrister fettered hand and foot with chains, bound by the law, unleashed by desire.

Alas, vain hope he had of ever realizing the fulfillment of his fantasies, unless he could ... somehow ... enter into the realm of his Lord's private social circle. For it was rumored by Byron's servant, Geoffrey, that Lord Kincade liked men, pretty young men, and Byron was both. At barely twenty-five, he was still supple and fresh; older men enjoyed his company, his conversation, and, yes, his body. Byron, poor ambitious Byron, wanted the best, and the best was Lord Kincade.

As he stood stoically, waiting to call the next case, he idly stroked the grain of the rich, dark mahogany railing surrounding the well of the Court. He imagined secret trysts with 'Cade,' as he would no doubt refer to his Lordship. Kincade would bend to the unexpected dominance of his junior counsel and quail before his silken lash. Byron's touch would be masterful; his voice more commanding than that of

any judge's declaration. Richard Kincade's capitulation would be swift and poignant, his taking complete.

"Byron, boy, be quick about it," said Lord Kincade.

Be quick about what? Byron's secret musings were disturbed by the sudden hush in the courtroom. He looked askance at the barrister.

His Lordship's knowing glance bespoke his intuitive realization of Byron's state, and he said, "The brief, Byron. Pass me the brief." He indicated the pile of missives placed in order on a red baize desk to his right.

Byron stumbled in his haste to fetch said brief, and a spatter of laughter erupted from the middle row of juniors awaiting their turns. Dignity in tatters, Byron strained to put the incident behind him, forthwith concentrating on the cases at hand.

Hours passed, the day grew long, but still the Court droned on throughout the day. Finally, the judge, and he was a very old judge who resembled the very essence of the law itself, called an end to the day. Thankfully, Byron had only to sidle out the west doorway and down the middle corridor to the dresser's room at the end of the dusky hallway.

"Well, hello, young Byron. How are things with you then?" the robe master asked.

"Ah, well enough."

Byron thought the robe master ancient and decrepit, when in fact he was neither. The subtle staleness of the room and the dim of the gaslights cast a shadow over everything and increased the pallor of the robe master's skin. Combined they lent a somber air of antiquity.

Into the chamber burst his Lordship, flinging his robes willy-nilly about the place. Byron gazed at the dark complexion and the clear-cut jaw of the object of his affection. The racks of hooks across the back wall of the dressing room inspired Byron to imagine other racks and bilboes with their iron bars and sliding shackles—shackles with which he could ensnare the barrister. He entertained such wicked thoughts that nature saw fit to inspire more than just his mind, and Byron's manhood leapt to the occasion and strained against the confines of his breeches. Mortification swept through him. He felt his cheeks sting with the heat of his blush.

Seemingly oblivious to Byron's consternation, his Lordship Kincade called out in mock civility, "What ho, Byron! Where were you today? East of India or some such place? You certainly weren't in the Queen's Court. I take it you'll be here tomorrow."

The hot blush on Byron's cheeks spread downward to his neck and infused his chest.

"Yes, Lord Kincade," he mumbled.

The robe master snickered into his hand. Lord Kincade gave him a hard look and relented a bit on Byron. "Well never mind, young man. What's done is done." And with that, the barrister made his exit.

Relieved, Byron smiled at his back. The barrister whirled about just outside the open door, and called back. "Oh, and Mr. Jones..."

"Yes, my Lord," Byron answered.

"Mr. Jones, would you be so kind as to collect my briefs well in advance of the morrow's cases? And perhaps before next week, you might take the opportunity to glance at the first several lots to ensure they are appropriate for the Court of Queen's Bench to hear."

It was advice and admonishment blended into one facetious *bon mot*, and Byron took note of the barrister's evident attempt at joviality. With a backward wave, he was off.

"Confound him," said the robe master, shaking out the barrister's wig. "How that man loves to fob his slovenly ways off on me."

Byron grabbed at the wig, and a brief tussle ensued, as though each man sought to grasp at his Lordship's very head. With a laugh, the robe master relinquished the wig to Byron, and with a bow, he presented its skull-like case. Byron placed the wig into the box with all the pomp and ceremony due the placing of the Queen's crown. Both men sensed the hilarity of the moment, and Byron's desire dissipated.

* * * *

Lord Kincade strode through the Great Hall, across the vestibule, and down a wide flight of stone steps to exit the courthouse. On his way past the outer courtyard, he chanced to pass Fitzhugh Jameson, his favorite solicitor and friend.

"Dueced, if it isn't Hugh," he said and pounded him cheerily on the back.

Hugh was dressed in the fashion of the day—a great sloppy red checkered tie and a woolen frock coat. He was one

of those pale creatures whose fairness of complexion was handsomely set off by his dark wavy curls and hawkish features. In comparison, Kincade looked the gypsy, all dark eyes and heavy brows. Physically, they were apt opponents; both were full-chested and muscular.

Hugh twirled the slender end of his fine outline of a mustache. "Hey, old chap. Are you off?"

"Absolutely, I'm having dinner with the parents tonight; Felicity's, of course, so I must rush home to transform myself into the perfect escort." This was said in such a droll fashion, it caused Fitzhugh to wince.

"Ouch, my friend, it seems as though the beard has become a tiresome lot."

"No doubt ... but necessary. Felicity is a charming beard, but quarrelsome and spiteful at times. My ardor for *her* charms peaked and waned almost in the same hour."

They both laughed heartily but stopped short at the sight of young Byron hurrying across the boulevard toward home. His quick engaging smile scored his features, belying his normal intensity, and enhanced both his earnest brown eyes and dimpled cheeks. Laughter turned to blatant lust for both men; a shared glance between the two revealed their hunger.

Hugh growled low in his throat.

"Too right, my friend, he is a delicate morsel."

They laughed.

"And so much sweeter meat than fair Felicity."

With that, Hugh cuffed the barrister gently on the chin and dashed off onto the thoroughfare.

Richard Kincade cursed the day he had aligned himself with fair Felicity. Society demanded every man, especially every virile man, procure a wife, and the barrister had reluctantly noticed young Felicity. She possessed most, if not all, of the requirements for someone of his station: good lineage, an ample though not imposing bosom, pleasing features complete with slightly up-turned nose, and a reasonable yet unremarkable intelligence. Yes, Felicity Turner would make an adequate wife and an excellent beard. It was her penchant for pettiness he found the most annoying; however, he also found it impossible to ignore her wheedling. She whined about virtually everything. Lately, he had begun to imagine that the edge of her voice could slice a man's mind in twain.

Her most striking feature, her unruly mass of auburn tresses, should have given him fair warning of her disposition. Untamed and fiery like her hair, Felicity knew only one master's tongue, her father's; his was the only advice she took, and his the only admonition she heeded. Kincade's engagement to Felicity threatened to become the longest running courtship in English history, for he could not bear to marry her.

Richard Kincade's choice of Felicity for a beard and a bride was understandable given that he had once ruled this social elitism with a fine disregard for propriety. Only as he became older and began to practice his profession did he begin to rise above and beyond the idle chit-chat of his cronies; the law had been his teacher, and time his mentor. A beard provided him with cover for his inclinations. Discreet dalliances with

men hidden by outrageous romances with women had been the order of his early years, but now as he began to mature, he wanted more. He longed for a mate to share his life and his bed. Marriage to Felicity would provide the accoutrements of decency: a wife, heirs, a home and hearth, yet he knew that he would never be able to love her or any woman, for his desire burned, not for the lusty bosom of a woman, but for the fine smooth muscular chest of a man.

Tonight's dinner with the Turners, while unutterably boring, would provide ample cover for his later rendezvous with Hugh and their newest playmate. A trying evening tonight lent good excuse to his absence on the morrow. He would feign overwork and grave fatigue, thus creating his alibi for more enjoyable pursuits. Felicity, not the tender caring sort, would not relish acting the nurse, and so he would be free.

Byron, on the other hand, was an eager and handsome upstart with a demeanor that matched his quiet handsomeness. Surely no rouge, instead he exuded an innocent exuberance charmingly combined with a smoldering sensuality. Lord Kincade gave much more thought to said young Byron's physique than that of his fiancée, and his daydreams of seducing his junior counsel occupied far more of his energies than preparations for his upcoming but oft delayed nuptials.

In a fit of self pity, Kincade raced up the stairway of his business apartment, flung open his chamber door, and howled for his valet to join him. Godwin hurried to answer his

master's calling. "Godwin, where have you been?" Kincade demanded.

"Sir, I've just now heard you come in—not mere minutes ago."

He sighed deeply. "Too true, old man. Ever sorry," he threw over his shoulder. Thoughts of Byron had stiffened more than Kincade's resolve to capture the source of his erection.

Godwin sighed. As Kincade turned and dropped his trousers, Godwin noticed the source of his irritation—the burgeoning brawn of his cock straining to be set free.

"Master Cade, would you care to be relieved of tonight's burden, before your expected appointment?"

Kincade smiled in anticipation. No one was better at relieving his loaded body than Godwin. Slowly, the loyal servant released the drawstring of his master's undergarments and pulled free his pulsing cock. Godwin's thumb circled the flaming head and droplets of moisture beaded beneath his touch. His master bared his teeth in the grimace of a smile.

The servant's gentle hands stroked up and down the hard length of his shaft. One hand moved to grab the swollen sack beneath—and squeezed not altogether gently. Kincade moaned low in the back of his throat. He fumbled with the button on his servant's trousers in feverish anticipation of Godwin's charms. If possible, his servant's cock far out-measured his own ample length. Godwin's erection had caused more than one man to blanch in fearful excitement,

but Kincade was used to the ministrations of his faithful servant.

Kincade grabbed Godwin's throbbing, wet shaft and pulled it to rub against his own. Fours hands stroked up and down and created a pulse that had to be sated. Groans of desire echoed about the bed chamber, until Kincade could stand it no longer. He turned and bent across the bed, exposing his backside to the thrusting cock waiting to enter him. Godwin thumbed his moisture against the waiting hole, then eased the length and breadth of himself into his eager master. Over and over he plunged into Kincade, until he thought his cock would explode. Finally, with a sigh, he came, squirting his juices into his master's arse. Godwin tenderly pushed his master forward, until he was able to pull free. With a slight laugh, Kincade tumbled onto the bed. Godwin knelt between his legs and covered his quivering cock with his mouth. The musky smell of Cade appeared to intensify Godwin's appetite, and he hungrily sucked the throbbing piece of manhood until it burst forth into his throat. Kincade pulled his servant to him and kissed the warm cum from his lips.

"What would you be wearing tonight, sire, to pay your respects to Miss Turner?"

They began to laugh.

* * * *

Miss Felicity Turner was *not* in a laughing mood. Her own frock was inches too small. She complained bitterly to her maid, Portia, as though her added weight was the fault of her maid and not her continued consumption of creamy éclairs.

Wisely Portia kept her counsel, but oh, the thoughts that did run through the confines of her mind. Portia thought Miss Felicity the most vain, insipid and spiteful character to be found, and within the company of her peers, she said that very thing. Luckily for Portia, other maids had come and gone in the young missus service, and all had shared her worthy opinion.

"Portia," she demanded, "pull the dress in closer. I can wear this dress; I've just worn it last month. Lord Kincade loves periwinkle, and this is my only frock in that color."

