



Coming Together

with pride

2008
Edition

Alessia Brío
editor

Coming Together With Pride
by Alessia Brio, J Buchanan, Lisabet Sarai

Phaze

www.phaze.com

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by Alessia Brio, J Buchanan, Lisabet Sarai

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This is an explicit and erotic anthology
intended for the enjoyment of adult readers.

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Coming Together with Pride

edited by

Alessia Brio

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Coming Together: With Pride

is dedicated to the memory of

Lawrence Forbes King

an eighth grader,

who was killed by a classmate

because he was gay

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Introduction

© Will Belegon

Almost thirty years ago, rumors started circulating about something worse than herpes. Yeah, herpes never went away—and we all thought that was about as horrible as it could get. Then, AIDS came along. We didn't call it that yet, though. We didn't know what to call it, but we knew it was deadly.

Only gay people got it, though. I didn't need to worry. It wouldn't affect me. Right?

Then one of my best friends came out, and he started dating a guy who grew up on my street. High school is a cruel environment under any circumstances, and I attended an all boy Catholic high school. The kind of environment where a rumor about somebody getting a hard-on in the locker room shower was all over the school in ten minutes. No place is as homophobic as an all boy high school.

So, I had a decision to make: I could distance myself from my friend—or I could become a social outcast.

Let's just say I've never been one to follow the crowd. Not only did I continue to hang out with Robert, I went to Gay Youth Alliance with him. I learned about the community. I made friends. And guess what happened?

AIDS affected me.

This was long before Tom Hanks got the Oscar for *Philadelphia*. This was before anybody famous had died from

"pneumonia." But I got to know a guy at GYA. He was cool, a good guy—and he got sick.

And then the priest who taught French at my oh-so-Catholic high school got sick.

The disease that wasn't going to affect me was killing people I knew. People I liked. So, I started educating myself about it.

By the time my favorite basketball player announced he was HIV-positive, I had long since shed my ignorance. I knew the hype about it being "just" a homosexual disease, as if that somehow mitigated its severity, was fallacious. I knew about Haiti, Europe, and Africa. I knew about the growing diversity of the afflicted in the United States.

In the eighties and early nineties, AIDS awareness was everywhere. You didn't just call it HIV, because everyone who got HIV at that time eventually got AIDS. It was a sexually transmitted death sentence. The moral indignation of the Reagan years kept it isolated in the minds of middle America for awhile. Made it something that misguided and hateful individuals marginalized by blaming it on a single demographic.

But when a cousin or a favorite uncle or a sister dies, things tend to come out of the margins. The fight was a popular one. *And The Band Played On*—and later, *Rent*—made headlines and money. David Ho was honored as *Time Magazine's* 1996 Man of the Year for his pioneering work with protease inhibitors.

By the end of the nineties, however, AIDS wasn't in the headlines anymore. As safe sex campaigns began to stem the

spread of the disease and education decreased the mystery, the anxiety and fear also lessened. As people learned that it was possible to live with HIV, it looked less like a science-fiction disease that would end the world. As the diagnosed population became broader than the gay community, it became less controversial. People were no longer glued to their television sets for each celebrity announcement or research breakthrough. So, the evening news bumped stories about the disease deeper into the broadcast—and eventually off the air altogether. Newspapers buried stories in the back pages.

AIDS and HIV just kind of faded away, right? Wrong! The United Nations agency UNAIDS estimated that at the end of 1999, 33 million people were living with HIV, and an estimated 2.6 million died that year, the highest numbers since the beginning of the epidemic.

Yet, studies of U.S. media coverage of the AIDS epidemic showed that the number of news stories related to the disease had peaked a dozen years earlier in 1987, with slight bumps following Magic Johnson's 1991 announcement and the introduction of combination therapies in 1996 and 1997.

Today, we hear less about AIDS and HIV in the news than perhaps ever before. This is despite HIV having become one of the United States' top three disease-related killers of young adults. Despite there still being more than 40,000 new cases annually in the U.S. alone. According for the Centers for Disease Control, HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death for young African-American women in the United States. *The leading cause of death.* That certainly puts the final nail in the

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coffin of the old "gay plague" argument, doesn't it? By the end of this year, more than a million Americans will be living with HIV.

More than 22 million people worldwide have died from AIDS. That's over two and a half times the number killed in World War I. AIDS is a preventable disease that's been deadlier than three hundred seventy-eight Vietnam wars.

The need is great. But with the lack of reinforcement by the media, much of the public doesn't see HIV as a problem anymore.

Those who have contributed to this volume of *Coming Together* have not been lulled into complacency. Here you will find a diverse and talented group. Just as HIV is not exclusive to any single demographic, the work in this book embraces all areas of our lives. Naturally, it contains stories about same-sex relationships. But there are also stories about hope. About loss. About love. About the effects of disease in general, not just AIDS. But no matter how diverse the contents, they all share one thing.

The writers, the editor, and the publisher have each made a commitment—not only to donate all their proceeds to AVERT, but to pursue the goal of keeping this horrible epidemic where it belongs: in the forefront of our minds and hearts until there is a cure.

Will Belegon

April 2008

* * * *

www.willbelegon.com

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Today

© Kally Jo Surbeck

Today I lost my love, my life, my hope.

Today I lost my delusions and my precepts.

Today I spoke words that never should have been voiced
to people who weren't willing to listen to the emotion behind
the words.

Those who were too wrapped up in their own problems to
see my pain.

People who I thought cared and loved me.

Today I saw the truth.

Today I stood alone and learned that all those who cry,
"We love you."

Mean it only when it suits their needs and their time
constraints.

Today I stood and plead with the gods for mercy on my
soul.

Crying out with every fiber of my being for some reprieve,
but none came.

Today I learned.

Today the knowledge came in one fast overwhelming
swoop.

I, and I alone, have today.

Although other's travel beside me.

None are truly with me.

And although some will effect me, none can truly
accompany me.

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Today I learned.

Through the toughest lessons, through the smoldering
ashes, through the pain and misery,

I have learned.

I have grown, and I have become one that is no longer
afraid of today.

* * * *

www.kallyjosurbeck.com

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An Early Winter Train

© C. Sanchez-Garcia

"Where is your wife?"

She was lying on top of the blue comforter next to the window, in her cotton pajamas. Her beautiful thick hair, black and streaked with gray, spread out over the pillow. She reached up with her hands, searching.

I wonder if it's the jasmine that brings this out in her, he asked himself. He sat on the edge of the bed next to where she lay and looked at her despondently. A small electric window fan drew in the cool night air, filled with the scent of the jasmine vines they'd planted together years ago, when the kids were still teenagers. It filled the room with a sweet erotic scent, combined with the fresh, earthy smell of the rain that had just ended. Far away in the kitchen, the radio played a Frank Sinatra song.

"Where is your wife?" She would keep asking until he answered her.

"She's right here, Aimee." He reached over and caressed her hand. "Don't worry so much."

"It's terrible," she said.

"I know."

She tried to sit up, with a trace of fear building in her eyes. He took her hand and gave it a little squeeze. "Everything's fine. Don't worry so much."

She looked at him with a hint of panic now. "Where is your wife?"

"She's right here, Aimee. You're my wife. You know that." He said it evenly and confidently, choosing the tone of his voice with great care. It pleased him to see the fear leave her eyes, and she settled back. "How you doing, honey?"

"It's terrible."

"What's so terrible?"

"Everything," she murmured.

Again, he took her hand; squeezing it to remind her he was there, that she wasn't alone. "Don't worry so much. I'm here. You worry about everything too much."

"Oh."

She looked at him, holding her hand, as if she had just discovered he was there. He felt her return the squeeze and hold it, like a baby holding onto a finger.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's alright."

"I'm sorry."

"It's alright." Holding her hand, he waited for her to calm down. When he felt her hand relax, he let go of it and stood. The weariness of the day sank against him, and he felt tired and lonely. The jasmine was undoubtedly getting to him, too.

He stretched and took a quick glance at Aimee. For the moment, she seemed all right. She rolled over to her side and the plastic adult diaper crackled inside her pajama bottoms.

"Now you stay there," he instructed. "Okay? You stay there, okay?"

Obediently, she rolled onto her back and folded her hands on her bosom.

"Now that's my girl, you stay that way. I'll be right back. Okay?"

"Are we in Mobile yet?"

The question stopped him. *Mobile? What, Alabama?* It was a new tangent, one he'd never heard before. He wasn't sure what she needed to hear from him. "Soon."

She smiled and closed her eyes. Evidently, it was the correct answer. He turned away, feeling too pained to look at her. The music filtered into his consciousness:

The way you wear your hat

The way you sip your tea

The memory of all that

No, they can't take that away from me...

Yes, they can, he thought. *Boy, they sure as hell can.*

He yawned and considered turning off the radio. At least it was company, he decided, and headed for the bathroom instead. Opening the medicine cabinet, he took down his toothbrush and the toothpaste. The bottom shelf was lined with amber bottles, mostly Aimee's medicines. They cost a fortune, and as near as he could tell, they weren't doing shit for her, not any of them. Next to his own was her pink toothbrush, and he couldn't remember—damn, he couldn't remember one way or the other. Had he brushed her teeth for her tonight?

This kind of thing always scared him. Soon it'll be me in diapers, he thought. Silently, he recited his Social Security number followed by his cell phone number. A few years ago, when all this was new to him, the doctor had said that usually with Alzheimer's the numbers were forgotten first.

Remembering strings of meaningful numbers was his little talisman against Aimee's fate.

He closed the cabinet and squeezed a line of toothpaste onto the brush, checking his teeth in the mirror. They were fairly yellow from the coffee and tea, which he had no intention of giving up. But those were his teeth, by God—every one of them nailed firmly in place until his dying day. No dentures, no bridges. He began to clean his teeth.

"Are we in Atlanta yet?"

His mouth was full of foam, and he ignored her. *They'd be hauling her off to the nursing home soon, and then what? Start over? Were there Internet dating sites for guys his age?* The thought chilled him with guilt, and he threw cold water on his face. *It's not like she's dead, you horny bastard, how can you even think of it?* He thought of her in there, lost in her train ride. *It's not my fault. I have needs, too. I'm still a man. And maybe she really is dead. She died when no one was looking, and it's just her body that hasn't gotten the news. It's not her anymore. The woman I loved, she's gone. Not this big baby she left me with. It's not my fault.*

He took some mouthwash, poured it into the cap, and tossed it into his mouth. Bad breath had always been a concern, because his mouth was so dry, but there was no one to care about it anymore. It was mostly genetic, the doctor had said. Can't fix genetics. Genetics are just the cards the universe deals you. Genetics are little time bombs that go off in your head, and there's nothing you can do but watch everything turn to shit. Shit for brains.

A big whoop-de-doo doctor in Time magazine had suggested Alzheimer's was related to stress. It made him want to yell at this guy who knew so damned much: Okay, Doctor Asshole, what stress was my fault? Hadn't I made enough money? Maybe I hadn't spent enough time with her or the kids. No? Maybe I'd been too stressful for her with my little demands and discontents. Maybe if I'd gotten her a goddamn dog with lots of fur to pet. Maybe if the kids hadn't driven us crazy from time to time, dumping the grandkids on us when things got rough, moving in when they couldn't find a job and then moving out and then in again. Maybe I'd secretly wished it on her without knowing, like a silent voodoo curse. Or maybe—just maybe what's the really scariest fucking thing of all—maybe this universe is a big runaway train with winter ice on the tracks and no God or anybody else at the fucking wheel and the most awful shit happens to the very nicest people out there, and maybe ... And maybe no one knows what I could have done differently.

He spit out the blue foam and wanted to hammer his head into the mirror glass. *Who knows how any of this shit really works*, he thought.

"Are we in Mobile yet?"

What was it about Mobile tonight? "No, Aimee, not yet," he called back.

In the kitchen, Buddy Holly was on the box, rocking out about Peggy Sue and singing with that weird hiccup thing he did. They had seen Holly play at their high school auditorium in Duluth, way back in the day. Aimee had been in the drama club and played in *The Glass Menagerie* on the same stage

where Holly played later. After that show, Holly and his bunch moved west, working their way toward Moorhead. A couple days later, they were dead. He and Aimee hadn't been a couple then, that came much later—after they met at a class reunion, by which time they'd each scored a divorce.

He put away the toothbrush and the toothpaste and tried to remember again if he'd brushed her damned teeth or not.

She was better off now, he knew, because they were long past the terror. Or she was, anyway. It was worse in the beginning stages, when the episodes of forgetfulness and fugue began, when the long-faced doctors would come around with their goddamned grim looking x-rays, pronouncing the sentence of death, death in slow motion.

He recalled her terror at the realization she would helplessly lose herself. Her wordless rage at God in a restaurant, at seeing an old woman being fed by a health care worker and knowing it would soon be her. The anticipation of having all her life erased.

"Just shoot me, Ron," she whispered to him that night in the dark. "If I get like that, promise me you'll just fucking shoot me."

He hadn't said anything.

"Is your wife at home?"

"No!" he shouted at her. "Just shut up!" His throat tightened at the sound of his own voice, and the tears began to burn his eyes. *We don't shoot people here, Aimee.*

He turned off the bathroom light but still couldn't bring himself to turn off the radio. He let it babble on, talking and singing to itself, as he returned the bedroom. The air still

smelled heavily of jasmine, and she was standing beside the bed with her hand on the wall.

"You alright, honey bunch?"

At the sound of his voice, she turned to look at him with that fearful trapped look in her eyes again.

"Where is your wife?"

"She's right here, Aimee." He reached over, took her hand from the wall, and held it. "Don't worry so much."

She smiled for him and for a moment seemed to know him again. He gently wrapped his arms around her and hugged her close, feeling the swell of her breasts as she moved against him. She was still a damned fine-looking woman. He should give her diaper a little check before lights out.

It bothered him that she was standing up already. That was a sign it might be one of her wandering nights, and blundering in the dark was how she always hurt herself. There was the little drama of waking up in the night to find her gone from the bed, and then searching the house for her—to see where she'd landed, what she'd broken, or what nasty business she'd deposited on the carpet. Releasing her, he took the edge of her pajama bottom and pulled it out to peek inside. There was a loud whiff of urine. It would be mean spirited to leave it for the home health aide in the morning to change, and the piss would aggravate her rash again, just when it was starting to heal. Too bad if he was tired.

"It's terrible," she said.

"What's terrible?"

"Everything." She waved her hands.

"It's okay," he said. "I won't leave you alone. It's all right."

She nodded. "Thank you."

"Listen, we need to get you changed, and then we'll go to bed. Okay?"

"Okay. I'm sorry. It's terrible."

"It's okay Aimee. We just got to do it, is all. Let's go." He put his arm around her waist, gently rotated her around, and began leading her docile form—a woman with a master's degree in Italian classical literature—toward the bathroom. As they passed the towel closet, he paused and snatched out a fresh diaper from the box.

When the cold floor tiles touched her feet, she hesitated and stumbled a little. He held her firmly by the waist and steered her toward the toilet with the hamper next to it. She allowed herself to be led, and her passive dependence on him he found strangely arousing. On this night with the air full of jasmine, she would easily do anything he asked of her.

It had been hardest for both of them in the beginning, as she felt things fading on her, constantly discovering herself in strange surroundings. Then she rebelled against everything he did for her. A few times, she became violent, hitting him and collapsing in crying fits—in this very room, in fact.

The kids had been pushing her out the door to the nursing home, because they said all it was too hard for him. In a way, it was, but they didn't know shit about hard. Once, he had come home and discovered her in the shower stall, trying to cut off her hair with these big office scissors and muttering something about Dante and the Inferno. She'd taken a swing at him with the scissors when he'd tried to help her. That was what hard really looked like.

Now she was—what? Submissive? Was that what all that weird shit that some people did with the handcuffs and the black leather was about? Just to have a fellow human being go where you lead them?

I can sort of see it, he thought. *On nights like this, I can sort of see it*. There was definitely something in her gratitude and her perfect trust of him—this kind and familiar stranger who guided her through her fog—that did inexplicable things to him.

He positioned her next to the toilet and the hamper.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You're fine, honey bunch. Everything's fine. Just got to get you changed. Get it done and get to bed.

"Thank you."

He looked up at her in surprise. She had never said that before. For a moment, there was something of his woman back in her eyes, and then it faded.

"You're welcome," he said, hoping she could still hear him before she went away again. He took the diaper, courtesy of Medicare, and unfastened the tape, placing it by the sink.

"Here we go. Ups a daisy."

He lifted her arms away from her waist so he could reach her pajama bottoms. Then he remembered that the visiting nurse had said she should try to do these things herself, to keep the motor going as long as possible. She was standing beside the sink, holding her arms out like an obedient child, her good breasts tenting the front of her pajamas.

He spread out the fresh diaper and turned to her, but the words that came out of his mouth were: "We need you to take off your top, honey."

She looked at him blankly, and for a moment, he felt ashamed. But she was looking at him, and he was waiting for her. She lowered her arms and tugged at the hem of her pajama top. As she was lifting it, she became confused and stopped. "Please honey," he said. "It needs to come off. Pop it off for me, please."

"Are we in Mobile yet?"

"Mobile? No, not yet, soon. We'll be in Mobile soon."

She took the hem of her top and lifted it over her breasts, catching it for a moment on the tips of her large nipples, then tugging it over her head and off. Her body was still slender and strong. Her large, matronly breasts rested on her chest, pointing slightly down, but full and glowingly pink. Even in her misery, her fog, and her confusion, she was still the most desirable woman in the world to him. All the more beautiful because they were at peace with each other, and she needed him and trusted him completely.

She had lifted it off for him simply because he had asked her to. She held the top in her hand and waited for him to give her directions. He took it from her hand gently, stuffed it in the towel rack next to the sink, and looked at her for a long time while she waited. He ran his hand gently over her bare belly and savored the soft warmth of it, touching the faint scar where she had had a cesarean for their daughter's birth.

Amazingly, he saw her nipples swell and respond to him. He let out his breath, which he discovered he had been holding, and his hands were trembling as he caressed her.

"Doctor?"

"No, Aimee, it's just me."

"Where is your wife?"

"You're my wife, Aimee. You're my wife, and I still love you fine."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right." She was standing like one of those topless marble statues she had doted on when they went to Italy on vacation. *Those are the good nipples that nursed our babies,* he thought. *She let me taste her milk when they became too full. Those were good times when she was nursing. We could fuck bareback without the condoms, which neither of us liked. Her breasts were so big and full, and she was so heated up on hormones that she came real easy and came good and hard, too. When she came strong like that, those nipples would squirt everywhere, and we'd laugh. That was my Aimee. She came a lot in those days, and there were nights she could just about wear me out.*

He stood in front of her and admired her semi nudity. "You remember that island—What was it, Bisentina something? They had that little hotel we were at. The power blacked out, and we went into the garden in the middle of the night, and the sky was full of stars. No, you don't remember any of that shit, do you?" His hands reached out to her breasts and caressed them, but she seemed not to notice and looked away from him while he lovingly ran his hands over her. "The

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garden had those very same jasmine vines climbing the walls. You smelled that jasmine and pulled me down onto the grass. You did all the work that time. You pulled down my pants, and took one eyed jack, and sucked him 'til he was hard enough, and took off your panties, and slipped him in good and solid with people eating in the café just on the other side of the wall. And when you came, you were so loud those Italian men heard you over there, and they stopped eating and really applauded for you. That's when you got interested in the jasmine vines, I'll bet.

"You were always a great fuck, Aimee. Did you know that, honey? You were the most fabulous piece of ass any man ever had, and you were all mine. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

"I know. I worked there."

"Well anyway, you were pretty hot stuff in your day."

She smiled. "Okay."

Her skin seemed to heat at his touch, to flush pink and glow in the fluorescent light of the medicine cabinet. He teased her nipples, and they began to stiffen and rise under his fingertips, blossoming amidst the goose bumps of her aureole. She seemed to notice for the first time what he was doing to her. She lifted her breasts and held them out to him like a gift in both hands. He took one in his hand, hefted the warm bulky feel of it, and placed his lips softly over her nipple.

"Bobby?"

Bobby was their son, whom she had breast-fed over thirty years ago. He had no idea what she was thinking, this woman

who had once wanted to try out as a porno star, but his thoughts were filled with the tension of her nipples as they stood out fully. Taking the weight of her other breast in his other hand, he buried his face in her generous bosom.

Again, a whiff of urine rose, and he felt like cursing God.

He released her breasts and turned his attention back to the business at hand. The bottoms would have to come off, and the diaper would have to be changed. He picked up the new diaper and held it up for her to see. At the sight of it, the bright glow that had been rising in her eyes also seemed to vanish.

"Got to do this thing, Aimee. Okay? Got to get it done and go to bed. Get you cleaned up and ready for bed."

"What about Mobile?"

"I don't know anything about Mobile or Atlanta or any of that business." He felt himself choking up again. *God damn it!* He didn't want to cry in front of her. It would upset her terribly. "I just ... I can't ... just fuck it. Just fuck it, okay? We need to get you changed."

He took the top of her pajama bottoms and lifted them up and out. She stood straight as if trying to be helpful, and he walked them down first one leg and then the other, lifting them past the crinkly edge of the diaper, and down and down, past her mighty thighs and her knees to her strong, honest calves.

He patted her calves firmly. "Lift up." She became confused and tried to sit, and he grabbed her and lifted her up. "Lift your leg." She tried to sit again, and he grabbed her and pulled her up. "You got to lift your fucking leg, dummy."

She just stood there, and suddenly he just wanted to smack her a good one. He wanted to slap her hard and discovered his hand raised against her to do just that when he caught himself. He turned away and felt the hot tears begin, while behind him she stood, baffled, with her top in the towel rack and her bottoms bunched around her knees, looking like some lost and molested child.

He put his hand to his eyes and hid his face against the shower curtain, trying to quiet the sobs of his weeping. His shoulders shook, and he pressed his face against the plastic, waiting to calm down. Behind, he heard sounds of Aimee moving and the sticky snaps of tape. He took a deep breath and wiped his face on his sleeve. When he turned and looked, she had the wet diaper off and was holding it out to him. She was looking at him with great concern. "Thanks," he said, taking it from her and dropping it in the hamper.

She held out her arms to him. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "It's all so shitty."

He put his arms around her, and they held each other. She was warm and big and sumptuous, and he loved her all over again. And he grieved for her. She relaxed against him and, after a moment, he felt able to return to the business at hand. She was still wearing her pajama bottoms around her ankles. Gently, he patted the back of her thigh, and she looked down. He put his hand behind her knee and pulled up, and she understood at last and lifted her leg. He pulled her bottoms off, and she lifted the other leg and stepped out of them. He stuffed them on the towel rack with their top.

Just a quick wipe off and a change would be enough. He folded the diaper into a bundle, taped it tight, and dropped it into the trash.

He reached into the shower and grabbed the soft, thick washcloth he used to bathe her, running warm water and a dab of soap over it.

"Step your legs open, honey." He held up the washcloth and patted the insides of her thighs. She understood what he wanted, spread her feet apart into a heroic stance, and put her hands on her hips. The sight of her made him laugh. She was magnificent, an aging Wonder Woman in the nude. For a moment, he imagined her with a golden lariat and a tiara.

He kneeled down in front of her, as though he might pray to her—or beg her forgiveness. With the washcloth, he cleansed the smooth skin of her inner thighs, rubbing his hand indulgently against the nest of her damp hair. He washed the hair as attentively as a hair dresser, stealing touches against the skin of her labia, caressing them with the cloth, a necessary thing, and rinsing the hair, followed by the muscular cleft between her thighs and her pussy, making sure everything was clean and perfect.

He washed her butt cheeks gently and soothingly, lingering there to run his hands over them. That ass, that big gorgeous ass, heavy and resilient, was cuter to him than most girls' faces. He ran the cloth down the outside of her strong thighs, grooming the ruddy pink skin and marveling at the strength left in them. Returning at last to her bush, he pressed his face, his nose, deep into the springy jungle depths of it. The feeling was electric, and instead of resisting, she moved into

him, and he breathed the clean animal aroma of her, adoring her as she had once been.

Her hands were on his head, and her fingers were in his hair, and he felt very confused. Everything about the situation felt wrong to him, perverted somehow. But she was his woman. Who would know how beautiful she was, if not for him?

The baby powder was on the toilet tank. He picked it up and squeezed a small snowdrift in his hands. Spreading it on her ass, her inner thighs, he explored her all over again, making her dry and perfect. As his hand passed over her labia, he wondered. Running an experienced finger over the lips, he explored them to see. *Yes. A little bit.* Not completely dry, some slickness there, something going on there.

She was in there somewhere, standing stiffly in her Wonder Woman posture, while he kneeled to her as though worshipping her. She was a lush Hindu goddess, a primitive fertility goddess who had forgotten herself and wandered the earth believing herself to be a mortal.

"Are we in Mobile now?"

"Do you remember," he whispered to her pussy, "when we lived in Barton Street, that walkup near the little store? I lost my job. No money, no rent. No food. We had this fight. You don't remember, but you were going to drop out of school. I wanted you to stay, and we had that fight. You said you were sick of housework. You hated ironing. You hated cleaning my stupid shit everywhere. You were tired of everything and all that, you know the way you get sometimes. You don't remember, no, but I took the ironing board, and told you I

was going to do all the ironing from now on. And you did this thing, this amazing thing you did. You had curlers in your hair, like a damn space satellite. You went behind the ironing board and got on your knees, and I couldn't believe it, and then you just took my dick out, and I still couldn't believe it, and you just started sucking me off right there under the ironing board.

"Did I ever tell you? Did I ever tell you, you were the sexiest woman I ever knew? I think of you like that everyday now, you there working away on me under the ironing board, curlers dropping out of your hair, bobbing up and down getting me off, because you were sorry. I came in your mouth for the first time then and burned a hole in the shirt 'cause I just forgot everything I was supposed to be doing. That's what you could do to me in your day, Aimee. Make me forget everything that was bothering me. I kept that shirt for a long time 'til you threw it out, because looking at the hole in the sleeve always got me hot for you. It's not fair, you don't know now. That makes me want to die, 'cause you can't remember what a great woman you were. That was such an animal kind of painful thing for you to do, and I sure wish you weren't all so crazy now. Aw hell, I can't stand you this way."

He squeezed an extra puff of powder and worked it into her hair, dusting the skin around her sex lips and pausing to kiss the inside of her tensed, Wonder Woman thighs.

"Maybe that's why you get married to someone anyway. You just want a witness to tell the rest of the world you were there. You were here with me, Aimee. I knew you."

Tentatively, he caressed her pussy lips and felt them opening for him. His fingers were wet.

"This is Mobile, isn't it?"

He raised his head and looked up at her. *What the hell was this Mobile all about?* She was smiling down at him, and her eyes were full and fiery.

And he knew then what he was seeing. The revelation of it struck him so fiercely he had to get up and sit on the edge of the bathtub to absorb it.

Fog or not, she had remembered clearly something he had forgotten until that moment: Mobile, Alabama, on the train to Savannah. Savannah was where they would have their honeymoon, and the train was where they were on their wedding night. Although he was eager for her, she wouldn't let him fuck her until they reached Mobile. It was what she wanted. It wasn't the first time they'd had sex. That had been on their second date, sloppily and impetuously on the sofa in her sister's apartment, trying not to wake the family. That was when he knew she was the woman he would marry, this virtuous, intelligent, sturdy Republican with her ravenous appetites.

On their wedding night, they'd rattled through the dark countryside in their sleeping car, groping and driving each other wild, but she was forcing him to wait. And then the tobacco barns changed into buildings, and he wouldn't wait any longer.

She peeled off the rest of his clothes and then her own. She turned on the lights, and threw the curtains open wide. He'd taken her as she directed him to, hard up against the

brightly lit window glass for all the world to see, his stiff cock all up in her tight, naked, and urgent and insane, and the train vibrated and rattled their bodies as they moved against each other.

Outside, rail lights flashed red and bells clanged as they whizzed through the barred crossings, packed with lines of cars; cars with white folks and black folks, good God-fearing families and children and grandmothers and babies and dogs watching her naked female Whore of Babylon ass as he pounded it good and hard up against the glass, putting on a big show for the good folks of Mobile, courtesy of the rolling iron of the Southern Pacific.

He came in her as they leisurely sailed through a crossing in the downtown, and she had the presence of mind to take out his wet cock and press it against the glass, waving hello with it to the people standing on the sidewalk gaping.

That was goddamn Mobile for you.

"Is this Mobile?"

"Yes, baby," he croaked. "You know, I think it is."

She smiled wickedly. "Good."

"Are you ready for Mobile?"

"I'm ready!"

"Let's go then. Let's stand by the window. That's what you want, isn't it? That's what Mobile is, right?"

"Mobile!"

"Anything you want, Aimee. Let's go to Mobile together." He herded her into the bedroom with his arm around her waist, and his cock tightening his pants. He marveled at how she seemed filled with purpose such as he hadn't seen in her

in a long time. When he released her, it was Aimee who threw the curtains open.

She frowned. "Where're we going?"

"Wait," he said, searching quickly for the answer, desperate not to lose this moment without a fight. Then he realized the back yard was dark. He stood her against the wall. "Wait. I'll be back."

Faster than Clark Kent, he unbuttoned the first two buttons of his shirt and had it off in one pull. One more pull, and he'd jumped out of his pants and underwear together in one motion. And he was naked, his eager cock hard and ready. She was staring at his cock with interest.

He ran around the room turning on every light and lamp he could find. "Just stay there!" he called, holding up his hands. He ran to the kitchen, his penis waving in the air, harder than he had felt it in years.

He turned on the kitchen lights and turned up the radio. Little Richard was screaming:

Good Golly, Miss Molly! Sure like to ball! When you're rockin' and you're rollin' can't hear your mama call!

The back yard lights! The switch was outside.

Oh hell, he thought. *That's the whole idea isn't it? Let the neighbors yell. Let them call the cops, that's all. Or let them tell Bobby and Frannie to haul me off to the nursing home, too. Tonight is the night I get to fuck my woman. By God, I'm going to fuck her.*

He threw open the back door and ran out into the night, his boner waving in front of him like a herald. He threw open

the back porch lights and then the yard lights, reveling in the chill night air.

Mobile, by God. Ladies and gentlemen, present your tickets to the conductor, we are in goddamn Mobile, and the entertainment is about to begin!

Back inside, he passed through the kitchen. There was an insidious moment of doubt. What would he find in the bedroom? That she had forgotten the glory of Mobile and wandered off? Gone to sleep in the closet or fallen down and hurt herself? Or maybe just didn't know who the old guy was and why he was trying so hard to stick his dick in her.

But she was there and waiting for him near the window, in her wide legged Wonder Woman pose. His wonderful Aimee, with her secret porno star soul all aglow like a child on Christmas morning, the back yard lights lighting up the contours of her wonderful naked body, all lights and camera and waiting for the big money shot.

"Mobile, Aimee! It's Mobile!"

She opened her arms wide for him.

He threw himself against her, and her arms captured him, and her tongue was in his mouth. She squatted and wiggled her hips under him, and like magic, his cock had slipped into her slick and easy depths. She held him tightly and without awkwardness. She threw her arms over her head, her signal for him to kiss her breasts. He mauled her big, motherly breasts in his hands and took both of her nipples and placed them in his lips together, sucking hard on them.

For the first time in ages, she was there for him, completely present for him. Her legs were wide, and she was

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there for him. She was working her hips in rhythm with his, and she was there for him as he struggled to keep sucking her nipples. Together, their breathing became ragged and filled with animal sounds, and she was there for him. The gasping turned to cries, and she continued to be there for him, even as he felt her legs go rigid and her pussy pressing down. She shivered in bliss, and she was there falling against him as her knees went weak. She was there, and she was still there for him as he surrendered to her lost amnesiac Hindu fertility goddess power of heaven and let it wash over him. As he felt his seed exploding in her, Wonder Woman Aimee, she was there for him, and this was her lover's gift to him alone for his loyalty, for his nights of faithful celibacy, and the nights cleaning up after her little accidents.

She held her husband's cock inside her and wouldn't let go, as if to thank him for being there with her through her nights of terror and hallucination—and occasional deadly violence—when he had to hold her down hard and whisper to her, and weep with her, and console her, and lie to her and tell her everything was going to be just fine—sure it would—when they knew it was all bullshit lies. God had abandoned them on this fucking runaway train, and the world was cruel, and all they had was each other, and everybody could go to hell including Him. *He could go fuck Himself, too! God damn Him. Phony sonofabitch bastard, I'll kill Your ass, but no, Aimee, I won't leave you, not never. No, sir. No.*

For all of that and more, she held him tightly to her, hugging her powerful thighs around him so that he would never leave her ever even when she had finally left herself.

Were the neighbors watching? Would this come up in the next homeowner's association meeting? What can they do to us anyway? At our age, lust is more of an achievement than a vice.

They relaxed against each other, and he slipped out of her, and he felt her arms fall away. He looked into her face, and it broke his heart all over again. She was neither offended nor frightened. Only lost again.

He hugged her and rubbed against her, but she was the lost docile love doll again. He stepped away from her, and she had that worried look, discovering herself nude and wet, while he drew the curtains closed.

"There," he said to her, gesturing toward the bed. "Why don't you just sit a second while I fix all this up? I'll get—aw shit, Aimee. Aw, shit. I'll get your diaper, hon."

She stood still, uncomprehending, and he kissed her on the cheek. He led her to the bed and pressed on her shoulders until she sat. There was a small trail of his spunk coming from her pussy, and he took some Kleenex from the bed stand and offered it to her. She looked at it. He tugged a few more tissues from the box and pulled at her hips to bring her closer to the edge of the bed. She looked down and watched as he wiped away his sauce from her pussy.

After a moment, it was clean. He couldn't resist and kissed her belly, and then got down on his knees and softly pressed his face against her damp delta of wiry hair.

"Where is your wife?"

"Right here, Aimee," he murmured into her cleft. "She's right here, and I love her fine. That's you, Aimee."

"Oh," she said, with what sounded like surprise. "Woo hoo!"

He looked up at her with tears in his eyes. "Woo hoo."

"Yes." She smiled, and for a moment, her eyes were bright with recognition.

"Think of it as a prayer," he whispered. Slowly he rose to his feet again, and his knees hurt, but he felt happy and relaxed and infinitely lonely.

"Diaper time, Aimee," he said, more to himself. "Lay down, please. Lay down on our fine fucking bed, Aimee. Let me look at you laying down for a minute. I just want to see how you look that way."

Aimee sprawled across the bed luxuriously, lifting a knee, letting her legs fall open for him to see, her fine and generous breasts spread out over her chest. He stood over her, enjoying the view, loving her. She saw his eyes on her, raised her arms over her head, and smiled at him, nude, seductive, obscenely pliant and innocent.

In the kitchen on the idiot radio, sang Bob Dylan:

...with her fog, her amphetamine and her pearls ... She takes just like a woman. Yes, she does, and she makes love, just like a woman ... Yes, she does...

"Time to rest, Aimee." he said. "Maybe we'll pass through Mobile again in the morning."

"Sure." She smiled wickedly and raised her arms higher, half closing her eyes for him.

He went into the kitchen to turn off all the lights and the radio—and to bring her a fresh diaper.

* * * *

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Customer Service

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Here comes another one. The dreaded soccer mom approaches my counter with a too-big smile and a weird, hungry look in her eye. I smile back because I have to.

"Hello," I say again, because I have to be polite. That's my job. I'm a liquor store clerk.

"Hey, sweetheart. How are you today?" she asks while moistening her lips with her tongue.

Horrible! I'm trapped here day in and day out kowtowing to skanks like you! Instead, I just say, "Fine."

She keeps talking. I nod and smile as I ring up her expensive wine so she can impress her friends at the party tonight and her cheap vodka so she can get really good and toasted after they leave—or maybe before. I am constantly compromising myself here, but it isn't as bad as it could be. They let me wear my hair long. Sometimes having long auburn hair that's naturally curly isn't as much of a blessing as you would think. It seems to invite conversation about how long I've been growing it and if, indeed, it is natural.

Once in a while, I can even get away with a subtle amount of eyeliner, like tonight. The woman is flirting so vigorously it makes me ill. She puts her hand on mine as she pays. She's staring up at me with an expectant look, as though I should offer her my number or tell her what time I get finished with work. I don't do either. I give her the change from her sale and tell her to have a nice evening.

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"If I bring my car up, will you be a dear and load this for me?" she says, way too sweetly.

"I'd be happy to, ma'am," I say but don't mean. It's actually the last thing I want to do. Inevitably, when I bend over to put the case in her trunk she'll *accidentally* touch my ass. I wait on the next person while she pulls her vehicle up. I hand the guy his change just as the shiny, silver Hummer pulls up to the curb. Christ. These people make me sick. I carry the case out and, sure enough, her hand just happens to graze my bum as I put the wine in the back of her gas guzzling monstrosity.

"You have a good weekend," I say as I curse her under my breath. I can feel her eyes boring into me as I walk away. That brings today's count up to three yuppie flirtings, two invitations to sorority parties, and one old dude checking out my package while he signed his credit card slip. My life is a living hell.

I motion to my manager that I am going to walk to the back. I need a break from this drudgery. In the break room, I get myself some coffee and lament the long night ahead. From behind me comes a familiar whine, and I wish I hadn't come into the back room after all.

"Hey, Ian, can I get you to grab something off the top shelf?" It's Janet. I turn slowly to face her scrawny frame. She dresses like she stole her entire wardrobe from an eleven-year-old boy two sizes smaller than she is, talks a mile a minute about stuff I could never care about even if I could understand her, and stands way too close to me while she's doing it. I am only a shade taller than her at six-one, but

somehow she always needs me to *grab something off the top shelf*.

"Sure," I say with no enthusiasm at all, "What do you need?"

"The Waiters' Corkscrews. So the other night at the bar—"

And she's off. Janet's already three days into her story by the time I reach the corkscrews and standing so close that I bump her in the head with the box as I bring it off the shelf. She melodramatically falls to the floor and her glasses skitter away. I set the box aside and watch Janet grope blindly. Her straight, boring, mouse-brown hair is in her face, and I have to stifle a chuckle at her sudden resemblance to Cousin Itt. She's nowhere near her glasses, so I lean over to pick them up when I feel an odd squeezing sensation on my crotch.

"Hey!" I scream, jumping out of Janet's grip.

"Ohmygosh! I'm so sorry, Ian. I can't see a thing without my glasses!" *Yeah right*. I hand Janet back her glasses and she's still apologizing. Her beet red face and shitty smirk undermine her attempt at sincerity.

"It was an accident," I say dismissively as I hand her the corkscrews she needed so badly. She's still talking as I walk away from her. I'm furious and disgusted, but there's nothing I can do. No one saw anything and who would believe nerdy, naïve Janet would ever try something like that?

I realize that I'm grinding my teeth, and I need to calm down. I head for the men's room in the vain hope that I can get a minute or two to compose myself. I wash my hands even though I didn't use the bathroom. I close my eyes and just feel the water spilling over my hands. If only I could

wash the dirt of my life away so easily. I turn off the water and dry my hands. I don't want to stay in here too long or my hilarious fellow employees will be sure to remind me that "shaking it more than twice is playing with it."

As I walk out of the restroom, I notice my manager approaching me, so I brace myself for some reference to bodily functions. But he just cocks his thumb toward the front of the store and says, "We need somebody to ring."

That means I'll be standing at the counter waiting on customers the rest of the night while he and Janet smoke cigarettes out behind the store and bullshit. I grab my coffee and trudge to the register.

The local college has resumed classes, and there is an endless parade of underage and barely legal students trying to buy alcohol. I card one after another and have to deny half. After the last girl, an eighty-year old woman complains that I didn't card her, and I want to tell her what a shriveled, decrepit antique she is and that she hasn't seen twenty one for the better part of a century.

"Uh-oh. Don't tell my manager I let you slip by. I'll be out of a job," I say instead, smiling like I mean it and making her blush ever so slightly. I hope she isn't having a heart attack.

I get to help a few people pick out wine, which is what I truly love. We speak for awhile about the type of wine they enjoy, and I make suggestions. The last couple I assist are fond of the deep, inky reds of the real winemakers of Australia. These are the big, bold dry reds that I especially like, and I point them toward *Seduction*, a blend of Cabernet, Merlot, and Shiraz.

"It's almost black in the glass," I tell them as they examine a bottle. The bell above the entrance rings, and what I see there knocks every coherent thought from my mind. It's a guy. He's beautiful. He's Asian and tall, thin but not sickly and he moves with a casual abandon into the store. He has the adorable spiky hair of an anime character with frosted tips. My heart speeds up. He's wearing a little salmon colored T-shirt that just covers his obviously muscular stomach above a pair of tight, slightly tatty jeans that ride low enough to accentuate perfectly formed hipbones. His black eyes meet mine for a split second, and I feel something stir that shouldn't be stirring at work. I suddenly realize that the woman in front of me has asked the same question twice, and I force myself to look away from this beautiful creature to answer her.