Portia privately thought his Lordship was testing her Lady's increasing girth. Not once did she think that her missus might be pregnant, for servants in both households, Turner and Lovelace, knew of the master's affection for his valet. Godwin was not one to kiss and not tell. Soon her Ladyship might find herself wedded, but bets were on the table whether or not she would as quickly be bedded. Portia found the affair a great farce, because Miss Turner was a horrible harridan of a woman whilst still single, and who knew what estate marriage might bring. She shuddered to think.

Obediently she tugged and pulled on the silken fabric, and though it was soft, it was not pliant. Portia looked at the already full corset in front of her; its seams threatened to rupture at any moment, but it was the only means of contracting her Ladyship into the favored garment.

"Stand still, Miss Felicity. Better still, hang onto the bedposts, whilst I pull your corset a bit tighter."

"Tighter! I can scarcely breathe as it is."

"I don't know what else to do, miss," she said. "Perhaps the dress shrunk."

"What a suggestion!" Felicity exhaled sharply and looked with dread at the beautiful gown. Its bodice was a mass of brilliant white ruffles adorned with an extravagant bow, and its pretty blue skirt flowed straight into layer upon layer of more ruffles until its hem. The cut of the gown enhanced her breasts and caused her waist to appear insubstantial. Her pale skin and beautiful auburn hair, flowing down her back, made the dress a perfect foil for her attractions

"Pull then. Pull the corset tighter. I shall wear this gown, and I shall be the most beautiful woman at dinner this evening."

Behind her back, Portia crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue. Then she yanked the cords of the corset, causing her mistress to grit her teeth and hang on tighter to the bedpost. Finally, amidst much crying and screaming and after a raucous belch, Felicity was hooked and tied into her evening gown.

"How am I going to sit down for dinner, Portia?" she cried.

"Carefully, miss ... very carefully, or you'll wind up straining your gizzard."

"Do women *have* gizzards?" Felicity asked stupidly.

"Why of course, miss, it's right above your womb," said Portia knowledgeably, and with a wink she departed.

Outside of the young woman's room, Portia leaned against the wall and sighed. Forever doomed to act as servant to one so hopelessly stupid and so intolerably arrogant. How was she

to stand such a punishment? For punishment was how she viewed her situation—a punishment bereft of a crime.

* * * *

Inside her bedroom, Felicity spread wide her fingers and gazed at their plumb white nakedness. Surely, soon, Kincade would see fit to place his ring upon one, marking her as his. Everyone knew of their engagement. What was the reason for his delay? Closing her eyes tightly, she imagined the breadth of his chest pressed flat against her own, his hands splayed under her hips lifting her onto his waiting desire. Even though his kisses seemed almost insolent at times, she regarded them as the prelude to a more intense infatuation.

Surely, she thought, he cannot resist my charms. Yes, she was beautiful, but it was a fleeting mark soon forgotten when one became acquainted with her personality. Unlike most women of her day, Felicity's education had lacked the finer subtleties needed to refine her character. Her sullen stare when denied a simple treat had been Kincade's glimpse past the sweet beguiling persona she tried so hard to wear. Like a mask that did not fit, kindness and gentleness did not set well on her Ladyship's face.

Surprisingly, Felicity never lacked for social invitations and suitors. Her irascible nature was viewed in society as a mark of her station. Her more distasteful qualities lent her the distinction of superiority. Her social companions did not mind her snobberies and pretensions, for they, themselves, were snobbish pretentious boors. Most of her friends were shiftless louts who lived off inherited titles and gains. Notwithstanding

the few productive mortals in their crowd, for the most part, the new social milieu was not by nature fastidious or discerning. Kincade was quite a catch, and she had no intention of letting him off the hook.

She determined to press for a wedding date and the sooner this was accomplished the better. Perhaps after dinner, she could lure him into the garden and entice him with sweet kisses. She smiled. Kincade would not stand a chance. She always got what she wanted, and Felicity wanted Lord Kincade.

"Tonight," she vowed.

Chapter Two

Byron smoothed the brilliant white paint across the curve of his cheek. The makeup was lead-based and heavy, but polite society decreed that everyone of the genial sort, male and female alike, adorn themselves with paint and rouge. As he stroked the make-up across his face, Byron admired his high cheekbones and the delicate curve of his chin. An acrid taste filled his mouth from the fumes of the paint, but he scarcely noticed. With shaking hands, he carefully dabbed a bit of rouge into the hollow of his cheek, tracing the fine line and creating sensuous shadows. He bit his lip in concentration as he labored to create the portrait of a beautiful woman on the right side of his face.

He outlined half of his mouth in dark red and then filled in the outline with rouge and lipstick. His wayward eyebrow, he wet and smoothed into a gentle arc, and he carefully outlined his right eye with a stick of pure kohl. The transformation was astounding. When Byron turned his face to the right, he was a man, but turning his face to the left revealed a beautiful woman, Rebecca.

A knock on his chamber door interrupted Byron's musings. "A moment, please?" he asked quietly.

But his servant, Geoffrey, neither heard nor heeded his request. He simply proceeded into the room as he always had, carrying his master's freshly brushed cloak and polished shoes. He stopped his purposeful journey toward the

wardrobe, though, when he caught a glimpse of Byron's reflection in the mirror.

"Oh my, sir, I am sorry to have disturbed you," he said.

Byron was shaken and frantically searched the top of his bureau for a cloth to wipe away the traces of his clandestine self. "Never mind, Geoffrey, I was just playing about. I thought about trying a new disguise for this year's masquerade. No bother."

"Well, sir, if I might say so, I think you make a beautiful woman—much more so than many of the women I've seen of late."

Byron stilled his searching. Furtively, he reached a long finger to capture a tube of lipstick that threatened to roll into his powder horn.

"Geoffrey..." he began.

The reflected dichotomy of gender was never more genially displayed. Silently he touched his lips, his cheek, the long narrow ridge of his nose. His mind began to whirl faster and faster, his breath felt cold, and his face became a kaleidoscope—first man ... then woman. Byron then Rebecca. Byron/Rebecca. Byronrebecca. Byrebecon. They flashed before him in the mirror.

"Sir? Sir?" Geoffrey called out, but Byron could not hear him.

He staggered. He tried to hold himself aright by hanging onto the edge of the bureau drawer. Geoffrey ran and caught him. Byron took one last long agonized glance and fainted.

* * * *

Geoffrey easily lifted the fallen figure and carried him to his bed. He sat down heavily onto the counterpane and cradled Byron in his lap. Looking down on the delicate features of his master, Geoffrey felt a sharp pang of despair. This creature could never be. Beautiful, wonderful, Byron was no initiate into the world of men and sex, but he was made for far more than the occasional fling. Here was someone who could bring another man love and happiness, someone who should know the mystery of romance and fan the flames of a life-long desire.

As Geoffrey held the sleeping young man in his arms, he dared to dream of the possibility of finding a mate, a life's partner, for his young friend. If only he could somehow change the course of Byron's life, before he became just another jaded cynic—bereft of feelings, lost without true love.

* * * *

Cynical more than aptly described his Lordship Kincade as he sat beside his fiancé at dinner that night. Not one usually bothered by the more inane subjects of social chatter, Richard Kincade found himself chafing at the bit, as it were, longing to leave such dreadful company. He found Felicity shallow, almost idiotic, and her parents' pretensions were only outweighed by their hearty girth.

Fat and stupid, he thought as he looked at his potential family. *If I do marry her, my children will likely be as bothersome as their mother, for who will raise them except for her, and who will love them? Not me.*

He shuddered at the thought of his impending doom, saddled with a household of spoiled and mischievous red-headed brats. Surely no man should have to suffer such a punishment. So dire did his Lordship imagine his future that he failed to notice a small tuft of hair floating in his soup. As he morosely shoveled bite after bite of the dreadful onion concoction into his mouth, he inadvertently slurped the wad of hair into his mouth. Suddenly he realized his mistake. He knew the cook at Cradfield's to be a horror, but her notoriety would soon be justified.

"GADDD,ARRRGH," he cried and gagged.

Without thinking, he spat the hairy waste across the table, right onto the plate of his hostess. Her gluttonous shoveling was thus interrupted, and she choked on a piece of lamb. Coughing and spewing lamb hither and thus, her Lady screamed in horror at the hairball on her platter. This caused her husband to jump up in alarm, snorting through his large round nostrils the contents of his last generous swallow of port. Sitting beside Kincade, Felicity kept on eating as though nothing were amiss. He looked at her in disbelief.

"Woman, are you with us? Can you not see what is taking place?"

The servants, Portia and young Kevin, snickered. They locked eyes and silently laughed in glee. "Portia!" Her Ladyship appeared to have gleaned an idea that her servant was amused. "Clean this up at once," she screamed, as though the entire debacle was somehow Portia's fault.

"Yes, mum," said Portia.

She waved a weary hand at Kevin, indicating that he could begin to remove the plates. The *status quo* had been realigned with servants in their places and guests contrite.

"Madam, I beg your pardon," Kincade said stiffly to Mrs. Turner.

"Quite all right, Richard. Did you have something in your throat?"

"Yes, I did," he said and spared her the tongue-lashing she deserved. He knew even a fool such as Mrs. Turner could look at the dreadful morsel and realize that it was a ball of hair.

"Well," she said and spread her hands in a magnanimous gesture, "we all make our little *faux pas* from time to time." She smiled. "But, Richard, dear," she wagged a chubby ring-encrusted finger at him, "try not to have them at the table."

Her husband gave a loud, "Harrumph!" in agreement.

His Lordship Kincade had reached his final straw of tolerance. He flung his napkin on the table and announced his departure.

"Felicity," he stood and nodded to her, "dear host and hostess," this was tinged with more than just a hint of sarcasm, "regrettably I must be going." He stood to leave.

Such a breach of etiquette was more than Felicity could bear.

"Richard," she screeched. "You're leaving? Now?"

"Yes, I have had more than enough for one day," he said and headed for the door.

Mrs. Turner rushed after Richard, crying and wailing about her cook, but he was not to be deterred. Kincade felt as he imagined a chained dog must feel when loosed from his

fetters. He wanted to run from the Turner household and never look back. He could hear Felicity yowling in the background, which spurred him on to race into the great hall, snatch his coat from the waiting young Kevin, and burst through the door into the night.

As he climbed into his waiting coach, he recalled that none of the criminals brought before the Queen's Court that morning had reflected the uncouth nature of humanity quite as distinctly as the Turners. He sighed and decided to officially make his break with Miss Felicity Turner. The courtship had ended. Now he would have to find a new beard.

"Who will I choose?" he wondered aloud. He punched his fist into his palm. "If only I did not have to do this thing. If only I could choose a man ... I would choose ... Byron Jones," he said.

* * * *

Lord Kincade gave little thought to the livery boy riding on the rear of his coach. Gaston, Godwin's nephew, heard everything. As he hung tightly to holds on the rear of the coach, his body bounced up and down on the rear running board. The little boy did not think it strange that Lord Kincade would prefer to marry a man. He shrugged. All adults were strange to him, but women were especially weird. He reasoned that girls could not do fun things anyway, but boys could hunt with dogs and climb trees. He thought perhaps he might marry a boy when he grew up. Gaston nodded his head and smiled into the brisk night sky.

* * * *

"Gaston!" Portia cried. "Don't be spooning yer blackberry jam onto yer kedgerree."

The boy looked up sheepishly but continued to spread his jam over the flaky fish and rice dish. His uncles laughed.

"Why not? It makes it taste better."

"Jam makes everythin' taste better," Godwin whispered to Geoffrey.

Gaston took pleasure in his morning breakfasts with his elders. Early every morning—just past sun-up, come rain or shine, his uncles and his mum met for breakfast at the estate of one of their employers. They breakfasted on the unknown benevolence of their masters and, to truth, enjoyed it greatly.

"I heard the dinner had a bad end last night?" Geoffrey asked Portia.

"Oh that! Dreadful, it were. Loads of coughing and screaming. I think the courtship's done," she said and spooned each man a full plate of kedgerree. "Blood pudding, anyone?"

"No thankee," said Geoffrey, but Godwin held out his plate.

"It's good and hot this morning," she said.

"So what happened?" asked Godwin.

"Ack. That blasted Callie somehow got a bit of Whiskers' hair in the soup."

Both men stopped eating to peer at their plates. Portia noticed.

"Oh, it won't happen when I'm the cook. You can trust that."

They resumed eating. Godwin waved for her to continue with the story.

"Apparently, it was quite a hairball. It looked huge to me, when his Lordship gagged on the thing. He was coughing fit to split, and then he sort of hacked it over on the missus' plate."

"How'd that twit miss a hairball in her soup pan?" wondered Geoffrey.

"It was onion soup with a cheese and bread topping. The cat is white, so ... I don't know. It weren't me, you know."

"Then what happened?" Godwin asked.

Portia took off her apron and sat down at the table to eat. She propped both elbows on the table and continued her story as she sliced her sausage. She pointed at Godwin with a forkful of dripping blood pudding.

"Then the missus, she starts screeching and the next thing Kevin and I see is the master coughing his port right through them huge nostrils of his. It was a sight! Everything might have still worked out, but her Ladyship got all huffy and more or less accused Lord Kincade of bad manners."

"She didn't!" cried Godwin.

"She did, too!"

"That was when he left, I take it?" asked Geoffrey.

"Too right. He left, and right pissed off he were, too."

"Well, I for one am not sorry to see that fool's errand end. I can't imagine anything worse than having that horrible Felicity in my household," said Godwin.

"You don't want her in his bedroom." Geoffrey winked at Godwin.

"No, I don't."

"Trust me. You don't want that spiteful bitch anywhere," said Portia. "She's stupid and mean—and that's on her good days."

They laughed and continued eating.

Godwin paused for a moment to comment. "It's a pity, though. He'll have to find another one."

Portia nodded. Through her sausage she mumbled, "A man like himself has got to have a beard. Folks will talk. He's a good barrister."

"A decent employer, too," added Geoffrey.

"We know you think so," said Godwin, and they chuckled.

For a while only the sounds of cutlery against glass and the satisfied smacks of good eating were heard. Gaston gave a small belch, and the adults had a quiet laugh at his jam smeared face.

"I know who Lord Kincade should marry," a small voice ventured.

"Who's that, little pip?" asked Portia.

"He should marry Lord Byron Jones. He wants to. I heard him say so last night."

The adults sat in stunned silence looking at one another.

Casually, Godwin said, "What did you say, son?"

"I said," Gaston repeated, "Lord Kincade said that he wanted to marry Byron Jones. I heard him say it in the coach last night. He was really very loud. He booms when he talks."

"Boys can't marry boys..." Portia started, but stopped when she noticed Godwin put his finger to his lips and shake his head at her.

"Out of the mouths of babes..." laughed Geoffrey. He turned to Godwin. "Remember what I told you about young Byron on our walk over here?"

"Yes, brother dear, I do."

They looked at one another and smiled. Then, in accord, they turned their full attention on Portia.

"What?" she cried.

"Portia, me dearie, what is it that you are always saying about her Ladyship Felicity?" asked Godwin.

"Oh, that if I can make her look a lady, I could turn a silk purse into a sow's ear. That what you mean?"

"It just might work, brother," Geoffrey whispered.

"Why not?" Godwin's face had a wistful look. "Wouldn't it be grand—those two together ... married."

"But how can we do it?"

Godwin gestured at Portia. "With her help. She's been dressing ladies, since she were only a tiny chit herself. She knows all the ins and outs of fashion. I really think she could do it."

Godwin said to Portia, then, "Yes, that's exactly what we want you to do."

"Well, sort of. We purpose you transform a bloke into a belle," said Geoffrey.

The brothers started sputtering and laughing. Godwin slapped his thigh and winked at Geoffrey. "Actually, we want you to turn a bloke into a beard."

Portia collected their dishes. While she stacked them in the sink to wash, she listened, as the men and the boy continued

to plot out their grand manipulations for Lord Kincade and Master Jones.

"Couple of ole instigators you two are," she said. She poured the hot water from the kettle into the sink to wash up. The steam rose high fogging the window above the sink. "Going to land us all in hot water. No doubt about it." She shook her head and laughed. "What a great trick, though. Wouldn't it be? Those two together and right under all those high and mighty noses," she mused.

"So, Portia, darling..." Geoffrey came and put his arm around her.

"Yes, dear, dear, Portia," said Godwin and encircled her from the other side. "Won't you help out a pair of hopeless old romantics? We need you," he wheedled.

"Sure thing, gents," she said and handed Geoffrey the dish rag and Godwin a soapy plate. "Tit for tat."

She dried her hands and pulled Gaston away from the table and toward the door.

"Time for school, for you young man," she said. Portia paused at the kitchen door and shook her head. "And you two ... hopeless old romantics," she mimicked. "More like conniving old mollies."

Chapter Three

Hugh Percival hurried along Parkhurst, past the back gate of Cradfield's kitchen. Portia was pulling young Gaston through the gate just as Hugh passed by, and the delicious morning smells of blood kidneys and baked halibut assailed him. He sighed hungrily, for he had skipped his breakfast. He wanted to catch Byron before he rounded up the morning's office work and headed for court.

The main player for a special game shared by Lord Percival and Lord Kincade had taken ill, and the week's main entertainment would be thwarted if Hugh could not find another player. For some strange, but unremarkable, reason, he had thought of young Byron as a substitute for Edwin, their latest third. Byron, delicious Byron, would be perfect for the evening's selection. Convincing Kincade, though, that his assistant should partake of their pleasure would prove to be tricky, but Hugh felt confident of his ability to persuade.

A trolley laden with barrels of ale rounded the corner just as Hugh walked into the street. Young Gaston chose that moment to pull away from his mum and dash headlong into the middle of the road. The driver yelled lustily at the boy. Gaston froze. The horses were bearing down on him.

"Watch out, boy!" yelled Hugh.

He leapt the curb and raced to the child. He did not stop to get his bearings, but snatched up the boy and dove for the sidewalk. They landed in a mud puddle just shy of the walk.

Gaston started to cry.

"Ho there, young man. What's the pity?" Hugh jumped to his feet and made a fancy bow. His soft-leather boots were covered in mud from heel to mid-calf, where they met the top of his breeches. He grabbed Gaston under the shoulders and hoisted him high in the air further splattering himself with mud, but Hugh did not mind the mud; he was much too concerned for the small boy.

"Thank ye, sir," said Gaston solemnly. "You saved me life."

Hugh felt his face flush with embarrassment. "Oh, well. Not a problem, not a worry, I always say." He sat the boy down and brushed away some of the muck. He turned to Portia. "This yours?"

She ran and grabbed Gaston's hand. Her face was pale with shock, but her voice held firm when she scolded her son. "Yes, he is. Thank you." To Gaston she said, "You almost stopped my heart. What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking about much of anythin', Mum. I spotted that kitty over there." He pointed to a small calico kitten crouched against the battered red brick of the butcher's shop. "And I wanted to pet it before it ran away."

"See, Mum, the boy meant no harm; he just wanted to pet the kitty."

She smiled and nodded at Hugh. He was busy with his handkerchief, trying to mop through the sludge.

"Sir," she said. Her cheeks dimpled prettily. "If you'd like, we could return to the kitchen over yon and spiff you up a bit?"

"That would be splendid. I'll take you up on that." He shook his index finger at her. "But mind, you hang onto that

boy when we cross the road. Better still, I'll do it," he said and grabbed Gaston's hand.

They were crossing the street when Portia cried out to her son's back, "You really gave me a fright, boy. You could've been killed. I might want to be a grandma one day, you know. Ever think of that?"

Gaston's laugh rang out across the street. "Grandma! I ain't getting married, mother dearie; I'm going to be just like Lord Kincade and marry me a man."

Portia choked. "Gaston, shush up," she managed.

Hugh stopped dead on the street and swung around to face Portia. Her stricken face told tales. "What's this?"

"Git goin', master. Umm, I hear the trolley ... 'tis coming back."

"Yes, I hear." He turned and swung Gaston up into his arms and headed for the kitchen.

Just as he reached the door, it opened. Geoffrey and Godwin were leaving on their way to their respective households. Much to their surprise, Lord Percival stood waiting on the other side. Hugh smiled at the two gentlemen.

"Oh my goodness, my Lord. What happened to you?" asked Geoffrey.

"Nothing a hard brush and some soap and water won't cure."

He brushed past the servants into the kitchen, still carrying Gaston.

"He knows," Portia hissed. "Yon boy told him about the Lord barrister."

Godwin waved his hand. "He knew that, anyway. He's one, too."

Portia grabbed their hair. "No, you old fools, he told them that Lord Kincade was planning to marry a man."

"Ah, we can't have that. Can we?" asked Godwin. "Besides, his Lordship don't even know himself yet. Now does he?"

"Godwin," said Geoffrey, "perhaps we'd best help Master Hugh with his toiletries. What do you think?"

"Oh, too right, brother. He might need us both."

Portia looked at the two conniving codgers and smiled. "You two old farts. What're up to?"

"Nothing much," Godwin said innocently.

"Yea, nothing much," said Geoffrey. "We just need to help Lord Percival trim his mustache."

"Trim his mustache?" cried Portia. "He ain't got much of one now! What's to trim?"

"Oh, darling Portia, there's trimming and there's *trimming*."

* * * *

As Lord Percival was learning the intimate art of mustache trimming, Byron Jones was dashing off for another day at court. With briefs piled high he nimbly crossed the Great Hall across to a flight of marble steps which led to a large vestibule. A statue of Cerberus, the three-headed dog, guarded the entrance to the court. Byron stopped to touch a nose, as he did every time he entered the courtroom.

"Wish me luck today," he whispered to the statue.

He was right worried about the day's lineup of cases. Mrs. Hargrave and Mrs. Fubby were back on the docket—first. Their case, though, had moved into more than just a dispute between neighbors; it was war. Byron's stomach felt as though it had a gaping hole in its center. Lord Kincade would be furious with him, but this time he'd had no choice. Life and limbs were at stake.

As Byron entered the Queen's Court, he saw Lord Kincade talking to the judge. The judge looked as though he had swallowed something sour; his demeanor, though dignified, bespoke a sad and silent existence, almost suggesting that nothing in his life had ever turned out exactly the way he had wanted. Lord Kincade, on the other hand, seemed almost resplendent in his robes and alight from the joy of a fine morning's stroll to work.

Byron's dread made him imagine his future meager existence. Once the day's docket was announced, he was sure that his employ as premier junior council for his Lordship was over. While he sorted through the morning briefs, he could hear Mrs. Hargrave bawling in the anteroom. Spectators milled about in the stands waiting for the day to begin. An extraordinary amount had turned out to watch the proceedings between the two neighbor ladies.