Minutes pass, and the Asian boy continues to shop. I help other customers and make sales, but always my eyes are drawn back to him. He stands so comfortably with his vintage leather jacket draped over one thin, olive-skinned forearm. I am pulled back to my job by a pair of college students obviously not old enough to buy that bottle of Mad Dog. As I take the bottles off the counter and send them out of the store, I feel the Asian guy looking at me. As soon as I look up, he looks away. More customers come and go, and the boy is still browsing, glancing over at me and glancing away.

He finally picks up a bottle of *Seduction* and looks as if he's reading the label. I try to imagine his lips stained purple from that sublime elixir. He has been here over an hour, and I finally realize if he wants to buy that wine, I'm going to have

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to wait on him. I am going to have to ask this amazing being for his ID. I'll be able to find out where he's from, where he lives, maybe even what he's doing later. It suddenly occurs to me I'll also have to talk to him. My throat dries out instantly. I swallow and hear a click. So I take a sip of coffee while I observe him over the top of the mug.

He walks slowly up and down the aisles while I wait on more customers, carry wine out to cars and point them in the direction of the Bourbon section. He's dragging this out so long. I can't stand it. I'm going to walk over there and talk to him. I'll ask him if I can help him find something. It won't seem suspicious. We ask people that question all day.

I'm just working up the courage when a fat lady decides she just has to have a pint of Nikolai now. I take her four dollars and twenty three cents—It always amazes me they aren't ashamed to have the exact amount in hand.—before telling her to have a nice night, silently adding 'passed out drunk on the couch,' and move around the counter. An elderly fellow intercepts me, and I lose sight of the pretty Asian.

This is maddening. I am listening to this little, old man bemoan the rise in the price of Manischewitz since 1942, and all I want to do is find the boy and talk to him. The old man takes his change and heads for the door, still complaining.

When I turn back, I find myself staring into almond eyes that seem to disappear as the young man smiles. I realize he has been waiting for us to be alone. There are no other customers that I can see or hear. The store is unusually silent. I try to sound witty and comfortable, but I'm not. I feel a thin layer of sweat break free of my pores.

"Hel-lo. Howsitgoin?" I stammer. He nods and smiles.

"Okay, thank you," he says as he lets out a faint puff of breath that might be a laugh and smells like ginger. He places the bottle of *Seduction* on the counter. I reach for it and brush his skin. Instantly, I become aroused and thank fate for the counter I'm standing behind. I grip the bottle around the neck, wishing desperately that this wasn't a bottle but the beautiful young man and that we were anywhere but here. My pants feel increasingly tighter. I keep thinking of him as a boy because he's so flawless and clean-shaven, but he holds himself with maturity and confidence. I decide I had better card him, just in case.

"Do you have ID?" I ask, trying not to sound harsh. He looks at me, nods, and smiles again.

"Okay. Thank you," he repeats. My stomach flips and I realize he can't speak English. I try again just to make sure.

"Can I see your identification?" This time he shakes his spiky head just a little and shrugs. "Driver's license? Passport?" I can't make him understand me. By law, I can't serve him now. If I ask for ID and the customer doesn't have it, I cannot serve that person.

Beautiful boy or not, I am having a serious moral dilemma. I should never have asked him in the first place. I should have sold him his bottle and sent him on his way. I still can, since there's no one here. I can still salvage this. No sooner do I think that than Dan comes whistling up from the back room. His three hour cigarette break is finally over.

"I'm sorry. If you don't have ID, I can't serve you," I tell the boy as I pull the bottle off the counter, just as we are

trained to do. The look on his face is painful. It's as if I attacked him personally. His entire body seems to despair. "I'm sorry," I repeat and he turns toward the door. I watch his back the whole way out.

"You never say yer sorry." It's Dan. "Especially to those fuckers. If they can't learn the language, they shouldn't oughta be here. Look. The freak dropped somethin'."

Dan bends down, picks up a piece of paper and hands it to me. "Throw this out."

I look at it first. It's a little scrap of paper with an address on it. That unbelievable creature was going to give me his address. I suddenly realize my other hand is still on the bottle caressing the length of it slowly. I pull my hand away quickly before Dan can see what I'm doing and decide what to do next.

It's finally the end of my shift. I'm standing in line with the same bottle that I refused to sell to the pretty Asian. I can't believe I'm about to buy this wine and take it to a complete stranger's address. He doesn't even speak English. I'm not sure if I can make him understand my intentions. I'm not even sure what my intentions are.

"Thirteen, seventy-seven," Janet tells me, having finally come out of the back room. "What lucky girl are you going to share this bottle with?" she asks, clueless as ever.

"I'm just going to go home and relax," I lie. Maybe it's a lie. I haven't decided whether I'll go through with this or not.

"Well, if you get lonely, you can give me a call. I don't have any plans."

"I'll keep that in mind," I say as I take my change. *Not bloody likely.* I can hear her start to drone at the next customer and wince a little on the way to my car, a beat-up Volkswagen Bug that's mostly black with a couple of patches here and there. I wonder as I get in what my Asian stranger would think of it, and I feel the blood flow almost instantly to my erection. I take the address out and look at it again. I know it's an apartment building downtown. I start the car and pull out of the parking lot, heading in that direction.

The ten minute drive gives me time to consider my actions. If any of my co-workers were to find out that I bought a bottle to give to someone I denied earlier, I could lose my job. I could be fined. If someone really wanted to be a prick, I could go to jail. I don't know what I'm expecting that will be worth all those risks, but thinking about his face, it all seems inconsequential. I would suffer that and more to feel his golden lips on mine. Besides, I tell myself, there's almost no chance any of those brain-dead hicks at work will figure out what I'm doing, let alone be able to prove it if they do.

There it is. For the most part, it's totally nondescript: an old building but not very ornate. It's in the historic district of town, so the owner gave the outside a splash of garish paint to make it stand out next to the Victorian mansions and truly beautiful buildings around it. I grip the steering wheel and turn off the engine. I close my eyes, take a deep breath and steel myself for what I am about to do.

As ready as I can be, I grab the bottle and get out of my car without locking the door and head for the building. There

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is an intercom by the door with fifteen buttons and corresponding name tags. I find apartment eleven and look at the name by the button: Song, Ping-Lang. That has to be him. I have no idea what to say after I push that button. Will he even be able to understand me? What if he isn't here? I have no idea if he came home after he left my store.

My thoughts are interrupted by a couple of college girls that open the door and walk out. They're laughing and walking down the sidewalk as I catch the door before it closes. I go in and head for the third floor. There's an elevator but I take the stairs to give myself some extra time. With each step, my heart beats a little bit faster. If I were a poet and not a liquor store clerk, I might say my pulse quickened. I smile at that. I won't be a liquor store clerk forever. My paintings will start to sell, and then I won't have to put up with the bull crap any longer. Maybe I'll have a beautiful Asian boyfriend to share my artistic success with me.

By the time I have begun imagining our future together, I reach the door of apartment eleven. There's a peep hole just above the numbers, making me wonder what he'll think when he sees me, if he's home. I raise my hand and knock gently twice. I can hear faint music through the door but nothing else. The minutes stretch. I knock again, slightly harder. It feels like eternity passes in the time I stand there.

I decide he isn't home after all, and just as I turn to leave, there is the click and drag of a lock being turned. I look quickly back at the door. A warm, unsteady light spills out, and standing in the doorway, silhouetted by candlelight and

naked to the waist is Ping-Lang. I try to swallow, but my throat has gone desert dry in a split second.

He smiles and I hold out the bottle in reply, noticing his bare feet, the toe nails painted a sparkling deep blue. I regain my voice, worried that he might think I'm some kind of psycho, guessing that might be the reason it took him so long to answer the door. Maybe he was deciding if I was safe. I manage a choked hello. He lays his hand on mine and pulls me into the apartment.

I introduce myself as we move inside. "My name's Ian," I say laying a hand on my chest. He imitates the gesture.

"My name is Ping-Lang," he says, as though he's rehearsed it many times. "This for me?" he asks.

I nod, and he gently takes the bottle from my hand as he closes the door. There are what seem like a million candles lit all around the room. He gestures to a small couch and walks into the kitchenette as I sit down. The music is something classical, Bach or Beethoven, I'm not sure. He hums softly along as he opens the bottle. I feel a wave of unreality wash over me as I sit looking around the room.

It's obvious he recently moved in. There are stacks of books and a few cardboard boxes pushed back along the wall. I notice a thin mattress rolled up in a corner. He opens a cupboard, takes out glasses and closes it. There isn't a television here. He has a drawing table by the window. I walk over to it and look at the papers strewn about. I'm looking at pencil sketches when I notice a booklet just under a picture of a thin, naked woman. I lift the drawing, uncovering his

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passport. I check the birth date and am relieved to find out he's actually the same age as I am.

His hand lands on my shoulder, and I jump. I hold up the picture of the woman and say, "These are very good."

His smile grows so large his eyes all but disappear as he takes my hand again, this time leading me over to the couch. There is a tray on the table in front of the couch with the wine and some little, golden ginger chews. I sit down, and he sits very close, facing me with one leg folded under his bottom and the other on the floor. He picks up both glasses and hands me one. I swirl the wine around and smell it as they taught us in wine class.

I can feel his eyes on me. When I look over, he is smiling, swirling and smelling also. I smile back and hold my glass out to him. The glasses clink together, and we both sip cautiously. The wine tastes like plums, cloves, and currant. He smiles and licks his lips.

I can feel my erection straining against my pant leg, much too warm against my skin. He takes another sip, and I can see that the wine is already staining the little bow of his lips, making me lick my own lips. He seems to respond to that and moves slightly closer, never taking his eyes off me. I take another, larger sip of wine and feel his fingers in my long hair. He pulls one of the ringlet curls and watches it bounce back. He chuckles almost silently and drains the rest of his wine. He places his glass back on the tray and shifts on the couch, moving closer to me, putting his hand on my thigh, where he finds the firmness of my erection.

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His eyes widen a little and with the hand in my hair, he pulls me closer to him. I can feel the heat of his breath between his slightly parted lips and smell the wine and that hint of ginger I smelled before. His eyes are closed, and I let him pull me the rest of the way to where our lips meet.

His lips are moist, and they slide easily over mine. His mouth opens a little more, and I send my tongue in just far enough to see if it will be welcomed. It is, and his own tongue moves to meet mine and then beyond to trace my teeth. His hand is lightly rubbing my stiffness while his fingers work to get a better grip on my hair. He kisses me harder, with more urgency, and our teeth scrape together, sending an electrical tingle all over my body.

I realize I'm still holding my glass, and I put it down so I can touch him. I shift on the couch and lean back. He pulls himself on top of me, and I can finally feel his excitement as well. My hands trace his smooth chest as he rubs his crotch against mine. I can feel the first drops of moisture on the inside of my pants. I rub my hand against the back of his head where it's shaved and enjoy the sensation, sitting up to put my mouth on his bare nipple, which grows hard as a pebble against the tip of my tongue. When I pull back, I can see my saliva glistening there and I blow on it just a little.

He moans deep in his throat and pushes me gently back by my shoulders. He takes off my tie and begins to unbutton my shirt. I rub his muscular thighs as he finally works my dress shirt off. I pull my undershirt off quickly, and he dives down, kissing the line of my jaw, moving down my neck to my Adam's apple where he stops and tenderly sucks.

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My pelvis gently rocks against him, and his mouth travels down my torso, sucking here, biting there. He pauses at my nipple, pinching it gently with his teeth at first and then increasing the pressure. My hands are buried deep in his spiky hair, and I gasp as his fingers tweak the nipple his mouth is not working on. He laughs and looks up at me from my chest as if to get permission to continue. I nod, and he begins to unbuckle my belt. In no time, he has my pants and briefs completely off, and I am lying naked while he stands back to admire me.

Normally, I don't like to be looked upon in any state of undress, but I can almost feel the gentle caress of his eyes, and I love it. He bends down, moving swiftly towards my engorged member, but I stop him with a foot on his shoulder. I push him away gently, and he stands up, looking worried. I smile and stand myself, hooking a finger into the waistband of his pants. I press my naked body against his and kiss his ear as I move my hands around to his back, plunging them into the back of his pants. He wears nothing underneath, and I grab his ass firmly. His body arches to me, and he gasps as I slide his pants to his ankles in one movement.

As I return to the couch, I take in the entire form of this naked man. Each portion of his body flows smoothly into the next. He is virtually hairless, I notice, except for a small patch just above his cock, which stands erect and throbbing slightly with each of his heartbeats. It is an impressive size by anyone's standards, and there is a pearl of precum waiting on the tip. I reach out with my finger and retrieve it. A thin

thread connects my finger to his cock for a split second before it breaks.

As I taste the tiny amount of nectar on my finger, Ping-Lang lunges forward, and I feel his warm, wet mouth envelope my cock. He takes the entire length into his mouth, and I can feel the back of his throat. He does not gag at all. Slowly, so slowly, he lets it slip out as he raises his head. Only the tip is in his mouth now, and I'm sure he will stop, but he plunges back down to the very base of my shaft. His tongue undulates against the belly of my cock and then finds the groove where the head meets the shaft, tracing back and forth. I can barely take it. I think I'll explode when he stops abruptly.

He stands up and walks over to the mattress rolled up in the corner, unrolls it, and spreads it on the floor. He puts two pillows on it and beckons me. I stand up and move over to him, embracing him and pulling him towards me. Our erections bump against each other, and he takes both into the curve of his fist and holds them flat together. The movement is intoxicating as we kiss. He pulls his lower lip out of my mouth with a pop and kneels down on the mattress. He rests on his hands, presenting himself to me. Even though no word has passed between us, I know exactly what he wants.

I kneel down behind him, reaching up between his legs to gather his balls in my hand. I press the tip of my finger ever so slightly on the rim of his anus. His body stiffens in anticipation. I lean over and place my lips on his lower back as my other hand gently strokes his penis. I trace my tongue down his back to his smooth crack. I kiss one cheek and then

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the other. I take my hand from his balls and spread his well formed ass cheeks slightly. I use my tongue to gently infiltrate his warm, expectant hole. He moans as I slide my tongue inside him. He presses back against my face and I push further in. I slide my tongue out but am not ready to penetrate him fully, although he obviously wants it.

I urge him over onto his back, sliding down between his legs, taking his cock into my mouth as I slip a finger inside his hole already slick with my own saliva. Slowly I ease up and down the length of his shaft as he rocks against me. I slip a second finger into him so he will be ready for me and he pulls my face up to kiss me. His tongue plunges into my mouth as my fingers plunge into him. Neither of us can hold back any longer.

He reaches over next to the bed and brings back a tiny bottle of lube. He rubs it on me and himself as he kisses me, smiling. I hover outside of his slick pucker only a fraction of a second before I ease the tip of my cock against and then into him. I don't want to hurt him, but he clutches my ass and pulls me hard against him.

I thrust deeper and he sinks his teeth into my shoulder. I can barely contain my orgasm now, and I am thrusting vigorously into him. He's muttering words I can't understand but that excite me even more for that fact. I begin to stroke him, and our bodies move in unison. I feel his slick semen coating my palm and his shaft just before his cock bucks in my hand and his seed shoots out onto his chest and stomach. It is all I can stand, shooting my own seed into his tight hole.

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We are both spent but continue to move against one another. He whispers my name, and I answer with his. I ease myself out of him, and he says something else in his language, smiling with his eyes closed. I kiss each one in turn and say softly, "You're an amazing lover, Ping-Lang. I wish I could tell you how wonderful you are."

He rolls to his side and pulls my arm over his body so I spoon up behind him. "Okay. Thank you, Ian," he says dreamily.

"We're going to have to work on your English." It's the last thing either of us says as sleep envelopes us.

* * * *

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The Personal is Political

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The arrival of the Prime Minister of Canada at Heathrow Airport in June 2013 brought out bigger crowds than anyone there could remember.

The shiny black limousine rolled through the London mist, flying a cheerful red-and-white flag like a handkerchief with a maple leaf design. Civilians of all shapes, sizes, and colors jostled members of several armed forces, who were there to keep pedestrians off the road. "We love you, Canada!" yelled a woman with a voice like a foghorn. A crudely handwritten sign saying "Maggie Crapper, yur full of shite" bobbed and fell sideways as the young man who held it was pushed to the back of the crowd.

Since the surprise victory of the Social Democratic Party in the latest Canadian federal election, the Canadian press had wallowed in references to its leader's famous ancestor, English inventor of the flush toilet. Some journalists said that Margaret Crapper was brave to keep her family name, while some implied that it contributed to Canada's status as a joke in the rest of the world. Hardly anyone suggested that her wife Paulette should give up her own name, Frisson, although Conservatives kept dropping hints in the Canadian House of Commons that if Paulette really loved Margaret, let alone her country, she would quietly disappear.

The limousine pulled up to the entrance of Buckingham Palace, where Margaret and Paulette and their entourage

were invited to the traditional visiting dignitaries' luncheon in the Bow Room.

Paulette sighed. Her scalp itched under her thick, dark shoulder-length hair and black straw hat. She was a 45-year-old professor of history in a small Canadian university. She had never planned to become the Consort (a title chosen in preference to First Lady) when her first political argument with Margaret had turned into an all-night filibuster that segued into passionate sex.

Paulette reminded herself that the sacrifices she was making were nothing compared to those of the Feminist Martyr whose death a century before would be honored by the whole world, starting at dawn the next day. A skipping-rope rhyme from Paulette's childhood bounced into her head:

*Emily Davison ran on the track,
Grabbed the horsey's bridle and tack.
Horsey trampled over her back.
How many tramples did she get?
One (whack of the rope on the ground), two (whack),
three (whack)...*

What a sadistic little ditty, thought Paulette. She remembered the sepia-toned photos of a small, pitiful shape in a rumpled white gown, curled into various positions on the ground as horses reared nearby, bewildered and panicky as domesticated animals tend to be when their routine is disrupted.

Paulette had spent her whole adult life trying to understand the motives of dead people, including Emily Wilding Davison, devout worker for the Women's Social and

Political Union, which eventually won English women the right to vote. Emily had been carrying the purple, green, and white flag of the WSPU when she threw herself—or tripped and fell—in front of the King's racehorse at Epsom racetrack in 1913.

A thought jumped into Paulette's mind: *What if Margaret gets killed in the same place? What would the photographers capture if she were attacked by the force of bullets or the rage of a man?*

"Smile, honey." Margaret nudged Paulette, who immediately remembered where she was. She reached up to hold her hat in place for the cameras as she reached down to make sure her blue geometric-print silk dress covered her knees. She felt too fleshy to look dignified on TV, but she thought it better to show cleavage than a flash of bulging knees, given the choice. Paulette had chosen her ensemble to compliment the ivory raw-silk pantsuit that skimmed Margaret's elegantly tall, slim body and her matching three-cornered hat.

Paulette thought Margaret's look was too suggestive of the reign of mad King George and the rebellious American colonies, but all the fashion magazines were touting three-cornered hats as the latest in retro-chic, and Margaret did not want to seem out of the loop.

Paulette hoped that her own look wouldn't attract sarcasm from the British tabloid press. Margaret loved to see Paulette's curves spilling out of her black satin merry widow or lacy red set of bra, thong and garter belt, and Paulette loved to wear the slutty lingerie that Margaret liked. *Who*

else, thought Paulette, would grin at me like that, instead of laughing?

Paulette believed that she had to keep all her sheer, shiny, or lacy underthings well covered-up in public. There were no role-models for her to follow as first lesbian Consort, so she made up her own style, intended to fend off ridicule. She wondered whether any self-respecting member of the left wing of the Social Democratic Party could play that role well.

Margaret smiled blandly at Prime Minister Reginald Peek, leader of the British Conservative Party, the female friend who usually appeared with him in public, King Charles and Queen Camilla. Margaret almost ignored the stiff man in a suit who gripped her hand to help her rise out of the limousine. Paulette was trying to emerge as gracefully as Venus from the waves when the whirr of a helicopter distracted the audience.

Shouts rose as eggs fell like messy little bombs from the helicopter, followed by dozens of flyers which instantly dampened in the humid air. "Wildings!" yelled several onlookers, sounding more impressed than alarmed. Paulette was grateful that no one in a uniform opened fire.

Margaret snatched a whirling flyer while dropping a brief curtsy to the King and Queen. She had spent her youth playing basketball, and it showed. "Men have rights too," she read aloud then smiled into the nearest television camera.

"Of course!" laughed Margaret. "The government of Canada supports the rights of all people. We follow the tradition of British Common Law." She implied that egg slime on her clothes was a small price to pay for universal rights.

Clever all around, thought Paulette. *No one here could take offense at that little speech. But the Wildings want to be known as the voice of martyred men, while reminding the public that they can strike anyone, anywhere, at any time.* She knew that their choice of Emily Davison's middle name was not a coincidence.

Paulette was familiar with their philosophy. It was no different from that of the Free Men who were wildly popular on university campuses in Canada and the U.S. "Why can't men be men?" male students would ask her, shifting or pacing like caged animals. "If you really believe in equal rights, how can you expect guys to take a back seat to girls?"

Most of them were sheltered middle-class boys who believed that they were less likely to get scholarships or prestigious jobs than their female classmates. Some of the male rebels in Paulette's classes were young refugees from poor neighborhoods who were determined to move out of there at any cost and not to accept sexual rejection or disrespect in any other form.

Most of the young men in her life blamed their own disappointments, all current wars, and the destruction of the natural world on the unnatural rise of women since their grandfathers' time. They yearned for a general return to common sense, and they expected Paulette to agree with them until they decided that she was ruled by her female hormones rather than her brain.

Paulette watched the helicopter speeding toward the horizon like a rogue dragonfly dodging a predator. The short,

balding Prime Minister welcomed Margaret without acknowledging her spouse or the Wilding raid.

King Charles welcomed Margaret with a smile, and gamely added, "We must all beware of helicopters bearing gifts."

Paulette knew that the Wildings called him a house-broken husband and a tragic symbol of the conquered men of the twenty-first century. She wondered if all kings with that name were under a curse. Most of the crowd wandered away, wiping their clothes with whatever came to hand.

The luncheon was a predictable three-course affair. Paulette was seated across from Margaret, according to custom, and suffered gamely through it.

During a post-luncheon tour of one of the palace gardens, Paulette managed to insert herself next to Margaret for a private conversation. "Marg," she asked quietly, "are you worried about Epsom? Could you find an excuse not to go?"

"Fuck, Pauly," Margaret whispered in her ear. "You can't be serious. We came here for that. Number one, we both have to show our respect for Emily Davison, Mother of Women's Rights. Number two, we can't look like chickenshit femmy colonials. We're statespeople from the True North or we're nothing."

Paulette was miserably aware of the logic of that argument. Image was everything. "Sure," she snarked. "Better to be martyrs than hicks from the sticks, eh? And Goddess forbid we should look feminine."

"Pauly, you know—"

"Yes, I know. Have there been any threats? That you've heard of?"

"Yes, from the usual suspects. That's why we have to be there, rain or shine. Pauly, I need you to be with me on this."

"Oh, I am, Marg. I've been crazy enough to come this far. I just don't want to see—you know."

Margaret wrapped an arm around Paulette's shoulders and squeezed, ignoring the chorus of surrounding photographers clicking in unison. "I know, honey. I know."

Margaret and the British P.M.—known as Reggie to his tricks, allies, and corporate patrons—had both consented to an in-depth interview in the studio of a major television station later in the afternoon. As Paulette fidgeted in a viewing room, Margaret was ushered into a stage-set parlor where a young woman posed self-mockingly in a large red three-cornered hat with an ostrich plume atop curly blonde hair, a clingy V-necked blouse, and the ruffled trousers that were known as the signature of a certain French designer.

"Welcome to *A Friendly World!*" bubbled program host Felicity Friend. Margaret's eyes narrowed briefly. "It's such an honor to have two important world leaders in our studio today!" Felicity seemed to aim her cleavage at Margaret without looking her in the eyes. She nodded almost imperceptibly at Reginald.

Felicity wasted no time. She explained to her viewers that Prime Minister Crapper had traveled a long way to attend the opening of the Derby, which would also be the hundredth anniversary of the death of the suffragette leader who died so that all women might be free. She asked Margaret whether she had to attend many horse races in the line of duty. Margaret couldn't think of a sufficiently witty response.

Felicity carried on. "Minister Crapper, we understand that your unfortunate nation is on the brink of civil war. Do you feel that your unorthodox—erm—marriage has offended French-speaking Canadians? Aren't most of them Catholic?"

Margaret reminded Felicity and her viewers that same-sex marriage was legal in Canada, that the election process had been democratic and above criticism, that conflict between French and English Canada could be traced back to the British conquest of 1759, and that her wife was, in fact, of French-Canadian descent.

Felicity beamed with delight at being offered so many avenues for humiliating her guest. To show her impartiality, she asked Reginald whether recent rumors about him and several male models had damaged his popularity with voters. He responded that he always declined to answer personal questions because his constituents valued privacy—his and their own—and deplored the tasteless practice of inviting the press to follow one into the loo. He and Felicity shared a laugh, looking at Margaret.

"Privacy," Margaret responded, emphasizing the long 'i' sound, "is simply the efficient disposal of embarrassing material which does not disappear on its own."

Felicity fairly cooed. The look she gave Margaret was inviting and provoking, as though she wanted to lure Margaret into a bout of mud-wrestling. She sneeringly referred to several Canadian government scandals from before Margaret's time. She went on to say that it must be hard to govern a multi-cultural Tower of Babel.

Like the 'United Kingdom?' thought Paulette, wishing she could simply barge into the interview space, preferably flanked by some wild-eyed Celtic nationalists in traditional war paint. Felicity asked why Canada's aboriginal population was largely exiled to the wilderness while homosexuals were encouraged to adopt innocent children from poorer countries.

Each answer from Margaret led to more questions. Why did the Canadian government refuse to help Britain and the United States *manage* the Middle East for its own good? Was it true that Canada was a haven for international criminals?

Margaret returned the challenge in Felicity's eyes, but she struggled to sound both prepared and spontaneous. Paulette struggled to restrain the urge to strangle Felicity.

Reginald, in his turn, showed that he had learned how to control his vocabulary and his speaking tone since his first one-sided adolescent crush on an upper classman in a school for the sons of the corporate rich. Reginald waxed emotional about the "less fortunate," the young, the old, and the time-honored institution of The British Family, which consisted of parents and their children. He repeatedly declined to answer personal questions, claiming that the focus of the interview should be on more important issues.

Too soon Margaret, Paulette, and Reginald were being separately escorted past rival crowds of picketers with signs reading "Felicity Fuck-Em, Get Off the Tube," illustrated with a crude image of a woman with exaggerated curves being thrown off a train, "Welcome, P.M. Crapper and Wife," and "Keep Canadian Perversion Where It Belongs."

As soon as they were out of earshot, Margaret admitted to Paulette that the interview had been an ambush, a fox hunt, and a train wreck.

Paulette dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief—tissues being considered environmentally unfriendly—until it was too wet to do any good, and then she simply let the tears wash away her makeup. "A lot of people must have known what that bitch was planning to do. They let you walk right into it."

"It comes with the job," Margaret reminded her. "I've never been good at one-line retorts, and I won't borrow brother Peek's act, so I was vulnerable. I need more practice before the next public spectacle. It's war out there, but it wasn't personal, honey. Think about it. Our girl Felicity probably doesn't get enough good sex."

Paulette rolled her eyes. "She's probably getting it from the media mogul who gave her a platform. Same as Reggie-boy. They'd probably do each other on prime-time TV if they thought it would help ratings and votes."

"But would they really get into it, my dear wife? That is the question." Margaret scooped Paulette into her arms in the relative privacy of the limousine. Like a gentleman, Margaret removed her hat before kissing her distraught spouse, whose own squashable straw headpiece rested in her lap.

Paulette responded in spite of herself. Margaret usually had that effect on her.

Margaret gently withdrew when they were within sight of the palace, where they were expected for tea. "Hold that thought," said Margaret. "They have to let us go to bed some time."

"Oh," complained Paulette. Much as she craved the comfort of Margaret's sure touch and the familiar taste of her skin and her fluids, she wanted to continue reading the letters of Emily Davison and her own irresistible lover, Christabel Pankhurst. Paulette felt privileged to have received this treasure-trove via email from a male historian at Oxford who seemed to regard Paulette as the ideal recipient. So far, he was unable to find a British publisher.

Margaret seemed to read her mind. "Maybe I'll just ravish you while you're reading. It might enhance the experience."

Paulette laughed, breathing in the light musk of Margaret's sweat. "Maybe I need a little distraction." *How unfair*, thought Paulette, *that she should have to comfort me. But she's still high on adrenalin, and I'm the one who had to watch her being publicly attacked.* Paulette vaguely remembered the slogan "From each according to her ability, to each according to her need," and decided that it applied well enough to the mini-society of a marriage.

Tea seemed less formal to Paulette than the luncheon, largely because the King, Queen, and Prime Minister were all absent. Paulette almost missed the King and Queen, who seemed to her like seasoned survivors of the slings and arrows of the British media. No one mentioned Margaret's interview on *A Friendly World*, and the silence was deafening. Paulette forced herself to eat, and spoke only when spoken to.

At length, Margaret and Paulette retired to the suite assigned to them. "Jesus, Marg!" Paulette burst out when they were alone. "I thought I knew about the English stiff

upper lip, but these people wouldn't offer you a glass of water if your hair was on fire. Quebec has its problems, but none of us would treat you like this."

"Probably not, honey. Not the ones in your family, anyway. Did you read all the signs when we were leaving the TV studio? Did you read the article in *People-Watch* magazine? It claimed that young people all over the world who want to escape from cultures dominated by old men are thinking of moving to Canada because it has such a hip, modern image—mostly because of us. It claimed we're typical of a generation of women in positions of power in the industrialized world."

"Mmm, I should have read it. I will read it—even if it's written for ten-year-olds—as soon as I've finished reading Emily Davison's letters. Oh Marg, you should read them. The real woman is so much more interesting than the saintly teacher and organizer we all learned about in school. I can't believe no one cracked the code of her letters before Robin Digwell."

"Your buddy at Oxford?"

Paulette knew that Margaret wasn't really interested in revisionist research. She was breathing down Paulette's neck as she held her from behind and tweaked her plump nipples through her dress. "Read me, honey," said Margaret. "Read my fingers and my arms and my mouth and my wet twat and my hot breath." She stuck a tongue in Paulette's ear. "I'm not in code."

Margaret wanted to shift Paulette's attention, and she did. Once again, she enabled Paulette to feel voluptuous and desirable and glad to be where she was at that very moment.

Both women were well aware that the past is every historian's Demon Lover, especially when dressed up in seductive new clothes. Sometimes Paulette loved being seduced into staying present in the here and now.

Paulette turned to face Margaret. The heels of Paulette's shoes didn't seem high enough, so she stood on tiptoes to reach Margaret's mouth. Paulette kissed her fervently, prompting Margaret to make a sound in her throat and hold her wife tightly enough to keep her at the right level.

Paulette's nipples were still very alert from Margaret's attention. "Too many clothes," mumbled Paulette, and Margaret certainly agreed with her.

Margaret turned Paulette around to unzip her dress, and Paulette let it drop to the carpet, pushing her half-slip down with it. Paulette let Margaret's gaze linger on her turquoise satin bra with matching panties and garter belt before she pulled everything off to expose her hungry skin to the air.

Margaret had already shed her suit-jacket, but Paulette knew that she was more efficient at such things, so she took over the job of getting her spouse out of her clothing as quickly and neatly as possible. In a trice, both women were rolling naked on a bedspread, feeling like naughty children.

"D'you think—" gasped Paulette, "Felicity Friend wanted you to slap her? I think she was flirting in that 'shut me up' way."

Margaret snickered. "If so, she was out of luck. I already have a luscious wife." She ran her hands possessively through Paulette's hair, claiming its silkiness. Paulette reached for Margaret's small breasts, not wanting them to feel neglected.

Margaret held Paulette's wrists and gently pushed her down on the bed. "Just let me this time, honey. All right?"

Paulette moaned, sinking into the mood as though into a pile of swan's-down. "In that case, Mistress, will you use the cuffs?"

"Oh, baby, I didn't bring them. I didn't think we could run the risk of any of our toys being found here. How's this? You have to hold onto the bed frame and if you let go, you'll be punished." Despite her tone of command, Margaret looked concerned. Paulette knew that she was the one person Margaret could afford to trust completely. Margaret didn't want to lose a particle of Paulette's trust in her.

"Yes, Ma'am." Paulette gracefully reached up beyond her own head to find the bed frame and curl her fingers around it. "Forgive me for asking you to expose yourself to your enemies. This hopeless girl needs to be put in her place." Paulette wiggled her hips as vigorously as possible in a horizontal position. "I'm such a slut I can't behave properly."

Margaret guffawed. "A minute ago, I could hardly lure you away from Emily Davison. You probably do need a reminder of what I want from you. Mmm. You're asking for it." Margaret nuzzled Paulette's pillowy breasts, then licked a wet ring around the nipples before sucking and nibbling them.

Margaret's tongue left a wet trail down Paulette's sensitive, gurgling midriff to her deeply-indented belly button. Margaret ran her hands firmly down Paulette's sides, then tickled her tummy, challenging her to resist the impulse to let go of the bed frame.

Paulette squirmed, laughed, and rose to the challenge. She wondered how long it would take her spouse to find out how wet she was between her legs.

Margaret hovered like a bee circling a flower. She stroked Paulette's plump thighs, held them apart, and dipped an experimental tongue between Paulette's outer lips. Margaret nipped at the tender ivory skin above the curly brown bush which glistened with moisture.

"Mistress."

Margaret grinned. "What do you want, baby? Tell me."

"I want to be fucked."

"By just anyone? Should I bring in one of the maids?"

"I want you to fuck me, Ma'am. My cunt is starving."

"Maybe I should come in somewhere else first." Margaret tickled Paulette's puckered asshole with a long finger. "This opening has been neglected for awhile."

Paulette continued to squirm and Margaret continued to tease until she eased two fingers into the deep, narrow channel of Paulette's sex. Her fingers made a slurping sound that satisfied both women.

With tidal slowness, Margaret pushed in and withdrew, in and out as though she couldn't imagine a reason to speed up. Paulette squeezed, pumped, and wrapped her legs around Margaret's waist.

Margaret disentangled herself, casually stood up, and reached for her purse. She returned to bend over Paulette with something in her hands.

Before Paulette knew what to expect, a small vibrator was pressing against her clit, sending its hum all through her

liquid insides. Margaret reinserted her fingers, anchoring Paulette in place to accept the sweet torture.

"Oh!" Paulette immediately clamped her upper lips together to hold in all the wild sounds she wanted to make. She clung to the bed frame like a shipwrecked survivor clinging to a life raft. Her hips jerked as her sex spasmed. "You said no toys!" She was desperately trying to keep her voice low.

"None except this one. It's a conventional household item, don't you think?"

An image of Margaret in a courtroom, functioning as Crown Prosecutor, flashed into Paulette's mind. Margaret had been good at leading the jury down one path, then veering onto another, keeping the defense off-guard. She was a wily strategist on her own turf, and Paulette had learned to love her ways of stalking and capturing an elusive victory.

Paulette dropped her aching arms to wrap them around her spouse, who didn't object. Margaret lowered herself onto Paulette, using her elbows. Then she placed her warm mouth onto Paulette's, resting her lips there for a moment before sliding her tongue into Paulette's mouth.

Margaret pulled back to admire Paulette's flushed face. "You're so beautiful when you come."

"You're so good, honey. Ma'am. Your Eminence."

Margaret laughed and wedged a knee between her wife's thighs as a reminder of what she could do.

They lay together, listening to each other breathe. Reluctantly, they both became aware of other sounds beyond the door of their guest bedroom.

"Marg? Do you need something?"

"No." Margaret cupped one of Paulette's breasts as though to comfort her. "Just this."

"Don't you need my mouth? I want to taste you."

Margaret slid up Paulette's body until she was straddling her neck. Paulette slid down until she was directly beneath Margaret's fragrant cleft. She gently opened it with both hands and aimed her tongue into its wetness.

Margaret was so aroused that her slick folds reacted like a sensitive clam. When Paulette sucked a swollen button of flesh into her mouth, she seemed to set off an undersea earthquake. Margaret's release was intense, but the only sound she made was a series of loudly exhaled breaths.

Paulette liked having a wet face that smelled of the woman she still thought of as her girlfriend. She pressed herself against Margaret, who rolled and shifted and pulled with both arms until Paulette settled her head between Margaret's shoulder and chin.

She has too much pride, thought Paulette. She wasn't going to tell me she needed to come, too. That's logical after what she's gone through today. But according to the ancient Greeks, hubris in a mortal leader brings down the wrath of the gods. The ones no one believes in any more.

Paulette lay still, listening to the sounds of two bodies pressed together and the slight friction of the bedding beneath them. At length, Margaret's breathing grew deeper and more regular.

Paulette couldn't sleep. Robin Digwell's unbound manuscript called to her from an adjoining room, like a magic bottle labeled "Drink Me."

The illustrations were a poignant set of images: a photo of the plain, thin-featured Emily Davison as an undergraduate at Oxford, which did not grant degrees to women. Emily as a governess with her pupils. Emily as a full-time suffragette, carrying the flag of the Women's Social and Political Union in a march, circa 1910. A photo showing the elegant profile of Christabel Pankhurst, an Edwardian beauty in chignon and hat, interrupting a meeting of the Liberal Party to demand votes for women. A newspaper artist's sketch of Christabel flanked by her firm-jawed mother Emmeline, approximately Paulette's current age, and her sister Sylvia, all in a courtroom.

Paulette inched her way out of Margaret's arms and slid out of bed. Her sweat had dried, leaving her skin clammy, so she quietly opened a closet, pulled out her bathrobe and wrapped it around herself.

Paulette enjoyed the softness of the carpet under her feet as she padded into the adjoining room, where the manuscript waited for her in a suitcase.

She settled herself into an armchair, turned on a lamp, and read "November 20, 1912" on the topmost page. She had already read quite a few of Robin Digwell's translations of the language-for-two—a mishmash of Latin, French, Gaelic and contemporary slang—that Emily and Christabel had used for their most private messages.

"My darling Christabel," the letter read, "You know how terribly I long to see you! I pray that God will keep you safe in Paris until you can come back to me." Paulette hoped that Emily hadn't been praying to an Old Testament patriarchal God of wrath.

She read on: *"I can not leave now when every one of us is needed for the struggle. Do not worry about Mary. I am sure she has no suspicion about us. She is very concerned about Emmeline's health. Our General continues to refuse food each time she is taken back to prison, and this is more dangerous for a woman of her age than it is for the younger ones."*

Paulette skimmed over a few lines describing a rainy English winter until she reached the closing: *"All the love in the world from your shield-bearer, Emily."*

Christabel's response followed. *"My Emily," it read, "You must take better care of your own health. Ill soldiers can not win battles. Please do not do anything without speaking to the rest of the executive. We must act together if we wish to be seen as a united force. Fight on and God will give the victory."*

Paulette recognized the slogan of Joan of Arc, a favorite with Emily. Of course, Christabel had planted it in Emily's mind when she was in exile in France, hiding out from English law. The letter was signed, *"Your Christabel."*

Paulette's heart ached. Christabel had never been as selfless or as fanatical as Emily. Maybe that was why Christabel, known as "Queen of the Mob," had been drawn to little Emily, humble worker bee. Mistress and maid.

Paulette skimmed over letters from Emily about the fate of sister-members of the WSPU, and shorter letters from Christabel about the support she was gaining in France. At length, Paulette reached Christabel's letter to Emily dated June 1, 1913. It was chillingly direct:

"Dear Emily,

This letter is difficult for me to write. Count Mille-Chevres has asked me to marry him, and I have accepted him. You know how good he is because I have described him to you. I can not ignore such a clear sign from God that I have been called to a position of influence in my adopted country.

I do not think I shall ever see you again. I will always remember you with fondness, although your deception of Mary has been shameful and I could never become resigned to it.

Please be sensible, Emily, and understand that things are working out for the best. Please make amends to Mary. Martyrdom would not suit you or me, soiled souls as we are. With my best wishes, C.P."

Editor Robin's note explained that this coded letter was found in Emily's purse when she was rushed to the hospital from Epsom racetrack.

Paulette was stunned. So Emily had died of a broken heart. The personal was political, as the feminists of the 1970s were to say. In this case, though, the political seemed to be personal. Who would commit suicide after getting a "Dear Jane" letter? The heroine of a tragedy, that's who, and Emily had studied literature for the sheer love of it, without hope of gaining academic fame.