Byron hurried over to warn his senior. Lord Kincade was laughing at something the judge had offered in his dour little voice. Byron was struck at how handsome the barrister was. His wig hung in great curls outlining his face. Its stern ambiguity was offset by his dark laughing eyes, and the deep cleft in his chin was emphasized by his wide smile. Byron's

breath caught in his throat at the fine figure of his dream lover. He longed to stroke the dimple in his Lordship's chin. Slowly. Byron shook his head trying desperately to dispel the images flooding his mind. He scowled angrily at the barrister.

Kincade seemed taken aback by the vehement expression on his junior's face.

"What's the matter, Byron?"

Byron shook his head again.

"Cat got your tongue?"

Byron almost laughed. Almost. His bright green eyes suddenly sparkled. "No, sir, but someone got the cat."

"What's that, Byron?" The barrister smiled down on his young protégée, yet his good humor was suddenly spoiled by the sight of the Mrs. Hargrave and Mrs. Fubby entering the courtroom.

Byron followed his gaze, and said, "Sir, we are representing Mrs. Fubby today. It appears that matters have gotten out of hand ... umm, rather Mrs. Fubby took part of Mrs. Hargrave's hand."

"She did what?"

"Sir, Mrs. Hargrave was further accosted by Tidbits..."

"Tidbits?" Lord Kincade interrupted. "Who or what is Tidbits, may I ask?"

"Tidbits is the cat. Rather, sir, he *was* the cat, until Mrs. Hargrave grabbed her meat cleaver and took off his head."

"She what?!"

Byron realized he had the barrister's full attention.

"She chopped off the poor cat's head. Then Mrs. Fubby took exception to the killing, so she grabbed the cleaver and

had a good one at Mrs. Hargrave. Witnesses say she swung for the missus' head, but she missed."

"Thank God for that."

"Aye, but then she grabbed Hargrave's hand and hacked off her thumb."

"Goodness," said Lord Kincade. "Byron, I've known those two women since I was a wee lad. They've bickered for years, but this ... this is enough."

"Yes, sir. Remember, we are defending Mrs. Fubby, sir."

Byron heard a soft hiss from his Lordship. "Byron, I am fully aware of which woman is our client."

Fully admonished, Byron mumbled, "Yes."

"Byron, I'm sorry. I'm just upset with those two old biddies."

Byron's surprise was evident.

"Would you please bring Mrs. Fubby's statement to me?"

Byron beat a hasty retreat to his bench for the brief. He could not believe it; Richard Kincade had apologized. Would wonders never cease?

The case brought by his Lordship was noteworthy, not only for its brevity but also for its lack of emotional appeal. As effectively as a chef paring a piece of ripe apple, Lord Kincade sliced to the truth of the matter and dispatched the case. The spectators had expected to hear heart-rending accounts from the warring parties. They had hoped to feel the loss along with Mrs. Fubby of her beloved Tidbits, and they had longed to shudder in horror at the grisly details of the mauling to Mrs. Hargrave's hand. Lord Kincade squelched such atrocious behavior by omitting a venue for personal testimony. Instead,

he interviewed the sole witness to the account, Mr. Harvey Sedgewrove, a retired professor of religious studies. Mr. Sedgewrove was as boring as he was tall, and he stood a good six foot four inches. A disappointing decorum overtook the audience of the Court.

The case was dispatched with Mrs. Fubby promising to pay the chirurgeon's bill for sewing the wound on Mrs. Hargrave's hand, and with Mrs. Hargrave swearing to keep her sharp utensils where they properly belonged, in the kitchen. The ladies felt deprived of their day in court; equally, though, both left with the satisfying opinion that she had been vindicated.

Once the matter of Tidbits and the Thumb, as the case came to be called, was finished, the rest of the day's briefs proved unremarkable, boring actually. Byron almost felt let down, but then he would recall Lord Kincade's apology and something deep within his heart would lighten. Byron's crush on Richard Kincade was beginning to take on the more mature nature of true love. With every passing day, he witnessed Kincade's attributes of integrity and wisdom, and those qualities became the example that Byron tried to emulate. Of course, Richard Kincade was a dashing handsome man, but Byron had begun to see past the genteel façade to the soul of the man beneath. Byron wanted this man, he needed him, and he aimed to have him.

Chapter Four

Hugh Percival, though no Macaroni, was surely foppish in his affectations. Nothing pleased him more than to be noticed; nothing, save, bringing joy to his childhood companion and first lover, Richard Kincade. Hugh had long since lost his grand attraction to Cade, but never would he lose the sense of debt he felt toward his dear friend. The idea of an alliance between Cade and young Byron amused him intensely. Perhaps for a brief moment, he felt a pang of jealousy. He was, after all, human, but the opportunity to thwart society and please his best friend outweighed any latent envy he might harbor.

His role in the affair would be as escort to the newly announced Rebecca Jones, Byron's fictitious cousin from the country. Newly arrived in town, she would need introduction, and who would know better how to make that overture into society than Lord Fitzhugh Percival. Convincing Byron to take part in this masquerade would not be easy, yet Hugh felt certain that it could be accomplished. Any fool could see that Byron was smitten with his Senior Counsel.

As Hugh walked down the avenue toward Byron's apartment, he was struck by the beauty of the bright blue sky. Clouds drifted, lazily painting swaths of white against the brilliant background. Flowers along the sidewalk seemed brighter, more vibrant. Love was in the air, and Hugh thought to himself, *what a wonderful day*. His step was jaunty. He felt as though he were on a special mission. Playing cupid to two

fine men who just needed the slightest of nudges to come together was a mission Hugh found irresistible.

He licked his right pinky finger and smoothed an errant eyebrow. Perfect. He leaned against a stile opposite Byron's apartment and waited for the young man to come along home from work. Shortly, he saw Byron strolling down the avenue with, of all people, Richard Kincade. *Damn*, he thought. *How do I get rid of Cade, so that I can have my talk with Byron?* Suddenly, Hugh had a wonderfully devious idea.

"Ah, Cade, Byron," shouted Hugh waving grandly.

Gleefully, he noted Kincade's discomfort at seeing him. *The old boy wants young Byron all to himself, does he ... well, he can just want a bit more. Nothing fans an attraction like the flames of jealousy. Perhaps Mr. Jones need not be so available.*

He strode forward and hooked his arm through Byron's. "Byron, you are just the man I wanted to see." He leaned close to Byron's ear. "I have a slight proposition to put to you ... if I may?"

Kincade looked bored. Hugh tried harder.

"I wondered, Mr. Jones, if you are otherwise engaged this evening. If not," he arched an eyebrow flirtatiously and smiled a dainty coy smile, "I wondered if you might join me for an evening's enjoyment." He touched his hands together on his chest and said in mock sadness, "I've unfortunately been stood up, and I had such an exciting evening planned, too."

* * * *

Anger flared so hot and quickly in Kincade that he was surprised by his own vehement reaction. Not for a moment did he stop to wonder at his anger. He had been a party to Hugh's evening plans with a virile rascal named Edwin. Sharing the sexually potent young Edwin was one thing, but the thought of sharing Byron incensed him.

Kincade thought back to his and Hugh's latest escapade with Edwin. Edwin had worn the hood. Made of ebony velvet, the hood covered his head completely. The thing transformed Edwin, with his slightly stodgy accountant's demeanor, into a debonair creature full of mystery and power. Kincade could see the scene unfold in his mind's eye.

Tall and powerfully built, the hooded man had towered over Kincade and Hugh as they knelt at his soft black leather boots. His breeches had been tight, too tight, outlining his thigh muscles and the throbbing bulge of his crotch. Unbuttoned, the soft velvet of his waistcoat revealed Edwin's gleaming pectoral muscles. As if to accentuate his brute force, his arms flexed with each snap of his riding crop against his boot tops. The crack of the small whip had reverberated around the tight confines of the cellar room.

Kincade looked at Hugh and recalled his submissive state only a week earlier. Hugh had turned his backside to the touch of Edwin's sharp lashes, which had been administered with growing intensity. He remembered his own excitement as he had watched Hugh's whipping. When the three had finally coupled, though, it was he, Kincade, who had stood in final dominance.

The ultimate moment for Kincade had come when he had held tight the black-hooded head of his tormentor. After succumbing to Kincade's passionate embrace, Edwin had knelt in front of him to suckle his bursting cock. Watching his dick slide in and out of the black velvet hole, feeling the soft crush of the hood's fabric as he guided Edwin's head, and smelling the hot frenzy of lust and sexual release had built Kincade's excitement to a fever pitch. His heat had increased greatly when Hugh had joined the duo. Caressing Kincade from behind, Hugh had entered into the sexual fray, bringing Cade the most complete of satisfactions.

The very thought of Byron playing the same role as Edwin, of sharing whatever delights he had to offer, created a pounding in Kincade's brain that threatened to break through his skull. Anger, white hot and blazing, exploded inside him. At that moment, he hated Hugh with every fiber of his being. The change from friend to fiend was almost immediate in his estimation. *How dare Hugh suggest such a thing!*

"Cade, what do you think of my idea?" asked Hugh. He tugged gently on Kincade's sleeve.

Roughly, Kincade pulled his sleeve from Hugh's grasp. With tight lips and an evident scowl, he said, "I don't think much of it, actually. Mr. Jones has a busy day ahead of him tomorrow, so perhaps he should go ahead home and have an early night."

Hugh smiled. "Oh, what's the harm ... just a few drinks ... maybe get to know one another better. You wouldn't want to join us, I take it?"

"As a matter of fact, no, I do not want to join you for drinks." Kincade turned to Byron. "I repeat what I said earlier. Have an early night. You have an incredibly hectic day tomorrow, and I wouldn't want you to be too tired to properly accomplish your tasks."

Byron's ire rose. "I am not so *old* as to tire easily, my Lord."

He bowed slightly to Lord Kincade, then said to Hugh, "If that offer of a drink is still on, I would be very pleased to accompany you, sir." He pointed to his apartment. "I would like to freshen up just a bit, though, before I join you." He grabbed the porch railing on the front of the apartment house and easily swung over it.

"Lord Kincade, sir, I will present myself to you on the morrow. Good day."

When he had gone, Kincade took a blow at Hugh. Hugh ducked and laughed.

"What? Are you angry? Just because you choose to let the chit go loose, does not mean that I will."

"Hugh, I'm warning you. This man is different; he's not some toy for you to play with and then discard."

"Who says that I'm planning to drop him?" He glanced wistfully at Byron's door. "I might decide to keep this one. We're drawing nigh to the moment, when we should start thinking about our old age."

"*Old age!* Are you daft, man? I'm not getting old; besides. that's what you take a wife for, old age. Indeed. One doesn't get a boyfriend for old age," he declared.

Byron hooted as he came out on the porch of his apartment. They turned to look. Together they admired the fit young man in front of them. He was handsome in a dreamy clean-cut way. Both men sighed. Hugh laughed, and Kincade's fury returned.

"Off with you then, the two of you. I don't have time for this nonsense," he said and left, striding angrily down the sidewalk.

* * * *

Byron joined Hugh on the walk. He looked fresh and attractive. Hugh put his arm around the young man and steered him in the direction of the latest pub. Byron had combed his hair back into a sleek ponytail revealing his fine-looking features. He twirled about in front of Lord Percival.