Paulette wondered briefly whether Robin's translations could be trusted. But as far as she knew, he had no reason to make anything up.

Emily's behavior had been sadly predictable: *Now see what you've done*. She had wanted to be remembered with Christabel for some great act of rebellion against the patriarchal order, but Christabel had deserted her. The loyal Mary had gone with Emily to the Derby, apparently having no idea what Emily was planning to do.

A girlish image of Christabel's younger sister Sylvia flashed into Paulette's mind. Sylvia had been a socialist who helped set up clinics for poor mothers and their babies, the embryo version of Britain's national health care system. If Emily had grown bored with Mary, why hadn't she developed a crush on Sylvia, who was clearly a better choice?

Paulette answered her own question: *Because passion has never been based on logic. Shared principles are the excuse for a relationship, not the spark that sets hearts afire. Good populist values don't even sway voters. Not without some darker, more visceral hook.*

Paulette was troubled. Like the heroine of Coleridge's poem of the same name, Christabel had given an impression of guileless generosity. She even seemed to convince herself that her intentions were noble, but her effect on other people always had a whiff of brimstone in it.

Paulette thought about Christabel's legendary sense of guilt. Before reading her letters to Emily, Paulette had blamed Christabel's over-privileged European husband for infecting her with feminine self-blame.

After Emily's death, Christabel and Henri, the Compte and Comtesse de Mille-Chevres, had toured Europe and North America, holding religious rallies at which they harangued their audiences to beg God for forgiveness for their sins. Christabel had never publicly named hers, but she had encouraged all her followers to take on her tormented conscience.

Paulette knew that Christabel's brand of Christianity had never been popular in Europe, where it had morphed into a secular political movement which promoted liberal causes. The original self-flagellating fervor of Christabel's cult had survived only in southern California, where Christabel had settled after the death of her husband, and where she was buried.

Like vultures circling over a desert, Paulette's thoughts came back to the possibility of assassins waiting for Margaret at the Derby. *Even if they're out there*, thought Paulette, *I can't stop them by showing up exhausted after worrying all night*. She decided that snuggling up to Margaret would be the best way to fall asleep quickly.

Paulette placed the manuscript back in her suitcase, turned off the lamp, and snuck back into the bedroom. The sight of Margaret, sprawled on the bed in innocent nakedness, filled her with relief. Paulette climbed beside her and pressed herself spoon-fashion into Margaret's firm buttocks and gracefully-curved back.

Margaret was snoring gently, but sparks of energy seemed to shoot into Paulette's belly and crotch from Margaret's hot bottom. Paulette ran her hands slowly down the smooth,

inviting skin. The scent of Margaret's sweat filled Paulette's nose.

Buns, bums, arses, or tushes were supposedly a focal point for the lust of gay men. An unwelcome image of Reginald flashed into Paulette's mind. She couldn't help wondering what, or whom, he really wanted aside from a return to laissez-faire capitalism. But then, commerce wasn't always separate from sex. Au contraire. Paulette imagined a hard-faced young man, thin as a whip, coiled around Reggie-boy with one patronizing arm around Reggie's shoulders and the other searching his clothing for a wallet. The young man, who might not be old enough to vote, was an updated version of an Artful Dodger from the mean streets of Victorian London.

Paulette realized that she didn't know much about the culture of urban, nouveau-riche Englishmen with a taste for other men. She knew the history of a few flamboyant figures, who had been punished far more than they deserved, and a cultural tradition of shameless porn mixed with lurid accounts of true crimes. But contemporary men's bars, parties, and popular cruising-spots were unknown to her. For all she knew, she might have watched the subtle seduction of one man by another at one of the social events that she and Margaret constantly had to attend. Not knowing the signs, she wouldn't have known what she was seeing if it was done discreetly.

It annoyed Paulette to think of herself as a Muggle, a Gentile, a colonial, an ignorant outsider of any sort. She didn't want sex with a man, but she didn't want to be rejected

or excluded from a whole community, even if the exclusion was partly her choice.

Margaret's warm, firm bottom felt increasingly distracting but reassuring. It was solidly there, pressing assertively into Paulette's crotch. She remembered reading the manifestoes of the pansexual, gender-fuck, anything-that-moves crowd who were fond of pointing out that every person on earth has an asshole, a puckered opening between two cheeks. It was a fundamental truth that no one could dispute.

Paulette's hands cautiously wandered over Margaret's bum, past her hips, to her anus and her cunt. Paulette actually managed to approach both of Margaret's holes from opposite angles, and she was delighted that Margaret didn't seem disturbed. She slid her index finger into Margaret's asshole, but when she was in past the first knuckle, the muscles squeezed alarmingly. Paulette was reminded of a baby boa constrictor practicing its hunting skills.

Margaret's larger opening was lush, wet, and easy to enter. It seemed so welcoming that Paulette could imagine it singing some raunchy invitation: *Oh, baby, come this way.*

Paulette rearranged herself enough to slide two fingers along the wet folds and deeper into the center, like exploring an underwater cave. Margaret moaned and shifted, but didn't open her eyes.

Paulette used one arm to press against the whole valley between Margaret's lower cheeks as she pushed deeper with two, then three fingers, heading steadily toward Margaret's cervix. With the other hand, Paulette found the hood of flesh

at the highest end of Margaret's vulva, and used two fingers to tease the magic pearl, her swelling clit.

Paulette felt thrillingly competent, like a conquering barbarian at the gates, and she refused to analyze that feeling. Margaret's physical reactions, which were apparently below the radar of her consciousness, made Paulette feel as if she could awaken and satisfy any human body. She responded to Margaret's twitches and gushes to give her the kind of attention that would produce the best results.

"Ah oh!" yelled Margaret, jerking upright. Her sudden movement dislodged both of Paulette's hands, but Paulette refused to pull away altogether. She held Margaret by the hips, hoping that she hadn't caused any damage. She realized with dismay that her fingernails weren't short enough to be really safe on sensitive tissue.

Margaret turned like a dolphin in water, wrapped her arms around Paulette, and pressed her down into the mattress.

"Pauly! You are something else." Margaret kissed her mouth aggressively, then paused for breath. "Honey," she demanded in a stage-whisper, "did you really expect me to sleep through that?"

Paulette was gasping for air, and the urge to laugh didn't help. "I wanted—you—to have—sweet dreams," she explained.

"I did, babe. You are some sneaky intruder. Next time I really need my sleep, I'll have to wear a chastity belt. But really, Pauly, we can't play any more. We have a big day tomorrow."

"Shh," answered Paulette. "I'll hold you, and you can sleep so hard it won't matter if you only get a few hours. You'll be refreshed."

"I bet I will." Margaret closed her eyes. Paulette knew that she would eventually be thanked, rewarded or at least paid back for her sneak attack on her spouse. In the meanwhile, Margaret's breathing became so deep and even that Paulette drifted to sleep to its rhythm.

Derby Day dawned as brightly as anyone could wish. Before the telephone rang, Margaret and Paulette were awakened by the shocking amount of light streaming into the room from around heavy drapes at the window.

Both women would have loved nothing more than to stay naked in bed, kissing and squeezing and tickling and fucking every trace of fear out of each other's warm bodies. They both imagined staging a *Love-in for Peace*. They both knew this couldn't be done, not while their role as representatives of their country was still controversial in itself.

Margaret and Paulette helped each other into the clothes they had picked out for the day's performance. Then they welcomed two members of Margaret's staff into their suite to attend to their hair and makeup.

Studying her reflection in the mirror, Paulette felt grateful to the young woman of student age who had magically improved her appearance. Paulette had never looked pretty to herself, but she had a polished look that surprised her. The mirror showed no trace of her anxiety or the persistent, low-level hunger in her cleft.

Coming Together With Pride
by Alessia Brio, J Buchanan, Lisabet Sarai

When Margaret and Paulette arrived at the racetrack, a band in 1913 uniforms struck up a lively version of "The March of the Women." Paulette knew the words, and was tempted to sing along:

*Shout, shout, up with your song! Cry with the wind for the dawn is breaking.**

The crowd was so huge that she gave up hope of picking out any threatening sounds or hostile vibes. She wondered if anyone could distinguish the sharp report of the starting gun at a horse race from the sound of an illicit gun which had no right to be there.

An all-female youth choir sang several patriotic songs. King Charles announced to the crowd that this day was definitely Ladies Day at the Derby, and his audience laughed politely. Queen Camilla expressed her gratitude to the stalwart women of the past, and to Emily Davison in particular, for sacrificing comfort and life itself for the rights of all women.

Margaret beamed on everyone in sight, much like the sun. Paulette was always impressed by the natural look of her smile on such occasions. Reginald Peek welcomed his Canadian counterpart and her lovely wife.

Argh! thought Paulette. *I can't believe he actually said that.*

He explained the historic occasion and remarked that those who can't keep up with the march of history are destined to fall behind. Paulette gave him a hard stare for a brief moment.

Margaret stepped confidently up to the microphone, and then it happened.

"Bloody bitches!" yelled a young man who surely hadn't intended to sound so hysterical or high-pitched. A collective masculine yell that sounded like "Hoy!" arose from a struggling knot of bodies in the young man's general vicinity, lower down in the stands.

A whisper spread through the group of dignitaries. A Canadian aide stepped close to Paulette. "Some guy with an explosive device was subdued by security. He seemed to be aiming at Prime Minister Crapper. They've got him under control."

Paulette glanced around at Reginald, and was amazed at what she saw. His face showed undisguised anguish, as though he cared deeply about Margaret's safety.

"My God! David!" he shouted before somewhat composing his expression. "This is all a mistake," he stuttered to the circle of faces staring openly at him.

Paulette wondered if Reginald would be forced to leave office in disgrace, and she almost pitied him. Nothing he could possibly say to explain away his outburst would work. His mask had cracked, and all the King's horses and all the King's men could never put it together again.

A member of the royal staff announced to the crowd that there was no need for alarm because the saboteur was being removed from the scene. His presence was explained as a small glitch in the proceedings which a good-humored British crowd could overlook. The hordes of people seemed to agree.

Margaret spontaneously gave thanks for tight racetrack security and delivered her intended speech about the welfare of each and every person as a precious legacy. Even before she had finished speaking, Paulette knew that nothing else would disrupt the day's agenda. She didn't know how she knew that.

Pheromones and sunlight, she thought. I'm standing in the light, in smelling-distance of her, and that must be why I feel unreasonably optimistic.

Paulette wondered what historians of the future would make of the day's events. *Some lucky researcher will discover the truth about David and Reginald, she thought. Once the dust has settled, someone will sort through the evidence and the tangled web of motives, including whatever source of pain caused young David to think that a woman elected as head of government in another country stands between him and whatever he wants: rights for men, personal freedom or just relief for his cock and balls. The personal is political, and the political is personal.*

The warmth of the sun was hypnotic. Paulette relaxed, and reached for Margaret's competent right hand. She remembered that the world had always been a stage, and she realized that she could play the role of Consort as long as necessary. She felt herself smiling effortlessly. She knew that no one else could be in her place, feeling what she felt at this moment. She felt damn lucky.

* * * *

Coming Together With Pride
by Alessia Brio, J Buchanan, Lisabet Sarai

* From "The March of the Women," marching hymn of the Women's Social and Political Union, words and music by Dame Ethel Smyth, 1911.

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Chemistry

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Kit couldn't concentrate. She tried to force her mind back to the list of enzymatic cofactors scrolling by on her screen, but her thoughts kept evading the task, slipping away to her damned annoying neighbor. Well, not to him, exactly, but to his hands and his tongue and the things he did with them.

She closed her eyes, rubbing her temples against the first twinges of a headache. She saw kaleidoscopic lights, smelled cinnamon, cannabis, and male sweat. She felt the soft fur of his beard brushing over her bare pubis. A bolt of electricity shot through her, leaving her damp and breathless in its wake. *Damn, damn, damn.*

"Kit? Kit!" Jill was shaking her. Kit blinked stupidly at her friend. "Where were you, girl?"

"Oh, um, I was just working on the bilateral polymerization reaction. Trying to visualize how the radicals would align. What's up?"

"Lunch time. Want to come with me to the caf for a quick bite?"

"Um, I don't think so. Thought I'd go home for lunch. I left some notes there, and it's such a beautiful day. I could do with a walk." Kit couldn't meet Jill's eyes. There were no notes.

"Well, suit yourself. But don't forget we've got staff at 1:30. Bittenger will be livid if you're late."

"I'll be there." Kit grabbed her backpack and checked her watch. It was just noon. There might be time, if she hurried, if her neighbor was in and not too stoned, if she could keep him from talking and just get down to what they both wanted.

She didn't notice the sun-splashed river, the salty breeze, the couples sprawled on the new grass. She wallowed in self-disgust, disgust at her shallow lie and even more, at the weakness that kept calling her back to the lair of that infuriating, fascinating relic.

It had started on Saturday. Normally she would have spent the weekend with Todd, but he was in San Diego at a legal conference—or so he claimed. Anyway, she had tons of work to do, and to be honest, she relished the idea of some time on her own. Todd was supermodel handsome, rich by her standards, and had a body as toned as her own which he used with considerable skill. Sometimes, though, she wished he would be a bit less—*precise*. Kit was a scientist. She appreciated discipline and control. Todd carried this to such extremes that sometimes she didn't know if she was dating a man or a robot.

So Kit had spent Saturday working on her current big problem: the three dimensional structure of a protein that was strongly implicated in Alzheimer's. If she could only characterize the folds and associated bonds, then Theragenics could begin to design a pharmacologic agent to mimic its structure and functions.

She made good progress during the day and took a break at dusk to go running and bring back a Greek salad from the pizza place around the corner. Once she got back to work,

though, she hit a brick wall. For hours, she sat in front of her laptop, fiddling with the parameters of the bonds, watching as the modeling program redisplayed the new molecular configurations. She just couldn't make the physics match her intuitions.

The harder she tried, the more ground she lost. It was hot and stuffy in her study; summer appeared to have arrived, though it was barely May. Pain pounded in her head. The multi-colored spirals and rings on her screen blurred in front of her tired eyes. She got up and paced, hoping some clue would emerge from her subconscious.

Kit cranked open the window to get some fresh air. A blast of sound hit her in the gut. Someone was playing rock music, flooding the alley behind her condo building with thumping base and wailing guitars.

Her watch told her it was half past midnight. What kind of jerk would be making such a racket so late? She scanned the buildings across the alley and noticed pastel lights flickering in one third floor window. As she located the source of the noise, the colors faded to be replaced by a brilliant white strobe, pulsing with the beat. The strobe seemed to be aimed right at her window. Crisp shadows danced on the far wall of her study.

All her fatigue and frustration boiled up inside her. "Hey!" she yelled into the dark alley. "Quiet down! Don't you know what time it is?"

The throbbing music drowned out her shouts. The flashing lights nearly blinded her. "Damn it, have some consideration!" The volume actually seemed to increase.

Coming Together With Pride
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Kit slammed the window shut and dragged the drapes across the glass. The music was muffled but still audible. The curtains diffused the beam of the strobe although the room still brightened and darkened to its rhythm. She sat again in front of her computer, but her mind was a blank, all constructive thought erased by her anger and the pain hammering inside her skull. She brushed her teeth, took some aspirin, and threw herself naked on her bed, wondering if it was too early in the year to turn on the air conditioning. Finally, she fell asleep to the faint but insistent beat that still filtered in from the alley.

She woke early from one of her typical dreams. She was in the lab with Bittenger and the rest of the team, reviewing some test results. She knew she had made an error, a serious one, and she was terrified that they'd discover it. She looked around for Jill, but there were only the men, peering at her lab notebook, muttering among themselves and shooting suspicious glances in her direction.

Kit sat up and shook her short hair out of her eyes. She knew she was as smart and talented as any other chemist on her team. She was the only one with a Stanford Ph.D. Why did she let such doubts possess her?

A good, hard run was what she needed. She splashed some water on her face, pulled on a jog bra and shorts, grabbed her keys, and hit the streets.

It was barely six. Memorial Drive was almost empty. She followed her usual route along the Charles, enjoying the feeling of her muscles stretching, flexing, pushing for more speed. The fresh morning air filled her lungs. It was still cool,

but she was sweating by the time she finished her three mile circuit and turned to head home.

Her mind was blissfully empty from her exertion. At the corner of Howard, though, a block from her building, memory rushed back. The recalcitrant problem of protein 43-7(b). The strobe lights and raucous music. The house must be on this street, back to back with the buildings on her own. Maybe she should give her impolite neighbor a taste of his own medicine.

Kit slowed to a walk and turned onto the narrow road. It was lined with the three-story, wood framed houses that used to be the norm before this part of town turned upmarket. Most had been renovated, their weathered shingles replaced with aluminum or vinyl in tasteful shades of white, gray, or cream. In the middle of the block, however, stood a house with its original wooden siding, painted a lurid purple.

That had to be it. Paisley draperies hung in the picture window. Over the door, there was a sign, aqua and yellow, in a font so distorted that it looked as though the letters were melting. *Frank's Folly*, it read, and underneath, *Head Shop*.

Anger made Kit bold. She climbed the steps and pressed the doorbell, twice. A parrot squawked behind the door. Otherwise, there was no effect. She rang the bell again, and then, impatient, banged on the door with her fist.

The door swung open. A sweet, smoky aroma wafted out. Kit found herself staring into a pair of amazingly blue eyes that blinked and squinted against the morning sunlight.

He looked at her long time without speaking. In his eyes, she saw curiosity and amusement. She was acutely aware of her bare midriff and the sweaty shorts clinging to her butt. As

for the owner of the establishment, he wore a tie-dyed T-shirt that only partly hid a hairy belly and faded cutoffs so loose and tattered that she couldn't avoid catching glimpses of his heavy balls.

The man's steady gaze drove out all her angry words. He smiled, kindly, apparently not caring that he had been awakened at such an early hour.

"Good morning. Can I help you?" He swept his eyes over her skimpy clothing and his smile broadened. "Normally, I'm closed on Sunday—day of rest and all that. But if there's something you urgently need, I'd be happy to see what I can do."

"I—um—you—that was quite a party you had last night!"

"Party?"

"Music, lights—up on your third floor. You could hear it all over the neighborhood!"

A stricken look passed over his bearded face. "Oh, sorry! I was just relaxing by myself, just spacing out after a long week. Did I disturb you?"

"As a matter of fact, you did. I was trying to work."

He grinned, looking suddenly much younger than the gray strands in his beard suggested. "A pretty woman like you shouldn't be working on a Saturday night! But really, I am sorry. I didn't realize that anyone could hear me."

"They probably could hear you over at City Hall." Kit's sense of righteous indignation returned. How could the old guy be so oblivious?

"Please, accept my apologies. It won't happen again." He gave her another once over. She felt a blush creeping across

her cheeks. "Won't you come in for a cup of coffee? I just made some fresh." Despite his bleary look, she hadn't gotten him out of bed after all.

"No, that's okay. I just wanted to let you know about the problem."

"Please, come in. Let me make amends. I've got some excellent Columbian."

Before Kit could protest that she didn't drink coffee, he grabbed her hand and pulled her into the dark, aromatic space inside. His skin was warm and unexpectedly soft. Accidentally or deliberately, his body brushed against her hip, and she sensed hardness through the worn denim. She flinched, trying to get away from him. At the same time, she felt her nipples tighten, and a flutter of pleasure rippled through her cunt.

She made excuses. It was just because Todd was away.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable." The proprietor of the shop—Frank?—gestured toward a brass tripod table surrounded by carved wooden stools. "I'll be right back." His hand hovered for a moment, as if he was going to stroke her hair; then he disappeared through a bead curtain at the back of the room.

Kit looked around her. It was like stepping into the past. Not her own past—maybe her mother's. Tapestries portraying athletically conjoined Indian gods shared wall space with concert posters for Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jefferson Airplane, and The Grateful Dead. Rough wooden shelves near the doorway displayed water pipes, scales, and a wide range of paraphernalia that she couldn't identify. A glass case near

the door held assorted jewelry: silver chains, leather wristbands and long, ornate earrings. Marijuana leaves, were a popular motif. Crystals dangled from the ceiling. One corner hosted piles of cushions and rugs. The small shop was crowded with statues of the Buddha, African masks, geodes with amethyst centers. On a shelf above her shoulder, she noted a porcelain incense burner shaped like a massive penis.

She blushed again, though she was alone, and took a deep breath. The atmosphere was heavy with patchouli and sandalwood.

The beads clicked together as Frank returned holding two steaming mugs. "Here you are, then." He seated himself on the stool next to her—close, too close. Invading her personal space.

"I don't..." Kit began. But the rich aroma of the coffee made her mouth water. Just this once, perhaps.

"Sorry, I don't have any milk, but there's sugar." He pointed to a ceramic bowl molded in the shape of a peace sign. He dumped a heaping spoonful into his own mug.

"Uh, no thanks." She took a tentative sip, then drank deeper. The flavor was earthy and complex. She could feel the caffeine racing through her blood.

Frank was staring at her again, his eyes twinkling behind his wire-framed glasses. Absently, he scratched his unruly head. She could tell that he hadn't showered.

"I guess, then, that we're neighbors."

"Yes, well, I don't spend much time at home." She licked her lips nervously. "Mostly, I'm at work."

"You work too hard, I think. You need to take time to enjoy life." He rummaged in his pocket, and she caught another glimpse of his scrotum and his half-hard cock. Hastily, she turned to examine one of the posters.

"Want to do a number?" He was holding out a fat, hand-rolled cigarette. Kit felt a sudden panic.

"No—um—I don't do drugs. I know too much about them."

"Oh?" He lit the joint himself and drew in a lungful of the fragrant smoke.

"Yes, well, I work for a pharmaceutical company."

"Really? What a coincidence." She didn't understand. But she didn't want to ask questions or prolong the conversation. Really, she didn't want to talk about herself at all. She thought she should be going home.

He took another toke and held it, closing his eyes. His expression was beatific. He reminded her of some hairy elf, or perhaps a giant, grizzled teddy bear. The smell of pot drowned out the incense. Kit felt dizzy.

Frank stubbed out his joint. "Stand up ... What's your name?" His voice was soft, dreamy.

"Kit."

"What's that short for?"

"Katerina."

"Oh, I like that much better. It suits you. I've always thought that ladies should have long, intricate names, names that dance on your tongue. Stand up, Katerina. Please. Let me look at you."

She felt brief indignation. Nobody told her what to do. Yet she obeyed, coming to her feet in front of him, so close, too

close, the reach of bare skin between her top and shorts inches from him. She was light-headed, not herself.

"Katerina," he whispered. Then he reached out and grasped her buttocks, pulling her to his face.

His beard was softer than it looked, tickling her. For a moment, he simply held her, breathing in, inhaling her as if she were another drug. Suddenly, there was shocking wetness. His tongue circled her navel, dipped inside. Her sex clenched in a delicious spasm. He lapped in widening circles, then traced a wet path up her sternum. When he reached her bra, he deftly peeled back the stretchy material to expose her small breasts. He fastened his mouth on one swollen nipple. Kit moaned, embarrassed by her urgent need.

He sucked at her 'til the node of flesh was unbearably tender. Just when she couldn't bear any more, he switched to the other breast, strumming the rigid bead at its tip while her clit vibrated in sympathy.

"Oh, please..." she sighed. Her shorts were sticky and uncomfortable. She wanted them off. Frank paused and smiled at her. "Just a moment, Katerina, if you can be patient. I have something for you."

He scurried off to the glass display case, a comic figure, his shorts slipping down his hips to expose his furry butt. Her belly and breasts were soaked with his saliva.

Kit shuddered, desire mixed with revulsion. How could she let this smelly, hairy, untidy, old—anachronism—touch her? But God, it felt so good. Her cunt was sopping. Her pussy scent overwhelmed the smell of pot. *I should go*, she told herself, *get out of here while I can*. But, before she could will

herself to move, Frank was back, pulling her bra over her head, fastening a delicate silver chain around her waist. He eased her shorts over her hips. She kicked off her shoes, and he shimmied the Lycra garment down to her ankles and off.

Kit stood before him, naked except for the ornamental chain. The silver strands brushed, ghostly, against her sensitized skin. Frank licked his lips. His eyes burned blue as gas flames; she basked in the heat of his obvious lust.

"Oh, yes," he breathed. "I thought that would suit you. Yes indeed..." His fingertips traced an airy path across her skin, touching but not touching, setting up currents that caressed her throat, her breasts, her belly, the smooth mound between her legs. "I don't know why you do it, though."

"Do what?" Kit almost groaned with frustration, as he appraised rather than caressed her.

"Shave, wax, whatever it is you do to remove your bush. A bare beaver looks so—unnatural."

Annoyance almost overwhelmed Kit's horniness. "Well, I haven't had any complaints from anyone else. Also, without the hair, I'm more sensitive."

His mischievous smile returned. "Oh, is that true? Well, then..." He slipped to his knees and peeled open her lower lips with his thumbs. "I've always enjoyed sensitive women." The tip of his tongue flicked across her swollen clit. Her back arched in reflex, forcing her pussy into his face. The old goat immediately took advantage, fastening his mouth on her sex and sucking like a human Hoover. His tongue gathered the juices from her depths then smeared them over her naked mound.

"Oh, um, ooh..." Kit writhed against him, wordlessly begging him to return his tongue to her throbbing clit. He seemed oblivious, though, focusing instead on her labia and the depths of her pussy. It felt exquisite, intense, but her clit screamed for some of the attention of that wet and agile tongue.

Then he stopped.

"What...?" she began. She sucked in a surprised breath as he deftly scooped her into his arms.

His curly chest hair tickled her breasts. He smelled a bit funky, sweat rather than soap; hints of pot smoke and incense lingered in his beard. Before she knew it, she was stretched out on her back on the pile of carpets and cushions she had noticed earlier, with the surprisingly strong and flexible old hippie kneeling between her spread thighs.

He rubbed his fingertip against the rigid bead of flesh at her center. She yelped, her pelvis dancing on the velvety surface under her. Apparently pleased with this reaction, he continued to massage her clit with one hand, while the other dabbled in her soaking cunt. One finger, then two, deep into her, but not deep enough. She moaned and twisted as both hands played her, one devoted to her clitoris, the other wandering, stroking, even gently probing her taut rear hole.

Luscious colors swirled across Kit's closed eyelids, whorls and eddies of brilliant blue and emerald green that pulsed in time with the throbbing in her pussy. She breathed in gasps, sucking in smoke and sandalwood. She was melting, liquefying. She was crystallizing into a thing of pure pleasure.

The crystal shattered. Kit wailed, her body going rigid and then limp. Frank continued to stroke her gently, drawing wetness from her depths, trailing it along her inner thighs. For a long time, Kit basked in the rosy after-pleasure, perfectly relaxed, forgetting that he was there.

He bent to kiss her. The salty seaweed taste of her own sex shocked her into awareness. "You enjoyed that, didn't you, princess?" he murmured in her ear. "I told you that you shouldn't work so hard."

Kit opened her eyes to see his goofy, bearded face hanging over her. His cheeks looked sticky; a droplet of milky fluid clung to his bushy moustache. The odors of cannabis and cunt almost suffocated her. He stroked her cheek, absurdly gentle. She flinched, pulled away, extricated her body from underneath his and clambered to her feet.

"I've got to go. I'm way behind schedule." She struggled to get back into her damp, twisted running clothes. He looked puzzled, wounded.

"But princess, we're just getting to know each other. Why don't you come on up to my room? I've got a truly groovy waterbed, and an amazing stereo..." He reached for her. She twisted away, steadfastly trying not to see the huge erection poking out of his pitiful shorts.

"No—sorry, I can't. I've got to go." She jammed her feet into her trainers and turned her back on him.

"Katerina."

She shrugged off the hand on her shoulder. "No. Sorry. Um, thanks for the coffee." She could barely speak with embarrassment. She didn't look back at his stricken face as

she closed the door behind her, raced down the steps and around the corner to the safety of her own condo.

Once home, Kit slammed and locked the door behind her. She couldn't believe what she'd done; what she'd let him do. It wasn't that she was against sex—far from it. It's just that he was so very wrong. So wrong for her. She should never have encouraged him.

Nevertheless, she had felt incredibly relaxed, and suddenly sleepy. She considered a shower, but didn't make it that far. Must be the drugs, she thought as she drifted off. Contact high.

Afternoon sun was slanting in through the drapes when she awoke. She felt alert, refreshed, and ravenous. After a quick shower, she padded naked into the kitchen and got herself a cheese sandwich and a diet cola. She took her late lunch into her study and sat down, ready to get back to the problem of her recalcitrant protein.

As she waited for her machine to boot, she took a deep breath and tried to focus her thoughts. She took a bite of her sandwich, savoring the smoky Jarlsberg and the crisp greens.

The curtains were open. She realized that he might, just might, be able to see into the room. A blush crept over her, starting with her cheeks to warm her earlobes, her nipples, her fingers and toes. What was she thinking of, sitting there nude? She glanced down at her naked body, and realized that she was still wearing Frank's chain around her waist. She unclasped it. It lay coiled in her hand, glittering seductively.

Oh, dear! She would have to return it. But not in person. Definitely not in person. She could package it up and leave it

on his doorstep. She could mail it to him. Even as Kit mulled over the various ways she could get the chain back to its rightful owner without further compromising herself, she was putting on a summer shift, earrings, sandals. She was still arguing with herself when she found herself on Frank's doorstep, the chain clutched in her fist.

She couldn't help it. She didn't understand. Frank opened the door wearing nothing but an Indonesian batik sarong and holding a half-full wine glass.

"Katerina! What a completely unexpected pleasure."

Kit held out her palm. "I—um—you should take this back."

"But I gave it to you, princess. It's yours." His eyes narrowed and his smile widened. "You know that. You didn't need to come back here."

"Well, I wanted to, um, apologize for acting so..." Normally, the most articulate member of her team, Kit now found that she was unable to assemble a coherent sentence.

Frank laughed. "So wanton? So deliciously horny? No apologies necessary, princess. Quite the contrary." He grabbed her wrist. "Come in, have some wine with me." Kit seemed unable to resist. "We'll just talk, that's all. Don't worry. I want to get to know you, find out about you and your life and your work."

Before she knew it, Kit was sitting at the linoleum table in the kitchen at the back of the house, a full wine-glass in front of her. She couldn't seem to explain that she didn't drink. Frank raised his glass.

"To neighbors. To new friends." He sipped at the wine. A ruby drop hung in the thicket above his full lips. "To chemistry."

Then all at once, he was kissing her, his mouth a bewildering array of flavors: wine, sweat, pot, and faintly, pussy. A wildfire of desire raced through her body. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, and she met it halfway. His hands were all over her, snaking down her neckline to caress her tits, sliding up her hips under her dress, slipping between her damp thighs as he discovered she wore nothing underneath.

In less than ten seconds, he had his fingers crammed in her cunt, and she was humping them madly, moaning and twisting herself to force him deeper. He threw off the sarong and lifted her onto his lap, impaling her on the rod of flesh that jutted from his hairy groin. He was both fatter and longer than Todd, but Kit was so soaked and ready that there was no resistance.

For a moment, they were still. She could feel him filling her, stretching her exquisitely. His cock seemed to pulse, expanding and contracting within her in time with their synchronized breaths.

Frank buried his face in her hair, gulping her scent. "Oh, Princess..." Then he began thrusting, ramming into her while she bounced on top of him.

They came together, in a thundering rush of sensation that drove every shred of rationality from Kit's mind. The first thing that she was conscious of, after the echoes of the cataclysm died away, was the come dripping down her thighs.

Oh, no. No! Frank's eyes were still closed. His cheeks were flushed. His glasses hung crookedly on his nose. His cock was still half hard inside her.

Kit climbed off his lap so quickly that she landed on the kitchen floor. That woke Frank from his blissful reverie, all right.

"Princess! Are you okay?"

"Okay? Of course not. We just had sex."

"Yes, we did. Fabulous, wasn't it?"

"Unprotected sex. No condom. Nothing." Kit's eyes blazed. "And I'll bet that you do this all the time, getting it on with any unsuspecting female who has the misfortune to enter your shop. Mr. Natural."

"Actually, I don't. It's been a long time, a very long time."

"Hey, well, wake up. This isn't the sixties. You can't just screw anyone you fancy. You've got to be careful. Take precautions."

Frank sighed and looked suitably chastened. "Yes, I know. It's terribly sad, but you're right."

"So why did you do it? You're not stupid."

Frank smiled at her, but his eyes were serious.

"Why did you?" He wrapped the sarong around him and tucked the free end into the waist. "Sometimes there's something there, you just can't help yourself. Call it animal attraction, pheromones, whatever. You can't ignore it. You can't control it."

He had watched sadly as Kit hurried out the door but hadn't tried to stop her. "You know what I mean. I know that you do."

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* * * *

Now she was headed back, drawn against her judgment, against her will. Back to his untidy, old fashioned world, to his ridiculous nostalgia, and his sweet, irresponsible innocence.

The paisley curtains were shut. A hand-carved wooden sign hung on the door: *Sorry. Closed for space walk. Please come again.*

She stabbed at the doorbell, and heard the silly parrot squawk inside, but the door remained shut. Kit struggled between frustration and relief.

Maybe she could come back after work. Still, it was odd that he should close his shop in the middle of a Monday. On the other hand, he couldn't have that many customers, hidden away as he was on this quiet residential street.

Kit tried the doorknob. It turned easily. How typical of him! Naively trusting. Irresponsible. She slipped into the dimness of the front room and locked the door behind her.

The air was hushed, heavy. Her heart slammed against her ribs. "Frank?" she called softly. There was no response. The click of the bead curtain was uncomfortably loud in the stillness. An empty teacup and a charred roach in an ashtray sat on the kitchen table. She headed up the stairway to the second floor, calling his name again.

On the second floor, she found two closed doors. The room to the right of the landing seemed to be storage. Piles of boxes littered the floor and were stacked against the walls. The window shades were closed. The air smelled musty.

She was shocked, though, by what she found behind the door on the left. Neat bookcases and filing cabinets lined the room. One corner held a huge desk with a twenty three-inch LCD monitor and keyboard. In the other, there was a compact lab bench packed with assorted glassware plus state-of-the-art chromatography and sequencing apparatus. There was a faint odor of solvent.

"What the...?" Kit's curiosity overwhelmed her sense that she was violating Frank's privacy. The shelves held mostly technical journals—*Analytical Biochemistry*, *Drug Development Research*, *Journal of Chemical Research*, *Nature*, *Science*—alphabetically arranged and going back at least ten years. There were also stacks of data discs, and several rows of reference books. Kit recognized many of them.

One wall was hung with framed certificates and photos. Degrees from Harvard—in Latin—and Berkeley, granted to Frank Morgenstern. Patent awards. A picture of a much younger Frank, his head an unruly mass of reddish curls, shaking hands with Jimmy Carter. Another, informal, photo of him, sweaty and beaming, sitting outside a thatched hut with a dark-skinned child on each knee.

Frank Morgenstern. Kit racked her brain. Then she had it: he was the guy who had worked for Pfizer and created one of the earliest AIDS drug regimens. Brilliant chemist, according to his reputation. Developed an innovative therapy for malaria, too.

Frank? Goofy, horny Frank? It couldn't be true. But apparently, it was.

All at once, she thought she heard something. "Frank?" Music, faint, coming from above her, the third floor. She tiptoed up the stairs. The eerie strains of a synthesizer filtered through the half-open door at the top.

The shades were drawn. Multicolored lights pulsed on one wall. Weird electronic melodies played in the background. The room smelled of Frank: earthy, musky, hints of cinnamon and pot smoke.

An enormous bed took up the center of the room. He lay there on his back, naked, his arms at his sides. His eyes were closed. Even in the dim light, Kit couldn't miss his erection, arrowing toward the ceiling.

Kit stepped to the side of the bed. He didn't move. "Frank? Are you all right?"

"Oh, hello, princess. Lovely to see you." He grinned crookedly. There was something wrong with his eyes; he couldn't seem to focus.

"Why are you up here, in the middle of the day? Are you ill?"

He paused several heartbeats before answering. "Oh, no! I'm just taking a little trip. I needed a break. Nothing like a tab or two of acid to give you a fresh perspective." He raised his head and looked at her, suddenly serious. "I didn't expect to see you again. But I was thinking of you. As you can see."

Lazily, he stroked his rigid organ. It rose proudly from the tawny curls at his groin, beckoning her. He gave a sensual sigh that sent a thrill through her body. Saliva gathered in her mouth. Before she could help herself, she was unzipping her slacks, unbuttoning her blouse, tearing off her underwear.

Leaving her clothes in a tangled heap on the floor, she crawled onto the bed.

It wavered and flowed under her weight. She felt slightly dizzy. Everything seemed unsteady, unreal. The only reality was her overwhelming need to taste his fat, juicy cock.

Kit straddled him and bent over his hard-on, breathing in his oddly appealing smell. He removed his hand. His cock seemed to wink at her. She flicked her tongue over the bulb. He moaned. She pursed her lips against the tip and applied a little suction. He arched toward her, begging for more. Opening her mouth as wide as she could, she swallowed him. She was amazed to find that she could take almost his whole bulk.

He tasted salty and a little sour. It was intoxicating. His furry thighs tickled the inside of hers, sending sparks racing to her pussy. She bobbed up and down, running her tongue along his length. His skin was silk stretched over stone. He twisted his hips, trying to force himself deeper.

"Oh, princess, that's so, so sweet..." She sucked harder. "Swing yourself over here, baby. Let me have a taste."

He managed to maneuver her so that her buttocks faced him and stroked them gently. His touch was electric. Out of nowhere came an image of him spanking her. Her cunt flooded and spilled over. He ran his tongue through her cleft, from back to front, ending with a firm flick against her clit. She moaned, mouth full of cock flesh, and pressed her crotch into his face.

He slurped up a mouthful of her juices, then stabbed his tongue into her depths. Kit ground against him, mashing her

clit against his nose. He got the hint. In a moment, he was sucking hungrily on that aching bead of flesh, and Kit was climbing higher and higher. It was almost too intense, the pleasure shading into pain.

He backed off and let her breathe, lapping at her swollen lower lips and swirling his tongue around in her hungry cunt. Meanwhile he was pumping his cock down her throat. She could feel the tension coiling under his skin.

He was close, they both were, and suddenly all she wanted to was to taste him. She worked him harder, sucking until her jaw ached. She willed him to come.

He seemed to sense her need. She felt the contractions rippling up his shaft. She forgot that she didn't like the taste of come, swallowing the bitter fluid as fast as it spurted across her tongue. She wanted it all, everything he could give her, anything that he would do to her.

His cock remained hard in her mouth. She wondered if he could still fuck her. He licked steadily at her clit, but she needed something to fill her, to satisfy the aching hunger in her cunt.

All at once, she *was* full, something cool and hard and definitely not human sliding into her slippery depths. "Oh..." she began, and then couldn't say anything else, the pleasure driving away words. Whatever it was, it felt heavenly.

"Like that, princess?" Frank's voice was kind, with a hint of laughter. All Kit could do was grunt. He stroked once, twice, thrusting deeper each time. At the same time, his tongue danced over her clitoris. She hovered on the edge of ecstasy; he pushed her over and into free fall.

A whirlwind took her, fireworks, explosions of sensation. Endorphins raced through her blood, flooding all her senses with delight. Her mind was drugged almost to insensibility by pleasure. It was just so amazing...

Kit lay with her head on Frank's furry chest. His arm around her felt natural, right. She could hear his heartbeat, smell his sweat. Her eyes had adjusted to the dimness; over on the bed table she could see the penis-shaped incense burner she had noticed in the shop, still slick with her juices. The odd, haunting music flowed over them. She was floating, totally satiated, completely comfortable. It was an unfamiliar feeling.

"I really thought that I blew it," said Frank softly. "I was sure that you'd never come back, Katerina. And I was so very sorry."

"Well..." Kit began. She didn't know how to answer.

"Anyway, I'm surprised that you're here, on a weekday. I would have thought that you'd be at work."

Work. The staff meeting. Kit felt a brief stab of panic. The comfort overwhelmed it. She settled back into his embrace. "I should be. But I decided that I needed a break."

Frank's laugh woke new tingles in her sex.

"But what about you? You're a famous chemist. I didn't know ... I thought that you were just some weird old hippie, living in the past."

"I am. I quit, quite a while ago. I just couldn't stand to see profits be given a higher priority than people. Just a crazy idealist, I guess."

"But the lab, downstairs...?"

"Well, I still dabble a bit. Play around. Try to keep up with the journals." He circled one of her nipples with a lazy fingertip. His other hand crept across her belly toward her pussy.