"How do you like my newest redingote?" he asked, flaring out the frock coat as he turned around.

"It's lovely, Byron. I'll be the envy of every molly in London."

Byron laughed and said, "Well every one but Lord Kincade. He doesn't seem to want my social company."

"Oh, don't be too sure of that, young man." Hugh smiled knowingly. "Don't be too sure of that, at all. I want to offer you an interesting proposition—one I think you will find irresistible."

* * * *

Felicity Turner was fit to be tied. At first, Richard Kincade had pursued her relentlessly, but now ... nothing. Surely he

wasn't dropping her over something as frivolous as a bit of hair in his soup. They were a couple; all of society knew that. How could he just abandon her? The morrow's eve was the first dance of the new season. Kincade had promised to take her, and he would. She knew it. He was a man of his word. She told herself that she was just imagining his aloof manner. She reasoned that perhaps, just perhaps, his ardor had cooled a little. It would be no great thing to fan his flames just a bit.

She studied her reflection in the glass panes of her balcony door. She ignored the deep brooding look on her face, concentrating instead on her slim figure and high-thrusting breasts. She cupped the underside of her breasts and twisted back and forth in front of the glass, admiring her reflection.

"Wait until he sees me in my new dress," she said.

* * * *

The bedroom door opened quietly. Portia entered, bringing a cup of steaming milk and a cold biscuit for Felicity. Ruefully, she watched the young girl prancing about in front of the mirror with her hands lifting up her bosom.

She would need more than that to lift for Lord Kincade to notice her. Portia stifled a nervous giggle. Taking a deep breath to steady herself, Portia said, "Miss, here is your milk."

"Oh, bother! Just put it down over there somewhere, girl."

Portia was several years older than Felicity, so she was hardly a girl.

"Yes, miss. By the by, miss, I won't be available tomorrow. Cindy will attend to you."

Felicity stopped swaying and turned to glare at her maid.

"What? No! I don't think so. You will be here first thing in the morning as usual, and you will remain here all day. I have to be dressed for an outing to the courtiers, and later, I must be dressed for the dance."

"I'm dreadfully sorry, miss, but I must be off," Portia said somewhat desperately. She hated confrontation with anyone, but most especially with Felicity Turner. The young miss had an ugly streak in her, and she felt no compunction in letting her anger take over. Portia, however, stood her ground, even though it felt a weak position to take. She said, "I'm helping out my uncle tomorrow ... Uncle Geoffrey. He works for young master Byron Jones. Mr. Jones' cousin, Rebecca, is coming for a brief visit. There is no one to attend to her."

Felicity brushed Portia's excuse away, with a wave of her hand. "Send Cindy," she demanded. "I need you." Felicity stomped over to her dressing table and perched on the stool in front of it. She tasted her milk. Steam drifted from the top of the cup. "This milk is too cold," she declared.

"Too cold? But, miss..."

"I said that it is too cold." Felicity's hateful glare dared Portia to contradict her.

"Yes, miss. I'll fetch another."

Inside Portia was as steaming hot as the refused cup of milk, but she schooled her face into a polite, subservient mask. She bowed slightly to Felicity and slowly gathered up the dishes. Portia realized that she had been too straightforward with her mistress. She decided to try a different tactic.

"I'll just be a moment. I thought ... I heard..." She left her thought hanging and turned to the door. "Oh, never mind."

"Wait," Felicity called. Ever the curious minx, she counted on Portia for bits and pieces of household gossip. "What did you hear?"

Portia opened the door slightly as though to check the hallway for gossip mongers. She turned to her mistress with a knowing look and a brazen little smile.

"Well, I heard this from the cook last night, who heard it from the cook at Lord Percival's that Miss Jones is coming to town to find a husband. I had thought I would size up the competition and see what she is about. But if you need me here, then I can just send Cindy over to Mr. Jones. Though, we all know that Cindy doesn't always pay attention to the details ... not that you'd be wanting any details ... still, I thought it might be nice to take a look. Especially after what happened with the soup and all."

"Hand me that milk, Portia. I'll just take a sip of it. Perhaps, it won't be too awful."

No, not too awful, Portia thought. *What a cow.*

She brought the cup and biscuit back to Felicity. Felicity beckoned for her to continue.

"Now you know this is all just rumors..."

Felicity nodded and said, "What else?"

"Mind you, the cook at Lord Percival's does seem to know things pretty straight. She said that his Lord was jealous of you and planned to use Miss Jones as a wedge between you and Mr. Kincade."

"A wedge?"

"Yes, miss, a wedge." She leaned in close to her mistress. "I remember when yon Fitzhugh Percival was just a child." She crossed her fingers behind her back, as she glibly lied away. "He always wanted to keep Richard Kincade all to himself. He drove off every friend the poor child had."

"Really?" Felicity asked.

Portia nodded solemnly.

"I think he means to break the two of you apart." Her words came faster and more insistent. "I think he means to use Miss Jones as a device to end your engagement. He has always been jealous of you. I had planned to act as maid to Miss Jones, and maybe see what the woman is like. I could find out where she stands in all of this."

"Of course, Portia, of course, you must go and help your uncle. How silly of me to keep you here, when Cindy can easily help me. In fact, politeness deems I make you go to help this newcomer into our midst." She pointed and looked sternly at Portia. "You must be efficient and quiet and help Miss Jones in any way you possibly can."

"Yes, miss, I will. Are you finished with your biscuit?"

Felicity looked at her plate in amazement. "Oh, my. How did I finish so quickly?"

Portia knew how. Felicity gobbled up anything and everything put in front of her.

Chapter Five

Named for the great goddess Athena, Hugh's youngest sister possessed none of that worshipful lady's finer points of persuasion; instead, most often anything she was apt to say was more open to cavil than serious consideration. However suspect they were, Athena's sensibilities lent themselves to sympathize with her brother and become a willing party in his act of divine deception and to aid his efforts in the transformation of Byron. Besides, any shopping expedition with Hugh was bound to be fruitful for Athena as well. He could never deny his baby sister anything she desired.

"The shoes might be a problem." That was Athena's entire objection to the entire plan. "He has deuced long feet. Narrow ones, too." She pursed her lips in concentration. "If we have Monsieur LeBlanc fashion the shoes to match the dress, we might be able to get by." She sketched a rough drawing of Indian-style slippers. "Perhaps we could go with an Eastern style. What do you think?"

"I don't know. Wouldn't he stand out?" Hugh asked.

"Well, we don't exactly want him to blend in," she laughed. "But I see what you mean. Too bad the sack dress is out of fashion."

"Sack dress? That sounds horrid. I'm glad it is."

"It would have solved some basic problems, but I for one am glad that styles change. What a time we would have if *les merveilleuses* were still in fashion."

"Les what?"

"*Les merveilleuses*, you remember those narrow see-through shifts we saw in Paris last summer?"

"Dear, yes. How would we ever hide his ... you know?"

Athena snickered. "The jig would certainly finish sooner than later, no doubt."

Hugh suddenly had an image of Byron's naked form showing through the sheer fabric favored in gay Paris. What a sight! "You are wicked," he said.

"That may be so, brother dear, but I'm not a spendthrift. Let's go shopping. This should be fun."

Athena proved to be an able shopper. She haggled over prices as though the money was her own, and yet she bought only the finest of materials. In addition to the night's party dress, she purchased two colorful banyans for Byron to have for daily wear around the house. One was a dark gold with vermillion Chinese characters printed on it, and the other was a beautiful sea-blue with black dragons overlaid on the sleeves. Both were elegant and androgynous.

The shoes were a problem. No one wanted to make them up without the rightful wearer present, and nothing Athena said would compel any cobbler to relent. Finally, she settled on a pair of stocked mules made with fine buff leather and adorned with brilliant jewels in turquoise, backed with a magnificent peacock feather on each shoe. The large feather helped to hide the size of the slipper.

After much deliberation, Athena also purchased a gorgeous empire dress of silver with a soft turquoise cape. The overall effect was beguiling but simple. She chose Byron's wig with the same economy of spirit; it was beautiful and elaborate,

but not pretentious in its height or design. Athena's friend, Diana, often wore a wig complete with a miniature carriage made of gold wire. Byron's wig possessed two accoutrements, a few jeweled sticks and several ribbons of silver. She hoped that Portia would be able to style the hairpiece to suit Byron.

Athena browsed through an assortment of hoops and paniers while she waited for her purchases to be packaged. A new split panier was available.

"I wonder, she mused holding up the garment, "whether or not it would be worth the trouble caused by fastening it to have the added mobility of a split panel?"

Hugh was playing with a false rump. He had just tied the thing around his waist and was modeling it with a great deal of vulgar fun, when the door of Monsieur LeBlanc's shop opened. Felicity Turner, followed closely by her mother, swept into the shop as though they were the princess and Queen Mother. Felicity seemed to have trouble deciding whether or not to notice Hugh, so he did the chivalrous thing and made himself noticed.

Galloping over to her while holding tightly to the rump, he bowed low and said, "My dear Felicity. Mrs. Turner. I'm charmed to be sure."

"Hugh," Felicity said somewhat stiffly

Hugh was staring in fascination at a black velvet mole on Felicity's cheek. He almost reached to touch it, but Athena coughed loudly to divert his attention. It worked. He glanced at her; she shook her head no. Instead he pointed at the large affectation and asked, "Felicity, is that a mole? Are you trying to hide a pox?"

Felicity gasped, "Yes ... I mean no. I'm not hiding anything."

Athena ducked behind the rack of hoops and closed her eyes in prayer. "Don't let him do it. Please, God, please don't let him do it."

She could not bring herself to look. Finally, she peeked around the side of the large wooden rack just in time to see Hugh peel the mole from the young woman's cheek.

"You've no pox mark! You don't need this," he shouted.

Felicity grabbed her cheek as though he had ripped off an actual mole. "Hugh, what are you doing?"

"Aiding and abetting the vain," he laughed. "I have just the place for this," he said and held up the mole. He turned and slapped it on the fake posterior. "Here, on my bum." He shook it at Felicity.

Mrs. Turner said, "I declare, Hugh, your sense of humor *is* atrocious."

Felicity grabbed her mother's arm and headed for the shop door.

"Mother, why didn't you chastise him? Something?"

"Shush, darling. He's the cream of society, and he may be a little eccentric, but one must always remember his station," she whispered loudly to her daughter.

As the door closed behind them, he shouted to his sister, "Did you hear that, Athena? I'm eccentric." He sounded hurt.

"Hugh, you are too incorrigible. Take off that vile thing; our packages are ready."

He stroked the huge backside. "Can't I keep it? I've come to like it."

"No. Mother would die. Take it off."

Finally, he was persuaded. He pulled the velvet mole from the rump and slapped it on his right cheek. Reluctantly he replaced the padded accessory back in its box.

Outside the shop on the street side, Hugh turned to Athena and asked anxiously, "Do you think I'm eccentric?"

"No, silly."

"I think Felicity's eccentric. She wears rouge on the tip of her nose ... makes her look like a clown."

Athena laughed and hugged him fiercely to her. "Brother, if you're eccentric, I wish all the world were odd."

She looked at the vibrant blush of his floppy bow tie and the black and white stripes of his pants. His hairstyle looked tousled like the creature it was named for, the *herisson*, the hedgehog.

Of course you're not eccentric; you're interesting."

"Ooo! Interesting." He struck an effeminate pose. "That's much better. Don't you think?"

* * * *

For the first time in his life, Byron felt whole—fully complete. His heart soared, took flight; it beat so hard that he could scarcely breathe. The looking glass reflected the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and it was him. Carefully he touched her face, the face of Rebecca, the woman he had always dreamt of being. While across the city cooks and maids transformed the Hamilton grounds into a showcase worthy of the season's premier palace ball, in the confines of Fitzhugh Percival's manor house another transformation had

taken place. The metamorphosis of Byron Jones was almost complete.

"Mistress Becca, would you stand please, for just a moment, and let me fasten your stays?" asked Portia.

Byron walked over and grabbed the ornately carved bed post. He had watched his sister cling to hers many times, while her stays were being laced. He inhaled deeply and awaited his initiation into womanhood.

Will this hurt? What will it be like to be bound in this get-up? He wondered.

Portia laughed when she witnessed his evident fright.

"Compared to lacing up Felicity Turner, you should be easy. Your waist is slim, and you really don't need the corset to enhance it. It's your bosom. The tighter I can lace the corset the more it will look like you have a bust."

The tighter Portia pulled the strings, the more Becca's chest swelled. His pectoral muscles were well defined for a young man which helped in their deception. Once the corset was in place, the bodice of Rebecca's dress revealed a slight but definite hint of breast, enough to be enticing and not enough to appear vulgar. Perfect.

Portia lifted the shimmering silver gown carefully over his head. "Be careful not to get any of your makeup on the dress. The lead in the makeup won't react kindly with the metal in the silver threads, sir," she said. "You don't want that sort of a chemical reaction."

He laughed. "You're right, I don't."

Gingerly, he held the fabric away from his body, until the skirt settled around his waist.

"There, now," said Portia. She pulled the skirt down over his hips, then cinched in the lowest hook. The entire back of the gown was fastened together with row upon row of hooks and eyes.

"Do you almost have it?"

"Be patient, lovie." Portia patted his backside. "It takes time and patience to be a woman. You can't just throw on your knickers and skirt and go gallivanting all over the place. Creating a beautiful woman is hard work, you know, and with you," she pointed out, "we ain't exactly starting with the right package."

"I know, I know. I'm just excited." He clapped his hands.

She led him over to the dressing table's chair. "I know you are." To protect his gown from the pomatum and powder, Portia laid a thin towel around his neck and over his shoulders. While she continued to rearrange the hairpiece, Byron played with the various creams and lotions on the vanity table. He took a quick whiff of the pomatum grease that Portia had used to hold the white powder for his hair. It stank something horrible.

"Eck!" he cried. "It reeks. Will I smell like this wax?"

Portia grabbed his shoulders and forced him to be still. "Would you stop moving? I'll soon have this from your head to your foot."

He realized then that she was nervous. He heard the fear in her voice. *What does she have to fear?* he thought. *I'm the one going to the ball as a female. What could happen to her?* It took a moment for him to move past his feelings for himself and to see that Portia's role in this was precarious indeed. He

might be in danger of exposure, t'was true, but the servants were perhaps at a far greater risk. Society would slap *his* hands, but theirs they might very well brand.

"I'm sorry, dear Portia," he said. "I'll be a good boy—girl."

"Ock, dear, you'd better be," she said. "Now bend over slightly and let me powder that wig." Carefully she placed the paper horn over his face and blew the white powder onto the wig. As the bellows wheezed and puffed, she added, "and whatever ye do, don't stand too near Mrs. Parker's granddaughter, Virginia. She's worn her wig so long now it's infested."

"What?!" His voice was muffled from the horn.

"She's got fleas!"

Byron laughed, until he started coughing into the powder horn. Portia patted his back briefly but continued pumping the talc over his hair.

"It ain't no joke, if you get those lice and fleas in your head. So, mind you listen to me," she admonished.

She pulled the horn away from his face and began dabbing at the edges of his make-up. Her voice had been stern, but the merry sparkle in her eyes begged him join in the fun.

"Well, Miss Portia, I'm mighty glad, then, that I want a man for my companion and not a society bride. I'm not sure that I'm cut out to pick off fleas, and as far as I know, none of my male companions have them."

"Don't be too sure of that, either," she said. "Some of society ain't all that persnickety about their toilet."

"I'm sure." His voice became droll. "Do you think I can do it—become the newest debutante? Or will I become the latest molly and the butt of everyone's jokes?"

"Truthfully, I think you can do this. And if it is love you're after, it is worth the risk. True love, *Miss Rrree-becca*, is hard to come by. Do you really love Lord Kincade? Or is this just some new lark to embark on?"

Rebecca Jones, beautiful yet complicated, grabbed Portia's hands and held them tightly. "I love him. I do. He's all I think about." Rebecca/Byron poured out his feelings to the maid. "I wonder how he looks in the morning before his shave. I want to see him close his eyes in slumber at night. I daydream about him all of the time. When he speaks to me, I cannot breathe. I love the way he smells, even. Isn't that love?" she asked. "I just hope that he fall in love with *me*, Portia. I couldn't bear it, if he never loved me."

"Don't worry, dearie; he'll love you." Portia turned Rebecca toward the mirror stand. "Look."

They looked at the beautiful reflection. Portia held up the turquoise cape. Gently she eased it up over the puffed silver sleeves of Rebecca's gown. The soft velvet cape against the foil silver gave Becca an ethereal grace. She tucked a finger under Becca's chin and said, "Look, miss. Who could resist you?"

Hot sweet tears came into Rebecca's eyes. So much was at stake—to be Lord Kincade's beard and his man would be the epitome of deception and the realization of desire.

* * * *

Never was a man so grateful to arrive at his destination than Richard Kincade was to disembark his carriage at the ball. As Felicity had expected, Kincade had kept his word and escorted her to the palace garden, but his manner was exasperated, his speech clipped, and his patience thin. More than obvious was his displeasure, so obvious in fact, that she had begun to wish he were more the cad and perhaps had forgotten the conventions of polite behavior. As soon as the carriage stopped, he jimmied the door and bolted from the confines of the buggy. Scarce chance he had of knowing that his life was about to change forever.

With undue haste he pulled Miss Turner from the carriage and marched her into the blue salon of the Hamilton estate. Snippets of conversation and random chords of music wafted in through the open doorways leading out into the garden. Grand candelabras bearing flaming tapers were aligned along the marble banisters surrounding the porch. Such a hazard did they pose that the youngest of servants was present with the sole purpose of making certain that none toppled onto either the porch or a guest. The latter proved far harder to guard than did the former, especially after several glasses of rum punch had been imbibed.

Kincade wondered morosely through the throng of guests, pulling Felicity along behind him and looking for any means of extradition from her unceasing barrage of laments. *Dear heavens above!* he thought. *Will this woman never shut up?*

* * * *

Geoffrey and Godwin, waiting in the alcove just off the south porch, noticed his discomfiture and decided to extricate Lord Kincade from his predicament. Of course, their motives weren't entirely altruistic; they needed Kincade alone to orchestrate their grand scheme.

"What say you, brother dear," asked Godwin, "should we do with yon harridan, Miss Felicity?"

"Ock, you mean how do we get rid of the bitch?"

Godwin laughed. "Exactly."

"I think Lord Kincade should have just a few more moments of her splendid company so as to better appreciate our substitute, young Byron."

"No, brother," he corrected, "young Rebecca."

"Too right, I forget myself. Of course, he should find in Rebecca all of the attributes one should be allowed to expect from a young lady, and how better to value Rebecca than to be subjected to Felicity."

They shared a quiet laugh.

* * * *

So, for a bit, Lord Kincade was left to suffer, and suffer he did. As the evening moved closer to the dinner gong, he moved even closer to gagging on the insufferable attitude of his companion. Felicity's mood darkened with the gloaming. Never a witty or bright person to begin with, she became even duller as the day waned. As they meandered through the crowd, Kincade was able to maintain a somewhat obligatory polite façade and speak of banal subjects and laugh at all the right places. Inside, a feeling had begun to grow of

expectation, and he could not understand or explain its origin. How could he feel hope in the midst of such hopeless companionship?

Finally, he realized the source of his anticipation. He was hoping to see Byron Jones. Mentally he castigated himself for harboring such vain wishes, yet he couldn't seem to help himself. He wanted to see Byron more than anything. He imagined Byron's gentle smile, his capricious laugh, the way his eyebrow arched when he asked a question. Kincade suffused with tenderness. Inadvertently he glanced down at Felicity, but his mind was solely on Byron.

* * * *

Thus was the scene when Byron as Rebecca entered the garden courtyard. Byron had hoped, somehow, to meet with Kincade; but seeing Richard with Felicity and seeing his look of seeming devotion for her broke his heart. Oh the pain—such physical pain that Rebecca cried aloud at its brutality. Tears flooded his eyes, and blindly he turned to Hugh.

"Oh, dear Hugh," he sobbed in despair. "How shall I bear it?"

"Never fear, sweetheart, he's not losing his heart to that horrible chit. Look." He pointed at the couple. "He sees her for what she is."

"So, what was that look?" asked Byron.

Hugh stroked his tiny mustache thoughtfully and said, "Perhaps his mind was on more masculine pursuits. Come with me. It's high time you were introduced to Lord Richard Kincade."

Byron hung back hesitantly. "What if he doesn't like me? Or, worse yet, what if he sees through this charade?"

"Would you leave the worrying to me?" Hugh shook his head. "I have everything under control."

* * * *

Master Fitzhugh Percival might have thought himself the conductor of the night's sonata, but in reality, Godwin, Geoffrey and Portia were in charge of the night's jig and waltz. They planned to put their scheme into action during the dinner hour, and so by instigating the help of young Gaston, they would manage to bring to ruin Miss Felicity's aspirations and to bring to fruition those of young Rebecca.

Lurking in the shadows, they watched the introduction of Lord Kincade and Miss Rebecca Jones and conspired how best to insure a match between the two. Perhaps, the terrible Miss Turner might meet with some unfortunate incident, so the servants devised their dastardly plot—rather too cheerfully Portia decided later, but at the time, it was great devilish fun.

Chapter Six

With a graceful flourish, Rebecca Jones flipped open her mother-of-pearl handled fan, which depicted the most charming of creatures: a unicorn cavorting in a garden to the seductive tunes of Pan. Hugh drew her near to her side, as they made their way across the crowded grounds to a semi-circle of Hugh's friends, who hovered near a punchbowl full of floating fruit and a tart libation. This was no weak offering to the gods, but instead it was a heavy hearty brew meant to rouse the partygoers and to insure the party's success. The ball would be remembered as a jolly good time simply because of the punch.

Kincade stood at the core of the merrymakers cutting some joke, when he happened to look up and see Rebecca.

Their eyes locked for but a brief moment, but in that moment Kincade felt the strangest feeling wash over him. Surely, he had never met this exotic creature, and yet she seemed so familiar to him. It was as though he had known her intimately for years. A heated flush rose from his throat into his cheeks, when he realized that he was staring at her. *Who is this woman?* he wondered. *I feel as though I could look into her very soul and find myself there. What is it about her? It is ... déjà vu. That's the word!*

Now, and most unusually, Kincade found himself with the stirrings of desire—for a woman! Never before had any woman managed to entice his Lordship, but this woman made him feel things he could not explain. Beside him, Felicity gave

a slight cough, jarring him back to the moment, for he was in the most delightful daydream.