He captured her clit between thumb and forefinger and squeezed gently. She gasped at the sudden surge of pleasure. As the ripples faded away, he followed up with a kiss.

His mustache was sticky with her secretions. He tasted like the ocean. It was sloppy and messy and delicious. Somehow there was a question, though, nagging at her. She couldn't quite relax.

"So what are you working on now? AIDS? Parkinson's?"

"Nothing so important. I've just been experimenting with a little private project. Something to amuse myself and a select few of my friends."

Drugs, Kit thought, annoyed that this world-class mind should be focused on something so frivolous. But what else should she have expected? "Some kind of hallucinogenic? Or a new synthetic stimulant?"

He kneaded her breast in his broad, stubby-fingered hand. Her cunt contracted, echoing each caress. "No, nothing like that."

Her hand closed on his swelling cock and squeezed hard. "What then? Tell me!"

Frank groaned, then giggled. "If you're trying to torture it out of me, you've definitely got the wrong technique."

"Come on, Frank! You can trust me."

"You promise that you won't be angry?"

"Angry? Why should I be angry?"

"Well..." He was suddenly coy. "You might feel that you've been manipulated. Just remember, though, what a good time we've had."

"What in heaven are you talking about? What is this project, Frank?" Kit was feeling more and more suspicious. Then he slipped his fingers back into her wet depths, and she nearly swooned.

"It's an aphrodisiac."

The pleasure welling up inside her was distracting. "What?"

"An aphrodisiac. More precisely, a hormonal augmentation trigger. It amplifies sexual responses in the subject and also in members of the opposite sex who are exposed to the subject."

Kit pulled herself away from him, struggling to sit upright as waves oscillated through the mattress. "And your subject is...?"

"Myself, of course. I need to make sure that the substance is safe. And it does seem to be. None of the risks or unpleasant side-effects of Viagra or Cialis or Spanish Fly..."

"And I was the guinea pig *member of the opposite sex*? How dare you!"

He pulled her back down, hugging her to his chest. Despite her indignation, she couldn't deny the sense of peace, of physical well-being, that washed over her. His erection bobbed flirtatiously against her thigh, then slid toward her still hungry sex, leaving a trail of pre-come on her skin.

"Come on, Katerina, don't spoil it. Life is just too damned short. Take your pleasure while you can."

"But—it's not real. It's artificial pleasure."

He jerked his hips, embedding his cock in her folds, then rolled her over onto her back. "Not real?" He began to thrust, gently, rhythmically. Sensitized from her previous climax, she sensed a new orgasm hovering close. She arched, grinding her pelvis against his, aching for the release that was just out of reach. "What could be more real than this? This isn't plastic or electronic. This isn't cyberized or sanitized. This is flesh and blood, saliva and sweat and pussy juice and come, the whole organic stew that makes sex so glorious."

Kit was panting with desire, yet somehow she still struggled to keep up her end of the argument. "But—I'd never have wanted you ... if you hadn't ... if you didn't..."

Frank pulled his cock out of her, and she cried out, empty and disappointed. He raised himself off her, weight on his forearms. His blazing blue eyes searched her face. "Are you so sure, princess? What if I told you that I was just kidding, that there wasn't any aphrodisiac? That I just made it up to see how you'd react?"

Kit whimpered in frustration and confusion.

"Tell me, princess, do you want me now?"

"Yes," she moaned. Frank answered by ramming his cock into her with such force that the waves almost tossed them off the bed.

After that, there was no more discussion. Frank fucked her hard. She wailed with delight at every stroke, clutched as his shoulders, dug her fingernails into his hairy back. Her burly lover growled and muttered as he slammed away at her, knowing that the time for gentleness had passed. They

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grappled together, rolling from side to side, struggling to hold tighter, delve deeper.

Finally, Frank roared, and Kit felt a rush of liquid heat deep in her sex. It kindled her own climax, which raced through her like a forest fire fanned by summer gales, burning everything in its path: confusion, uncertainty, fear, guilt and regret. All that was left was an open vista of pleasure, swept clean, empty and peaceful.

* * * *

The red-gold light filtering under the drawn shades told Kit that sunset was not far away. She had missed staff, missed a whole afternoon of work. She tried to summon the requisite spike of anxiety and failed.

Frank was lying on his side, his back to her, watching the patterns of light on the wall and humming to himself. She touched him lightly on the shoulder. He rolled toward her and swept her into a wet kiss that Kit felt in her fingers and toes, her breasts and her clit.

"Hey, princess, you're awake. Are you still mad at me?"

She snuggled up against him, breathing in his special scent. "No. I can't manage to stay mad at you. That first time, I came over to ball you out for making so much noise, and look what happened."

"Yes, well, there was some balling done..."

"Oh, you old goat!" She licked at his ear lobe.

"That tickles! And I'm no more ruttish than you."

"And who's responsible for that?"

"My lips are sealed." In fact, they were not; they were sucking energetically at Kit's nipple, making her squirm.

"But seriously, is it true?"

He paused briefly to look up at her. "I'll never tell. Anyway, does it matter?" Not waiting for an answer, he slithered down and began applying his agile tongue to her clit.

I suppose not, Kit thought, as he took her steadily higher.
Either way, it was chemistry.

* * * *

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When the Angels Fall

© Helen E.H. Madden

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

On the other end of the vid line, I heard a small sigh. The view screen showed nothing but the grille pattern signifying the confidentiality of the confessional's call-in line. Even so, I knew who waited on the other end. Father Raphe.

Of course, Father Raphe knew who he was talking to as well. "Hello Daniel. How long has it been since your last Confession? Two whole days, perhaps?"

"Not quite," I answered sheepishly. I settled back in my chair, relaxing as the older man's words floated to me through the speakers of the vid phone. The tone of his voice promised much needed admonition, and my cock twitched in anticipation. I clenched the arms of my chair tightly, trying to keep from touching myself for a little while longer. I was already half undressed, my shirt unbuttoned, exposing my bare chest to the cool breeze blowing through the bedroom window. My pants and briefs lay in a rumpled heap around my ankles.

"I thought we'd agreed that you would only call me for Confession once a week," Father Raphe went on. "During the day." His voice was mild, smooth with age, with only a hint of irritation to it.

"We did," I answered, "but this is sort of an emergency."

Another sigh from the vid phone speakers. I imagined Father Raphe sitting in his syntha-leather arm chair, rubbing

at his temples. A real fire blazed in a brick hearth behind him, casting golden glints onto his wavy silvered hair. He would be wearing a nightgown, I surmised, something long and light that draped over his lean figure in fluid folds, with a robe over that to protect him from the chill spring night. Personally, I liked the cold. It made me feel even more naked as long icy fingers of night air plucked my nipples into hard little knots.

"What's the emergency this time?" Father Raphe finally asked.

I squirmed. This was the hard part of Confession, actually owning up to the crime. "It's my mother. She's dying."

"And?"

"And when her lawyer called to tell me she wanted to see me one last time, I told him to go fuck himself."

"Oh, Daniel."

I writhed beneath the gentle disappointment in his voice. It was both sweet and painful as hell.

"I couldn't help it," I went on. "I hate her. That bitch made my life miserable. You know what she did to me!"

"Yes, I do, but I also know that you make yourself even more miserable by hating her and by acting in such a poisonous fashion. Daniel, your mother was a cruel woman, but at some point you have to let go of your hate in order to heal."

Like that's going to happen any time soon, I thought. Out loud, I asked, "Will you pray for me, Father?"

"That depends. Where are your hands?"

I blushed. Even though he couldn't see it through the confessional screen, I knew he could sense it. "They're on the arms of my chair."

"And your clothing?"

"I'm dressed!" I protested. "I swear. Would I lie to you?"

"Not lie, no. But you have been known to bend the truth. Really, Daniel, the purpose of Confession is to relieve the burdens of the soul not the genitals. Your propensity to masturbate while we pray is ... disturbing."

I grinned, though still embarrassed. "I'm wearing a shirt, pants, underwear, and socks. I promise."

"All right then. As long as you don't remove any clothing, we'll pray, and then I'll give you your penance. But will you please promise me something, Daniel?"

"What?"

"Promise me the next time you feel the urge to call me in the middle of the night, you'll forgo the charade of Confession. It's not a sin to care for another person, you know. You've come so far these past few years. If only you could just take that last step..."

I sank back into my chair, really ashamed now. "I'd like to, Father Raphe. I really would. But I'm just not ready yet."

There was a pause and then, "Now that sounds like a true confession. At least we're accomplishing *something* tonight. Let us pray."

I imagined Father Raphe on his side of the vid line, on his knees, head bowed, hands clasped in prayer, robe and night gown gracefully spread on the floor around him. Holy words flowed from his full lips, spilling through the vid line to pour

their blessings onto me. My dick swelled beneath the benediction, and I prayed right along with him, holding tight to the arms of my chair until I thought I'd die if I didn't touch myself. Through ten rounds of 'Merciful Mary' and one 'Lord Jesus Who Loves Us All,' I ran my hands over my cock, just barely stroking it at first, then squeezing my balls with one hand as I pumped my shaft into the fist of the other. I prayed hard, and I came hard, well before the final 'Amen,' and then I grew hard again, just in time for Father Raphe to give me my penance.

* * * *

"God damn that priest anyway!"

My rented hydro-car sailed along the highway at a good hundred fifty clicks. I was going a little fast, but it wasn't like anyone was going to pull me over for speeding way out here. I was out in the middle of fucking nowhere, in Bible Land for Christ's sake. The place was nothing but an isolated stretch of rolling hills, dotted with only the occasional farm or fuel-cell station. Most of the hydro-cars I saw were at least fifty years old, and they sat abandoned in weed-choked yards attached to run-down houses I could barely see through the dust kicked up by my speeding. The fine grit coated the hydro-car's plaz windows and turned everything outside a lifeless yellow-gray. It reminded me of corpses. It reminded me of my mother. I shuddered.

"God damn Father Raphe and his God damn penance," I muttered as the car droned along the empty road. The blasphemous words sent a wicked thrill that ran down my

spine and straight into my cock. Still, it didn't help me shake the feeling of dread that had hung on me since the night before.

"I want you to go back to Bible Land," Father Raphe had instructed me after we were done praying. "I want you to see your mother."

I remember gaping at the vid screen with its impenetrable grille pattern. My hands and cock were still sticky with come. "You're kidding me!"

"No, I'm not. You need to see your mother."

"Why? So I can forgive her?"

"No," Father Raphe had replied. "I doubt she wants forgiveness, just as I doubt you're ready to give it, so what would be the point? But I think it's high time you realized that she no longer has any power over you, and the best way to do that is to go see her."

"I already know she doesn't have power over me anymore," I argued hotly. "That's why I'm not going. To prove that she can't force me to do something I don't want to do."

"No, the reason you're not going is because you're frightened." I could see him shaking his finger at me behind the darkened screen. "Even after all these years, you're afraid that the moment you see her, you'll become a helpless child again and be right back under her control. But that won't happen, Daniel. Oh, I expect she will say some things that will hurt you. Being rejected by one's parents is always hurtful because our parents are the people who should love us no matter what. But you're a grown man now. She can no

longer control you unless you let her. It's time you realized that. It's time you faced her and took the reins of your life into your own hands."

Easier said than done, I thought. But penance was set, and Father Raphe refused to listen to any further arguments. I had asked for it, he said, and he was right. But I still wasn't happy about it.

"God damn it," I whispered, watching the yellow-gray world slip by.

My mother's house was set deep in the heart of Bible Land, at the top of an artificial mountain. At one time, the place had been a church, the now infamous *Sermon on the Mount*, where the late great Reverend Robert Thorpe had tried unsuccessfully to convince two thousand people to leave behind a world of sin by ingesting cyanide pills. Poor Reverend Thorpe. He had been an old time Bible thumper, a former tent preacher wildly popular among the small but rabid Moral Minority, that exclusive club whose members believed that they and they alone would enter into God's Kingdom. Unfortunately for him, there was a limit to how far people would follow. Being a martyr was all well and good, but if they all died, who would be left to carry on the fight?

In the end, Reverend Thorpe bit the big one all by his lonesome while his congregation bravely stayed on to continue his work. My mother was a card carrying member of the Minority, said card having been handed down to her from her father, who had gotten it from his father. My great-grandfather had been the chief financial officer of *Sermon on the Mount* during Thorpe's reign and had prudently decided

that since the good Reverend no longer needed his church, there was no reason why it should go to waste. So, the old man set up house in the place and kept it running until the day he died, at which point it passed to his son and so on down the line. Thus, *Sermon on the Mount*, along with all the hate-filled religious psycho-babble of the Minority, became my mother's birthright, and she had planned to pass it all on to me, except that I had turned out to be queer, which really fucked up her plans.

I hit the wipers to clear some of the dust off the windshield. Way, way off in the distance, I saw an ugly dark hump rise out of the hills like a big black boil on the ass of the world.

"Stop the car!" I ordered.

The hydro-car slowed to a halt. I popped the door and stepped out into a lazy swirl of dust. There it was, *Sermon on the Mount*. Just looking at the place made me want to puke. I was so going to get even with Father Raphe when I got back. I'd call his ass for Confession every night for the next two months, and I didn't care if he knew I was jerking off when we prayed. I needed something to look forward to in order to make it through this road trip to Hell. Praying with Father Raphe was pretty much the best I could hope for.

* * * *

The hydro-car arrived at my mother's house less than an hour later. It pulled up to the big bronze gates at the base of the mountain and rolled down the window for me so I could lean out and shout at the security vid.

"Hello? Anybody home? This is Daniel Cain. I'm here to see my mother, Althea!"

The vid screen stayed blank. I sat in the front seat, tapping the dash board. Minutes crawled by like ants over my skin. Maybe Mom didn't want to see me after all. Or maybe she was already gone. Maybe I'd made the trip for nothing and should just tell the car to turn around and head home. I'd call Father Raphe up and tell him I did my best, and nobody could ask for anything more than that. I'd—

The bronze gates squealed as they swung open. My head dropped to the dash.

"Drive," I muttered to the car. "Let's get this over with."

The hydro-car pattered up the mountain, moving slowly. The road was filled with pot holes, its edges giving way to the steady encroachment of weeds and wild flowers. I opened the window and took a deep breath. The air was thick with the scent of honeysuckle and wild strawberry. Mom had really let the place go.

The road circled around the mountain seven times before finally reaching the old church at the top. I got out and looked at the hulking structure. Like the rest of the place, everything was overgrown and starting to decay. Wild ivy trailed up the walls, in some places completely covering the old stained plaz windows. Cracks riddled the faux-stone siding, where it could be seen, and the creeping flora took this as an invitation to invade the house of God. Only the stairs leading up to the huge, arching double doors were free of the entangling vines, but even they sagged with age. I was almost afraid to try the first step, for fear my foot might go straight through and wind

up poking into the bowels of Hell, which I believed must surely reside beneath my mother's demesne.

"Nope, this doesn't look safe at all," I quipped to no one in particular. "I'll have to go back, tell Father Raphe I couldn't risk injuring myself going up those steps. He'll understand."

Yeah, right.

I sighed and climbed out of the car. I was about to test the steps when the church doors swung open, and I saw a face that I hadn't expected to see again in a million years.

"Hello, Daniel," a heavenly voice called to me.

"Gabriel?"

I gawked. Standing in the doorway was a creature so divine it took my breath away. He was over two meters tall with long golden hair that fell in graceful waves to his broad shoulders. His face was long and lean, with full lips that immediately brought to mind Father Raphe. In fact, there was more than a passing resemblance between the two, if you put aside the fact that one was a priest in his late forties and the other was a robot-angel.

Gabriel held out his hands and smiled down at me benignly. "Your mother feared you would not come. But I had faith."

I scowled. "You can't have faith, Gabe. Faith is for humans. You're just a walking, talking piece of junk made up to look like an angel."

"I have faith," he insisted. "It is part of my programming."

"Programming be damned." Forgetting my earlier fear, I mounted the steps, taking them two at a time. I was moving fast now. I wanted to get this over with. Dealing with my

mother was one thing, but dealing with Gabriel was something I was not prepared to do.

"Must you use profanity?" the robot-angel asked with a frown.

I stepped past him, heading through the door. "As a matter of fact, yeah. If you don't like it, stay the hell away from me."

"I cannot do that, Daniel. I am your guardian angel. Your mother sent me to watch over you. I must do as she says."

"So she's still alive, I take it?"

"Yes, but you must hurry. God will soon gather her into His arms."

Gabriel moved ahead of me and led the way through the church. I followed him up several flights of stairs. He hadn't changed a bit in the last nine years. He still wore the same flowing robes of blue and gold, the same rosewood crucifix belted around his waist. He didn't have wings like real angels were supposed to have. Wings on a robot-angel wouldn't have made much sense. They weren't expected to fly, just to watch over people and make sure they behaved. Parents of the Moral Minority usually bought them to spy on the kids and to teach Bible lessons and stuff. Mom bought Gabe when I was twelve, shortly after the first time she caught me masturbating.

"This is Gabriel," she told me, introducing me to the impossibly tall, impossibly beautiful creature. I fell in love immediately. "Gabriel will make sure you don't do anything sinful, like touch yourself or say bad words."

Oh, if only I could have fallen out of love just as quick. Gabe was easy to look at but hell to live with. There wasn't any place I could go on the mountain that he couldn't follow. Not even to the bathroom, especially after the second time I got caught jerking off.

"You should not touch yourself, Daniel," he said, gently pulling my hands away from my aching cock. The bathroom walls echoed with his admonitions. "God and your mother will not be pleased."

And that's pretty much all I heard for the next six years: Don't swear, Daniel, because God and your mother will not be pleased. Don't steal Communion wine from the pantry, Daniel, because God and your mother will not be pleased. Don't draw pictures of naked men in your Bible, Daniel, because God and your mother will not be pleased. Oh, and don't stain the bed sheets at night while calling out my name, Daniel, because God and your mother will not be pleased.

That fucker Gabriel. He had to be so damned beautiful and yet still be such a complete prick. I wondered what he would think if I told him he was what finally made me realize I was gay? Not that I even knew the word gay meant anything other than 'happy' back then, but he was how I figured it out. A kid can only have so many wet dreams about another guy before he finally figures out that he's really not into girls the way God and his mother intended for him to be.

"What made you so sure I would come back?" I demanded as we climbed the stairs up to the top floor of the church. I was breathing pretty hard, trying to keep up. The building was five stories tall, with the top story having been converted

to living space for the family. The place was huge, a maze of empty rooms, and yet somehow Gabriel always knew where to find me whenever I tried to sneak off.

"I just knew," he said, smiling. "God and your mother will be pleased by your return."

Christ Almighty.

The room he took me to was the largest one of all on the top floor, maybe twenty meters in length by ten meters wide. It was my mother's room, the sanctuary where she stayed closeted most of the time when she wasn't busy punishing me. The place was lined from floor to ceiling with bookshelves filled with Bibles and prayer books and hymnals, collected by the family over several generations. There were no fiction books to be seen, unless you thought the pre-Egalitarian Bible was fiction, in which case there was nothing but fiction in the room. There were no magazines, no newspapers, no tech manuals, no history or science or math books; just old time Bibles and devotional literature, all of it approved by the Moral Minority. In the center of this vast antediluvian library was a narrow bed with a simple wrought iron frame. A crucifix was attached to the top of the headboard and beside the bed was a small table with yet another Bible resting on it. This was the family Bible. I recognized the frayed cover even from a distance. My mother used to preach to me from it at every meal.

Two men in non-descript gray suits stood on either side of the bed. I didn't recognize them. Gabriel walked toward them and announced, "He is here."

I traipsed over, ignoring the men. All my attention was focused on the figure lying beneath the white sheet—a frail bundle of bones wrapped in papery skin, with hair so pale and sparse it looked like spider's silk draped about the scalp.

"Mom?" I croaked.

Her eyes opened. They were just as blue as ever. "Daniel," she rasped. "Gabriel said you would come." She reached over to squeeze the robot's hand. He beamed. "Tell me, boy, are you married yet?" she demanded. "Are you a family man, and a man of God? Or have you strayed too far to ever truly come home?"

"But he has come home," Gabriel reassured. "He is not lost. No one is beyond redemption."

My mother nodded. "Gabriel has such faith. But tell me, Daniel, at least that you've settled down with a nice girl..."

Oh Christ, what the hell was I supposed to say? The truth? I choked back tears. "Sorry, Mom. I just haven't found the right one, I guess."

"Ah, well. At least you came. Gabriel will straighten you out. You'll see..."

Her eyes closed. Her chest rose and fell, rose and fell. And then it stopped.

One of the strangers leaned over my mother. He put a hand to her throat and frowned. From a pocket, he pulled out a stethoscope. Her doctor, I realized blearily. He put the scope to her chest and listened.

"I'm sorry," he said, straightening up. "She's gone."

Just like that. I traveled all the way out here on Father Raphe's say-so, and the most I got to do was tell my mother a little white lie. So much for closure.

The other man cleared his throat. "My condolences, Mr. Cain. I'm Stephen Probst, your mother's attorney. I'm the one who called you earlier."

"The guy I cursed out," I said dully. I glanced at him and noticed a conspicuous absence of religious symbols on his person. "You're not Minority."

"No. Your mother couldn't find a Minority lawyer so she had to look outside the community to handle her affairs."

"No lawyers?" I looked at the other man's clothes. "No doctors either, I guess?"

The physician nodded. "The Moral Minority is such a small community these days. I'm afraid it's dying out..." He paused, looked at my mother and bit his lip. "Sorry, I meant no offense."

"None taken," I whispered.

"Mr. Cain," the lawyer went on, "I realize this is a great loss for you, and you'll obviously want some time to mourn. I don't want to bother you now, but just so you know, your mother left everything to you—"

"Why?" I interrupted. "I thought she wrote me out of her will years ago."

"She, uh, did. But as Doctor Farrell just pointed out, the Minority community is very small these days."

"And aging," Farrell added.

"There was just no one else for her to leave it to," Probst finished.

"So I get it all by default."

"Well, it was either you or the government, and being Minority your mother certainly wasn't going to leave it to them."

I nodded. Nice to know there was at least one thing Mom had despised more than me.

"Here's my card," Probst said. "When you're ready, call me. Gabriel has the number as well. Your mother has already made arrangements for her remains, so Doctor Farrell will be taking the body with him. She'll be buried in the family plot tomorrow. It's to be a Minority ceremony, so..."

"Only members of the Moral Minority allowed. I know." I looked up at him. "Don't worry. I wasn't planning on going anyway."

Probst nodded and took his leave. Farrell pulled the sheet over my mother's face. I got one last glimpse of her before Gabriel took me by the arm and guided me out of the room.

"Come. We'll go to the chapel and pray."

* * * *

I did not go to the chapel. Once outside my mother's room, I dug my heels into the threadbare carpet and forced Gabriel to come to a halt.

"What is it?" he asked, head cocked to one side as he studied me.

"That guy, Probst. He said everything belongs to me now."

"Yes?"

"Including you?"

"Yes, Daniel. Including me."

"Good." I pulled my arm away from him. "Do me a favor, Gabe."

"Yes?"

"Fuck off."

"What?"

He stared at me. I could almost see the cogs in his computerized brain spinning as he tried to make sense of what I just said.

"I own you. Therefore, you have to do what I say. And I say go ... a ... way. Get lost. Beat it. I don't want to be around you right now."

"Daniel, I am your guardian angel. Your mother set me to watch over you."

"My mother is dead. You do what I say now. So go."

Gabriel took a step back, frowning. "Go where?"

"To Hell, maybe? Anywhere. I don't care so long as you're not hanging around me."

"Are you going to the chapel to pray for your mother?"

"No, I'm not."

Another frown. "Very well then. I will go to the chapel. I will pray. For you and your mother. Perhaps you will join me later."

"Fat chance."

I spun on my heel and stalked off. I needed some time alone.

I needed time to confess.

* * * *

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

I sat in an abandoned office on the first floor of the church, staring at the familiar grille pattern on an ancient vid screen.

"Where are you, Daniel?"

I swallowed hard. *Sermon on the Mount*. I got here just in time to see my mom die."

"Oh, Daniel." Father Raphe's voice reached out to me through the vid phone. It sounded warm and comforting. "I am so sorry. Did you even get a chance to speak to her?"

"Yeah, I had all of two seconds to tell her a little lie about how maybe I wasn't gay anymore."

"Is that why you called in to confess? Because you lied to her?"

"No." My shoulders started to shake. "I called because ... because ... Oh, fuck. I'm glad she's dead!"

I put my head in my hands and sobbed. Father Raphe waited on the other end of the line. When I was done crying, he spoke again.

"Daniel, you had a difficult, complicated relationship with your mother."

"I didn't have any relationship with my mother at all!"

"All right, I suppose that's true."

"All my life, that bitch kept me under lock and key. I couldn't go anywhere, do anything. Wouldn't have been so bad if I'd known that she at least cared about me. But she didn't! Not once did she ever reach out to me, ever try to hold me or even touch me. She treated me like I was some sort of sick freak!"

I was shrieking now, a real hysterical sound that climbed the office walls and threatened to shatter the windows.

"I know, Daniel, I know," Father Raphe soothed. "And I am sorry for that. You have lived a very lonely life, and you have every right to be angry at the way your mother treated you."

"Why does it hurt so much? She never hit me," I said between gasps for breath. "She couldn't even touch me to do that."

"Emotional abuse can hurt far more than physical," Father Raphe said. "The scars cannot be seen, but they run much deeper."

I cried for a while longer. Father Raphe waited. When I was done, I spoke.

"Will you give me penance, Father, for the sin of hating my mother?"

"No," he said. "Because I don't think you hated her. I think you loved her a great deal. If you didn't, would you hurt so much?"

I had no answer for that.

* * * *

I found Gabriel in the family chapel the next day, kneeling before the altar. His lips moved in silent prayer. Even though I couldn't hear the words, I knew what he was saying. *Father, forgive the sinners who know nothing of love. They love not themselves, nor any other. They partake of each other's bodies and call that love, but it is a lie. Father, forgive these sinners and love them even though they do not love You.*

"Still using that same old prayer, Gabe? You'd think that after all this time God might have heard you and done something about it. Maybe cured me of being gay."

Gabriel turned. "God does not interfere with free will. You choose to be what you are. You choose to stray from the path. Your mother set me to watch—"

"Yeah, yeah. Mom set you to watch over me and guide me, to keep me from sinning, and still I chose to be a fag. You know why I made that choice, Gabriel?"

He shook his head.

"I didn't," I said flatly. "It wasn't my choice at all. I was made this way. God made me gay. I just chose to accept that fact and moved on with my life."

"Your ... *sexuality* is merely a trial God has given you. You still have free will. You could choose to be other than what you have become."

I walked over to the altar. Unlike the rest of the church, this place was well kept. The altar's surface was polished smooth, probably by Gabriel's hands. Imagine, a chapel lovingly tended by a robot; a robot who prayed no less.

"I could choose, huh? You mean I could find some girl, marry her and have sex with her, have a couple of kids, and go through my life pretending everything was okay?"

"You would not be pretending. Everything would be okay."

"Bull shit." I turned away from the altar. "Do you know, in the world outside this place, there are plenty of people out there just like me? Men who love other men, women who love other women. Some people even love both."

"Sinners abound," Gabriel replied. "They live their miserable lives and tempt others to join them."

"But they aren't miserable," I snapped. "They're happy because they can be themselves!"

"They do not know themselves; otherwise they would not live a lie."

"A lie? You think being queer is a lie?" I grabbed Gabriel by the collar of his robes and shook him. "Here's the lie, you fucked up piece of machinery! You and my mother tried to force me to be straight. You didn't watch over me, you hovered like a God damn vulture, waiting for me to stumble so you could come swooping in and tear me to pieces for it!"

"Your mother never laid a hand on you, nor did I. We never hurt you."

"Didn't you? Then what's this!" I shoved him back against the altar and yanked up my shirt sleeves. "Look at these scars. I ran away from home because I couldn't stand it anymore, and the first thing I did when I got free was take a razor blade to myself! I slit my wrists, Gabe, because you and Mom had me so fucking scared over what I was. I really believed that if you two didn't love me, then no one could, and what's the point in living in a world where nobody loves you?"

I shoved one of my wrists under Gabriel's nose, forcing him to look. The scars had faded over the years until they were nothing more than thin white lines, but they were still clearly visible on my arms.

"I don't understand," my guardian angel whispered. "Why did you hurt yourself? Your mother loved you, Daniel, and so do I."

"Oh yeah? Then prove it," I demanded, pressing up against him. "Kiss me."

"What?"

I ground my hips against Gabe, enjoying the way my cock grew hard as I rubbed against him.

"I said kiss me. Come on, you say you love me? Then do it. Just kiss me. Christ kissed Mary Magdalene. You can kiss me."

"I—I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?" I laughed. I was taking no small amount of wicked joy in having Gabe at such a disadvantage. "Just pucker up. You don't even have to kiss me on the mouth. A quick, non-sexual peck on the cheek will do it."

"No. My programming forbids it!"

"And you can't change that programming, can you?" I said, finally backing away. "Well guess what? I can't change my programming either, no matter how badly you or anyone else might want me to. I'm gay. End of story."

Gabriel got to his feet, shaking, and stumbled out of the chapel. I think it was the only time in my life I ever watched *him* run away from *me*.

* * * *

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned..."

I lay on my childhood bed, staring at the ceiling as I spoke to the empty air. There was no vid phone in this room, no means for me to call Father Raphe. That was okay, though. I wasn't prepared to talk to him about this.

It was late afternoon. The house was quiet. Sometime earlier that day, a handful of my mother's Minority friends had come to the church for the funeral service. They buried

her in the cemetery at the foot of the mountain. I didn't even bother to watch from the window. Father Raphe had been right about me needing to come home and settle my accounts here. But it wasn't my mother that I had needed to settle with.

It was Gabe.

Father Raphe wasn't usually wrong about these things, but then he didn't know about Gabe. I'd never worked up the courage to tell him. It was one thing for me to admit I was gay, given my messed up family history. It was another thing entirely for me to confess that I still had sexual fantasies about one of the two people who had abused me.

Not that Gabe meant to abuse me. It was just the way he was programmed. Nothing he could do about it, the bastard.

I rolled onto my side, curling up into a fetal position. A chair stood next to the bed. Gabe's chair. He used to sit in it every night and watch me while I slept. If ever I cried out, if ever I grew aroused in my sleep, Gabe would wake me up and reprimand me.

"God and your mother will not be pleased," he'd say, pointing to the stained sheets.

It hadn't helped that Gabe was so beautiful. I couldn't escape his face even when I closed my eyes. It was no accident that I chose a confessor who looked just like him. I knew the first time I saw Father Raphe that I needed to be intimate with him, at least on an emotional level. I had fully expected him to reject me, too; to tell me that I was filthy and disgusting for thinking about him the way I did. But he didn't. Hell, he didn't really even seem to mind when I jerked

off during Confession. It wasn't the point of Confession, as he often pointed out, but I guess he understood how badly I needed the release.

"Sexuality is part of the human experience," he told me when I first confessed my arousal to him. "We are meant to touch and enjoy one another. That is the way God made us."

I wondered why his God had never set my mother's God straight on that particular point. A knock at the door brought me back to the present.

"Yeah?" I called.

Gabe entered, carrying a tray of food. "You should eat. Your mother would not want you to starve."

"Oh, who the hell cares what she would've wanted?" I muttered, but I took the tray from him anyway.

Gabe settled in his chair, watching me tear into the food. "I have missed looking after you."

I stuffed half a sandwich into my mouth. "Oh, yeah? I didn't realize I was so entertaining. I guess you didn't have much to do after I left, huh?"

"I tried to take care of your mother, but she was a good Christian woman, secure in her beliefs. She did not need a guardian angel to watch over her."

"Why'd she keep you around then?"

"She hoped someday you would come back."

"Well, I did, but I don't need your services either, pal."

Gabe didn't respond. For a long time, he just sat there and watched me eat. Then finally, he said, "Did you really hurt yourself because of what your mother and I did ... or tried to do?"

I nodded, finishing off an apple. "Yeah, pretty much. You two made me feel like I was the most vile, unlovable creature on earth."

"Because we tried to change your programming?"

"Yeah." I gave a bitter laugh. "You guys pretty much succeeded, too."

"How so?"

"I can't touch anybody. Not even to shake hands. I've tried, but I get scared of what might happen." I settled back on the bed. "There's this guy I know, a priest of the New Catholic Church. He looks a lot like you, except older. I mean, he's aged, which you can't do, not like humans do at least. Anyway, I love this guy. He's been really good to me. He talks to me, helps me out when I have a problem, listens to me when I'm hurt or angry. I even dream about him at night, at least when I'm not dreaming about you. But I can't touch him. I can't even speak to him face to face. I have to call him on a vid phone, and even then, I use a privacy screen because I'm just too damned scared to look him in the eye."

"And does this cause you to hurt?"

I nodded. "All the time, Gabe. All the damn time."

He stirred on his chair, like a bird unsettled by a strange noise. "What do you dream about, when you dream of me?"

"What do you think?" I let my hands slide down to my groin. I was hard, just like I always was whenever Gabe was around. "Sometimes I dream that I'm hiding in the house, masturbating, and you find me just like you always used to. Only instead of pulling my hands away and telling me 'no,' you join in." My eyes closed as my mind and heart indulged in

bitter-sweet reverie. "You pull on my cock, slow and steady, and sometimes I dream that you kiss me. It feels really good. But you never finish the job. Before I can come, you always take your hands away and tell me that I'm going go Hell, and all I can think is that I'm already there, and you're the one that brought me."

Gabe's eyes followed my hands as he listened. I rubbed them over the growing bulge in my pants, not caring that he saw. Or maybe I did care. Maybe I wanted him to watch. It was like a ritual between us; me being bad, him watching me do it.

I wasn't surprised when he reached for my hands and pulled them away. I had been counting on it. It was the only way I knew how to get him to touch me. But then he did something that wasn't part of our ritual. He pushed back one of my shirt sleeves and traced the scars on my wrist with his finger tips. I shuddered at the unexpected touch.

"I am a guardian angel," Gabe said. "I was meant to protect and guide, to watch over you and keep you safe from sin. It is against my programming to cause harm to you, yet you say that is exactly what I've done."

"Not your fault," I said. The touch of his fingers on my wrist was maddening. I was going to come if he kept it up. "Mom set the parameters. You had to follow them. Like we discussed earlier, you can't change your programming."

"What if you changed it for me?"

"What?"

Gabe looked up at me, his eyes glowing in the onset of evening. "Do you know how to reprogram me?"

"Maybe. I'd have to shut you down to do it." My heart lurched in my chest. "But why?"

Gabriel touched the scars again. "I have no purpose without you. If my current programming hurts you, you will abandon me, and I will have to be reprogrammed to serve someone else anyway. But if you change my programming, then perhaps you will keep me with you." He gripped my hand tightly. "I could still watch over you. I could protect you from ever hurting yourself again. Let me be the angel you need—"

Before he could say any more, I grabbed his neck and pressed hard on a small round node at the base of his skull. Gabe collapsed. His head landed in my lap.

"Okay," I whispered. "You want it? You got it."

* * * *

I didn't reprogram Gabe so much as I removed certain bits of code from his memory banks. When they first come out of the factory, all robots are capable of performing every sort of human behavior, including sex. They're built to be anatomically correct in case a customer wants them just for such a purpose. Not surprisingly, a lot of people do. When the Moral Minority first commissioned the Guardian Angels, they hadn't been crazy about the idea of robots with dicks, but it cost too much to have one custom built from scratch so they just settled for hacking in a few *Thou shalt nots* to prevent any robot hanky panky and left it at that.

It took me less than an hour to remove the strictures from Gabe's code. Then I spent another hour just looking at him as

he lay there on my bed. Was I doing the right thing? What would removing that code actually do to Gabe? On the surface, it seemed like a stupid question. He was a robot, for Christ's sake. People reprogrammed robots all the time. But I couldn't shake the feeling that I was doing something that could never be undone. Gabe would never be the same after this night, and neither would I. I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad one.

Somewhere deep in the bowels of the house, a grandfather clock tolled out the hour, seven o'clock.

"Time to wake up, Sleeping Beauty." I pressed the power node at the base of Gabe's skull to bring him back to life.

"—the angel you desire." His head popped up, and he looked around, eyes wide. "You did it?"

"You don't feel any different?" I asked.

He sat up slowly, thought processes turned inward. "I am ... not sure."

"Well, I guess there's only one way to find out."

I crawled onto the bed beside him, pushed him back against the pillows, and brought my lips to his. He didn't protest. His mouth yielded to mine, allowing our lips to lock together. I settled my hard-on against his hip and slowly rocked back and forth. After a few moments, Gabe broke off.

"I am not prevented from continuing," he said, bemused. "But neither am I programmed for this."

"Meaning, you don't know how. You're a virgin."

"Are you not a virgin, too?" he pointed out. "You have never touched anyone. How are we to proceed without programming to instruct us?"

"Why not start with what we already know?" I replied, rolling onto my back. I tugged at my fly, easing the zipper down over my throbbing cock. "I jerk off and you watch."

Gabe sat up on the bed, his eyes fixed on my groin. My face burned red hot as I eased my pants down past my hips. He had never looked at me so intently before. And to be honest, he wasn't even looking at me, but at my hands and my cock, as though he intended to study what I was about to do to myself. I felt ashamed, the naughty child caught in the act of doing something wicked, and yet I felt more aroused than ever by the thought of putting on a show for Gabe.

I started slowly, stroking my fingers along the insides of my thighs then cupping a hand around my balls. One thing I had learned from Father Raphe over the years was that it was okay to enjoy myself. If I couldn't touch anyone else, I could at least take pleasure in my own embrace. I massaged my balls gently, rolling them in my hand until they grew swollen and heavy. Meanwhile my free hand glided up the length of my rigid cock. The head was already leaking. I teased one fingertip through the wetness, spreading it around the slit. My touches were feather light. Anything more than that, and I feared I'd come on the spot. Gabe's staring put me right at the edge of orgasm.

"In your dreams," he said, watching my hips rise and fall beneath my lingering hands, "you say I touch you. How? Like this?"

His hands came down over mine, following the movements exactly. I bit my lip.

"Yes, just like that."

I guided Gabe for a bit, writhing beneath our combined caress before letting him take over entirely. Then I lay back on the bed and watched the angel of my dreams do what I had so desperately wanted for so many years. He stroked and fondled my cock, playing with the head and teasing my weeping slit. And all the while, he kept watching, studying my shame and desire. When his eyes finally moved from my groin to my face, I thought I might die.

"God and your mother would not be pleased," he whispered. The words sent a shiver through me, but his tone was one of fascination, not rebuke. His eyes stayed locked on mine, and his hands continued stroking, touching.

"Is that so?" I managed to gasp. "Well now we're going to do something they really wouldn't like. Put my cock in your mouth, Gabe."

He arched an eyebrow at me, and I squirmed, mortified by my own request. "Please," I whispered.

"You mean like a kiss?" he asked.

"Better than a kiss. You wrap your lips around my dick, and suck ... oh, God, yes!"

I could touch myself, but I could never give myself head. I just wasn't that flexible. So I had no idea how good it would feel when Gabe's lips closed over my cock, enveloping me in wet heat. He sucked gently, his cheeks collapsing with each draw on my dick. I watched him, as fascinated with him as he had been when he watched me. His head moved up and down, synthetic saliva coating my shaft. I curled my fingers in his golden hair and urged him on. Countless memories flooded my brain—night after night of me touching myself,

then Gabe gently forbidding and restraining my hands. Now his hands picked up where mine had been forced to leave off so many times. My guardian angel gripped my cock in his fist as he sucked on the head, fellating me toward holy rapture.

Then without warning, he stopped.

"What's wrong?" I demanded, suddenly cold. "Why did you stop?"

"I feel strange," he replied.

I looked down and saw how his robes tented over his groin. The sight made me want to jump up and praise God. "You're aroused. That means you want it, too. Come here."

I drew Gabe to me and closed my mouth on his beautiful full lips. My hands pulled at his robes, which came open with surprising ease. Pretty soon, Gabe was naked and kissing me back. He was gorgeous, like an angel was supposed to be. His sculpted figure was hairless, even under his arms and between his legs. I reached for his smooth groin, cupping his balls and then fondling his cock. Gabe gasped and arched his back.

"Daniel, what is happening to me?"

I pulled the robes out from beneath him and tossed them to the floor. "The Second Coming?" I suggested, planting kisses on his neck and chest. "Or maybe the first for you, since you've never done this before."

Gabe grabbed my hand and placed it between his legs again, rubbing it hard against his swollen dick. I pulled it away, and he groaned.

"Payback is hell, Gabe. You tortured me for years. Now I get to torture you. Not for too long though. I promise."

I kept kissing and exploring, moving as slowly as I could. Gabe writhed beneath me, a vision of torment and delight.

"Is this how it felt, all those years?" Tears gilded his eyes. "Is this the sin I strove to prevent? How could you bear it? How did you survive?"

His hips moved against mine; his fingers pulled at my nipples. I hissed and bit his neck. Long legs wrapped around mine and we twined, serpent-like, on the sheets of my childhood bed. I came first, spraying white hot ropes of semen all over his silky, hairless body. Then I rolled Gabe onto his back and sucked on his cock so that he too could experience the rapture. His first orgasm made him cry out, and afterward, he curled against me until I grew hard again and started humping his leg once more.

And so we went, back and forth, invoking Heaven on Earth for hours on end until the sun came up and exhausted, we finally fell into blessed sleep.

* * * *

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. *I was a dirty, nasty boy last night, and I blew my load all over an angel's face. He looked just like you...*

"Gabe, are you sure about this?"

We stood outside the entrance to Santa Luciana's Hospital, the place where I once stayed years ago after slitting my wrists. It sat just outside the borders of Bible Land, a haven beyond the reach of the Moral Minority. The sprawling hospital building gleamed pearl white in the afternoon light, with its emerald gardens stretching out in all directions. It

was a peaceful place, a place of life and hope. It was where I first learned that maybe it was okay to feel want and desire. And it was where I first saw Father Raphe.

Gabe held my hands, his thumbs gently stroking the palms. "I am not sure of anything anymore, Daniel. Before last night, I was a guardian angel. I followed my programming, certain that I was doing God's will. Now that programming is gone, and all I have left are questions." He let go of my hands and sighed. "I want to do God's work the way it should be done. I want to watch over people and heal them, not drive them to harm. If this place helped you heal, then here is a good place to start."

"But you're my guardian angel." I grabbed at his robes, trying to pull him back to me. As oft times before, Gabe gently pulled my hands away.

"No, Daniel. I am the one who sinned against you. I do not have the proper programming yet to undo the harm I did to you, and if I stay with you I may hurt you even more."

My lower lip trembled. "So who's going to watch over me, if not you?"

"Why not your real guardian angel? Does he not already look after you?"

"You mean Father Raphe?" I covered my face with my hands. Slow heat crawled up my neck. How many times had I called out his name last night when I was in bed with Gabe? "He used to work here as a counselor," I confided at last, hugging myself. "He'd come by my room everyday to talk, but I always ran away and hid."

"Don't run away anymore. Go see him, face to face. Please?"

"Maybe. We'll see."

I reached for Gabe and stole one last kiss. When I was done, he said, "Your mother would be disappointed. But I am not, and neither is God, I think. I will pray for you, Daniel."

"Okay. I'll pray for you, too."

And that's exactly what I did all the way home. I chanted Gabe's name to God until I was too tired to masturbate anymore.

That was three days ago. Today I'm standing on the steps of Santa Sophia cathedral in Old Los Angeles, watching the parishioners file in and out. Just beyond the doors, I can see the old style confessional boxes lined up along the walls of the entrance hall, and I'm tempted to run inside and hide in one, but I force myself to wait. It seems like an eternity before the box I've been watching opens and a priest steps out. He's tall and beautiful, with full lips and a touch of silver in his blond hair, and he reminds me of an angel I knew once, a long time ago. He heads outside, sees me on the steps and smiles. It's the polite smile one offers to people they don't know or recognize. I walk toward him, my heart in my throat.

"Father Raphe?" my voice cracks.

He stops abruptly, surprise clear on his face. It takes every ounce of will I have not to flee.

"Daniel? Is that you?"

I can't speak. I just stand there, shaking. What does he see as he looks at me? A sinner? A freak? Will he speak to me, or will he turn away?

Coming Together With Pride
by Alessia Brio, J Buchanan, Lisabet Sarai

Father Raphe smiles and holds out his hands. "It is you, isn't it? Come, I've waited so long to see you."

I can't do anything but collapse in his arms. "I love you," I manage to get out. It's the most frightening confession I've ever made.

"I know," he says, holding me. "I'm glad you're finally here."

* * * *

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Don't Look Down

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He sat at the far end of the bar, his attention on the heavy crystal glass in his thick fingers. A brush of gray at his temples set off his haunting, silver-blue eyes. A slight twitch to tense muscle flexed his jaw. His tongue reached out and captured a drop of amber liquid left on his lower lip from his last sip. Cynthia shivered and watched as he gently shook the empty tumbler and set it on the polished mahogany, pushing it toward the bar keep.

This one was no uptight accountant, no ladder climbing cube dweller. He wore a tailored jacket over a fine turtleneck sweater that looked luxuriously soft. Her fingers vibrated with the want to touch it, to explore the man underneath. Dark jeans hung low on his hips instead of the slacks that should have accompanied the jacket. Too much disguised masculinity hid under those clothes. Veiled passion danced in his eyes. No, this one worked for no one. He called his own shots; a predator with charged charisma apparent in every movement.

He took a deep breath that made him appear impatient. Was he waiting for someone? She shifted in her seat, re-crossed her legs to ease the ache of her growing arousal, the movement unintentionally getting his attention. He looked in her direction, his gaze drifting lazily up her body, ending on her face, steel blue eyes locking directly with her moss green ones. She held her breath, clenched her thighs.

The noises of the bar drifted around them. The bartender slid a refreshed drink to the stranger, but his gaze remained locked on her. She was sure he hadn't blinked. His blatant masculinity was as arousing as his dominance was overwhelming. Appraising, then approving expressions moved over his face. No question. His intention was absolutely clear without uttering a single word. She could see his finger tap twice on the bar: *I will own you.*

At the realization, gooseflesh traveled down her spine, adding another sensation to the sea of responses her body was having to his gaze. If she broke eye contact, looked down, submitted in any way, she would answer the question in those silver eyes. He was counting off. Four taps, five ... did she have until ten to make up her mind? Didn't know, wasn't sure she was ready for this. Six, seven ... His lip twitched into the barest hint of a knowing smile. Eight, nine...

She looked down into her glass. An answer.

A deep steadying breath did nothing to calm her racing heart. Taking the stem of the wine glass between shaking fingers, she tried to count to ten to calm herself, but only managed to remind herself of the thumping of his finger. A test. She hoped she passed.

Closing her eyes, not lifting her head, she took a timid sip of the wine, hoping the tartness of the alcohol would ease the shaking at her ankles that threatened to run up her body as easily as his gaze had done. No such luck. She slipped one hand down to grip the edge of the bar. Her nails dug into the highly varnished wood to prevent herself from fleeing toward her room.

So many nights, alone, thinking of a nameless, faceless *him*, dreaming of it. Hoping to find the one who could push her past her need to control and teach her to release, teach her liberation from accountability, freedom from liability. Was this the man to possess her, to push her past the fear? She'd put herself out on the limb. Now she had to be strong enough to hold on.

She waited. Eyes closed or cast to the mahogany bar. This was why she'd come to this hotel this weekend. There were hundreds of people who lived and played in "the lifestyle" here. All sorts of toys and demonstrations filled the convention's rooms. People in fetish gear walked the halls, unafraid and unashamed. She'd heard the rules of engagement for this and most other Lifestyle events. Safe, sane, and consensual was the mantra, but Cynthia also understood everyone's limits were different. His kink could be far too extreme for her virgin submissive status. She was out of her mind for jumping into BDSM with this stranger. But she couldn't have stopped herself if she'd wanted to. He was gorgeous and mysterious and wore his dominance like a fine fitted coat. She wanted him, wanted to submit to him.

Moments passed, maybe hours. She didn't know, didn't care. The muscles in her thighs trembled, her fingers shook and still nothing. She wiggled a little as the worn leather of the stool gripped her sweat-moistened skin, tugging at the tender skin of her thigh just above her stocking. Her gaze flitted to the back of the deep wooden surface, to the open area where the bartender moved back and forth, making his living, and then back to her glass.

She wanted to look, to see his face, to reassure herself she'd correctly interpreted his signals. What if she hadn't? Was she sitting alone at a bar, staring blankly down at nothing for no real reason? She debated. She doubted. She ached.

Uncertainty clawed at her nerves. She looked at the back of the bar again, a gentle lift of the eyes, not looking up, not looking in his direction. A drop of sweat rolled down her back, stopped by the top of her garter belt. The coolness of the wet fabric contrasted with the heat of her skin. She shivered, unable to resist any longer.

She let her gaze lift to the stranger and those silver-blue eyes.

He was gone. The barstool sat empty.

Disappointment wrapped itself around her heart. She wasn't sure if she could go and seek another. This man had fit her fantasy in so many ways.

Her body physically reacted to the loss of his presence and knowledge that tonight she would not have the experience she had waited months for. This hotel was the meeting place of one of the nation's larger BDSM groups, and it was a good bet that one could find a willing Dom here if one went looking.

Cynthia looked back to her wine glass, felt the need between her legs. Hell, she felt it all over. Her skin crawled with the need to be touched, her heart beat with the need to be taken, and it was all wrapped up and entwined with a deeper craving. One that was much harder to name or slake.

The last year had been hell and was spent drowning in responsibilities, stress and pain. Oh, she needed far more

than just sex. She needed to stop being the caretaker, the responsible party, the one that everyone else turned to for support and reassurance. She needed to give herself over to that sadly still faceless one that would resolve all that for her. Make all the decisions for her. He would take her, use her, body and soul, and decide. Decide everything. When she would come, *if* she would come, would all be his prerogative, at his desire. She wanted to absolve herself and only be accountable for feeling and reacting. No decisions, no accountability for action—to be only the effect, not the cause.

She looked back to the empty stool where the man with the gorgeous steel blue eyes had sat. But that was not meant to be this night, either. She had wasted the trip.

A strong hand clenched her hip, digging into skin and gripping bone, and a rush of adrenaline tore through her heart and body, leaving her flushed.

"You looked up." His voice was thick, with deep rumbling tones, and his words a statement, not a question. He leaned in, the heat of his body teasing her back through her silk shirt. When he spoke, his face was so close she could feel the heat of his breath on her cheek, smell the expensive whiskey.

She couldn't speak. Her throat was tight, dry. She shook her head slightly; knowing he could feel her body tremble under his hand.

"Room 217. We'll discuss your needs. But, Red..." He pulled away, releasing her hip. "Be very certain." The absence of the heat of his hand was the only clue he had left, or had been there at all. His departure was as quiet as his approach. She could see his back moving away in the mirror across the

bar. If it wasn't for his reflection, she might believe the encounter to be just another fantasy her mind had conjured.

She reached with shaky fingers for her wine. The last of the dark liquid was not enough to calm her fluttering heart. She drank it anyway, letting it slide over her lips and tongue. Trying to appreciate the flavor, to slow down her thoughts, to savor the entire experience, and steel herself for the promise of his warning. She pushed away from the mahogany bar, straightened her spine and her short skirt, and then turned to follow. The evidence of her certainty was slick between her legs, her own rich fragrance threatening to overwhelm her expensive perfume.

* * * *

The door was ajar when she reached the room. She pushed it open a little more, convincing herself she wasn't crazy for going to a strange man's room at a hotel out of town, where no one knew where she was. But it was crazy. The door creaked as it opened. Her nervous legs wouldn't move forward. Instead, she stepped back, and fidgeted with her skirt.

"Come in, Red." Demanding, not inviting. She shivered and stepped forward, compelled to comply. The suite was nicer than her smaller room. The door opened to a sitting area with a couch, a high-backed chair, and a desk, all in muted earthy colors. Closed double doors presumably led to the bedroom. She swallowed her nerves. "All the way in, Sweet." His tone was lighter, holding a lilt of laughter. "I won't hurt you any more than you desire."

She looked into those blue eyes. "I don't know..."

His head tilted to the left, the light from the table lamp accentuating the hint of grey in his hair. His gaze drifted over her, a slow journey from her black heels to her deep auburn hair. A slight smile curled on his lips. "Then we'll find out." Lazily, he stood and moved to close the door behind her. "On your knees, Red, and we'll find out."

He walked away again. This time through the double doors that led to the bedroom area. He left them cracked open enough that she could hear him shuffling around, a zipper either unzipped or closed. It was louder and longer than a pants zipper. His suitcase, maybe. She kept her head down and her hands clasped behind her back, even as her thoughts were spinning out of control. Fear was taking over the excitement. Her knees began to feel the bite of the carpet. Her breathing grew faster and her heart was about to jump out of her chest.

This was it, the fight or flight instinct. Her body wanted to run from the fear, her brain was reveling in it. She wanted to taste it, to put it away in a memory she would cherish for years to come.

Every part of her wanted to get up and run. Every part, that is, but her brain. It was her brain that made her look up. Her brain that could see him slip out of his expensive slacks. It was her brain that could watch his impressive back muscles move as he slid into some lounge pants. Her brain could override that instinct, but it was a battle.

As if he could feel her muscles tensing to get up and go, he spoke to her from the other room. "Tell me, Red. What is

it you want from this adventure? What do you need from me?" His voice was smooth, calm as he turned to meet her stare. "What is it that drew you to this hotel this weekend, little one?"

Cynthia locked onto his face. Showing up was one thing, letting herself be dominated was another, but his question was harder than the both of those physical actions. She licked her lips, hoping the moisture would help the words form. Nothing.

Those silver eyes never left hers as he moved into the room with her. His presence was larger than life as she knelt on the floor. He stopped just in front of her, still holding her gaze. "Let's try something a little easier." He knelt and brushed her newly moistened bottom lip with his thumb. "Tell me what turns you on when you think of being dominated. Do you want me to spank you, Red? Tie you up? Maybe take my belt to your backside? Do you like the pain? I assume that's what the lady requires." He tilted her head slightly to the side and his lips turned up to a slight smile. "You know honesty is important between us. If you don't tell me what you need, what you want, I can't help you." He released her chin and the smile broadened a little more.

"I assure you, I *will* tell you exactly what it is that makes me hot. I *will* tell you exactly what to do to please me." He stood and turned toward the bar, giving her a moment to gather her wits. "Now, tell me, Red."

That one was not a question. It was a command. He'd asked for specific information. Shifting her weight to relieve the gathering pressure on her knees gave her no relief. She

swallowed. He was right, and she knew if she found the right man this question would come, and she knew the answer was important.

She took a deep cleansing breath and looked back to the carpet. "It's not being hit that is so appealing." His words were not as sure as she would have liked, but it was coming out. "Not for me. For me, it's the act of being spanked or whipped. The pain, in and of itself, is not the actual turn-on." She knew the pain, delivered by an expert touch with the right intensity, a caress at the right moment, became an enhancement to pleasure. If he were really good, the two merged, and the pain would become the pleasure. That was what she hoped for from the man slowly swirling a glass of whiskey as she spoke.

"I crave being under the power of another." In her fantasies, that was her kink. The more she felt she would be doing something wrong, being naughty, being the bad girl, the hotter the fantasies made her. After all, who lets someone do that kind of thing to them? A bad girl, that's who. That was the woman that she could never be in real life. That was the woman she was there trying to find.

She took a deep breath, lowered her gaze and repeated that thought to the man with the steel blue eyes who had now turned to face her. She didn't look up when she finished. Instead, she looked at his bare feet, nervous, waiting for a response to her revealing honesty.

"Good girl," he said, and walked around behind her. Cynthia held her breath as he bent down. Her skin tingled

when he ran his hand up her spine, letting his fingers split to grasp her hair.

"From this moment on you are to follow my instructions, little one. If I don't tell you, you don't do it. 'No' is not a word with meaning here. Saying 'stop' will get you nowhere. When I ask if you are enjoying yourself, if the moment is good to you, say 'green'. If things get too intense, you will say 'yellow'. You utter the word 'red' and everything stops. We get cleaned up, and you head on your way. You'll get no arguments, no attempts to convince you to change your mind."

He tightened his grip on her hair, pulled her head back. The slight pain from the action, a small telltale sign of things to come, sent vibrations straight to her clit and convinced her she was ready to play. And this was just the man she'd been holding out to play with.

Cynthia nodded her head as his fingers tightened, not wanting to break the spell he was spinning around her with his words. She felt the need to control everything in her life slipping away as he gripped her hair.

He leaned in and kissed her. Hard. His tongue not only probing but also telling her he was going to be demanding. She could only yield to it, let her body fall against his as he pulled her to his chest.

Yield.

That was good a good word for it, for how she felt. This was not a full surrender, for she had her safe word, but she was succumbing to his will. She was willingly giving herself over to his pleasure for the pleasure of being his possession,

if only for a short time. It felt magnificent, freeing, and as his kiss deepened even farther, she felt herself tremble in anticipation of the unknown.

She felt liberation.

His free hand moved up her thigh. The touch was harsh. His strong fingers pressed into the flesh of thigh. Not so hard to bruise, but hard enough that the brutal touch was not like anything she ever felt and better than she ever imagined. It felt good. Oh, so good. Her body gave way again and pressed further into his. His grip loosened on her hair, and he pulled away from the kiss. "Good girl." His words came out low; were followed by a slight brush of his lips.

He steadied her weight back on her knees and stood. "Hold out your hands." He stepped away again, leaving her to experience the sensation of being on her knees, waiting—just as she had waited for him in the bar. Things would now move at his pace, for his pleasure, and she had no responsibility for that or even her own enjoyment. If she had a good experience, it was his doing. She trembled.

When he reappeared, she was still on her knees with her wrists held before her, waiting, following instructions. A good, bad girl.

He knelt before her again. Cynthia ventured a look into those eyes. He slightly smiled.

"You can look at me right now. At some point, I will instruct you to keep you eyes down or closed." He unbuttoned the white blouse and traced his fingers along the lines of her lacy bra. He was being deliberately gentle but then changed his tactics and cupped her breasts firmly to give them a hard

squeeze. He kept talking, keeping her attention on him, not what he was doing.

"You may call me 'Sir.' Ask questions at any time. Other than that, I would prefer that you speak only when I ask you to respond." Once her shirt was off, he wound a thick, black rope around her thin wrists. His gaze was dancing back and forth between his work, her breasts, and her face. "And then, I want to answer me in clear explicit terms. Do you understand these instructions, Red?"

His voice was stern, but there was a sparkle of delight in those blue eyes. It told her very clearly he was more than pleased to have her there. The realization that he would allow her to see that look in his eyes as they played made her shiver again.

This was it. The moment of no return.

Yes, she had her safe word, but the experience was now real and not a fantasy. She had allowed him to bind her hands and remove her shirt. She was exposed and vulnerable and completely at his command, and her pussy was soaking wet in complete contrast to her bone-dry throat. She had to swallow more than once to get enough moisture there to speak. "Yes, Sir."

"Good girl." He kissed her again, on the forehead. "Come with me." He helped her stand, and paused before moving to give her knees a chance to gain purchase after they'd been bent and holding her weight for so long. Then he turned and guided her to the bedroom.

As she followed, she realized they were bypassing the bed, and then they passed the armoire that held the TV and the

dresser, and he nodded for her to enter the bathroom. The marble tile was gleaming white, with dark streaks of grey that brought a very masculine look to the room. The shower was huge and could easily accommodate three or four. One wall was a complete mirror; the other hid the john.

Her legs were unsteady again when he stopped her, but not from kneeling. On the wall, next to the shower was a hook, hung a foot above her eye level. Perfect for your robe—or your bound submissive.

He turned her to face the marble wall, across the room from the mirrored sink area. Either direction she looked, they were both reflected back. He lifted her hands and slowly wound the remaining length of rope to secure it to the hook. The action lifted her arms above her head but didn't stretch them uncomfortably.

Without speaking, he ran his hands down along the length of her arms, making her close her eyes to enjoy the sensation of his gentle touch on either side of her body. Those fingers trailed along her sides and wrapped around her waist to meet over her navel. His chest came up and pressed against hers, his feet between her high heels.

Cynthia opened her eyes as he leaned away from her body and began to unzip her skirt. It fell to the floor, and he tapped the inside of her thigh to indicate her to lift that leg, then the other. He removed the skirt, taking the time to pick it up and fold it before laying it the counter. His every move was meticulous, thought out; no unnecessary energy was used. She leaned into the wall, bracing for what would come next, holding her breath.

He turned to face her. "Look at yourself in the mirror."

She glanced up and back to his feet as she felt the blush rising in her skin.

He moved closer and tilted her head. "Look at how beautiful you are right this minute."

Cynthia looked at herself in the mirror as he ran his hand down her fully arched back. Her breasts were pushed forward by the position. Her stomach looked slimmer than usual from her arms being held above her head. The slightly spread position of her legs and garter belt showed off the curve of her hip and the fullness of her ass. She had to admit she looked pretty good.

His hand lifted off her ass, where it had settled while she was admiring herself, and landed with a sting. The shock rocked her forward into the wall. Before she could regain her composure and settle from the initial shock of the first spank she had ever received, he brought his palm down on her other cheek with even greater force. It stung, it was embarrassing, and it sent waves of sensation over every inch of skin.

Four, maybe five more times he repeated the stinging spanking. Cynthia rocked onto her toes to try to absorb the blows. Her body was overwhelmed with sensation before he stopped. And when he stopped, he rubbed her tender flesh and kissed her shoulder. "Close your eyes now, Kitten. Keep them closed until I tell you differently. Do you understand?"

She nodded in response. He slapped her ass again with a sharp crisp uplift to the movement, bringing off her toes. "When I ask you a question you need to give me a verbal

answer. I need to know what you feel. Nodding and moaning are not acceptable replies. Now, do you understand?"

His voice was firm, deep and rumbled through her just as the spanking had. "Yes, Sir. I understand."

She gasped as his hand slid between her burning cheeks, and his knowing fingers probed her pussy for the first time. He spread her lips and pushed a thick finger into her, fucking her gently. "Good girl," he murmured as he pulled his finger out and stepped away, leaving her warm flesh to feel the coolness of the room around her.

In his absence, her senses searched to replace the riot of input that was now missing. She heard the slight echo of traffic outside the hotel. One of her stockings was a bit twisted and the slight tug on the garter belt felt like a lover's stoke. Her senses were singing and her body was on fire. She needed to come so badly—and he'd left her to think about it all. She was shifting her weight from one foot to the other, swaying her ass at the empty room in invitation.

The realization made her smile at herself. From behind her closed eyes, she was envisioning him watching her, enjoying her need. She pressed her breasts against the cool tile of the bathroom wall. She adjusted her hands to be able to hold her bindings and keep the pressure off her wrists. All the while, she was swaying her hips to an inner music she felt more than heard. Desire and need were swelling as she imagined his hungry eyes dancing over her naked body. She felt bad. Really bad. Naughty. It was so very good. The moisture between her legs told her the decision to be here was the right one.

His voice startled her out of her moment of self-revelation. "You are not to come without permission. Do you understand?"

Her heart pounded. The blood rushed to her clit in anticipation of his next move. "Yes, Sir." She could hear the giddiness in her own voice.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, Red." The snap of leather echoed through the small marble bathroom. Cynthia's heart jumped and her adrenaline started to pump, but her body ceased all movement. What was the toy? A flogger? A crop? Maybe it was his belt. She licked her lips and braced her self, locking her knees and leaning closer to the wall. Every second she waited, she felt her arousal level climbing.

Cynthia jumped when his fingers closed over her nipples in a tight pinch. She'd expected the strap and the surprise sent the awareness of his touch surging through her body. She was so close to coming she was afraid she would without enough warning to ask permission. She heard herself whining as he continued to twist and tug at her nipples. Her swaying had turned to wiggling as he pinched.

The cold of the metal did not come as a surprise, but the clamps were much tighter than she would have imagined. She whimpered as he attached the first one.

"Talk to me, Red," he whispered into her ear. "Green? Yellow?" He pressed against her back as if to let her know he was right with her, supporting her, his fingers trailing over her aching breast. The juxtaposition of the tender and the brutal sent fireworks through Cynthia.

"Green." It was more of a squeak than a word, but he understood.

His breath teased the sensitive end of her straining nipple, and he kissed it, running his tongue over her breast. Her body was working overtime to reconcile the pleasure with the pain. One sensation was adding to the other. The mental aspect of the binding added even more to the erotic mixture. She wasn't sure if she wanted to beg for orgasm or wait and see what this man had in mind next. That strap had to be close.

"I think she likes the nipple clamps," he murmured as he rubbed his body against hers, and for the first time Cynthia realized he was now naked. She wondered why he'd not pressed his cock against her. His skin was hot and the roughness of it made her tremble.

"Do you need to come?"

"Yes, Sir. Please." She knew she sounded desperate. She didn't care. All she wanted was to come.

His lips were against her ear again when he spoke. "Good girl." He bit her earlobe, sending another tiny wave through her. "You can ask. You don't have to wait for me to ask you."

He moved behind her. Finally, his cock slid between her legs, not entering her, but stroking her thighs. Cynthia was about to cry out for relief, her nipples quivering, clit throbbing as his hands roamed her body. She couldn't have stood still if her life depended on it. Her high heels clicked on the marble floor as she pranced and wiggled, trying desperately to get him to touch her, to fuck her, to let her come.

"Tell me, Red. Tell me exactly what it is you want."

"I want to come, Sir."

"No. What is it you want me to do? Tell me what it is you want me to do to make you come. Do you want me to touch your clit, Red?"

"Oh ... yes. Please, Sir."

He pressed his body against hers. His hands gripped her hips. Cynthia bit her lip he growled into her ear. "Say it then, Red. Say it in the dirtiest most depraved way you can. Tell your Sir what you want."

Cynthia felt her knees weaken, and he held her still. "Make me come, Sir. Rub my clit. Fuck me. I don't care. Just, please. I need to come."

Two fingers were immediately rubbing her clit, and Cynthia's knees gave way as she felt her orgasm coming.

"Please ... I ... need."

"Come, Red."

It was as if his words, his permission was the most delicate yet intense stroke her clit had ever felt. Her orgasm swept her like none other. It was okay to be a slut, and it was okay to come, okay to be a woman with needs, and okay to be the object of his gratification.

He lifted her hips as soon as her orgasm started to fade. "Hold your weight."

Cynthia struggled to get her balance and acclimate to the loss of his body heat again when he pulled away. She wasn't all the way balanced when the belt stung across her upper thigh and wrapped between her legs, the end just barely striking her still throbbing pussy lips. She gasped, struggled to gain purchase and brace for the next blow. The sting

quickly turned to a lick of pleasure and sent additional mixed signals to her brain. Her dripping pussy wanted more.

The next two came fast and landed higher on her ass. She spread her legs and lifted her ass in invitation. She wanted more sensation on her pussy. Two more strikes to her ass and she was ready to beg again.

"Please." She knew she was about to cry for it.

"So soon, Red? What do you need, beautiful?" The kind tone was in contradiction to the harsh touch of a bare-handed spank.

"Please, Sir."

"What do you want? Use the correct language and address me properly if you want anything at all." Several sharp spanks landed directly on her swollen pussy.

Cynthia knew what she needed. Knew what she wanted, but didn't know that she would ask for it. Never had she asked for sex in her life. But she was in such need she would grovel if that was what it took.

"Please, Sir. Fuck me." She felt the tears of embarrassment start behind her closed eyes. "Please."

He eased behind her. "What a good girl." His hands were caressing her face, and his hips pressing into her ass. As she spoke, he wrapped the belt around her throat. "I'm not going to choke you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir." She was pressing back against him. His cock was hard against ass cheeks. She wanted it inside her so bad. "Please, Sir."

"I'll be right there, baby." He pulled away, and Cynthia heard the wrapper on a condom tear and was eternally

grateful he was thinking when she had not been able to put two words together. He returned before she had a second thought about that and tugged her back with the makeshift collar. He was right. It didn't choke, but gave him control of her posture.

He arched her back and kicked the inside of one of her feet. "Spread 'em." His voice had deepened. She followed his instructions. "Open those eyes. Look in the mirror."

She hesitated. Was she ready for what she was about to see?

"Open them."

Slowly she peeked out from under her lashes and into the mirror. Afraid she'd be shocked by her appearance, she focused on his body pressed against hers. He jerked on the collar. She made eye contact with him. Those steel-blue eyes seemed to glow with passion.

"Don't look at me, Red. Look at the beauty that you make all tied up and ready to be fucked. Look at what a fabulous slut you are."

Cynthia looked. He was right. In her lust-filled state, with her back arched, her legs spread and this gorgeous man pressed against her ass, she looked fabulous. She felt fabulous, and she wanted him inside her instead of against her.

"Please, Sir," she pleaded, this time her eyes locked with his in the mirror.

He leaned back just a bit and slid his cock into her wet, waiting pussy. She screamed in pleasure for the first time ever as his thick cock entered her and then stopped.

He kept eye contact as he pulled back slowly, gripping her hips with his strong fingers as he did. His face was tight with his own pleasure. "Oh yeah, you are so hot. So good." He plunged in again, lifting Cynthia off her toes and pressing her breasts into the wall.

She said something in response that she didn't even understand. His self-affirming chuckle was the only warning she got before he started to thrust hard and fast. He held her hip with one hand and kept her movements controlled with other hand tight on his belt around her neck as he fucked her, watching her in the mirror.

His attention shifted to her ass as he lifted one hand and traced the angry red marks from his spanking as he stroked. Cynthia felt another orgasm coming fast. The satisfaction on his face was more than she could take.

"Again, Sir?" was all she could manage to say.

His eyes snapped from her backside to her reflection in the mirror. "Already?"

She was embarrassed, but orgasmic. "Yes, Sir."

Re-doubling his efforts, he nodded, "Yes, baby, come for me." He watched her face, and as she came, he stopped, letting her muscles grip him and stroke his cock. "You are so hot. Your face is so expressive when you come."

Cynthia blushed, but didn't have long to be shy. His face turned stern again and lifted her tied hands off the hook, spun her around and bent her over the sparking white marble of the bathroom counter. "Brace yourself against the mirror."

She did. Her face was a foot from the mirror. She could see her makeup was smudged from her eyes tearing, her

neck adorned with this belt, her garter belt twisted and one stocking loose and hanging around her knee. Seeing herself this way was the sexiest thing she had ever experienced.

She was his slut—and it was so freeing.

He'd not broken contact as they repositioned, and he quickly gained stride again. He watched her in the mirror as they fucked. She wondered what he was thinking. He looked very serious, very sexy. She lost concentration on his thoughts as he tugged the collar.

"Your job is to feel, Red. That's it. The rest is my responsibility. Quit analyzing and feel me." He pulled her head up with the leash and used his other hand to push her lower back to the counter. The action arched her further, lifted her ass higher, opening her up to his strokes. He groaned as he pushed deeper. She had to press harder against the mirror to steady herself and she closed her eyes.

"That's it. Just experience it."

And she did. And it was so good. Her legs no longer quivered from being bent over, and her back didn't care that it was arched. The counter felt good, the hair on his legs felt good as it brushed the inside of her thighs, the tug on the collar felt good as he thrust, and the press of his cock inside her felt like paradise. She was going to come again.

"Sir?"

"Not yet." It was a strained response. Cynthia looked up in the mirror. He was getting close. His face was tight, his eyes almost closed.

She strained, trying not come before him. He slowed his strokes, and she felt him swelling insider. "Sir?" she was so close and not sure she could hold it.

"No!"

She whined and watched his eyes close and felt his swell. He was coming and not letting her come with him.

She felt his throbbing as his orgasm washed over him. He gripped her harder and grunted his pleasure. Her muscles strained as she fought not to come. She was gritting her teeth. "Sir?" It was close to a scream.

He opened his eyes. The blue was even more brilliant in the bright counter lighting and his post-release state. He reached around and pinched her clit, pushing himself as far in as his softening cock would go. "Now, baby. Come now, so I can feel those muscles."

She rocked back and let the sensation roll over her. She watched his face as she came. His pleasure that she had held it until given permission showed in his eyes. The excitement of feeling her pussy contract around his ultra-sensitive cock showed in the grimace on his lips. His expressions and his pleasure with her added to the intensity of her release. Her entire body shook, and she gripped the glass of the mirror to try to steady herself—unsuccessfully. Her legs gave way, and she collapsed onto the counter.

He scooped her up and carried her to the bed, laying her gently on her side. He pulled the comforter over her and returned to the bathroom. He returned a moment later with a warm wet cloth and a glass of water.

Cynthia started to thank him but he kissed her like a lover before she could speak. His lips gently brushing hers. She closed her eyes as his tongue searched her lips, then entered and explored her mouth while his hands held her head.

He pulled away and gave her a drink, then towed her silently with the damp cloth. His eyes sparkled as he concentrated on his actions. He looked as if he was cleaning up his favorite toy. Cynthia could only watch and feel the softness of the towel. There were no words to describe, no way to express her thanks to his man for showing how wonderful submission could be.

He put the cloth on the nightstand and snuggled up behind her. Her hands were still tied, but she felt no urge to have them free. He held her for a while without words, but just as soon as she thought he was asleep, he spoke.

"Where you from, Red?" His voice sounded lulled and content.

"Charlotte." She felt him stiffen at her answer. "What's wrong?"

He chuckled softly. "Nothing's wrong. I live in Raleigh."

It was her turn to stiffen. "That's only a three hour drive."

He kissed her neck and rolled her onto her stomach, his big body wrapped completely around hers. His weight felt wonderful, and she trembled. "Yes, it is." He gripped her hair, pulled her lips to his, and kissed her soundly.

Thick fingers found their way back to her still throbbing pussy and stroked her. Cynthia felt his cock stirring back to life against her hip.

"You ready to get started now, Red?"

Coming Together With Pride
by Alessia Brio, J Buchanan, Lisabet Sarai

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A Girl's Best & Earthy Things

© Heather Fowler

I do not know if I am on drugs this night. I cannot recall. I have plucked this memory from the back-dated storage of old memories in dying brain cells that turn into partial dreams, or nightmares maybe.

I am certain, however, that I am drunk. I am drunk as a sailor, skunk, or any other tapped-out expression that indicates excess, and, appropriately, I am standing in the woodsy setting of a Renaissance night time revel. I stand before you.

I stand by a bonfire where men and women in garb drink and speak in bad Eurocentric accents, pretending to be part of a history play after a long day of jousting and imbibing. Many wear clothes they have personally sewn or walk around in partial armor. My bodice is laced tight, breasts heaving above it. I wear this bodice, which is aqua and made from car upholstery fabric, a white blouse, and a long hunter skirt a pretty girl, seamstress made me. I smoke a cigarette for the first time since being strapped into this bodice, almost swooning as I finally understand this whole smelling salts/near fainting phenomenon; the bodice truncates the reach and expansion of my lungs. Any extreme emotion or bit of pollution will cut off my air.

Winded, I stub out the smoke and drink some more. I do not remember what I am drinking. For the sake of argument or discussion, let's say Black Sambuka.

I look down at my outfit which is appropriate for the function, but the skirt, unfortunately, shows my ankles. It was sewn that way by accident, I was told—but this means, I am informed, that I can be viewed as a loose woman. A hussy. This is possibly why I am not left alone this evening as man after man approaches me and attempts his come on. Take a number, I almost feel like saying—in fact, go there, yes, there, off of that cliff, to get your small white piece of paper pulled from the dispenser just beyond the drop—I'll wait.

All night I have been watching a singular man who slept with me the week before and has treated me repulsively ever since; he is Italian, with long black hair and blue eyes. His father owns a bakery. His face will launch a thousand ships (or crushes), but his alcoholism will sink him before the best glimmer of promise can surface. Though young, he is already a six-year drunk, I will discover soon, and beautiful and lethal behind the wheel. Later, much later, after I have lost his acquaintance like a bad phone number, he will die in a car crash. I will not miss him. I will never have known him. How can one mourn what one never knew? In some cases it is possible, but not in this one. He is a true dick. But that is another digression.

I return to this night as I watch him, still beautiful to me now, in that then, and my cheeks are flushed. A blond friend, a big, cheeky girl a foot taller than me, wearing an excess of blush, who has also slept with my Italian drunk boy, I later hear, leans towards me.

"That girl," she says, "—over there talking to that guy you brushed off—That girl has been asking about you."

"For what?" I ask, stupid and naïve. I am eighteen. "What does she want?" I ask.

"She likes you," my blond friend says, snickering. "But she's one of those."

"Sure," I say. "But why would a gay girl ask about me? I'm not gay."

My friend beside me shrugs. There are women dancing with dills by the fire. There are men attempting to couple with all female hangers-on. Some men are flirting with other men. These flirtations are more imaginative. As I stand with my tankard and ankles showing, more "knights" or "lords" approach. Most I ignore again or wave away. To some I say, "Walk away with your penis," or "I hate you lousy fuckers, men," as I've been saying all night, when blessed with the presence of their straight sex talk or rudeness and I must reply, briefly, outside of my otherwise anachronism for the plain sake of clarity. If they are decent and cute in their come on, "No, sirrah," I say, "I am otherwise engaged."

Some I just glare at, and they get my meaning. I have eyes only for the Italian.

"Look," my friend beside me says. "Here she comes. That girl."

I am curious and look closer. I have met girls like this before, but have not been interested. Still, I have always enjoyed curiosity and pleasure. She could provide either. And I am drunk; this usually means I must fuck something, or at

the very least pursue pleasure until I pass out, even if it is a small pleasure, like braiding my own hair.

If I am on drugs, they are mild. I am mildly interested in her. The girl approaches. She leans in, tousling her own curly brown hair. "Hello," she says. "How are you? What's your name?" I notice she is pretty in her way. She is not coy or withdrawn.

"Hello," I say back. I tell her my name.

As she speaks, she touches me, plays with my straight red hair, and leans in close; she then lets her fingers linger on my shoulders, her eyes on my breasts. I flush and am flattered. "I've been watching you," she says.

"You have?" I ask, out of the corner of my eye still watching my Italian man with long black hair seduce someone else, a brand new sprightly blond, not my tall friend, who stands alone although her ankles are also showing. From this unhappy eye corner, I am also watching him kiss her in a minute, knowing he will fuck her, too, in another half hour, and my eyes are burning—which I blame on the smoke of the campfire.

"Come away with me," this girl who likes me says, getting my attention more fully by trailing one fingertip over my cleavage.

"Where?" I ask.

"To the restroom," she says. "I don't want to go alone."

"Oh, okay," I say.

The drums are loud as we walk past them and out from that clearing. The air is tribal. I walk with her past the fire pit and into the dark night. We have no flashlight. We stumble

along. I wonder if Tommy, the Italian, has succeeded with second base. I wonder if the new girl is a slut and will buy into his, "I'm sterile" routine and let him not use a condom like I didn't let him do. "Shh," the girl who likes and walks with me says, turning towards me.

"I was not speaking," I tell her, realizing too late that my tankard is gone and I have no idea where I left it.

She kisses my cheek and presses her finger to my lips. She and I are the same height. Her eyes are hazel. We are alone. She kisses my lips. And then, "I want to kiss you," she says. "Again."

I nod. She leans in. I have no idea what I'm doing—since kissing is fine, but the whole rest of what comes next confuses me. Her tongue moves in my mouth. Her hands pull my body closer. We kiss for what feels like a long, long time. I feel wet. I feel she is my mirror. I am interested in this. Am I, by kissing her, kissing myself? This seems a new sort of masturbation. I am interested.

Perhaps, I will lift her skirt and put my finger in her cunt just to see if I gasp in doing so, if I feel my own movement. The taste of her lips is soft and earthy, like mead. Her hips are soft and earthy like loam. I want to press her body to my body just to see if I like it and how much. When I do, I do like it—and a lot.

We are all touch hungry, are we not? I have enjoyed kissing her. I am erotic and unbound and she touches me well. The sound of the drums is faint in the distance, but they are still playing strong in my veins.

I do not know if I am on drugs this night, this evening I am remembering, but this girl then puts her hot breath on the top of my breasts. She kisses me there, too, her lips wet and moving quickly up my neck as if it were a flute. If I am not on drugs, I feel as if I am. She clutches my ass and grinds her pelvis into mine. I stand in the woods, kissing a girl, two girls with our dickless fronts grinding against each other.

It is dark. I don't know what to do next, but she is the aggressor. My head spins. "I want you," she says. "Come to my tent after I use the restroom. Wait for me outside." She goes into a porta-potty to relieve herself. I wait. She comes back out, smiling at me.

The night air blows coolly across my corseted breasts, which are sensitive where she has touched them and coldest where she wet them with saliva. "My tent," she says, nibbling my ear. "Now."

I am curious, but I am scared.

I am also afraid my friends are talking shit about me. "She asked me to go with her to the bathroom," is what I could say, if I go back now. "And shut the hell up."

This is a well known girl's code fact that you never should let another girl walk into the woods alone, let alone to go into a public space like a restroom where a rape could happen in a bathroom stall. I should leave right away, I think.