"Hugh," she said a mite too sweetly, "please do introduce us to your friend. I presume she is dear Byron's cousin."

"Oh yes, yes indeed," blustered Hugh. "Miss Rebecca Jones, I would like for you to meet his Lordship Richard Kincade and his intended, Miss Felicity Turner." He turned with a slight bow to the couple, and said, "Richard, Felicity, please meet my newest dear friend, Miss Rebecca Jones."

That explains it, thought Kincade. *She is Byron's cousin. My God, no wonder she seems so familiar. She has his eyes.* Aloud he said, "Wonder of wonders, Byron's cousin." His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I've not heard young Byron speak of any relatives."

"Well, we've never really been close," Rebecca said. "At least, our families are not too familiar, but Byron and I found we had much in common."

Hugh choked back a laugh; Rebecca shot him a reproachful glance.

"I'm sure," drawled Kincade.

Rebecca turned to Felicity and asked, "Are you closely acquainted with my cousin, Felicity?"

"Oh dear me, yes," she said. Felicity patted herself and gave a self-deprecating laugh. "Byron and I are this close," she said and held up her right hand to show her crossed fingers.

"Really?" asked Rebecca. "Do, please, tell me more."

As Felicity waxed lyrical about her supposed friendship with Byron, Lord Kincade took the opportunity to study the

beautiful Miss Jones. A closer examination began to reveal some interesting clues about the woman. Kincade noticed that she was quite tall for a woman; she was probably only a few inches shy of six feet—and speaking of feet, hers were rather large. Even though her satin choker was wide, it still did not entirely cover her Adam's apple. Lord Kincade was almost positive that the fairer sex lacked that particular physical accoutrement. Rebecca's eyes were of considerable interest to him, because they were so much like Byron's. His Lordship had found Byron's eyes so alluring, and here this person possessed the same doe-like soft brown eyes.

The dinner gong sounded.

"Well, Richard, if you can tear your eyes away from Miss Jones, we should head into the dining room." Felicity was furious with him. Imagine him ignoring her for the odious Miss Jones. Unfortunately, her tone betrayed her.

Hugh tucked his arm under Rebecca's and said, "Too right, Kincade. You've got your own date, old man."

"Beg pardon," Kincade said stiffly. "It's just that she reminds me so much of Byron." He scratched his cheek. "By the by, where is Byron?"

"Oh, he's around here somewhere, I'm sure," said Hugh. He turned to Rebecca. "Shall we?"

* * * *

The two couples joined the press of people crowding into the dining room. Wonderful smells of roasted chicken and fresh bread beckoned them into the feast, and Rebecca had a hard time restraining her natural boyish hunger. Everyone

milled about looking for their place cards before settling down to be served. Unfortunately, a grave error had apparently occurred. Lord Kincade and Miss Turner were not placed together, rather Lord Kincade found himself seated by Rebecca while the erstwhile Felicity found herself much too close to one Rueben McKinley—a nasty bloke with the bad habit of constantly picking his nose.

"I am *not* supposed to be here; I should be with my fiancé," she screeched, but to no avail.

Geoffrey hurried to her side. "I am so sorry, Miss. I wish that we could move you, but alas, the difficulties involved..." He spread his hands in a gesture that alluded to a vast span. "I'm sure you will have wonderful company with Lord Reuben on your right and his twin Lord Rufus on your left."

Felicity was horrified. But like so many things that weren't incorporated into her education, perception proved to be another of the lady's lackings. Geoffrey chuckled softly as he walked toward the kitchen. Lord Rueben picked away at an errant bugger, flaring and sniffing away with his hairy nostrils. She blanched and turned to face his brother. Lord Rufus was not a nose picker, but he was unusually endowed with rather large testicles which he adjusted constantly. It was as though he could never find a comfortable place to put them. Sitting, apparently, proved to be uncomfortable, for he was forever touching himself and shifting in his seat.

Rage boiled behind Felicity's dark green eyes. Her pixie face became drawn and hard—a foretaste of its future permanent state. At that moment, she appeared to loathe

everyone and everything, but most especially she hated that dreadful servant of Lord Kincade's, Geoffrey.

"Surely, the man could have done something!"

And he had ... done something. He had dropped a little something into her flaming auburn mane. Actually, he had dropped two somethings ... two small but distinctly recognizable creatures ... two cockroaches.

* * * *

While Felicity was occupied with an insect infestation of both the six-legged and two-legged varieties, Rebecca and Kincade had a marvelous time together. Rebecca opened up to Kincade, regaling him with witty anecdotes and making mischievous comments about various and sundry of the guests. She flirted outrageously with him, knowing it might be her one and only chance. One moment she was all the coquette, and the next she would be innocent and shy.

Despite himself, he was intrigued; for he had figured out almost from the beginning that Rebecca was actually Byron. He wondered what the young man was playing at. No one else seemed to notice that the beautiful young woman was not a woman at all. He suspected Hugh was in on this lark; he would have to be...

I think I should seduce Miss Rebecca Jones and just see what happens, he decided. Suddenly, he was aroused. *Oh, yes. I should definitely see what young Byron is up to. This could prove to be great fun, great fun indeed.*

He propped his elbow on the table and rested his chin in his hand. "Tell me, Rebecca ... I may call you Rebecca?"

She nodded.

"Rebecca, would you mind foregoing dessert and have a dance with me? The parquet is no longer crowded, and we can avoid being crushed."

Hugh choked and elbowed Rebecca fiercely in the side. She cast her glance to him, and he mouthed the word *no* to her. Still, the temptation of a dance with Kincade proved to be Rebecca's undoing. How could she say no?

"I would love to dance," she said in a low husky voice.

Something inside Kincade melted. He smiled. "Very well. May I take your hand?"

Byron's long, slender fingers curled into Kincade's. Kincade found himself longing to pull the younger person into his arms, to kiss and caress her ... him?

They moved onto the parquet platform that served as the ballroom floor in the garden. The heady scent of roses, the heat of the candles, the sounds of evening birds settling for the night combined to create the perfect romantic atmosphere. Rebecca found herself pulled into Kincade's embrace, closer than she had imagined. Though he held her hand with the lightest of touches, it was exciting.

As they danced and whirled to the soft refrain, Kincade stroked the inside of Rebecca's hand, sending tingling sensations throughout her body. Slowly his thumb moved back and forth against the sensitive inside of her hand.

Rebecca's mouth went dry. She licked her lips and Kincade's gaze followed every tiny flick of her tongue. His tongue briefly darted onto his bottom lip in response. He

pulled her closer, and his hand rubbed the small of her back. She caught her breath in surprise.

What is he doing? she wondered. She looked into his eyes; they were alight with amusement and desire...

Slowly, and without Rebecca being aware of it, Kincade moved them closer and closer to the edge of the dance floor. He continued his gentle assault on her palm. The feeling created a commotion inside of her. She was unprepared for such a sensual experience in such a public place.

When they reached the corner of the parquet, Kincade pushed Rebecca away in a sudden twirl and then pulled her back, catching her lightly around the waist and leading her to a secluded place beneath a large sycamore tree. Its low hanging branches and thick foliage shielded the couple from any prying eyes. Rebecca pulled a leaf from one of the lower branches. She walked away from Kincade; torn between anxiety and longing, she played with the leaf turning it over and over in her hand, until she realized that she was evoking the same feelings he had caused by stroking her palm. She shredded the leaf and dropped the ravaged pieces onto the ground.

Kincade walked up behind her. Carefully he placed his hands around her waist. Rebecca was all too aware of him behind her—of the warm male heat of him, the scent of his skin, the weight of his hands. His fingers tightened. He leaned forward and brushed his lips against the nape of her neck. Softly he began to kiss her there. Tenderly he placed small hot kisses that left her breathless. Finally, he turned her to

face him and pulled her close in a crushing embrace, then he kissed her.

But Rebecca was not really a *her*, and the part of Rebecca that was Byron responded. Byron felt himself grow hard, then harder, and unbelievably harder still; until the masculine overcame the feminine and blossomed. Byron's erection was full and complete—and crushed against the equally hard member of Kincade's body. Byron's body stiffened in mute rejection of his betrayal, while his cock, that fiend, responded readily to the feel of Kincade's against him.

Byron looked into Kincade's eyes and saw that he knew. *He knew!* Yet he had said nothing. With a cry, Byron pushed down on the manly object protruding between the panels of his petticoat; yet the moment he released it to gather his cape about him, it bounced back to attention. He turned to run.

"Byron, wait," said Kincade and grabbed futilely for his arm.

Sick with dread and unfulfilled desire, Byron ducked under the branches of the sycamore and ran alongside the deserted side of the palace. Kincade made as though to follow him, but once he rounded the corner of the mansion, he could no longer see which way Byron had run.

Byron fled into the confines of the stable and called for a livery boy to help him mount a coach. The confused youngster led him to Lord Percival's carriage and instructed the driver to take Miss Jones to the home of her cousin. As the carriage hurried down the long winding driveway, the boy scratched his head and said, "That woman had the deepest

voice. If I hadn't seen her, I would have sworn she was a man."

* * * *

"Take me home!" she screamed. Felicity stood in the midst of the dining room, raking her fingers through her hair and stamping her feet in agitation. Gaston, nearby, pointed his finger at her and yelled in his clear childish voice.

"Cockroach! I see a cockroach in yon hair!"

Tittering broke out as Felicity searched through her hair for the offensive creature. Rueben removed his finger from his nostril long enough to point a stained finger in her direction and yell, "It's there, Felicity, there on your bodice."

She hit frantically at her chest while Rufus, who was the more active of the twins, heaved himself from his chair in a vain attempt to rescue her, only to wobble unsteadily pitching forward and falling against her chest. He flung out his hands and managed to grab both of her breasts before they both toppled backward onto a nearby serving table. Felicity's misfortune was increased; she landed square in the middle of a huge tureen of steaming duck soup; Rufus fell heavily on top of her. His gigantic testicles made direct contact with Felicity's knee. He screamed a high-pitched trill and rolled over into a platter of beans, clutching his aching parts.

Meanwhile, the cockroach, no doubt seeking a safe hiding place, scurried up the front of Felicity's dress and dove headfirst into her cleavage. Said mistress plunged her hand between her breasts, all the while wailing at the top of her lungs.

* * * *

Godwin discreetly pulled young Gaston back into the kitchen. His uncles clapped him on the back.

"Good job, young man, good job," they said. They peeked through the waiter's window into the dining room.

"Let me see, please," said Gaston, so Geoffrey hoisted him up allowing him full view of the ridiculous scene.

Felicity's anger erupted into a violent caterwauling that caused Geoffrey to quickly lower young Gaston and cover his ears. Loud and unchecked laughter could be heard coming from somewhere behind her; she spun around and spotted the source of such audacious merriment—Hugh Percival. Braying like a deranged donkey, she pushed her way through the crowd to confront him.

"You," she hissed. "You did this."

Hugh wiped the tears from his eyes, sniffed and said, "Oh, not I, dear Felicity. I couldn't have come up with such divine a scheme, though I must say I greatly appreciate you thinking I could have done so." He giggled and snorted as the roach peeped over the lacy bodice of her dress. Quickly he grabbed the little creature.