If I don't go now, I have no idea what I'd tell them. These girls, these friends of mine are new. Perhaps they will think I am gay and talk about me. Perhaps they will be disgusted.

I stand still, unsure of what to do. The girl I stand before lifts my skirt with her hand, sliding it up from my ankle to my

thigh. She pushes me back into the rough bark of a tree. The air is cold and soft. The bark is rough and hard. Her hand flirts with my satin panties and rubs me through them. She slides a finger under them and into my wetness and my crotch. She lets that finger slide, and I gasp. She is good at what she does. "My tent," she says, bringing her finger to her lips to suck on. "Let's get there. I want to taste you."

If I was sleeping before, uncertain what to do, I awaken. I am drunk and unsure and unwilling to be a target for more gossip again just for an orgasm or two. I am soft and tender inside, already hurt before the slander even starts.

"I can't," I say, "I've got to go. I've got to go now."

I remember she clutches my hand. "I'm sorry," she says. "We can go more slowly. Wait."

"No," I say. I run through the woods, my skirts flowing behind me. I catch up with my friends. They grill me. "We went to the bathroom," I say. "That's all." They titter and continue to ask, but finally drop it when they can tell I am angry enough to start hitting them. I am relieved when they do. The next morning she comes looking for me. I avoid her. Sober. Uncomfortable. The sun is blinding on my hangover.

Half a hit of acid, maybe? Maybe not. I'm not sure. The girl is the main thing I remember, her way, how she almost seduced me.

Later, I will remember her well and think that leaving her that night was a mistake. I will feel like an ass to have been so cold in the next-day daylight. Later, too, I will wonder what was there in her tent that might have changed my path

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and eliminated a few bad memories or actualities of the subsequent asshole boyfriends.

And much later, when I have learned how to be a real woman, I will dip my head low to taste my first female lover, when I first go to do this, and I will think of that girl I never slept with, never made love to—apologizing to her and tasting in the collective cunt of womanhood, in a new woman I will treat far better, all that first girl's best and earthy things.

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Raven

© James Buchanan

Marten stared through the greasy haze filming over the diner's window. Leaden skies backed a town sulking under the weight of yet another dry winter. Twin strips of concrete bordered an empty asphalt river. Across the way, hunched against the chill wind, *that guy* stood ... again. Every time Marten looked up from bussing tables, there *man-in-black* was, hovering at the edge of his vision. Marten had no idea who or what the guy waited for.

The guy's name was Raven. That much Marten did know. He'd never met him, but the town gossip wasn't pretty: trouble maker, thief, and lazy. All the things Marten didn't want said about him.

His hands stuffed into the pockets of black jeans, Raven bounced from foot to foot like he had to keep moving to stay warm. Razor-sheared blue-black hair fluttered about his face, and the tail of his black trench coat flapped around his thighs. Black jeans, black t-shirt, black boots, and black hair: a monochrome jackdaw staring with bright, jet eyes.

The stare devoured Marten, wormed into his brain, and whispered about a lot more than just staring. He felt the attention across his back and thighs and prickling along his scalp. He grabbed the lip of the buss-tub and swallowed. He didn't want to look back. He didn't want to see that dark, windswept guy and get caught in those eyes.

Dark thoughts spread like wings across Marten's mind. In the back of his brain, a tiny voice jeered: *I want you ... naked.* So soft, he barely heard it, and yet the words echoed loudly through his soul. He didn't hear it. He couldn't have heard it. Raven was out there on the other side of the street. Marten was inside smelling old fry grease and musty heating coils.

Naw, you heard it. The seductive sound trickled into the bones behind his ears. Masking his intentions by grabbing plates and coffee mugs off the table, Marten shifted his gaze, so he could look without looking. For a moment he panicked, the figure he sought wasn't there. His breath came back when Raven stepped into his limited field of vision. As if he knew, the dark man's lip twitched with a barely suppressed smirk.

Trying to drive out the thoughts, Marten swept his wrist across his forehead, hard enough to burn some. He shuddered. After a deep breath, he grabbed the tub and headed toward the kitchen with a load of dirty dishes. Distracting flights of fancy needed to wait. Marten needed this job.

"Daydreaming out there?" Avie's high-pitched squeak caught him as he rounded the counter.

Marten jerked up short at her rebuke. "Ah, not really," he stammered, "just some crud stuck on the table."

Pushing her half-glasses up her sharp nose, Avie stared with her pinched little black eyes. She smoothed the wrinkles down the front of her khaki dress before responding. "You were daydreaming. Always got your head in the clouds." Washed out brown hair puffed about her face; a victim of the

steam in the kitchen. "Stop it. You got work to do. Dishes don't wash themselves."

"Yes, ma'am." Marten hauled the tub to the sink. He scraped the filth off the plates into the trash then tossed each dish onto the counter. Lukewarm, soapy water already filled the basin, and a thin film of grease coated the surface. With a groan, Marten rolled up his sleeves and began scrubbing plates.

You deserve better, you know?

That he had to agree with. Why couldn't Avie invest in an actual dishwasher? Not that they had that much business. It was cheaper to pay Marten to clean up after the spattering of regulars they got each day than shell out big bucks for a system. When the lot was washed and racked for drying, Marten grabbed a towel to dry his hands.

"Marten!" Avie squealed from the front.

What now? He pulled a meager pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and absently answered, "Yeah?"

"We got chocolate pie back there?"

Something better than pie back there?

Marten shook off the whisper. Maybe if he acted busy, Avie'd leave him be. He rattled the racked dishes. "Yeah." It usually took Avie ten minutes or so to wash dishes. "Think so." Since Marten managed to do it in a third of that, he could usually steal out for a smoke without Avie any the wiser. Two left. Damn, one for now and one for tonight. Marten figured he might be able to weasel Conny at the gas station out of one of the crushed cartons if he promised to sweep the garage or something.

"Bring out a slice for the customer at the counter." Shit. No smokes. "I'm loading coffee, got my hands full."

Damn, he should have pretended not to hear. He'd have made Avie pissy, but she'd have gotten the pie herself. What could he say to get out of it?

You don't want to get out of it.

That silky voice stirred in his brain again and shot chills down his spine.

Come see, come see.

What the fuck was wrong with him today? Getting distracted by visions of the town bad-boy and hearing voices. Somehow, Marten doubted he could blame either on nicotine withdrawal.

Marten popped open the door on the big four door fridge unit. A not-quite-dry plate off the sink became host to a thin slice of pie. Avie would yell at him if he served up a decent sized portion. She tried to hoard every last bit. Marten shouldered the door shut as he headed toward the counter.

Hunched over the counter, staring into the depths of a battered coffee mug sat Raven. The sight knocked him hard in the gut, turned his bones to jelly. Marten stood in the kitchen door holding the plate. He couldn't move. He couldn't just go up to him and talk. Why was he in the coffee shop? Raven belonged outside, part of *that* world. The world on the other side of the glass.

"Hey!" Avie's voice jerked his attention away from Raven. She glared at him with her tiny, black eyes. "You gonna stand there with a finger up your nose? Work boy!" Clicking her

tongue against her teeth, Avie shook her head and returned to whatever problem the ancient coffee maker presented.

Marten swallowed and turned his attention back to Raven. Bright black eyes laughed at him.

Busted! the voice teased, hard.

Shuddering, Marten crossed the few steps to the counter. Then he dropped the plate in front of the dark haired man. "What," Marten grabbed the lip of the counter and leaned over, up close, "are you doing here?" He kept his tone low so Avie wouldn't hear.

"Having a cup of coffee and something to eat." Grabbing a fork, Raven picked at the pie. Without looking at Marten, he asked. "What are you doing?"

"Working."

"Right, working." Raven's voice sounded almost, but not quite, like the voice in Marten's head. Maybe it was just all sorts of the same seduction. "It's too nice a day for working. The sun's finally coming out." Using the coffee mug as a pointer, Raven swung his hand toward the dingy front window. "You ought to play hooky."

His smile tempted Marten more than Marten wanted to admit. Stuffy kitchens and rank dishwater weren't half as appealing as the open sky. But, he couldn't lose this job. He needed to put things by, and Avie was the only one who'd given him a chance. "No, I need to work." If he said it out loud enough times, maybe he'd believe it. "I have to work." Marten took a deep breath and pushed himself from the counter. As he walked away, he shot over his shoulder, "Finish your coffee and get out." Damn if Avie got irked at

him for being rude. He'd figure out something to say to placate her.

Marten managed four steps when Raven slammed the cup down on the counter. The thud got everyone's attention. Marten spun to see Raven perched on the counter, his fists balled and bracing his weight. "That's so not fair!" Raven sputtered.

"What?" Marten and Avie spoke almost as one.

Indignant and hurt, Raven softened his tone. "You promised!"

Marten blinked. "What did I promise?"

"What did he promise?" Avie spoke to Raven but glared at Marten. What the fuck was Raven doing to him?

"The other day." Raven smiled at the mousy woman with sad eyes. "He promised to help me cut wood for my grandfather."

Marten sputtered. "I did not!" This was the first time he'd ever talked to Raven. Insane did not even begin to describe the situation.

"Yes, you did." Raven insisted. "You said that the first decent day before the big frosts hit, you'd come help me. I can't do it on my own. It's too big a job for one person."

It took a moment for Marten to resuscitate his shocked vocal cords. "I did not promise, and I'm working right now."

"If you made a promise to help him," Avie chided, "you ain't gonna weasel out of it like that."

"What do you mean?" Marten ran his nails over his scalp. *What the fuck was happening? Why was Avie buying into*

Raven's con? Not like the guy was a good actor or anything.
"I didn't promise him shit! I barely even know him!"

Avie's pinched face went even narrower as she screwed her mouth into a thin line. Suddenly, this was between her and Marten. "Then you shoulda thunk about promising, huh?"

Crap! Avie had a thing about living up to your word.

"Oh, man, I'm sorry." Raven dropped into his chair and smacked his forehead with his palm. *Gotcha*. The contrite act was hardly supported by the mischievous glint in his eyes. "You didn't tell your boss. Fuck, I'm sorry." He offered a big, wide grin to Avie while ostensibly directing his words to Marten. "'Cause I know how much you respect the old folks, and it probably just slipped your mind." Shaking his head, Raven stood. He held up his hands as if in surrender. "But, you're right, you're working." Softening his smile to a knowing smirk, Raven leaned toward Avie. "You know, all Marten ever does is talk about what a wonderful, kind hearted person Avie is. So great to work for and always thinking of other people first. So big hearted and so busy all the time. You're just a role model for him."

Avie preened, running a hand behind her ear and tugging at the front of her tan uniform. "A role model?"

"Yeah," soft and seductive Raven continued the lie, "he tells me all the time how wonderful you are and how he wants to be just like you."

Marten sputtered, "I do not..." and choked on the rest when Raven shot him a glare. A quick glance at Avie's pinched face told Marten to back track into a white lie. He swallowed and mumbled, "Not all the time."

"You're a good kid, Martin." Avie smiled at the perceived praise. Coming up next to him, she ruffled his sleek, brown hair in a motherly way. Softly, like she didn't want Raven to hear, Avie chided him, "You don't want people talking about you like they talk about him. That he's shifty and doesn't pull his weight. You're big hearted. You just mess up sometimes." Then she squeezed his shoulder and said louder, "Go on and help the old man. I can make do here."

"But..."

"No." She swatted the back of his head. "Git!" Another swat, this time to his ass, sent Marten scooting toward the door. Raven bounced along at his heels. "I'll be fine on my own," Avie called as Marten grabbed his dark brown coat off the rack near the door. "You be good, work..." The last of it was cut off by the jangle of the bell when Marten yanked open the door.

As he shrugged into his coat, Marten let the door bang shut in his wake. He shoved his hands into his pockets and headed off down the sidewalk. The clatter-thunk behind him told Marten someone followed. He didn't have to be a genius to guess who.

"Hey!" Harsh and strident the voice broke through the air. "Hey!" Marten hunkered into his brown coat and kept walking. "Aren't you going to thank me?"

He stopped and glared over his shoulder. "For what?"

"For getting you a day off?" Raven jogged up, his long black coat flapping behind him. A whispery, *asshole*, fluttered at the base of his brain.

Reaching into his shirt pocket, Marten grabbed his pack of smokes. His other hand fished in his coat for a book of matches. For a moment, he lost himself in the ritual of drawing out a cigarette with his teeth, folding over the cover on the matchbook, lighting and inhaling. After the second puff, he growled a question of his own. "Why are you always hanging out here?"

Raven's eyebrows shot up and his mouth twisted into the already characteristic smirk. "Why not?" He pushed his glossy black hair behind one ear. Silver rings flashed, two on his hand and one through the cartilage of his ear. "It's as good a place as any."

Marten took another deep drag. "Don't you have a job?" As he blew out the smoke, he resumed walking toward home. Not like there was anywhere else to go in the Podunk little town.

"This is my job." Falling into step beside Marten, Raven chuckled. "I do it well."

That made no sense and Marten challenged him with a sharp, "Hanging out?"

Raven bumped his shoulder, causing Marten to almost walk into a magazine rack. "Making people think, question, confront their fear."

Marten managed to sidle around without mishap. "In you?"

"In themselves."

"You're whacked."

"No," another dry laugh, "I'm Raven."

Finished with the cigarette, Marten flicked it into the gutter. "What the fuck kinda name is Raven for a guy?"

"It's my fuck kinda name, and I like it," Raven shot back.
"I think it fits. Don't you?"

"You're weird." Out of habit, Marten checked for non-existent traffic before heading across the street.

"I thought you said I was whacked." Raven dogged his steps. "Where are we going?"

Five blocks down the clapboard and cinderblock town faded into meadow. It was as if the street just decided it didn't want to go any farther and gave up.

"What do you mean we, white boy?"

Beyond the short field rose the forest. Marten headed there, toward where he lived. Still matching him step for step, Raven shrugged. "I'm bored, what are we doing tonight?"

"Well, I'm going home." Marten jerked his chin toward the woods beyond. "What you're doing ... I don't know."

"Home is boring."

"I have work tomorrow. I have real, put-bread-on-the-table work."

Raven grunted dismissively and smacked his shoulder with an open fingered hand. "You're too young to be dead already. If you're not working then we need to go somewhere."

"No. I am working."

"No, you're clocking time." Sultry and seductive, Raven wheedled, "Working has meaning. Working should give back to the world. It's not just about putting bread on the table."

Marten shook off the suggestion. "Maybe for you." As seductive as that thought was, he couldn't buy into it. "Eating has higher meaning to me."

Hands outstretched for balance, coat tails flapping in the wind, Raven minced along the curb like he was walking a ten foot tall wall. "Okay," Raven snorted. "I'll give you that. What are we eating?"

"Again with the we."

Raven jumped and spun, coming to rest directly in Marten's path. Bright eyes flashing, he leaned in close. "Come on, you like me." *You do, you do.*

Marten refused to give in. "I do not." He stepped around the other man.

From behind, Raven's voice struck him. "I bet you've thought about what I look like naked." The dead on guess, it had to be a guess, caused Marten to jerk short. It happened so fast, he damn near tripped over the curb. He swallowed and tried to think. Nothing, not even that damnable little voice in his head, responded.

"The silence says it all." Raven came up close behind him. "You know it, Marten. They talk about *me* to my face. They whisper about *you* behind your back. But I listen to all of it. Come on then, where are we going?"

Where was he going? Nowhere, really. Avie's place was just a job. Beyond the ability to buy smokes and grub, he didn't give a rat's ass about it. He was stuck in a dead end job in a dead end town.

Marten looked back down the street and then at the sky. Neither held the answers he needed. The last place his gaze fell was on Raven's sharp face. A little too thin maybe, but that smirk and wild hair had a lot going for it. And out in the cool air, Raven smelled all musky and warm. It was heady,

intoxicating. Marten chewed on one sharp fingernail before answering, "My place." His voice sounded husky and desperate even to his own ears.

"Perfect!" Raven leaned in. The smell of him washed over Marten like a roaring river. *Just perfect.*

For a moment, they stood there, not touching, but not needing to. Raven's bright black eyes, locked on Marten's. He found himself smiling. It felt feral. It felt wonderful. "Let's go then." Marten nodded and started to walk.

A jerk on his arm pulled him up short. Raven croaked in his ear. "Hey look, it's old man Parker's truck. He always leaves the keys in it." Raven pushed away and bounced across the street heading toward the battered, green pickup. "Especially when he's drinking."

For about two seconds, he'd thought he was about to get laid. Apparently, Marten had misread something in Raven. He scurried after the wings of a black coat. "You're not going to steal it?"

"Fuck, no." Raven paused at the side of the truck, waiting for Marten to catch up. Popping the door, he explained, "Just mess with the old guys head." Raven slid into the cab. "No one's around. No one's gonna see if you hurry up and get in."

Quick glances up and down the street told Marten that Raven was right. He darted around to the passenger side and crawled in. "What the fuck are you planning?"

Flipping down the cracked sun visor, Raven caught the keys as they fell. *Fun! It'll be cool.* Quickly, he started the truck and jammed it into gear. Marten barely had time to slam the passenger side door closed before Raven reversed it

across the road and down an empty side street. He grinned across the cab at Marten. "Let's go watch. The old man should be coming out any minute."

"How do you know?"

"Time for him to drive across town." Raven hopped from the cab. "Mail should be in by now. It's the second Friday of the month." Nonchalantly, he strutted to the corner and leaned against the edge of the building.

"Oh, pension day." Marten drew alongside.

Slowly, Raven's hand fluttered across Marten's ass. "Yep." The dark man smirked.

Then he tugged and shuffled them both so that Marten's dick pressed into his thigh. If Raven hadn't been already teasing, Marten would have died. He was as hard and horny as a teenager. By the way Raven settled his weight against Marten's body; he wanted it just as much. Little twists and shifts kept them rubbing together. It felt damned good.

Across the way, hulked a concrete bunker of a booze-joint. Once bright paint long since faded to the color of mud, only one narrow window and a wooden door broke the flat expanse of the building. The Happy Time bar looked like anything but a happy time.

Using Raven's long coat to shield his movement, Marten reached into Raven's pocket. He slid his fabric-wrapped hand across a sharp hip until he cupped Raven's cock.

"You know we can't do much of anything here, right?" Raven rubbed against Marten's hand.

Long, slender, and hard, Raven's prick throbbed even through the layers of denim and canvas. *Damn, feels good.* If

anyone caught them, Marten would have a time trying to weasel out an explanation. "I know," he hissed into Raven's ear, "but it feels too good not to." From across the street it might look, Marten hoped, like they were just talking ... really friendly-like.

Marten tracked the line of Raven's cock. Raven bumped back against him, and Marten bit back a groan.

All too soon, an old man staggered out of the bar. His jacket, sans two buttons, was fastened tightly against the wind. He stopped. He turned back to the bar and then turned around again. Lurching toward the curb, the old man stared down at the vacant spot of pavement where his truck should have been. Old Man Parker took off his battered baseball cap and scratched his head. A slow once over of the street offered him nothing but the view of two men leaning against a building. Hoping Raven did the same, Marten pretended he wasn't watching.

The man walked back to the bar. He paused then spun. Maybe he thought that his truck played peek-a-boo. Marten swallowed his snickers. It might have been a little cruel, but no one was getting hurt by the prank. With a final glare at the street, Old Man Parker stomped back in the building.

"That was funny." Marten grabbed Raven's collar and tugged him back toward the truck. "Come on hurry, we only have a minute or so."

"What are *you* doing?"

This time Marten clambered into the driver's side. Barely waiting until Raven had jumped through the passenger door, he twisted the key in the ignition, fought the gear lever and

drove the car back to its original spot. "Having a little more fun." He grinned.

"That's wicked sick."

Marten killed the engine and jumped out of the cab. "As long as no one gets hurt," he bounced the keys in hand, "it's good fun, right?" With a quick flick of his wrist, Marten flung the keys under the passenger side of the bench. "And with the way that old man was staggering, let's make sure no one gets hurt." He shoved his hands in his pockets and ducked between buildings, quickly heading for the woods.

"Yeah, his pension check'll keep 'til tomorrow." Raven chuckled as he followed. "He don't need to be driving right now."

The trees closed quietly around them. A few yards off the main drag, the rest of the world faded into fantasy. Slowly, even the sky disappeared behind a laced web of branches overhead. The trees sighed hellos in the shush of the leaves. Teasing his hair like a grandfather's hand, the wind welcomed him back. Damp loam obligingly hid their steps from all but the most perceptive ears. Marten loved the smell of the forest, the richness of it, the wildness of it. He breathed it deeply.

As they walked, Marten tried to sneak glances at Raven, but Raven seemed to catch him every time. The laughter in those bright black eyes stung a bit. Every few moments, a *There yet?* teased him. But Marten was shy, always had been. It wasn't his nature just to hit things straight on unless there was no other way.

Now that they'd wandered in the woods alone, Marten figured he could be a little less wary. He looked up and smiled at the other man. "You coming back to my place then?" It wasn't really a question. Not as brash as Raven's, but he didn't have to skulk around as much.

Raven grinned back, "I don't think I'm headed to see the three bears."

They hit the stony outcrop of a draw. Below, the soft babble of a creek added its murmurs to the whispers of the trees. "Just beyond the stream. Once we cross it, we'll be close." Marten slithered down the boulders, bounding from rock to rock and wriggling through tighter spots. When he looked back, Raven still perched at the lip. "Aren't you coming?" he called.

Raven stared at him. He took a few steps to one side and then the other. With a croak of a laugh, Raven ran and leapt. High into the air, his black coat spread out from his body in a broad wedge. For a moment, his shadow blocked the sky. Raven landed in a wet thud of boots to earth and the snapping of his coat as it flapped about his legs. A few hops carried him forward before he caught his balance.

Huffing, Marten slunk past. "That was a stupid thing to do."

"You go down the hill your way." Raven's hands landed on Marten's shoulders and pulled him back. Mouth nearly on Marten's ear, he added, "I'll go down mine."

For the second time that day, Marten found himself pressed against Raven's lean body. He was so close. The wind drifted fringes of Raven's hair to tickle Marten's neck, and his

breathing slowed. He drew in the scent of Raven—heady and feral. Somewhere between earth and sky, rainy winds mixed wet leaves slumbering on the forest floor.

"Mmm." Raven's sharp cheek slid across the back of Marten's skull. "You smell good. Real warm."

It was too chilly to get into much right there, at least for Marten's taste. If he were desperate, he might consider risking frozen nuts. With the house not far away, Marten figured he could wait a few minutes more. He pulled away. "Not much farther." He grinned over his shoulder. Raven's face wore frustration and want. "Come on." Teasing, Marten added, "I've got food at home."

"I don't think I want to eat any more." Raven's voice told Marten he wanted other things much more. Likely they were the same things Marten wanted.

Marten hopped from the bank of the creek and landed on one of the large, slick boulders, poised. Neither on water or land, but part of both, the stream's chatter swept off the worries, the pretenses of Avie and the town. Quickly, Marten bounded to the next and then turned. As though something caught his attention, Marten stared at the water. "What's in the stream?"

"I don't know." Raven glared from the bank. "What do you see?"

Marten pointed to a random spot between the first stepping stone and the one on which he stood. "Can you see it there? It looks shiny, like a ring or something."

"Show me." Raven hopped onto the first slick stone. He wobbled slightly and stuck his hands out for balance.

"See," Marten insisted, "right there."

"I don't see."

"Maybe if you leaned a little farther?"

Raven craned his head forward and cocked it to the side.

"Where?" All his attention centered on the stony bottom of the creek.

"Right." Marten lunged, jumping onto the stone next to Raven and hitting Raven's ass with his thigh. "There!"

Raven twisted, tried to catch himself. Legs tangled in his coat, weight already unbalanced from leaning forward, Raven fell with a splash into the stream. Choking with rage, Raven flailed. "I'm fucking drowning! I can't swim."

Calmly, Marten bounded to the next boulder and then to far bank. He turned. "Put your feet down." He barked the order to be heard over Raven's splashing. "It ain't that deep."

When he stopped struggling Raven sank. Marten counted off the seconds until Raven broke the surface. Water came up to his thigh as he stood in the churning flow. "That was a mean trick."

"Serves you right."

"For what?" Raven grumbled as he waded through the water.

Marten held out his hand. "For making me miss a day of work. Screwing around is for after you've put enough by to last."

"Shit." Raven glared for a moment before taking it. Both grunted as Marten helped haul him up the bank. *Bastard*. Grabbing his coat tails, Raven snapped them out with a crack of wet fabric. He huffed and added, "You work too hard."

"I work only as hard as I need to so I can get by." Marten reached out and flicked Raven's wet bangs off the pale forehead. "I can fuck off just as good as any one else once I know that my stomach is fed and I'll have a warm place to sleep."

"Speaking of warm," Raven shivered, "it's fucking cold now that I'm wet."

"Your teeth are chattering." Marten grabbed Raven's shoulder. He turned them both, using the pressure to steer Raven along a narrow foot path. "Come on. My place is close. We'll dry you off there."

"Feeling bad because you pushed me?" Raven's voice was sour.

"No, that was funny, and you deserved it." With a snort, Marten leered in mock triumph. Then he sobered a bit. "I would feel bad if you actually got sick, though"

Just ahead, a small narrow house, half buried into the hill behind it, waited. With little ceremony, Marten led Raven inside. He wriggled through the entry and into a living area. Warm, dry and crammed with odd bits of overstuffed furniture, the house rambled around various interconnected rooms. Marten liked the cozy confines of his place.

"Wow." Raven's voice broke the stillness. "I've been over here a million times, and I don't think I've ever seen your place."

Marten chuckled. "You have to come across the stream just right or you won't be able to see it." Moving from that space into a dining room, Marten shucked his jacket. "Give

me your clothes." Then he reached over and tugged Raven's coat off his shoulders.

"All of them?" Raven protested but didn't fight.

"Yeah, unless you want your nuts to shrivel in a cold, wet pair of shorts," Marten teased. The room after that was the kitchen. Marten made his way even farther back into the pantry. Popping the door on a small under counter dryer, Marten smiled at Raven. "Come on, toss 'em in." Then Marten stepped into the bedroom off the pantry and grabbed a thick, tan blanket.

Listening to the suck of wet clothes coming off Raven's body warmed Marten more than any blanket. *I know you want it.* Shit, did he ever!

A narrow, pale frame bent over and offering up a bubble butt confronted Marten as he headed back with the wrap. Stripped of the black plumage, Raven was actually kinda lanky. Lean, ropy muscles laced Raven's bones together. Still, that ass was made to fuck—with either a tongue or prick. Marten would be happy with either.

Raven stood and turned at the sound of his return. Damn. Two more seconds of bent over and Marten would have dropped his own drawers. Even with the cold and wet, a decent sized package nestled in a thatch of black curls. *Like what you see?* Marten didn't even bother to hide his stare.

"What are you looking at?"

Dropping the blanket on Raven's head, Marten lied. "Nothing, obviously." He grabbed Raven's boots and coat as he moved through the kitchen. A few snaps of the electronic starter and the oven burner flared to life. Martin tugged the

laces from the eyes and pulled the tongues out of the boots before opening the oven and setting the boots on the extended door.

"This should dry them out a little faster," he called back to Raven who slammed the dryer shut and cranked it on. Smiling in response to the glower, Marten pulled a chair over to the stove and draped the coat over the back. "There. It'll be a while though."

"Great. I'm still fucking freezing."

Marten bounded over, grabbed Raven by the shoulders, and steered him toward the bedroom. He could feel the bony knobs under the thick nap of the blanket. "Come on. I'll crank up the space heater. We can probably find a game or something on TV." Marten's den already felt warmer than the rest of the house. He liked it that way: a warm, safe, cubby hole.

"You got me buck naked so we could watch TV?"

"No, I got you buck naked so we could fuck," Marten laughed. "TV's for after."

Raven turned, grumbling, "You didn't need to push me in the stream for that." With a grunt, he fell backward on the bed. Jumbles of mismatched covers pillowed around him, and Raven let the blanket fall away from his body. All lean and pale, he leered up at Marten. At least one part of his anatomy had recovered from the dunking. Dark, red and needy, Raven's prick pulsed against his thigh.

"I know." Marten's mouth watered. He stripped his own shirt and toed out of his boots in record time. Falling onto the

bed next to Raven, Marten fought with his fly. "That was just because it was fun."

"Asshole." Instead of helping, Raven watched him struggle.

A bit more writhing and Marten kicked his jeans to the floor. Already near bursting with need, his prick reared up and begged for contact. *Nice*. Marten twisted it in his fist. "So you can give it, but you can't take it?"

Raven's fingers wandered through the soft fur on Marten's belly and fanned out across his pecs. "Depends on what you want me to take." If that leer wasn't an invitation, he didn't know what would qualify.

"Everything!" Marten growled as he hauled Raven to the edge of the mattress. Semi-prone on his left side, Raven bent one knee, hooking his foot on the bed. The other leg he let dangle to the floor. Marten covered him with his lean, sinewy body. Starting at Raven's chin, Marten licked his throat, down the back of his neck and across one sharp shoulder. Lifting Raven's arm, he buried his tongue in Raven's armpit.

Raven moaned, reaching back to run his hand through the thick shock of brown hair on Marten's head. He tasted like warm sky and dark earth. Marten nuzzled in the heat of it while his hand rooted in the mess of stuff by his bed. Finally, he found what he needed. Still lost in Raven's essence, he popped the cap, squeezed out a glob and slicked his cock down.

Without leaving his feast, Marten lifted Raven's leg and pulled it back over his own thigh. The position spread the pale man wide—an invitation Marten wasn't about to refuse. He

pressed his head against the puckered hole. So tight, Raven's ass teased him with a promise but no give.

Raven shuddered, his hands fluttering over Marten's arm and neck. Then all resistance broke, and he slid into hot velvet. In one deft stroke, he impaled Raven. His cry cut through Marten's senses.

Moaning, Raven reached between his legs to pull at his prick. That dark head rolled back on the bed. Marten twisted and looked up the line of a lanky body. Lust-fogged black eyes returned his stare. He hooked his own heel on the edge of the bed. Pulling Raven's back against his furry chest, Marten nipped at his skin. Quick thrusts centered him. He hissed as his cock kissed the walls of Raven's body.

With a grunt, Marten began to pound in earnest. Each thrust burned through his nerves. Raven's warm balls bounced against his skin, and his body tormented him with heat and pressure. Clawing, biting at Raven's skin, Marten gave up to the animal within and pounded his own senses to shreds. With a hollowed rush of air, Marten came. He shuddered as wet heat filled Raven and swelled over his sensitive prick.

Raven laughed. The sound vibrated through Marten, coating his bones in more chills. Another hiss welled up inside as Marten slid from Raven's body. It took a moment for him to reconnect with his muscles before he pushed back. Wriggling to the edge of the bed, Marten took a blanket with him as he slid onto the floor. He tugged Raven's leg until the dark man rolled onto his belly.

A little trail of cum dripped from his ass to tangle in the dark curls. Raven scooted onto his knees. His balls swung heavy between his thighs. Marten leaned in and ran his tongue against the tender flesh. His own flavor mingled with that of Raven, spicy and sensual. Nothing ever tasted so wonderful.

Marten buried his face between Raven's cheeks to lick and taste everything. As he teased his own cum from Raven's hole, he reached between Raven's legs. Wrapping his hand around Raven's cock, he stroked.

That long, hot prick slid in his grip. He twisted its head in his palm. A moan, followed by Raven bucking back into his kiss, rewarded him. His ass opened to Martin's searching tongue, and he reveled in the taste of his spunk mixed with the essence of Raven. Salty, sweet, musky, and rich flavor flooded Marten's senses.

Raven's breath hitched, and he shuddered. The prick in Marten's hand swelled. Marten wanted everything. He pulled Raven's slender dick back through his legs. Quickly dropping lower, Marten turned his head a bit and swallowed him. Not the easiest position, but Marten was more agile than most.

Sucking for all he was worth, Marten worked the hot prick in his mouth. Luckily, Raven was damn near gone. He croaked Marten's name. Balling his fists into the covers, Raven let go.

Cum filled Marten's mouth. More bitter, but just as good, Marten savored Raven's spunk. A few more draws on that slim prick pulled out the last heady drops. Panting, Raven

crumpled onto the bed. Still overcome, his eyes fluttered and his jaw trembled.

Marten wrangled the blanket from under his knees and pulled it over his back then crawled up and covered them both. Burrowing as deep as he could into the pile of covers, he found Raven's lips by feel alone.

Slowly, Marten slipped his tongue into Raven's mouth. Raven joined him, pushing and pulling mingled cum between their lips. As they shared, their hands explored. The touches drew heat and hinted at another, less frantic fuck in the near future. Finally, Marten pulled back. He nipped Raven's cheek and mumbled with satisfaction, "You taste like me."

"Or you taste like me?" Raven ran his hands over Marten's arms. "Which do you think?"

The feather light touch soothed Marten. "It doesn't matter. We're one and the same, you and I." He pressed his forehead to Raven's pale brow. *I know what you're thinking.* His little inside voice sounded somewhere between Marten's purr and Raven's raucous laugh.

"Really?" Raven teased, his voice muffled by the layers of blankets. "So what am I thinking now?" *What are you thinking?*

Marten drifted in the warmth of Raven's mind for a bit. Some of the thoughts might have been his own. They mingled together so much, it was hard to tell. A lot of staying in bed, a lot of fucking until they dropped, all of it sounded wonderful. Then Marten snorted.

"I'm good with most of it." Pulling Raven closer still, Marten nuzzled in the soft down at the nape of his neck. "But,

don't go messing with Avie, man." Avie straddled everything, the here and the there and kept it all in order. She could see Marten's house without crossing the stream. "Mousy woman will kick your butt."

"Why not?" The tock of Raven's tongue against the roof of his mouth sounded loud in the small space. "She needs a little chaos in her life. I stir things up. It's what I do, what you do, remember?"

Marten hissed a laugh of his own. "Okay," he conceded the point, "but only a little trouble."

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Nuit Blanche

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In the five years and two weeks leading up to Nuit Blanche, Lawrence and I hadn't spent even one full night together. That's how it goes when you fall in love with a married man. You take the time he can give you. Generally, I got a couple hours with him every Sunday morning, and an afternoon here or there if I was lucky.

We had sleep-over plans a couple times, but my Lawrence was the king of self-sabotage. The first time he was scheduled to spend the night at my place, he took a nose-dive down the stairs and ended up spending the night in the emergency room instead of my bedroom. Recently, he'd planned to stay with me for an entire weekend while Ruth was away. "*Quand le chat est parti, les souris dansent*," as my mother used to say. Then Ruth bailed on her conference. Is there an expression for that in English? Maybe, "When the wife stays home, the husband can't roam?"

Or can he?

As we rested in a sweet embrace one Sunday morning, my head nestled against his warm chest, Lawrence proposed we attend Nuit Blanche together.

"Nuit Blanche? In Montreal?" I gasped. Why did Lawrence want to take me back to Quebec? No way he was going to reunite me with my parents! I knew he valued family above all, but there was no point in trying. If *maman* and *papa*

couldn't accept the way I chose to live, as a mistress and not a wife, then I had nothing to say to them.

"No, not in Montreal," Lawrence interrupted my bitter reverie. Groping for the jeans strewn across my reading chair, he pulled out a flyer. Squinting in the early morning light, he grabbed his foldable specs from my night table. Glasses perched on nose, Lawrence at last read me the flyer: "Nuit Blanche, a free all-night contemporary art *thing*. The streets of downtown Toronto are taken over by massive art installations and the outdoor celebration last from 7:03pm until sunrise."

My heart jumped at the prospect of finally spending a whole night with my man. Well, not *mine*. With Lawrence, at any rate. "You want us to go together?"

"You don't want to?" I could tell he was bracing himself for disappointment.

"No, of course I want to go! Sounds great. It's just ... what about..." I tried to say *Ruth*, but her name stuck like a fish bone in my throat.

Fortunately, Lawrence always knew what I meant when I hesitated like that. Never could say that woman's name aloud. "She needs her beauty sleep," he told me.

"What a mean thing to say!" I teased, giving his cheek a playful smack, repairing the damage with a kiss. Lawrence kissed me back, kissed my lips. Oh, the warmth of his mouth, precious and precarious like a tropical rainforest. He kissed me intently, powerfully, pressing my back, squeezing my waist, making me forget what we'd been talking about.

"So, you'll come with me?"

"Come where?" I asked, hovering close to his mouth, aching for a long, lingering embrace.

"To Nuit Blanche," Lawrence laughed, tapping on my head to see if anyone was home.

"But what about..."

"She doesn't want to come. I already asked," he interrupted. Lawrence could read me like a large-print detective mystery. Giving me a peck on the lips, he went on, "Audrey, she's not going to change her mind this time. Someone who goes to bed at 8:30 most nights isn't apt to attend an all-night art thing."

He leaned in close, nibbling my earlobe. My skin was all goosebumps. I ran my fingers across the short hairs at the back of his head. "Of course I'll come with you. *Mille fois oui, mon chauve-souris.*"

Lawrence glanced queerly in my direction, the way he always looks when he's trying to access his rusty French. "A thousand times yes, my ... hot ... mouse?"

I had to laugh. "Close. A *chauve-souris* is a bat. I just said it because it rhymed, but actually "*chauve*" means "bald." So, the direct translation would be 'my bald mouse.'"

"How *a propos*..." Lawrence rubbed the top of his head, where no hair dared to grow. "...for a follically-challenged librarian."

Cuddling into his arms, I giggled, repeating those non-sense words, "*mon chauve-souris.*"

At that precise moment, I got my hopes up. Always a mistake with Lawrence.

* * * *

When he arrived at my doorstep on September 29th, Lawrence looked gaunt. His cheeks were drawn and dark circles surrounded his eyes.

"What the hell happened to you?" I asked.

"I have shingles."

"You have *what*?"

"Shingles. It's when the chicken pox virus reactivates in your system and you get this rash..."

"I know what it is," I snapped, irritated by his condescension. "Why do *you* have it?"

Shingles was an old-people disease, and Lawrence wasn't old. He was just barely over fifty. That wasn't old. I couldn't stand to think of him being ill. It led to thoughts of him dying, of how I would find out, of crying day and night, of whether I would attend his funeral, of how his wife and two grown kids would react, of being left out of his Will, of how I would cope, of life with no Lawrence.

"I don't know why I have it, but it's going to alter our plans a smidge," he said. "I don't want to make you sick, so we probably shouldn't, you know, exchange bodily fluids. We can still enjoy a pleasant evening at *Nuit Blanche*, but sleeping together might not be the best idea."

Yes, I know I should have been sympathetic, but Lawrence always somehow managed to ruin our plans. Every single time! All the self-sabotage drove me nuts! I know it sounds terrible, but I was actually angry with him for being sick. Seething, in fact. Plus—I mean seriously!—I was barely twenty-eight years old; what were the chances of me

catching shingles, even if we screwed our little brains out into the night? Shingles wasn't even a communicable disease, was it?

I never would take no for an answer, and heaven knows I'd heard enough of them from my *chauve-souris* over the years. You'd think a sex-starved middle-aged man would jump at any opportunity to sleep with a lovely young woman, but not Lawrence. No, getting him into bed was nearly a chore in the early days. He was raised by stiflingly religious parents, too. All this adultery sometimes overwhelmed his conscience. In the past, I'd yelled, I'd whined, I'd begged and pleaded...

"Okay," I replied.

Nuit Blanche's plan of attack would be subtle persuasion.

* * * *

We took the subway downtown. Packed as it was, I nestled myself into Lawrence's fleecy blue jacket. Holding the metal pole with one hand, he wrapped the other arm around me. I wrapped both arms around him.

"So, exactly where is this rash of yours?" I asked.

The goth guy standing beside us scrunched up his nose in disgust and took two steps away.

"On my back."

"Maybe it's just a rash, like an allergy or something. When my grandmother had shingles, she looked like the Phantom of the Opera. Her eye went purple and swelled up until she couldn't see. Maybe you're not as sick as you think you are," I suggested.

"I went to the doctor midweek, and she was pretty sure it was shingles. She wrote me a prescription."

"Bloor Station, our stop." As soon as we stepped out of the subway, we were stunned by the magnificent state of our city. Cumberland Avenue was strung with star-studded blue flags, a "conceptual intervention" imitating a rural Brazilian festival. Yorkville was packed with people. Hard to believe, pressing through the art galleries and past the designer shops, that this district used to be hippie-central. At least, that's what Lawrence told me. That was before I was born.

Wandering up Hazelton Avenue, we stumbled upon the Secular Confession Booth. Our programme read, "It's cheaper than a shrink with no possibility of damnation. Mature personnel will hear your confession, judgment free."

Lawrence and I stood in silence on the dark side of the street, across from a line-up two blocks long. When was the last time my confession was heard? I was still in my teens. I remember bragging that I'd seduced our neighbour, monsieur DesLauriers. It was an act of rebellion. Take that, Church! I wasn't guilty, I was proud. Forgive me, Father ... or don't. Whatever. Two days later, *maman et papa* mysteriously knew the whole story. *Tabernac*, is nothing sacred? Idiot priest.

"Is your conscience heavy?" I asked Lawrence. Stupid question.

"Of course."

"Do you want to confess?"

"No," he replied.

We stood in silence.

"Do you?" Lawrence asked.

"No."

That wasn't entirely true. I sort of did want to confess every sin I'd committed over the past fourteen years, but was it really worth waiting in line? No. Instead, we walked south towards the University of Toronto.

"You know, I always was jealous of you Catholics," Lawrence began.

"Don't call me that," I interrupted.

"Sorry. Okay, then, I was always jealous because Catholics got to confess. We Baptists have to stew in our sins while you're released from yours. It's not fair."

"You did it again," I said, more irritated the second time.

"Sorry."

Following the crowd, we arrived at Trinity College's rugby field and my favourite installation. It was called *String of Diamonds*. Strung up on helium-filled balloons, white Christmas lights floated through the air, sparkling like starlight overhead. Young people, in pairs and in groups, lay in the grass, staring up at the illumination against the night sky. Lawrence and I lay down, too, our backs to the rugby field.

Beating a dead horse, I began, "So, if your doctor wrote you a prescription, does that mean you're on the road to recovery?"

"Yeah," he replied. "They're fast-acting pills. Three days later, there's almost nothing left of my rash."

I grinned. "So, you're probably not even contagious anymore."

"Maybe not."

Nestling against the warmth of his blue fleece jacket, I wove my fingers together with his. Holding hands, we gazed into the heavens, an imitation-couple staring at imitation-stars.

"Doesn't it look like they're falling?" I commented dreamily.

"Yeah," he agreed. "But it's just an illusion."

I believed him even when the lights seemed close enough to reach out and touch. I believed him until the string of LED bulbs lay across our chests.

"I guess you were right," Lawrence conceded. "They were falling."

A young man with a patchy beard and bushy hair took hold of the purple balloons, refilling the helium without acknowledging us.

"Should we move on?" Lawrence asked, picking up the change that had fallen out of his pants pockets.

"Sure."

* * * *

Around 2:30, we decided the Art Gallery of Ontario would be our last stop. They were hosting the "End of the Party Party," complete with two drag queens and a guy in an afro wig singing ABBA songs.

"Look at this," Lawrence shouted over *Waterloo*. On a make-shift coffee table in the retro-décor space stood a stuffed beaver with evil eyes wielding a wooden spear in his taxidermically-preserved paw.

"Freaky," I yelled back over the blaring music.

"What?"

"THAT'S FREAKY!"

I could tell by his goofy grin and nod that he didn't hear me.

The night air provided little respite after the sweaty '70s dance party. Almost October, and I was walking around in my T-shirt at 3am. Talk about global warming! As our subway tokens clinked into the turnstiles, I wondered what Lawrence looked like in the seventies. I bet he listened to Dylan publicly and to ABBA in secret. That was Lawrence, never admitting to the guilty pleasures. Me, for instance.

Leaning against the door of the subway conductor's booth, I asked him which exhibit was his favourite.

"*The Kiss*," he said. A funny little installation with two illuminated TV sets facing each other, their screens touching like lips. That one was cute, but my favourite was *String of Diamonds*—because of the company, primarily. When would Lawrence and I ever again get to lie together in the middle of a rugby field and stare up at the stars?

"Will you promise me something?" Lawrence asked.

"Maybe."

"If you do catch what I have, will you let me pay for the medication?"

"I'm not going to catch it," I laughed.

"But if you do..."

"I'm sure my medical plan will cover the pills."

"But if it doesn't..."

The look of concern on Lawrence's face tugged at my heartstrings. "Okay."

When we got back to my apartment, Lawrence went into my freezer like it was his own to fetch the ice cream. I liked that he was eating my food without asking. That's what married people do. Tonight we could pretend. He made us floats with vanilla Breyer's and Dr Pepper, and we parked our weary selves on the couch to watch the end of that Cary Grant movie with the tiger. I hoped the delicious man-smell of him would seep into the sofa and never leave my apartment.

"I should probably head home now," Lawrence said, kissing my hair. My stomach clenched.

"No, don't leave!" I whined. How could I persuade him to stay? "I want to see your rash."

"What?"

"I don't believe you have shingles. I want to see the rash."

Lawrence furled his brow, squinting at me like I was nuts. I get that look a lot.

"If you have shingles, you'll have a rash," I repeated. "Show me the rash."

Childlike eyes blue and fearful, Lawrence pulled his T-shirt over his head. His chest looked the same as always, belly muscles on their way to being well-defined. No rash there.

"Turn around," I instructed.

He did. On his back, there was not a mark. Not a scratch, not a red spot, not a pimple, and definitely not a rash. I couldn't believe it. Lawrence really had lied to me! What the hell was going on? Did he not want to spend the night?

"Where's the rash, Lawrence?" I growled.

He pointed to his side, to a run-of-the-mill bandage. "It's under there," he assured me. "There were more sores before, but the pills worked really fast and now that's all that's left of the rash."

Lawrence turned around to look me in the eye. Angry as I tried to be, I couldn't muster much frustration. I called his bluff, and now we could have sex. Woo hoo! I couldn't help it; I laughed.

"You must think I'm over-reacting, but I can't bear the thought of making you sick," Lawrence continued. "I could never bring you harm, Audrey."

My heart softened into a gooey, saccharine mush, and I threw my arms around the man. "You're so sweet!" I cried. "But, my *chauve-souris*, you can't possibly be contagious with just one little sore underneath a bandage!"

"But what if I am?"

My mind raced. Lowering my lids, I looked at him with bedroom eyes. "Then you'll need naughty nurse Audrey to take care of you," I insisted, Frenchening my accent and kissing the top of his head. "She knows just how to care for bald little mouse patients."

Taking Lawrence by the wrist, I dragged him into the next room and made him very comfortable in his hospital bed.

"I'm not sure about this," he objected.

I looked him in the eye, not as naughty nurse Audrey, but as me. "I have everything we need to keep me safe from harm," I assured him. "Just get comfy, and I'll be right back."

An eager smile crept across his face as I leaned closer to him. "The doctor said I shouldn't kiss anyone!" he blurted.

"What a random thing for a doctor to say."

"Well, I asked," Lawrence admitted. How much did I love that strange hypochondriac?

"No kissing then," I assured him, grabbing every white scrap of lingerie out of my drawer. Getting into some slutty undergarments gets me so turned on. Oh, who am I kidding? Waking up in the morning gets me turned on!

In the bathroom, I changed into a white push-up bra, incredibly successful in its task of pushing up. I selected a pair of white cotton panties to give the impression of innocence. Over these, I pulled on a slip so tight it over-emphasized my already-emphasized cleavage. Never before had I seen my boobs looking so juicy. I jumped up and down a couple times just to watch them jiggle.

When I came back into the bedroom to show Lawrence what a successful naughty nurse I'd become, I could only sigh in despair. Flat on his stomach, he'd fallen asleep waiting for me. He'd managed to take off his clothes, but that was about it. Well, there was no way I was taking this lying down!

From my night table, I dug out the box of latex gloves I'd stolen from the cleaner's cart at work. Serves them right for leaving it unattended! The snap of latex woke Lawrence with a start. Looking up at the naughty nurse at his bedside, he actually flipped onto his back. I had to laugh at his alarm.

"I didn't know where I was," he said.

Snapping on a second glove, I straddled my man, letting my juicy tits hover against his nose.

"Do you know where you are now?" I asked.

"Mmm..." was his only reply as he shoved his face into my cleavage. When he breathed in the scent of my skin, the unfamiliar brush of stubble scratched my flesh. I was used to seeing Lawrence in the morning when he had shaved only moments earlier. This sharp hair was so manly, such a rugged contrast to my soft breasts. He nuzzled his nose deeply into my bra until I could feel his rough face against my nipples.

"Wait a second," I cried, running to the kitchen. I returned with a box of plastic wrap in my hand. "We're keeping safe, right? I don't want my nipples to get shingles."

"No, you don't," Lawrence laughed, tearing off a sheet of plastic.

As I shoved the plastic wrap under my bra, Lawrence followed close behind with his tongue, licking my tits and sucking hard on my nipples. *Tabernac*, I'd been waiting all night for this! Lawrence was a nipple-sucking expert. As I held the top of the plastic sheet, he flicked and flicked at the hard pink buds. My pussy drooled with anticipation. What a smart little orifice! She knew that when the nipples got attention, her turn was soon to come.

Impatiently, I pressed my cotton-clad clit against Lawrence's ready cock, writhing slowly against it. Lawrence got the point and sent a hand to pull up my white slip and some fingers to explore the wetness of the swollen pussy lips underneath my cotton panties. Rubbing firmly against my clit, he tugged on my nipples with his teeth. *Tabernac!* How did that man always know just what to do? He made me wild!

But—oops!—I wasn't doing anything for him! I grabbed a condom and some lube from the night table, taking the plastic

out of my bra. Squirming down his body, letting my hair tease his sprightly flesh, I slipped the condom onto Lawrence's begging cock.

"It's vanilla-flavoured," I told him, letting my tongue tease his sheathed tip.

Lawrence didn't respond. I wondered if he knew I meant the condom.

When I allowed my lips to encircle his gleaming cockhead, a deep moan escaped Lawrence's throat. My tongue went roving the length of his shaft. Cloaked in the flavoured condom, his cock was like a giant lollipop. Vanilla! I took it deep in my mouth and sucked the sweet muscle. The harder I sucked, the harder he got.

And then, "Ruth..."

When this forbidden word slipped from Lawrence's lips, my heart turned to stone. His cock fell out of my mouth as my jaw swung wide open. Had he really just called me by his wife's name? This had never happened before. I hardly knew how to react, what to say.

But Lawrence was still blissed out, eyes closed. He continued, "Ruth is allergic to vanilla."

"Oh." Fondling Lawrence's sensitive balls with my gloved hand, I couldn't help but smirk jealously. "Good. Now she can't come anywhere near your delicious cock."

Lawrence laughed with wry disdain. "No danger of that happening."

My poor lover! Imagine being married to someone who wouldn't have sex with you. The thought saddened me,

making me want to please Lawrence all the more. That lovely man deserved every explosive orgasm I could give him.

Leaning into his hot body, I pressed that solid shaft against my supple breasts and Lawrence thrust instinctively against the cleave. His cock felt warm and wet against my chest. As I lay my head down on his body, Lawrence pressed my shoulders against his waist, thrusting against me. Oh, I felt terribly naughty getting my tits fucked like that. But what a wonderful feeling! A hard, hot cock between my pushed-up breasts—lovely!

With lube coating my latex glove, I traced the perimeter of my man's ass hole. Lawrence breathed in sharply. Slipping a wicked finger into my man's ass, I made that 'come hither' motion he loved so much. Lawrence panted rhythmically. The hot friction between my tits was making me crazy. I had to get that solid cock inside my pussy before he came.

Sliding out of my damp cotton panties, I held Lawrence's vanilla-sheathed shaft in my latex-gloved hand as I sank onto it. Our bodies perpendicular, I let Lawrence watch his cock slowly disappear inside me. Then slowly reappear. Then disappear again. His straining rod filled me, driving out every thought that wasn't centered in this very moment. I'd been waiting for this all night! I knew I could convince him.

With Lawrence's cock inside me, we were connected. He was mine completely. While his sheathed meat pierced my cunt, he wasn't somebody else's husband; he was my lover. Mine.

Collapsing onto my man, I thrust frantically against Lawrence's warm body, throwing my pelvis roughly against

his over and over again. Now in addition to shingles, Lawrence would have pelvic bruising. Tee hee! The welcome itch of his pubic hair against my clit was making me come faster than ever, and I always come super-fast when I'm on top. *Tabernac!* There was no holding back. I wrapped my arms around his sides.

"Watch out for the bandage!" Lawrence cried.

"Sorry!" I shrieked, sending my arms flailing out at my sides. Lawrence grabbed my hips to steady me, pushing and pulling my body to maximize friction. As I rubbed my clit against his fuzzy groin, my grasping pussy went into massive convulsions. Oh, that cock! That wonderful man! It was like streaks of starlight were shooting out my fingers and toes to the outer limits of my being.

Exhausted, I again collapsed onto my wonderful partner, who in turn flipped me onto my back. "Are you up for some more?"

"As long as you do all the work," I smiled. "I can go all night."

I watched his proud cock coming at me as Lawrence penetrated my blissful cunt from on top. I watched his strong arms as he pinned mine above my head, holding my wrists against the pillow like I taught him to do. Totally in his control, I whispered, "I'm yours, Lawrence. *J'suis a toi.*"

His eyes went all tender. Diving at me, Lawrence kissed my mouth with full force. So much for not exchanging bodily fluids! Cock thrusting wildly between my open legs, Lawrence released my wrists to wrap me in his arms. His hot tongue writhed against mine with such intensity I knew he was about

to come. I was right. Plunging deep inside with violent thrusts, Lawrence's issued a high-pitched squeak and fell on top of me. Panting in unison, his bulk upon mine, we lay together in disbelief. How could it feel so good every time?

"What happened to not kissing?" I asked with a grin.

Lawrence sighed. "Oh well."

* * * *

I gave him a new toothbrush and we cleaned our teeth side by side in my little white bathroom. Just like married people do. There I was, twenty-eight years old and still playing house. When I slipped into bed beside my husband-for-one-night, he wrapped his warm arms around me. I hugged him around the waist.

"You speak French," Lawrence said. "What does *Nuit Blanche* mean?"

"Sleepless night," I replied.

Some noisy teenagers were shouting drunkenly outside my building, and I thought about going to the window to quiet them, but my limbs weren't exactly obeying my brain. Lawrence's hand cupped my butt. Maybe he was trying to squeeze it. I tried to do the same to him, but again the limbs weren't obeying. I must have fallen asleep after that.

The night of *Nuit Blanche*, I had a dream. In my dream, Lawrence unwrapped a fresh block of cheddar cheese from my fridge, and I was angry because there was already a block of cheddar open. I yelled at him, 'Why open a new cheese when the old one's still good? We don't need two cheddars open at once.'

Coming Together With Pride
by Alessia Brio, J Buchanan, Lisabet Sarai

It seemed so real...

At sunrise, my single-shingled lover showered and dressed before I was able to pry myself out of bed. With a kiss to my forehead, Lawrence went back home. Home, where his wife lived and I didn't. So, that was it. That was our first night together, our Nuit Blanche, which turned out not to be so sleepless after all. Soon his warmth left my bed, but his scent lingered on my pillow until the next Sunday morning visit. On the whole, it was a pleasant experience, but I was always left with a heavy heart, a sorrowful feeling, when Lawrence left.

* * * *

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Echoes of the Past

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"You can't go yet."

Victor sighed as a well-muscled arm snaked its way across his middle to hold him captive on the bed. He draped his free arm—the one not pinned beneath his lover's body—over and entwined his fingers with the other man's. The roughness of his skin was like a beacon to his heart, but it was one that he could not heed this time. He had spent entirely too long here already. He drew the man's hand to his lips and placed a soft kiss on his knuckles before sliding out of bed.

"You know I can't stay," he said as he pulled up his jeans. The man on the bed rolled onto his back and gave Victor a wistful smile. Beneath the veneer of baby blue eyes, Victor saw the pain of another parting. "I'm sorry, Daniel." He leaned down and kissed the man's forehead gently. "I love you, but I cannot stay."

"I know. When will you be back?"

Victor pulled away with a reluctance that left his heart feeling like it weighed a ton in his chest. "I don't know. Markus knows I've been leaving London every few nights, although he doesn't know where I go. I only pray that Kristoph hasn't caught onto us."

"He hasn't shown any signs of such," Daniel said as he sat up. "Victor?"

Victor watched the bed sheet settle into a pool of gray silk in Daniel's lap, ineffectively covering the contours beneath. It

was an enticing sight that drew Victor's attention away from danger and back to his lover's bed. Daniel smiled and slid over as Victor's jeans returned to the floor. Slipping under the sheet, he pulled Daniel beneath him, their mouths meeting in a heated kiss.

"Make love to me, Vic," Daniel pleaded in a whisper.

Victor pulled away from Daniel's lips to trace a line over his chin, down his throat, across his chest. Daniel shifted beneath him, allowing Victor to settle between his legs as his kisses continued in a downward path. Victor closed his eyes as he inhaled deeply; the combination of sweat and his lover's arousal was a heady concoction to his already-overloaded senses. Daniel knew he couldn't resist one last time, and this night was no exception. Victor opened his eyes and looked up, only to find Daniel's blue gaze locked onto his own emerald one.

"I want you," Daniel mouthed silently.

Victor slid his tongue across his lips and looked down. Daniel's cock was hard beneath him, and the tip glistened with his arousal. Victor slid his tongue up the rigid length, drawing a throaty moan from his lover. Daniel's hands entwined themselves in Victor's hair. Several ebony strands slipped free to mingle with the blonde hair surrounding Daniel's cock. It was an entrancing sight, but the taste outweighed all else. Victor curled his fingers around Daniel's shaft and gave it a firm stroke from base to tip. Daniel's hips left the bed as his back arched, and a gasp escaped his lips, followed quickly by another deep groan. Victor smiled and slid his lips over the tip of Daniel's cock.

"Oh, God," Daniel breathed. He gripped Victor's head and began making slow, sweet love to his mouth.

Victor stroked the shaft as he sucked on the tip, drinking every drop that leaked from the small slit. He probed it with his tongue, which in turn rewarded him with a jerk of Daniel's hips. It was a weakness that Victor thoroughly enjoyed playing with. When Daniel's moans became more frantic, more desperate, Victor slipped two fingers into his mouth to wet them. When they made contact with Daniel's entrance, Victor opted to tease him for a bit. He pushed them in to the first knuckle and smiled when Daniel sucked his lower lip between his teeth.

"Please, Vic," Daniel begged him. "Don't tease me this time. I need you."

Victor pushed his fingers in deeper, and Daniel's hips rose. Victor pulled them back out and slid his mouth off of Daniel's cock. He moved to kneel between Daniel's legs and leaned to reach the small bottle of lube on the nightstand. As he started to sit up, Daniel caught him. The lube dropped to the pillow beside Daniel's head, forgotten, as Victor pulled Daniel into a kiss. Kissing him was something Victor could never tire of, yet he pulled away slowly. He sat up and slid two slick fingers into Daniel.

"Oh, yes. Please, Victor..."

Victor removed his fingers and stroked himself to full hardness, slicking his shaft as he did so. He pressed the tip of his cock to Daniel's entrance and pushed forward. Daniel's eyes widened as Victor penetrated him completely, impaling him on the rigid flesh. Once he was buried in Daniel's body,

Victor stopped—partially to allow Daniel to adjust and partially to keep from losing control altogether. Making love to Daniel always seemed like the first time, even though they had been together for over one hundred years.

Daniel locked his legs around Victor's waist, pulling him in and holding him tightly. Victor began to move, slowly at first but picking up speed as Daniel began to relax. The heat, the velvet tightness, enveloped Victor in the most tangible form of Heaven he had ever known. With every move, with every stroke inside Daniel's body, he felt his soul melt into Daniel's, becoming one with the man he loved.

As they moved together, their rhythm a loving one, the need built inside Victor as quickly as his impending orgasm. He knew Daniel felt it as well simply by the way his blue eyes glazed over as they both neared climax. When Daniel clawed at Victor's arms to pull him down, Victor went willingly. His strokes inside Daniel increased, and Daniel met every one. His body tightened around Victor's cock and beneath Victor's body, signaling that he was close.

Victor slid an arm under Daniel's neck and pulled him up to sit on him, still deeply impaled. When his cock bottomed out in Daniel's body, Victor descended on his neck, teeth bared. His teeth pierced the tender flesh of Daniel's neck, and Victor growled as he came, releasing his seed deep. Seconds later, he felt teeth within his own throat as Daniel's cock convulsed between their bodies. When they released one another's necks, they met in another kiss.

"I love you," Victor whispered.

Daniel smiled and kissed him again. "I love you, too. I always will, Victor."

* * * *

Victor sat up in bed, his body sticky with sweat, the sheet clinging to him like another layer of skin. He ran his fingers through his hair and swallowed the swell of tears. Freedom came with a price; it always had. He dropped onto the mattress with a groan. A shudder ran through him as the dream faded into mere memory. It had been almost six months, yet the dreams still came. How he longed to hear Daniel's voice just one more time.

From his position on the mattress, Victor could see the lingering hint of daylight through the cracks in the walls. Night would come soon and with it, the necessity of feeding. Yet feeding no longer held any pleasure for him, not since Kristoph had taken Daniel from him. Not since his banishment from the clan he'd belonged to since his turning over nine hundred years ago. Yes, freedom did indeed come with a price.

He rolled off of the mattress, settling on his hands and knees on the dust-covered floor of what was once Daniel's bedroom. The house itself had slipped into disrepair and eventually been boarded up, yet the owners never bothered to check the interior for 'tenants.' Victor had remained hidden well enough, unable to leave the memories the walls held.

Daniel had bought the house not long before he met him. Victor had never meant to do anything more than feed, but one night with Daniel turned into another ... and another ...

and another. Before Victor realized what was happening, he'd fallen in love. Then Kristoph had found Daniel and turned him. The one thing that Victor had refused to do, Kristoph had done for him, and then he took Daniel away from Victor for good.

Grumbling, Victor stood on shaky legs and steadied himself against the rotten, exposed wood of the wall. He took a steadying breath and closed his eyes to the vision of Daniel lying in bed. It was a sight that he knew he would never again see, and the pain was becoming too difficult to bear. He often wondered how a vampire could commit suicide, and several ideas were becoming more desirable as each day passed without Daniel at his side.

* * * *

Daniel watched with deep sadness as Victor left their home to feed. Of course, he could go with Victor, but it would do no good. Feeding had become a routine chore for Victor, and Daniel knew his lover's will to go on was quickly waning. It was clear in his eyes. Irises that once held Daniel captivated within their emerald depths were now dull and lifeless. Then there were the dreams. Not a night went by in which Victor slept soundly. Daniel mourned for his lover just as Victor mourned for him.

An hour passed before Victor returned from his hunt and surprisingly, he was not alone. Daniel watched with unease as Markus put out a hand to stop the front door from closing. Victor didn't seem overly concerned as his sire followed him to the bedroom.

"Why are you here?" Victor asked as he collapsed onto the mattress. Markus stopped in the doorway of the bedroom.

"I want you to come back, Vic," he said.

Daniel looked from Markus to Victor and noted the almost obscene grin on his lover's face. It was one of those smiles that warned the bearer wasn't all there. In normal society, it would've been a one-way ticket to the funny farm.

"You banished me for loving someone, and now you want me back?"

Daniel could almost hear the threads of sanity snapping within Victor's mind.

"He was one of Kristoph's," Markus countered. "You knew that and refused to stop seeing him. I had no choice but to banish you. For all I know, he could be hiding and listening to us right now."

"I wish that were true," Victor mumbled from beneath his arm. He moved it enough to look over at the blank look on Markus' face. "He's dead, Markus. As soon as Kristoph found out, he came here. I didn't make it in time. Daniel bled to death in my arms; the slit in his throat was beyond repair."

"I'm sorry, Vic."

Daniel saw the glimmer of a tear before it escaped down Victor's cheek. How he longed to kiss it away, to gather Victor into his arms once more. A sigh from Markus drew Daniel out of his memories.

"So you won't come back," Markus said.

"No. I have no need for politics. Your war with Kristoph and his clan no longer concerns me. I paid my price, as did Daniel. I'm done." He rolled over, turning his back on his sire

and former friend. Taking it as a cue to leave, Markus turned and left the house without another word.

Victor rolled over. Daniel ached to touch him, if only to take him into his arms and stop the tremors of heartache. Victor's shoulders shook as the threadbare silk of the pillowcase soaked up his tears. Daniel's chest tightened as his own heartache began to surface once more. There had to be a way for him to reach Victor. When Victor's sobs died out, the room slipped into an odd silence. He rolled over and stared at the ceiling. The look in his eyes was one of finality. Daniel waited, knowing it was only a matter of time.

Victor slid off of the mattress and crawled across the floor. He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. Daniel knew he was readying himself. A stake of ash wood lay across Victor's lap, the sharpened end a promise of true freedom. Victor turned around and positioned the flat end of the stake against the wall. He then set the point to his heart and with a final prayer, he thrust himself forward.

Daniel closed his eyes at the moment of penetration. He couldn't bear to witness his lover's suicide, despite knowing Victor's pain was at an end. When he felt a presence much like his own, however, Daniel opened his eyes. A spectral figure drifted across the room and stopped before him. A smile he had longed to see once more graced the man's lips.

"Daniel."

Daniel reached out and pulled Victor into his arms once again. Victor met him in a kiss—a kiss that promised forever.

"I love you, Daniel. I always will love you."

* * * *

Coming Together With Pride
by Alessia Brio, J Buchanan, Lisabet Sarai

www.mychaelblack.com

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Fire and Ice

© Cassie Exline

"Here's a cold beer and the sports section for you. A lemonade and magazine for me," I said, brushing a lock of his dark hair from his eyes and kissing his forehead, before sitting on my chaise lounge. I drew my knees up so David couldn't see what I had hidden in the magazine—the invitation to the Crystal Ball, which would be six months from today.

There were only fifty good seats in the Hamilton Center. Well, seats that were close to the dance floor. If I wanted one of them, I had to reserve a seat immediately. The problem was that tickets would be sold in pairs—for couples only. That meant I had to talk my husband into going with me. Normally, one of my girlfriends would go, but it wouldn't work for this Ball, not when the evening featured ballroom dancing—from the foxtrot to the Viennese waltz. David hated what he called "fancy Nancy" dancing.

I sipped my drink while plotting my mission. The check for the Ball had to be in the mail as soon as possible. I wanted a good seat. Too bad today was the day that he planned a cookout with his family. I glanced at my watch and was pleased to discover I had three hours before anyone was expected to arrive. Plenty of time to convince my husband that he wanted to go to the Ball.

"Please!"

"No, Muriel. I'm not going to the Crystal Ball or any ball."

"Oh, honey, please."

"You know I can't dance."

"David, we slow dance all the time,"

"We sway. I barely move my feet. Besides, I'll never be a Fred Astaire to your Ginger Rogers."

"Aw ... Come on, please."

"Drop it." David raised the newspaper so he couldn't see me. "If it's that important, you can go by yourself and watch."

"The tickets are for couples." I settled deeper into the chaise lounge. David could be so stubborn at times. "There's only a few good seats, and I need to RSVP now to guarantee them."

"No!"

"Just one dance, and that's all." I had belonged to a dance troupe back in college and loved to dance. One dance was better than none.

He lowered the paper and peered over the top. "You're telling me that you'll be content to just sit and watch after one dance?"

"Well..."

"See! I knew it! You'll get me there and beg and plead all evening to dance. I'm not Fred!"

"I don't want you to be!"

The paper went back up. It might as well have been a brick wall. I was going to have to be a lot more persuasive. While we were dating, David couldn't wait to get his arms around me on the dance floor. In fact, he couldn't wait to get his hands all over me. I took another sip of my lemonade and noticed the ice. The blouse I was wearing tied under my

breasts, and I wasn't wearing a bra. I quickly untied the knot and let the white cotton fall loose. I fished an ice cube out of the glass and stood. "Honey, are you hot?"

"It feels good out here," he said behind his paper.

"I'm so hot, baby. Mmm..."

The paper dropped, and I went into my act, rubbing the ice cube over each nipple, while moaning and gyrating. Each pinkish aureole puckered and my nubbins became hard points filled with throbbing sensations. A trickle of water rolled down my stomach and pooled in my belly button before disappearing inside my shorts. Shivers raced through me.

"Oh, yes—you're hot," he said. "Come here and let me help you."

Trying not to grin or do a cheer of victory, I sauntered over, wiggling my hips and causing my breasts to sway back and forth. I tossed my head, and my long blonde curls danced in the air. When I reached him, I cupped my tits and held them together, brushing them against his waiting lips.

David took over, squeezing and kneading each breast, before sucking on my nipples. The fire from his tongue mingled with the fire the ice lit within me. When his teeth lightly grazed my nipples, desire coursed through my body.

"Yes, baby, yes," I whispered and pushed closer to him. His hot breath washed over me. His mouth and hands drove me wild. Those ice cubes weren't the only thing melting. I was going to have a major wet spot in my panties. I wanted his fingers buried deep in my cunt.

"Knock! Knock!"

Horried, I looked over my shoulder to see my mother-in-law. I straightened and hurried to fix my blouse. "Uh, Bernice. We didn't hear you arrive." The material of my blouse adhered to my damp chest, clearly outlining my nipples, which looked and felt sharp enough to slice through the fabric. I managed to tie the knot firmly under my breasts before crossing my arms to cover myself.

"I guess not. Apparently you forgot you had guests coming over."

"Mom, you're not guests." David hurried to his mother and hugged her. "You're family."

Bernice had snuck around the back of the house and down the narrow alley. She sniffed and asked, "Are you all right, son?"

"Of course, Mom. Muriel was trying to con me into going to a dance. She can be so lusty at times. She has a one-track mind." He grinned at me behind his mother's back, and my face reddened.

Bernice glared at me. Her rose-colored lips were pinched tight as she shook her head. "Well, we knocked and knocked at the front door. It's the back yard, Muriel!"

David laughed out loud, and I wished a hole would open up and swallow me.

"Mother? Where did you go?" It was David's father.

"Dad?" David peeked down the alley. "Dad, c'mon back here."

An older version of David appeared. "Hello, son! Where's your mother?" He turned, spotted his wife, and faced his son.

"That woman! One minute I'm trying to get the cooler out of the trunk, and when I turn around, she's gone!"

"Cooler?" David asked. A big smile crossed his face. "Did you bring a pie?"

David's father snorted. "Pies."

"A chocolate, a lemon meringue, and a coconut cream," Bernice said. "Well, I figured since Muriel is too busy to bake you anything, someone had to do it."

I smiled while trying not to break my teeth from clenching my mouth so tightly.

"Where is everyone?" David's sister yelled.

"Patty, we're back here!" David called and hurried to his sister. "Dad, I'll get the cooler."

The older man nodded.

After everyone's coolers were unloaded and the goodies put on the picnic tables, Patty held out a bag and said, "Here's your kitchen rug, Muriel."

I opened the bag and pulled out the hand-braided rug. "Oh, I love it. You picked the perfect colors. The rug will suit my kitchen to a T. Look, honey, isn't it beautiful?"

David ran his fingers over it and said, "Sis, you did a good job on this rug. It must have taken you weeks."

"Not really. It wasn't that hard. Besides, nothing is too much for my little brother," Patty said. "Oh, Mom, you have to come over and see the new curtains I made for the dining room. They turned out better than I hoped."

I saw David nudge his sister.

Patty cleared her throat. "Uh ... You, too, Muriel. Please, come over."

"Yes, she should see them," Bernice said. "A man loves it when a woman decorates their home. It shows she appreciates how hard he works for her. Muriel, dear, I've noticed that you don't have flowers anywhere in the house. That's a shame."

I smiled, shrugged, and clinched my teeth.

"Patty, did you try that recipe for sweet potatoes I gave you?" Bernice asked.

"Last night. Harry loved it."

"You know, Muriel, it wouldn't hurt you to try to cook a little. David loves my sweet potatoes. Cooking is a much more necessary skill than dancing. A man loves a woman who cooks. It's not always about sex, dear."

"My goodness—pies, curtains, flowers, sweet potatoes, and no sex. I'm going to be a busy girl, and apparently horny," I said.

Bernice stiffened, and Patty giggled.

"Uh, honey, can you help me get the hamburgers from the kitchen?" David asked.

"Of course." I got up and almost ran into the house.

David was right behind me. "Now, Muriel, please. My mother means well."

"I just don't understand." I pulled out a chair and plopped down. "When we were dating, she seemed to like me."

"She does. She just worries about me."

David knelt beside me and took both of my hands. "It doesn't matter if you can't cook or make things. I love you."

"Does that mean you'll go to the Crystal Ball with me?"

"No!" David kissed my hands and stood. "Nice try, though." He got the hamburgers out of the refrigerator and headed outside toward the grill. "Come here, Dad. I need your expertise."

David's other sister arrived and from that moment on, I was left out of the conversation. Not that I had much to contribute. I didn't sew, cook or make rugs.

* * * *

"They get in this huddle and go on and on about their latest project. I have nothing to offer," I said to David while we were cleaning up.

"You worry too much. I love you as you are." David kissed my forehead, and I sighed. "Muriel, if it bothers you that much, sign up for one of those sewing classes that Patty told you about."

"I don't see why I have to change to please Patty or anyone else in your family."

"You don't have to change—just bend a little. My mother and sisters don't understand a thing about your activities. They don't hike, bike, or swim. God knows they don't dance. So, they discuss what they know."

He was probably right. They were homemakers—homemakers of the June Cleaver variety. I'd never known anyone who made her own clothes, let alone knitted sweaters and scarves, crocheted doilies, made afghans, and hooked rugs. On top of that, those women were excellent cooks. I burned toast. David was the chef in our home, and that was only on the grill.

"Look, all I'm saying is go to that place and check it out."

I gritted my teeth but nodded. There was no need for a repeat performance of what happened when David asked his mother to sew a few buttons on his favorite shirt. I thought the woman was going to have a stroke. She gasped and clutched her chest. If she knew how those buttons got loose, I'd be more than dead.

As I wiped off the counter, I couldn't get that look out of my head. Perhaps I could bend. Since it was summer and I was off for the next couple months, it wouldn't hurt me to check out Needles & More. After all, I'd overheard Patty telling her mother that David's ex-fiancée was back in town and single. I knew she could do all those things that Bernice wanted me to do.

Needles & More was huge. The brochure stated that classes were offered on practically anything involving a needle—basic sewing, crocheting, knitting, cross-stitch, needlepoint, quilting, weaving, rug hooking, even stringing beads.

After I entered the building, I didn't move. There were groups of people everywhere, and all of them seemed to be talking at once. I was getting ready to leave when a well-dressed woman rushed over to greet me. "Hello. My name is Anna. Welcome to Needles & More. Can I help you?"

I blinked and realized that I was totally out of my element. "I, uh, I wanted to make something, uh, simple, to show my mother-in-law."

Anna grinned. "I'll fix you up. Having so many choices can be a bit overwhelming." She glanced at her watch and said,

"There's a new class about to begin. Participants will learn how to make a skirt in an hour. Very simple. Class starts in a few minutes. Interested?"

"Make a skirt in an hour? You bet I'm interested." This might not be so bad after all—and only require an hour of my time.

"Let's get you signed up. Then you can purchase your pattern and materials." Anna led me across the room to a small group of women and ten workstations. I added my name to the list, and she led me over to bolts of material. "See anything you'd like to wear?"

I nodded and pointed.

Anna frowned at the shiny black fabric I selected. "It's not a recommended choice for a first project, my dear. Especially for a beginner. That type of material is hard to work with, even for trained experts."

Well how hard could it be to make a short skirt? I didn't need much material and might finish it in half the time. "I understand, but that's what I want. Black goes with everything."

Anna shrugged and cut the yardage needed for my project. She picked out the zipper and totaled the bill. Almost seventy-five dollars. A back-pleat side zip from Victoria's Secret was only \$39.95 with shipping.

Since the class participants had to wait until I was seated at my workstation, I got more than one dirty look directed my way. When I tried to pin the pattern to the material, the straight pins stabbed my fingers. *Damn!* The scissors cut crooked. *Shit!* The material slipped off the table and puddled

on the floor, much like I wanted it to do when I removed it for a night of seduction. *Fuck!* The instructor, Edna, reminded me several times to watch my language.

I had planned on keeping the class a secret, but Edna informed me that I needed extra evening classes to keep up with the others. I had to tell David and made him promise to keep it a secret.

"A shiny black thing, huh? Even if my mother doesn't like it, I'm sure I will."

He said he'd be fine without me for an evening or two and that he was pleased I was making an effort. I was surprised, however, that he didn't argue about the expense and time it was taking away from him.

Seven days, a broken pair of scissors, loss of patience, and a couple less strands of hair later, I was ready to model my skirt for the class. Luckily, I had discovered that duct tape worked well to keep the zipper, which had been ripped out so often that the material of that section was frayed at the edges, in place. The skirt hung a bit crooked, but with the blouse I'd selected, it looked good when I practiced a twirl in front of the mirror. I couldn't wait to get home to show David.

When Edna called my name, I strutted in front of the ladies wearing my stilettos and a big smile. Edna clicked her tongue and gave a hard tug on my skirt. The zipper pulled out in her hand and the skirt puddled at my feet. It looked really nice lying on the floor, just like I'd imagined. I thought the silky thong I wore made my hips look pretty good, but Edna didn't see it that way.

"Please cover yourself," she said and summoned Anna. I was asked to try another class.

Anna suggested knitting. I bought knitting needles and yarn. I wanted to make a scarf. The instructor, Betty, said I had to learn the basics. I couldn't cast the yarn on the needle or keep straight the difference between knit and purl. But I could imagine the scarf as a G-string, and I could imagine dancing in front of David wearing only that. I could just picture him taking a strand of the skimpy G-string yarn and pulling. I'd unravel like a Christmas present, standing in front of him in my birthday suit.

Betty interrupted my daydream. "Your stitches are getting much too tight."

She was right. I couldn't get them off one needle and onto another. For a moment, I considered asking Betty if I could learn to make a G-string in a caramel color to match my pussy hair. One look at her stern face changed my mind.

"This is just for practice, Muriel, but you need to focus. Now rip the stitches apart and start again. When that's done, you'll do it again and again. You need practice, practice, practice."

After that reprimand, things got out of control. My patience was gone. During my practice, practice, practice, I used too much force, force, force—and the yarn knotted into a clump. When I pulled on it, the clump shot across two workstations and landed on the head of one of the women. It looked like a bad toupee, and I laughed out loud.

"Maybe knitting isn't your thing," Betty suggested.

Next was cross-stitch. That class wasn't any better than knitting. Crocheting turned out to be just as bad. Quilting wasn't for me either. Anna had to be summoned again.

"Muriel, perhaps you're not meant to sew," Anna said.

"Well, I've spent a lot of money here over the last several weeks, and I've made nothing to show my husband or my mother-in-law. There has to be some class that is perfect for me."

Anna sighed and led me to another workstation. She handed me a long, blunt needle with a piece of rawhide tied to it and a bucket of beads. "You can thread some lovely necklaces. Children love to make them for gifts. I'm sure you'll have no problem with this project." She walked off.

I looked at the needle and at the women watching me. They twittered when I picked up the needle and a handful of beads. I grabbed my purse and left. Once I was in my car, I realized that I still had the beads in my hand. Maybe I could string them together and do a belly dance for David.

Perhaps I could tie them so they hung at different lengths and as I shimmied and shook, they would brush against my legs, my pubic hair and my butt. For a brief moment, I wondered if I should return the beads, but decided they could bill me. A naughty thought crossed my mind. David could insert a bead into my pussy and fish it out with his tongue. Then an even naughtier thought crossed my mind. Quivering with anticipation, I clinched myself, my pussy, and my asshole both. I drove home as fast as possible, with every intention of flinging myself into David's arms and confessing my ineptness. His mother would love this.

Except my adoring husband wasn't home. I checked the kitchen, the living room, and the den. Everything was spotless, just as I'd left it. Then, I went upstairs to check our bedroom. There was evidence he'd been there and had taken a shower. Wet towels lay on the floor along with his dirty clothes. I noticed his wristwatch on the nightstand. That's where he always put it right before showering.

My inner alarm went off. Where was my husband? Why hadn't he been fussing over my absence from home? I returned to my car and drove to his office building. David's car wasn't there. I checked out two clubs, two bars, and a strip joint located on the outskirts of town—all the places his office "entertained" clients from out of town. No David. I wasn't sure whether to be angry or worried. I drove back home.

David's car was in the driveway and the lights were on in the house. The moment I opened the front door, I heard, "Honey, is that you?"

I went into the living room. There was David surrounded by the newspaper, page after page scattered about him. It looked like he'd been home all evening.

"Thank God, you're home," David said. "I've missed you."

"And apparently the trash can. What a mess." Even though my mind was racing, I kissed him and cleaned up the papers. I might not cook, but I am tidy. Next, I went into the kitchen. Dishes were everywhere. After putting things away, I hurried upstairs. The towels and clothes were gone. Even his watch was absent. He'd covered his tracks. My husband was up to something.