"Here, here, good fellow," he held up the cockroach, "be on your way; you've done your deed tonight." He stood and bowed to the cockroach, while the remaining guests laughed and clapped in amusement.

Felicity ended their mirth by stomping the cockroach, thus ending his short but quite adventurous life.

Kincade chose that moment to rush into the dining room looking for his best friend. "Hugh," he cried and ran toward him.

Most unfortunately, it had not escaped Felicity's notice that he had left the dining room with Rebecca. She spilled her virulent anger onto Kincade, screaming and pounding on his chest with her fists.

He grabbed her hands. "Woman, be still," he said loudly. Felicity choked and sputtered, but finally she calmed down.

"Where is she, Hugh?" he asked. "Where did she go?"

"Who? Rebecca?"

"Take me home," demanded Felicity.

"Hugh..." Kincade's voice had a quiet but dangerous edge to it.

"I am sure she is at Byron's."

Felicity stomped her foot down on Kincade's and screamed, "You're not listening to me! I said, 'Take me home.' Who cares where Rebecca is? I certainly don't."

Kincade turned to her and snarled, "I care." He punctuated his next words with a stab of his index finger to her chest, saying, "I cannot abide you; I find you the most despicable woman I have ever met." He started to leave, and then stopped. "Do something about that vermin in your hair. It's disgusting."

"Ohhhh!" she screamed and clutched her head.

Hugh laughed in delight.

"This is all your fault," she said to him. "You brought that ... that horrible Rebecca person here to drive a wedge between Kincade and me. Didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," he said proudly. He turned to smile at the servants watching from the kitchen serving window. Portia winked at him, while Gaston clapped his hands.

Chapter Seven

Byron stumbled into his room and fell onto his bed. From across the room he spied his reflection in the vanity mirror. He touched his face, the face of Rebecca. She was crying—her beauty stained by her tears. Everything was ruined ... everything. He had hoped that Kincade would fall for Rebecca, and he had seemed to, but then to realize that he had suspected all along just made the entire night seem like a parody of some half-baked tragedy.

He will never love me now, Byron thought. I am such a fool.

His agony at being caught in his deception was painful. His heart literally ached within his breast. *Why, he wondered, would a man like Kincade want a silly molly like me? He can have his pick of men and women; he would never notice an idiot such as me.*

He rose and walked to the mirror. "You are no woman, and you never will be," he said to the woman in the mirror. "You have just been lost in your dreams and in your love, but no man, especially Richard Kincade, will ever really want you."

"You're wrong." Kincade's deep voice said quietly from the doorway.

Slowly, Byron looked up to see him reflected in the mirror. He didn't turn but stood very still. He wondered if Kincade's reflection was real or merely a delusion created by his errant heart.

"I do want you." He walked up behind Byron and looked with him at Rebecca. "I want you as Byron..."

Byron's expression changed from hope to hurt.

"Let me finish," he said and gently turned Byron around to face him, "and I want you as my beard, Rebecca. With you, I can have the best of both worlds. I can have it all."

"I may always have to hide behind the beard," Byron said.

"I don't care. I love you—all of you." He started kissing Byron. "I want you." He stopped and looked at Byron. He smiled mischievously. "And recently, I've had the distinct feeling that you want me, too."

"How could you tell?"

He slid his hand down the front of Byron's shimmering silver gown. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe this," he said and rubbed his hand against the bulge in the gown.

He knelt in front and rubbed Byron's hardened shaft through the fabric of his skirt, creating the most exquisite friction. Byron closed his eyes and gave himself up to the feeling. Slowly, Kincade lifted the flowing skirt and slid his hands under the skirt and petticoat. His hands stroked Byron's legs. Up and down his fingers roamed, sending shivers of delight through Byron's body. Kincade found the most deliciously tender spot behind Byron's knees. He tickled the smooth concave, until with a sigh Byron collapsed onto the vanity bench.

"I think we should move to the bed," said Kincade. He looked long and hard at Byron. "Yes?" It was obvious he would not make a move without his lover's consent.

"Yes," breathed Byron. He stood and began removing all evidence of Rebecca. Carefully, he removed his wig and turned for Kincade to unhook his dress. The touch of Kincade's fingers as he unfastened the rows of hooks, the cold rush of air against Byron's skin, the tender touch of a fingertip sliding down his spine ignited a pure hot flame of desire in Byron that only Kincade could extinguish.

When he stood before Kincade, naked except for his make-up, he felt the most incredible sensation. He was proud to be able to elicit Kincade's pleasure as Rebecca, but even more so, he knew that Kincade desired Byron. Kincade plucked a clean towel from the vanity and began to scrub the make-up from Byron's face. As he did, Byron's hands moved to unfasten his Lordship's waistcoat. Soon both men were standing naked before one another.

"You are beautiful," Kincade said.

Byron lovingly touched the broad expanse of Kincade's chest. His fingers played in the splay of hairs that curled across his bulging pectoral muscles. He felt the Kincade's reaction as he slid his fingers across his abdomen. His eyes never leaving Kincade's, Byron's hand reached farther down to touch the tip of his cock. The head of Kincade's penis became slick as Byron's finger traced rings around it. Byron reached to cup his balls, making Kincade squirm with delight.

Byron knelt in front of him, continuing to fondle his scrotum as his mouth covered the head of his cock. Slowly, he sucked its tender tip. His tongue traced the edge and the tender slit causing Kincade to cry out. He continued to tease the head of Kincade's cock, until he felt Kincade buck against

him. Then he grasped Kincade's buttocks and pulled the pulsing shaft deep into his mouth.

Kincade watched in dreamy ecstasy as his cock pulsed in and out of Byron's mouth. He grabbed Byron's shoulders to steady himself. He could feel the hard throb of his cock as it grew larger and harder—until it reached the point of no return. With a harsh cry, he came into Byron's throat.

"I love you," he gasped. "I love you, Byron."

Byron rose to kiss his man. "I love you, too."

Together, they lay down on the bed. Byron shivered slightly in the night air.

"Are you cold?" Kincade asked.

"Just a bit."

Kincade pulled back the covers, and they crawled beneath them, finding warmth in their embrace. They cuddled, while Kincade recovered. Byron closed his eyes and lightly dozed off to sleep.

From his drowsy state, he awoke to find Kincade lying on top of him.

"Mmm," Byron murmured.

"I want to make love to you."

"I know."

"Will you let me take you—completely?"

Byron nodded and reached for Kincade, but Kincade stilled his hand. Byron could feel his lover's cock hard against his stomach. His own penis rose in response. Kincade explored Byron's nubile young body. With a groan, he climbed from the bed and stood beside it.

"What are you doing?" asked Byron. "Where are you going?"

Kincade pulled Byron's legs around toward him and lifted them to rest on his shoulders. He licked an index finger and gently rubbed it against Byron's ass, then slowly slipped it in. Carefully he moved it in and out of Byron's ass, until his tightness began to ease up a bit.

Byron moaned and met the thrust of Kincade's finger. He was unsurprised, when Kincade replaced the pulsing finger with his hard slick cock. Byron relished the feeling as Kincade slowly and carefully pushed his member inside. Byron could feel Kincade's hand grab *his* cock sliding up and down. Byron's body was soon covered in a fine sheen of sweat. The smell of his arousal and his sweat excited Kincade to thrust harder and harder into his lover.

Finally, he could feel the tension build in his balls. Byron's cock throbbed harder and harder as Kincade worked it in his hands. With cries of passion and wonder, they came. The tight warmth of Byron's ass clung to Kincade's cock, until it gradually softened and slipped free.

Spent, they climbed back under the covers and went to sleep.

* * * *

The next morning Godwin, Geoffrey, and Gaston sat around the table of Master Byron Jones' kitchen; Portia spread freshly churned butter on their toast. As she handed it about, she presented the brothers with a new proposition.

"...and so," she said, "I thought we should find someone suitable for Miss Turner, else I will be stuck forever in her dreadful employ."

The brothers looked askance at one another.

"How do you propose we do that?" asked Godwin.

"She's horrible," said Geoffrey.

Young Gaston happily licked the butter from his toast. "I know how," he said.

As one, they turned to glance at his butter-covered face.

"How's that, pip?" asked Portia.

"Well, as you know, I was the footman on Miss Turner's carriage. I rode on the back so as to be ready to open her door."

"We know, we know," said Godwin.

"Get on with your story, boy," said Geoffrey.

He smiled in pure innocence and said, "Miss Turner said that she was right through with men, 'all men,' she said." He looked at Portia and grinned. "Then she said that she would never marry a man, instead she wanted a woman."

They gasped.

Gaston nodded earnestly.

"She said that if she had her druthers, she would marry her maid, Portia."

Portia screamed and threw her apron over her head. Her uncles burst into laughter. Suddenly, they stopped laughing and looked at one another speculating on such a course.

"Oh no, you don't!" Portia cried and ran from the room.

About the Authors

James Buchanan is a multi-published author of homoerotic romance. James grew up in a small Southwestern town, hours away from any other small Southwestern towns. A stint at the State University, where he ostensibly majored in English, garnered him a degree useful for being someone's secretary. The absolute lack of employment opportunities led James to Southern California. After a stint in County Mental Health (administration, not client) he ran screaming into the field of Law. James has been practicing for nine years and someday he might even get it right.

Visit James at www.james-buchanan.com for more information on his books.

* * * *

Inspired by the important things in life: beauty, love, and passion, **Jade Falconer** has spent several years writing erotic fiction. The forbidden nature of homoeroticism has been the basis for many megabytes of fiction that has delighted a wide circle of online readers. Please feel free to visit Jade on MySpace at www.myspace.com/jadefalconer.

* * * *

Eliza Gayle is an author of contemporary erotic romance and co-owner of ScrapFairy Designs, creating book trailers and MySpace identities for authors.

* * * *

Jamie Hill was born and raised in the Midwest, where she continues to live with her husband and two sons.

At one time or another the Hills have shared their home with a rabbit, a cocker spaniel, a bearded dragon lizard, two rat terrier pups and a menagerie of fish in two 55-gallon freshwater aquariums.

*She now juggles her spare time to include writing every day, freelance editing, reading as she finds time, tinkering on the computer, listening to country music, as many naps as possible, and watching movies (especially **scary movies**) with her family.*

For more information please visit her website:
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* * * *

Although she appears every inch the well-behaved wife and mother, in her heart, **Selah March** is a hellion—contrary, hedonistic and, on occasion, more than a touch wicked. Her twin obsessions with eroticism and the supernatural have found a much-needed outlet in fiction. Through the characters in her stories, she gives free rein to a dark sensuality that might otherwise remain hidden away forever ... and wouldn't that be a shame?

A former schoolteacher, Selah resides in the northeastern United States. She holds a B.A. plus graduate credits in English Literature, and is published in short fiction and nonfiction in local and regional magazines and newspapers. She enjoys solitude, long walks after nightfall, and the

bracing rigors of a six-month-long winter. For more information, see www.SelahMarch.com.

* * * *

Yeva Wiest is one femme who loves her wife, freelance writing, traveling, and her wild little pug. She is currently working on her second novel. Her erotic fiction has appeared in Tales of Travelrotica for Lesbians and will soon appear in the upcoming Tales of Travelrotica for Lesbians Volume 2. You can e-mail Yeva at ywiest@yahoo.com or visit her MySpace at www.myspace.com/yejawiest.

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