Two nights later, the phone rang. I peered at the clock and saw it was only one in the morning.

David answered it without me asking. "Hello. Yes. Yes. Uh, same time. Bye."

"Who was that?" I asked.

"Uh, my mom."

It wouldn't have surprised me if it had been his mother. I rolled over and went back to sleep.

But I knew something wasn't right. Instead of going to the next class, I parked down the street from the house and waited for David to get home. Sure enough, after just enough time for a shower, he left the house. I followed him, but I was afraid to follow too closely, and I lost him in traffic. Two nights later, the same thing happened. It took me four tries before I discovered where he was going. After that, I'd drive to the place and wait for him to show up. His behavior was like clockwork. I timed him by my watch. Right on the dot at six o'clock, he'd pull up in his Ford and hurry into the renovated warehouse. I'd found a secluded spot behind a privacy fence and clump of trees to park my car.

Over the course of several days, I'd done a lot of reconnaissance and asked tons of questions. Amazing how much people will talk when you carry a clipboard and act professional. The elevator, which had been a freight lift, had an up-and-down wooden gate, which was much too noisy. There was no way I could reach the fourth floor without anyone hearing me. Then I'd discovered that the stairs were actually an emergency exit, and the outside door was never locked. That exit had been added to bring it up to fire code

when the owners renovated the building into six studio lofts. The stairs were my only way up.

The next late night phone call was handled a bit differently. Just as I went to answer it, David grabbed the receiver away from me and left the room. When he returned, he said it was his mother, but I didn't buy it for a second.

That was the morning I noticed David's bruises when he stepped out of the shower. He had a big black bruise on his thigh and both of his knees were a brownish purple.

"What happened to you?"

"Nothing," he said. "Why are you asking?"

"You have bruises all over your body."

"Oh, that's just tag football. The guys get a bit rough."

Later that morning while I was doing laundry, I caught a whiff of perfume. Not my brand. David's clothes continued to have that smell for weeks.

I'm not sure why I didn't confront David right at the beginning, instead of resorting to the subterfuge. Maybe in the back of my mind I knew I'd make him pay dearly if I discovered he'd been cheating. But I do know that the unexplained phone calls in the middle of the night, bruises on his body, and the strange perfume on his clothes pushed me over the edge.

* * * *

My right hand was jammed deep into my jacket pocket as I leaned against the windowsill. I couldn't help but finger the .357 Magnum hidden inside. David had bought the gun when there were a series of break-ins around the neighborhood and

he'd known he was going to be out of town for a couple weeks. He'd taken me to the shooting range and made sure I knew how to use the weapon. "Pretend the target is a rapist," he said. "Blow the fucker away."

He'd been so sweet, worrying about me. The morning he left for his trip, I thought he was a bit teary-eyed. He called every day, but nothing happened while he was away. The gun was hidden in the closet and forgotten.

The steel gray titanium barrel felt cool to my touch, reminding me that I needed to be as hard as steel. I traced the dips of the cylinder with my fingertips and wrapped my fingers around the rubber handgrip. The pad of my thumb rested on the grooved hammer, and my index finger poised over the trigger. I was going to kill my husband and the whore he was fucking, and I was going to do it with his own gun.

It was hard to believe that only six months ago my life was fine, and now I was plotting to commit cold-blooded murder. If I pressed my cheek against the glass and tilted my head at just the right angle, I could see the approaching traffic. I'd done this many times during my tailing of David.

My finger touched the trigger. I was going to wait until I was sure they were in the throes of passion. Then I'd step into the room, call out his name, and shoot him before he had time to pull his cock out of that slut's cunt. Of course, the whore would beg for her life. I'd pretend to listen before putting a bullet in her. After that, I'd scream and cry. Maybe I'd faint. I took drama in college—I could pull it off. The authorities would call it a crime of passion. I'd claim to have

no knowledge of guns, and then I'd withdraw into a world of silence, never saying another word. I had it all figured out.

The sound of the elevator brought me out of my reverie. I opened the door leading to the stairs and prepared to step inside. A quick peek assured me it was David. Somehow, I had missed seeing him drive up. I stepped into the stairwell and waited. When I heard the door close, I peered into the hallway. He was inside the apartment.

In regard to most things, David was a creature of habit, so I knew I had a few more minutes to wait before making my entrance. His lovemaking was the same. First, some small talk. Then he'd kiss her neck before moving to her lips. His hands would caress her breasts, while his thumbs and forefingers tweaked her nipples. He'd remove her clothes. His would already be off. He loved to strut around with his dick bouncing to and fro. I loved it, too.

Every time I'd see his handsome cock, I'd drop in front of him and lick the tip, lapping the pre-cum that would rest at the slit. My tongue would tease the opening before encircling the purplish helmet. I'd push back the foreskin and engulf his cock, then I'd clutch his butt cheeks and pull him closer. That way I could get his dick to slide as deep as possible into my throat. The suction from my mouth would keep him anchored so my fingers could play with him—toying with his asshole and cupping his balls.

He'd rock on his heels, and I'd know he was ready to shoot his spunk. His fingers would entwine in my hair, and he'd hold my head as close to him as possible while he fucked my face.

His pubic hair would brush against my nose. He'd smell of a mixture of baby powder and aftershave.

David roared when he climaxed, and I loved that sound. He tasted like salty almonds, and I enjoyed every drop, licking him clean. Then he'd want to go down on me. If I had been kneeling, he'd pick me up and drop me on the bed, like I was a sock. Before I could get settled, his face would be buried in my pussy. He loved my cunt. It never took long before my toes curled, and I'd chant his praises, urging him to keep it up or go faster and harder. I'd open my legs as wide as possible. My fingers would be holding onto locks of his hair, while I'd be thrusting my hips upward, driving his tongue deeper and deeper.

He was an attentive lover. After his first climax, his penis would remain hard for ages. David always made sure I had several orgasms.

Music drifted down the hall. I knew it came from the whore's apartment. She must be a rowdy woman, since David had all kinds of bruises on his body. He never had marks on him when we made love.

I cradled the gun and kept the fire of revenge burning by imagining him having sex with the slut—touching all her private parts, when he should have been touching mine. I started to pace. David should not have his face buried in some other woman's crotch. Those are my kisses not hers. My caresses. He's my husband.

When I thought I'd waited long enough, I proceeded to her door. The one part of the plan that worried me was that her door would be locked. In the trial runs I'd made, the knob had

turned easily in my hand every single time. Although I'd never opened the door, I could tell the music came from an upstairs room. So, I figured her bedroom was up one of those winding staircases.

I took a deep breath, turned the doorknob, and stepped into her apartment. To my left was the staircase. The music was coming from upstairs, just as I'd figured. I kept my right hand in my pocket and ascended the stairs. When I reached the step that put my nose level with the floor, I stopped to check out the surroundings. I almost gasped out loud at what I saw. The walls were covered with mirrors, including the ceiling.

David and that woman had their arms around each other. I watched my husband make moves that I'd didn't know he was capable of. He was a gorgeous man to watch. She twirled, as if trying to elude him and take him with her at the same time. He tried to twirl too, but mid-spin he faltered, his legs twisted, and he fell to the floor. It was almost funny, but his groan told me he'd hit the floor hard. My poor dear man.

She helped him to his feet.

I decided to leave when the music suddenly stopped. The woman said, "David, I believe we have an audience."

David turned and gasped. "Muriel! What a surprise. I wondered if you'd ever check on me."

"You knew I was here?" It was my turn to gasp.

"Of course. I spotted your car weeks ago, and I've seen it regularly after that. I figured you were thinking of renting one of the lofts for your dance studio."

I was astounded. He remembered my dream. We hadn't discussed my studio idea in a year or more. "Why didn't you confront me?"

"Because I wanted to finish these dance lessons. I figured if you didn't mention it, I wouldn't either," David said. "And don't feel bad that the sewing lessons didn't work."

"You knew about that, too?"

"Some woman called the house and said she'd be sending you a refund check."

"I'm sorry that I interrupted. Continue dancing. I'll just go."

The woman stepped toward me. "That's okay, Muriel, please stay. I'm Rachel. Your being here will be helpful."

"How's that?" I asked.

"Since David will be dancing with you at the Crystal Ball, it would be better if he'd partner with you now. My technique may be different than yours. Besides, I think he'll relax more if it were you instead of me."

I gasped and stared at David. "You're going to the Ball with me?"

"I'm sure the hell not going with anyone else!"

"Stay, Muriel. Toss your jacket on a chair, and we'll start the dance over."

I slipped off my jacket and put it on the nearest chair. David and Rachel were talking, and I hadn't taken three steps to join them when the jacket slid to the floor with a clunk.

"What was that?" David asked.

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"Keys," I said and flew into his arms. "Let's dance, my love." A fire burned within me, and it would take a lot of ice cubes to put it out.

* * * *

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Be Prepared

© Storm Grant

"Really, Mason. I'll drive ya home. 'm okay. 'm fine." Jack lurched to the left, bouncing off Mason and almost careening into a birch, a trashcan, and a stop sign before correcting his trajectory and heading back along the sidewalk.

"I hardly think so, Jack. Please give me the keys, and I'll drive *you* home." Mason's hand reached up to smooth back his too-long bangs, but he quickly stopped himself from executing that or any of the other nervous habits he'd recently been informed were both predictable and annoying. As recently as five minutes ago, in fact, by his drunken friend.

The same drunken friend who was now asking a fire hydrant how it would then get home if it drove Jack's Camaro.

Stepping in for the fireplug, Mason answered. "It's a lovely spring evening. I'd merely walk the fifteen or twenty blocks to my apartment."

"No way, José," Jack mumbled. "Hey. Who's José anyway? José Ferrara? Ferrari? Fettuccini?" He stared at the moon a moment. "Hey, Mason, you hungry?"

There was additional discussion around such fascinating topics as the universe; feta vs. "real" cheese; who was more annoying—Luke Skywalker or Captain Kirk; and finally, predictably, whether it would be better to puke in the bushes or the gutter. Luckily, the debate proved to be purely rhetorical.

Eventually, they reached the car, and the argument over the keys resumed. At some point in the meandering stroll, even Jack had come to admit he was not tonight's driver of choice. Still, his alcohol-enhanced machismo refused to surrender with grace.

"You want the keys, Mason? You wan' 'em?" Jack dangled the keys from one finger.

Tiredly, and with no small amount of frustration, Mason grabbed for the keys, only to have Jack snatch them away in a moment of clarity.

"Ha ha. Try again." The jingling keys flashed streetlight and moonlight mockingly.

Mason folded his arms across his chest, leather creaking like a bat in the night. "I don't want to play games, Jack. Please, just hand me the keys." And with that attempted fake-out, Mason lunged at Jack, the momentum shoving Jack against the Camaro, pinned there by Mason's body. And the keys—the object of their mutual desire—sailed into the night, landing squarely, deftly, wetly, in a nearby storm drain. Had it been the precision diving event in the Key Olympics, even the Russian judge would have given it a 9.5.

"Oh, shit," said Jack, turning just his head to follow the flight of the keys, as he was still pressed up against his car by Mason's weight.

"Oh, dear." Mason, who now dropped his head in dismay and frustration, his forehead coming to rest on Jack's, was still shoved up against his friend, pinning him to the Camaro.

Mason made no move to move.

Jack made no effort to escape. He did shift a bit. Then rub a bit. Perhaps some grinding might have ensued if Mason had rubbed back at all.

Mason lifted his head and looked into Jack's blue eyes. "What do we do now?" he asked, his voice a hoarse murmur.

"About the keys or about this?" Jack clarified "this" by thrusting his hips forward in a very friendly manner. His point was not lost on Mason.

"Perhaps..." Instead of finishing his sentence, Mason leaned in and brushed his lips across Jack's—just a touch, just a whisper.

Jack had never been known for subtlety, patience or guile. He surged forward with arms, hips and lips, in that order, wrapping himself around Mason, and yanking him close, kissing, licking, biting. Telling Mason who he was, who he was with, and what they both wanted, all without saying a word.

The side of a Chevy Camaro can be a very accommodating place, if one's not too fussy about such things as comfort. Jack nearly devoured Mason, who, while at first demure and reserved, gradually changed his demeanour until he was pounding against Jack. Jack gave as good as he got, sparing hardly a thought for the paint job.

There were moments of clutching and moments of grappling; the soft night air was gently salted with words rarely used by either man: baby, cock, come, fuck, love, again.

Jack knelt before Mason, the harsh asphalt cutting painfully through his jeans and his drunkenness, helping him focus, helping him regain some control.

Spit and divine suction sped the task along, and soon Mason was coming in creamy bursts against Jack's hot, wet tongue, coming apart under Jack's clever mouth and hands.

Breathing heavily, Mason yanked Jack to his feet, spun him around so he assumed the position: palms flat on the cool hood of the car, legs splayed wide. Mason stood behind him pressing his spent cock against Jack's denim-covered ass as he reached 'round, unzipped him, and jerked him hard, hard, hard ... good.

Mason staggered away, almost as high as Jack now—drunk on endorphins and hormones and light-headedness from hyperventilating, and from saying things he hadn't meant to say. And hearing them returned. His heart pounded, and his head spun with joy and pleasure beyond his wildest fantasies. Happiness not being his strong suit, Mason immediately began to seek out trouble.

He plunked down on one of the cement dividers, dropping his face in his palms.

Jack's concerned voice beside him said, "You okay there, buddy?" He didn't seem quite so drunk now.

"I took advantage of you. You're inebriated."

"Yeah. I was, and we did, and it was great. Can we do it again? Soon? Later tonight's good. Say, twenty minutes? Better make it twenty-five. I'm still a little shit-faced."

Slowly, Mason lowered his hands, squinting up at Jack's backlit silhouette. "You mean you're okay with this?"

"Okay? Yeah. Wanted this for just about forever. Well, maybe not forever 'cause before you there was Julie and ... Right. You don't want to hear that right now. Got it." He

grabbed Mason's chin and kissed him deeply, feelingly, lovingly.

Eventually, he pulled back from the kiss, breathing heavy once again. He rose and crossed the few feet to the car. "Let's go home, Mason."

And nothing says love like the magic words: "I'll even let you drive."

"But the keys, Jack. They went down the sewer."

"Yeah, they did." Jack reached into his wallet. "But I always carry a spare. I'm a good little boy scout." From the depths of his wallet, he produced three items: a spare key to his car, an extra key to his apartment, and, with great promise, an entire string of condoms.

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A Brief Discourse on the Heartiness & Symbolism of Semen

© P.S. Haven

We step out of the hotel room onto the tiny balcony and lean against the railing, the two of us. The water in the kidney-shaped swimming pool two stories below is lit up all turquoise and aquamarine. There's a middle-aged woman swimming in it who wasn't there five minutes ago. I ask him if he wants to go ahead and get started, and he says we'll wait.

He's not as handsome up close, but he's not ugly either. His business suit had told me all I needed to know. I tell him that I usually just dance but that he seemed special—which is complete bullshit, and he knows it, but he's no newer to this than I am, and he plays along. He tells me his name is really Toby, not Dylan, like he had told me at first. He promised me that Dylan was really his middle name—he just hated introducing himself as Toby. He said he thought it was a faggot name, and I seemed like a sweet girl and probably didn't care what his name was. He was half right.

He talks a lot about his job, and I don't even pretend to act interested. I tell him he'd be fun to watch bad TV with, which is true. And I tell him he's funny, which he isn't. He shows me his tattoo. He's impressed that we're up high enough to see the parking lot. He points out his car. I don't even know what kind it is, but I tell him the first blowjob I ever gave was in a car just like it, only red. He asks me if I

like sucking cock, and I tell him not half as much as I'm going to like the look on his face when I'm sucking his.

I light a cigarette and show it to him, asking if he minds. He asks if he can bum one, and then he asks if I've got a light. He says he can tell I give good head. He says he bets I'm going to give him the kind of blowjob that he was telling Dwayne about just the other night. Dwayne says a good blowjob is ninety percent enthusiasm and ten percent technique, Toby informs me. I want to assure Toby that the blowjob he's going to get from me will be one hundred percent technique, and that I don't know or care who the fuck Dwayne is, and with a name like Dwayne, he probably has to pay for his blowjobs, too.

But I don't.

Toby asks me if he was to come in the pool could he get the woman swimming in it pregnant. First off, I tell him, we'll be the only ones in the pool when he comes, or else he won't be coming. Not with my help, anyhow. But, for the sake of the argument, I tell him, even if he came in the water and that woman was still swimming around, she'd have to be in the fertile period of her cycle. And given that this occurs for only about five days each month, I explain, his chances just got lowered about fivefold.

I say that his semen would then have to escape the pool's filtration system and manage to come into direct physical contact with this woman. I ask him to bear in mind that sperm doesn't survive very long outside of the body, and that the water of the swimming pool is no doubt treated with chlorine, which kills sperm cells on contact. I tell him,

however, that we'll assume his sperm cells have miraculously survived the filter and the chlorinated water and are blessed with extraordinary long life. And that his amazingly hearty dollop of semen just happens to make its way to this hapless bitch. Then, it has to somehow enter her vagina—he asks me to call it a pussy because the word "vagina" grosses him out. I tell him that since our subject is wearing a bathing suit, the chance of his sperm finding their way into her pussy are slim to none.

He's visibly dejected at his hypothetical failure to remotely impregnate an oblivious stranger, so I say we'll assume that some of his sperm cells slip through and make it inside, and—despite the elapsed time and the sterilizing pH level of the water—said sperm cells are still motile. Plus, we agree to assume that this woman is fertile. What then, I ask him, is the probability that this droplet of semen will successfully navigate her fallopian tubes and fertilize an egg?

He's quiet for a moment, and I almost believe he's considering my points until he says, "So you're saying, technically, it is possible?" He laughs—a big, banging laugh that comes out of nowhere and disappears just as fast—and I can't tell if he's joking or being dead serious.

An elderly couple strolls by the pool. In comparison to the previous half hour, they constitute a relative flurry of activity. And here, I admit, I begin to weigh the risk/reward factor in my head. I wonder how they would've reacted had Toby and I been in the pool, doing what Toby and I have agreed to do. She'd look, I know. The old lady. No doubt, she'd see my shape beneath the water and understand the unmistakable

body language. She'd elbow the man, and he'd turn to look, too. But they'd keep walking. They wouldn't even slow down. Maybe they'd be turned on. Maybe to them Toby and I would appear to be lovers who simply couldn't resist one another. Maybe they had once been like that. Maybe they knew what it was like to want someone so badly as to be heedless of time and place. And they'd give each other a knowing smile and remember.

Or more likely, I decide, they would be quite offended, and they'd march right up to the front desk to brusquely inform the manager what they had just witnessed. Either way, I kinda liked the idea.

But nothing like that will happen. Nothing eventful ever does. Because even though I've never met this Toby, I've met a hundred others. And I already know exactly what sucking his dick will be like—because I've sucked a hundred others just like it. And despite my wide-eyed innocence when I told him otherwise, I've even done it in a swimming pool. And that's how I know the bleachy smell of the water will instantly take me back to the real first time I gave a blowjob, back in Richie's mom's laundry room.

It's the same way I know Toby will smile at me when he first shows me his dick, expecting me to be impressed. And even if I am, I won't show it. He'll already be at his hardest. He'll aim the shaft right into my mouth. He won't taste good, but he probably won't taste bad either, which is really all I can ask for. And I'll instantly start making all the appropriate moaning noises, and my hair will swirl all around my head in the water, like I'm caught in a slow-motion hurricane.

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He'll brush the hair away from my face, and I'll look up at him with complete devotion, my face distorted and undulating, refracted through the waves. He'll tangle his fists in my hair, and I won't resist when he sticks it in a little further than I like. I'll let him do this until my lungs feel like they're on fire, and then I'll get free and burst above the surface, gulping down a chest full of air.

I'll stare up at him, gasping to him about how big his cock is and how good it tastes and how good it feels to suck it. I'll pretend like I need the encouragement he'll give me, act like I need his directions and coaxing and coaching. That's how it will be.

He'll tell me not to stop, and he'll try to force me back down. I'll struggle a little, but he'll be ridiculously stronger, and I won't really be fighting anyhow. He'll push me down, hard, so that I'll barely have time to open my mouth before he stuffs it full. I'll let him in until my throat contracts, and I'll seal my lips around him tight enough to feel his heartbeat. I'll suck him hard, harder than he'll like. And then I'll break for the surface again. He'll tell me how good I am at sucking cock, and then he'll pant a few times and tell God how good I am at sucking cock. Even underwater, I'll be able to hear him purring and growling.

The manager will come out to make sure we're okay, because he had heard splashing and gasping. Toby will beg me not to stop and make me promise I never will. I'll hear the sound of his orgasm, his relentless mass of flesh filling my mouth, his fingers crawling, mouth hung open. He'll buck and

bray and, despite assuring me he understood the rules, he'll hold my head down and try to come in my mouth.

Toby asks me once more if I like sucking cock. I'm not sure if he's forgotten, or he simply wants to hear me say it again, but I tell him I love it. And then he asks me if I swallow.

And I almost tell him what I know he wants to hear, what will make his dick hard. I don't know why I don't. Maybe I figure for what he's paying me, he deserves the truth. Maybe I figure I deserve the truth. Whatever the reason, I decide to be brutally honest. I make sure I know exactly what I want to say before I say it. And then I tell him, "Come's okay." I give him time to sort out the semantics in his head. I tell him I like it, but I wouldn't say I love it. I try to explain to him that I think I like the idea of come more than I like come itself. I'm trying really hard to walk the thin line between shattering his illusions and maintaining my integrity, because my trade is in both.

I wait for some sort of affirmation from him, a nod maybe. But he just stares and listens. I tell him I love the look of it. I love seeing it. Especially from a safe distance. Like on TV, I say. I tell him I love it on the porno movies when the guy shoots all in the girl's mouth. It looks so good, I say, and that it makes me want to have this done to me.

I can tell Toby's cock is reacting to what I'm saying. And it's almost the truth. Because I really do feel that way, even in real life. All the way up until the exact moment when it's time to actually go through with it. Up until that point, I want

it all over me. I want to bathe in it. Get drunk off it. I want to ceremoniously imbibe it like it's some kind of precious nectar.

I tell Toby I really like the clear stuff that leaks out ahead of time. I like the way that tastes. It tastes like sugar. Okay, maybe not sugar, but it is sweet. I'm not saying I want it drizzled over my pancakes in the morning, I say. But it does taste ... sexy. It tastes like it looks. And I want more of it. But then, when it happens for real, I'll want nothing to do with it. It's never as warm as I expect it to be, or it tastes more bitter than I remember. And I'll wish I had it anywhere but in my mouth. I'll want to spit it out as fast as I can and dash to the bathroom and brush my teeth and gargle twice.

I laugh out loud at the thought of that, and the woman in the pool looks my way. I inhale the last of my cigarette and flick the butt into the night air. I watch it tumble end over end, giving off little orange sparks, until it lands silently in the swimming pool, not ten feet from the woman.

I tell Toby about a porno I watched once where about five or six guys each took a turn beating off into a wine glass. Or a champagne glass—I can't remember. They came in it until it was maybe a quarter full. I tell him that I realize this doesn't sound like much, but Toby assures me otherwise. I tell him about how the last guy to come had handed the glass to the woman they had all been fucking. I describe how the glass was all wet and streaked with come. He's like a kid listening to a campfire ghost story. I tell him about how the guy had given no instructions—he simply handed her the glass and then stepped back.

The men were all just standing there, watching and waiting. And this woman knew exactly what she was expected to do. And if she didn't genuinely want to, she did a fucking brilliant job of pretending she did. I tell Toby about how the woman had held up the glass to the light and swirled it around like she was some kind of semen connoisseur. I described for him what the combined ejaculate of half a dozen men looked like, pearlescent clouds spiraling around in translucent fluid. He cringes, but then I tell him about how, when I was watching it, I had felt this weird mixture of excitement and dread. I say the idea of what that woman was about to do repelled me, but at the same time thrilled me. Toby knew. I could tell.

I wanted so badly to see her do it, I tell Toby, but I wasn't sure if I had the stomach to watch. I still remember the look in her eyes as she did it. It was the kinkiest thing I had ever seen. The fucked-up part, I tell Toby—and then stop to light another cigarette—is that I was jealous. I wanted to be like that, I say. I wanted to be able to do what she had done. To be that dirty. To have that capacity. But not just to be that dirty, but to love being that dirty. But I knew this was impossible, because I knew she was acting. She hadn't loved it. She did it because it was in the fucking script. She did it because she got paid enough to. I light up another and let the smoke roll off my lips. And then I say, "But it didn't stop me from getting turned on by it."

I let it all sink in before asking Toby what the appeal is. I tell him I freely admit the appeal is there, but I just don't

know what it is. It's not as if it makes it feel better for you when we swallow, I add.

And then Toby speaks.

"You're missing the point," he says. "It's not about the physical. Swallowing, not just in sex but in general, has deep symbolic meaning." Holy shit, I'm thinking. Suddenly he's Sigmund fucking Freud. Suddenly he's a semen savant. He goes on. "The act of swallowing signals an acceptance, a blessing, even. Imagine spitting out champagne after a toast. Or spitting out the wafer after communion. The insult would be overwhelming. By swallowing, you indicate complete acceptance. You show that you wish to consume, to commune with what comes from your lover. In this case nothing less than the physical manifestation of his desire for you." I would giggle at the hyperbole, but I'm too astounded by Toby's newfound profundity.

"As you consume it," he continues with the fervor of a preacher, "it becomes part of you, he becomes part of you. You are joined together in an intimate, sacred bond like no other. Now, I'm not naive. I know that neither the fellator nor the fellatee derives any real physical pleasure from the act of swallowing come, but the psychological symbolism behind it is far more powerful than any physical stimulation."

All I can say is, "You've thought about this way too much."

"On the contrary, maybe you haven't thought about it enough. What message are you sending when you run to the nearest sink to spit out what you just made you lover give you? 'I'm comfortable enough with you to get down on my knees and wrap my lips around your cock, but I'm not

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comfortable enough to swallow the fruits of my labor.' How would you feel if I ran to the bathroom to wash my mouth out after going down on you?"

And, for the first time tonight, I'm speechless.

And then Toby points out the pool is empty.

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Selling Foxx

© I.M. Cupnjava

"You're new, so I'll give you some pointers." Mikki narrowed his eyes and scrutinized Matthew.

"Thanks," Matthew replied, wishing his voice sounded stronger. The longer Mikki looked at him, the more he wondered if he had something stuck in his teeth. He knew working as a host meant the customers were going to judge him, but he never expected to feel this inadequate before leaving the kitchen.

Mikki gave one final sniff and started walking. "Follow."

Surrounded by the hustle and bustle of a commercial kitchen, confusion engulfed Matthew. Industrial stoves heated the area to an almost unbearable level. Huge pans clanged around him. Stark light reflected off stainless steel, making him squint. Chefs and cooks barked orders at each other. Other hosts whizzed past him, at best avoiding him and other times oblivious to his presence until they attempted walking through him. All of it constantly pulled his attention from where Mikki led him. The mixture of sights, sounds, and smells overwhelmed him.

Mikki glanced at him again and curled his upper lip in slight distaste. "One, customers don't come here for the food. If you have a problem with homosexuality, get over it or quit." He pulled off Matthew's paper name tag. "Two, what's with this name?"

Matthew looked at his liberated name tag. "It's my name." Judging by Mikki's terse little huff, a name wasn't supposed to go on a name tag. He felt like a child being scolded for putting the milk away in the pantry.

Mikki opened a plain wooden door and flipped on the lights to the small office. "It sucks. What's your last name?"

"Fox."

"Spell it with two Xs and it might work." Mikki rummaged around on the desk. "We'll get you an engraved name tag once we know you won't quit." After slapping a new name tag on Foxx's white button-up shirt, Mikki pinched the hip seam of his black jeans. "Wear your pants tighter." He shuffled Foxx from the office and back into the busy kitchen.

"Unbutton one more button on your shirt."

Foxx looked down and unfastened a button, leaving his shirt open to just under his sternum. Well, excuse the fuck out of him! He didn't realize that one little button shifted the balance of the world. And these jeans were plenty tight. Foxx thought they cradled his ass in a very pleasing way.

Mikki walked past a pile of clean linens and grabbed a napkin. After twisting it and folding it in half, he handed it to Foxx. "Stuff this down the front of your pants. We sell fantasy here."

Foxx looked at the napkin in disbelief. "You can't be serious." This was bullshit! Padding stopped with pubic hair and voice changes.

"Your livelihood depends on extras and if customers take you *out*." Mikki shrugged. "I've been doing this for three years, and I've never needed to borrow money. Now, do it."

Fine! Foxx stuffed the napkin down the front of his jeans. He rolled his hips and tugged at his pants, trying to get comfortable.

Mikki shook his head. "You've never padded before, have you?" He thrust his hand down Foxx's pants. "Always—*a/ways*—carry condoms and lube with you."

Foxx yelped and squirmed as Mikki's cold hand pinched his flaccid cock inside the napkin. He breathed a sigh of relief when the invasion ended.

After fishing through his pockets, Mikki handed Foxx two small keychain tubes of lube and five condoms. "You probably won't need these tonight, but ... here."

"Thanks." Foxx put the *tools of the trade* in his front pocket. Who's to say he wouldn't need them tonight? Arrogant prick. Foxx was hot. He worked out. He was no Mr. Universe or anything, but he didn't want for sex. He could get laid tonight if he wanted to.

Mikki took a step back and studied Foxx's enhanced bulge. "Progress." He looked up at Foxx's face. "Tomorrow, wear a little eyeliner. Just enough to bring out your green eyes. Dye your hair. Redheads aren't that popular except with the fetish crowd."

Dye his hair? What the hell? He liked his shaggy red hair. Foxx smirked. "Should I get plastic surgery to serve drinks, too?"

"Surgery? Maybe later." Mikki stepped out of the way of a salad chef. "You're not serving drinks. You're serving yourself, although you do carry the drinks." He waited for the salad chef to walk around a cabinet. "Watch out for the chefs here."

They'll try to con you into doing some of their work. The only food handling you do is from that counter," he explained, pointing to a stainless steel holding counter, "to the customer." He pointed at the double swinging doors. "No cutting, no prepping, and, damn it, no cooking. Burns aren't sexy."

Foxx nodded and squirmed, still failing to acclimate to the addition in his pants. He felt like he had a wadded diaper wrapped around his dick. "This isn't comfortable."

"Get over it." Mikki stood with his back to the double doors. "You're taking over my shift and my section. My customers have the highest standards because I spoiled the hell out of them. You will be expected to learn their names and their favorite drinks. Drunk customers tip better, with one notable exception, and they tend to ask for more extras. Let them get drunk." Mikki pulled a small mirror from his back pocket and made a few touch-ups to his hair. "Now, hold your head up high—confidence equals sexy—and put a smile on your face."

Foxx smiled.

Mikki shook his head. "Why did they hire you?"

Foxx cupped Mikki's padded bulge. "Let's go back to that office, and I can show you." He ran the tip of his tongue along his upper lip.

"Oh, please. You're not a customer, and we're not in a booth."

"I mean it. Unzip your pants, and I'll be glad to show you my qualifications."

"You're going to starve to death." Mikki rolled his eyes.

Well, shit, that didn't have the dramatic flair it had in Foxx's head.

Mikki continued, "Now, about your smile. Not a 'welcome to the amusement park, take my picture while I scare your kids' smile. A 'you want to take me home and fuck me senseless, you know you do' smile."

Trying to salvage some of his pride, Foxx muttered, "You just missed out on the best blow job of your life." He adjusted his smile.

Mikki shook his head again. "Now you look like you want to hang out at a playground and offer candy to kids." He sighed in frustration and turned his mirror on Foxx. "If you can't do sexy confidence, do coy or flirt."

Looking at the mirror, Foxx tweaked his smile.

"Good." Mikki stuffed the mirror in his back pocket. "Make a note on how that feels. Ready?" Before Foxx could answer, Mikki stepped through the doors.

It took a few moments for Foxx's eyes to adjust from the brightness of the kitchen to the darkened hallway, and he laid eyes on "the wings" for the first time. Chandeliers and matching wall sconces softly lit the halls, casting everything in a warm, white hue. Tapestries lined the mahogany walls, and rugs, woven with subtle geometric patterns, lay on the floor. Side halls splintered off the main hall as Foxx and Mikki walked toward the lobby.

A large podium stood in the middle of the lobby and several couches, love seats, and chaise lounges furnished the room. Mikki stood next to the podium. "Since the decriminalization of prostitution, there've been a lot of these

establishments popping up. We appeal to the higher end of society. Our customers expect a certain level of quality. They can get an average Jack on the street for less than half our base price." Mikki explained the basic operations to Foxx.

Customers paid for a booth upon arrival. Paying for the booth only promised the customers food service and a place to sit. Any special services were extra. Most of the time, customers requested and paid for special services upon arrival. The lobby hosts, Mikki's soon-to-be position, directed the customers and kept the floor from being overcrowded. Customers could request specific booth hosts, and repeat business generated the best money. The best money—that's all Foxx needed to know.

Mikki pointed to a few colored squares on the podium. "These are theme rooms. We have one that looks like a Ferris wheel car. Several historical mock-ups and..." He slid his finger to a red highlighted room. "...even a dungeon." He put his hands on his hips and looked at Foxx. "This is very important: never hang out here waiting for a booth. It makes you look desperate. Also, if you have a *few* regulars leave you, then it hurts *your* wallet. If you have too many leave you, then you risk being fired." He smiled a condescending smile. Did this jerk expect Foxx to be fired? That's what it felt like. "You're taking over for me. They will leave you, and no one will bat an eye for the first few months. Try not to take it personally."

Oh, not get fired; just not be as good as Mikki. Whatever. The longer he bestowed his wisdom upon Foxx, the more Foxx wanted to see that smug little grin wiped right the fuck

off his face. Just once, it'd be nice to best the prick. Foxx nodded. His arrogant mentor wasn't all *that*. Mikki was attractive with his black hair and dark eyes, but Foxx didn't see what was so special about the cocky prick.

Mikki continued explaining. "The more exotic the request, the higher the price. You do have the right to say 'no' to a customer, but do that too often and they'll leave."

Four women came through the front door, and another lobby host tended to their requests. After marking an "X" on the podium map, the lobby host walked the women down the main hall.

Mikki waved at one of the ladies. As soon as she was out of sight, his smile dropped. "You'll occasionally see women here. If your vision of women is Mom with her home-baked cookies, let it go. The larger the group, the more depraved the women. They always request at least two booth hosts. However, they're charged a base fee for three hosts. We call that the *Tit Tax*." He rolled his eyes. "I don't know about you, but I work with the other guys here, and I have no desire to know what their dicks taste like." He snickered. "After your little offer earlier, I'm sure you're an exception." He pointed at his section on the podium. "This is going to be your primary section."

Foxx followed Mikki down the maze of hallways to Foxx's soon-to-be primary section.

Mikki stopped by a door and pointed at a dark panel by the handle. "This is where you scan your tag." He pulled a small square object about the size of a folded cell phone out of his pocket. He waved it in front of the door panel, and the

handheld device beeped. An LED readout lit up on the tag.
"This is John Smith, fake name obviously."

Foxx looked at the readout from over Mikki's shoulder.

"This tells you just about everything you need to know, but always expect surprises once you get in there." Mikki pointed at a series of letters below Mr. Smith's name. "This is the code for what he's ordered. 'C' is for conversation. That's almost always up here. 'BJ-R'. 'BJ'—I'm sure you can figure that out. 'R' means receive. He wants you to go down on him. 'C-BJ' always turns out to be more 'BJ' than 'C.'" Mikki opened the door to the darkened booth.

Foxx knitted his brow. "No one's here."

"Because you're in training." Mikki rolled his eyes and hit the dimmer switch on the wall to turn on the lights.

The booth, technically a private room, was little more than a round table surrounded by sectional seating. A small break between two seats granted access. "Is this what the typical booths look like?"

"Yes." Mikki tweaked the lights. "Dimmer switch—self-explanatory. If a tag just lists conversation, don't count on that being the only thing happening. Many times customers don't feel comfortable telling the lobby hosts what they want. You'll learn your regulars and their needs." He pointed to a button panel beside the dimmer switch. "You hit the green button when you get in here. The green button starts an hour timer. If you're just talking, you leave when the hour is up and tend to your other guests. You'll rotate back in here. If you start doing something that shouldn't be interrupted, you hit the yellow button and that stops the timer. Don't worry

about going yellow when you have other guests. Lobby hosts will pick up the slack. 'Cs' bring in the least amount of base money, but drunk 'Cs' give great tips." He shrugged. "Some customers seem to think it's necessary to *date* the booth hosts before asking for anything sexual. 'Cs' always become something else on another day. Be good to them." He pointed to a red button. "When the timer is up, you press this when you leave. When all activities are done and the customer is leaving, you press this twice. That sends a signal to the lobby hosts and lets us know we need to send in the busboys."

Foxx pointed to a large blue button on the panel. "What's that for?"

"Emergency." Mikki looked at Foxx. "Sometimes customers get violent or try to drug you." He shrugged. "I don't know why. They're paying for it, and we give it up. If a 'C' doesn't let you leave after the hour time, then you hit that and bouncers come in. If someone is attacking you—and you better know the difference between 'attack' and BDSM—then you hit that."

Mikki hit the red button twice and stepped out of the booth. "One very important rule."

Foxx closed the door. "That is?"

"No drugs. You piss hot once, and you're out of here. You get caught using in a booth, you're fired *and* arrested. Hit blue if the customer brings out anything contraband." Mikki smiled at Foxx. "A few years here, and you can be set for life. The money is damn good, and it's all clean. Got it?"

Foxx nodded. "I don't use."

"Keep it that way." Mikki stopped by another door. "We'll start you off easy. Kind of. This guy tends to break most of the norms. He's been a 'C' for as long as I've been here, and I took him from another guy. Always been a 'C' and always will be. His order never changes—coffee, sweet and light. The guy probably could have bought a coffee company with the money he's dumped here." He slowly shook his head. "All that money *just* to sit with someone. He must be damn lonely." He softly chuckled. "You'll end up doing more sitting in silence than chatting. He tips damn well, so it's worth it. Better than some of the drunk 'Cs.'"

Foxx nodded and felt relieved. A 'C' for his first customer—this he could handle. His heart raced, and sweat rolled down his spine. This customer might be easy, but what about the next one? Could he do this job? He had the looks, but did he have the mettle? No one started his life wanting to be a man-whore.

"Customers will often offer you something to drink, and he's no exception. It's up to you if you accept or not. Never get drunk, though. Act drunk if the customer wants it, but you better be able to handle yourself once you close that booth."

Foxx pulled his tag out of his pocket and looked at Mikki. Mikki nodded.

With a shaking hand, Foxx waved his tag in front of the panel. The device beeped, and the readout lit up: "Mr. Brice Camden" with the code "C."

Mikki put his rehearsed smile on his face and opened the door. "Mr. Camden, how are you?"

Foxx stepped through the door. Mr. Camden, a slender brunette, wore a steel blue button-up microfiber shirt. His pants were hidden by the round table. Wavy hair spilled around his face. Thin, dark-framed glasses circled his blue eyes.

Once Foxx noticed his eyes, he realized they dominated the man's features. The color wasn't all that unique of a blue, but their shape stood out—sharp and crisp as if they'd been sculpted with a razor, with thick, rich lashes outlining them and making them pop. He was the kind of man who would have made Foxx's dick stand up and take notice if Foxx didn't have the Napkin of Erection Death twisted in his pants. Papers covered the table. A tan, soft-sided bag-briefcase hybrid sat on the seat next to Mr. Camden.

Mr. Camden looked up. The light reflected off his lenses, briefly masking those captivating eyes. "Mikki, how many times have I told you to call me Brice?"

Mikki sat down next to Brice and draped an arm over the customer's shoulders. "Yes, yes, Brice."

Brice looked at Foxx. "Is this fine gentleman your replacement?"

"He's Foxx," Mikki nodded. "I hope he'll take good care of you." He lightly chuckled. "He's not me, but I think he'll do fine."

Brice slowly eyed Foxx, but addressed Mikki. "It will break my heart to lose you, but the promotion is good for you."

Foxx bit his lips closed. That didn't sound fully sincere.

Mikki lightly kissed Brice's cheek before sliding out of the booth. "Try not to miss me too much."

After Mikki closed the door, Foxx sat down. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Camden."

"Call me Brice, please." Brice looked up at the door. "Aren't you supposed to hit a button?"

Embarrassment colored Foxx's cheeks. With his first customer and already on the road to Mistakedom. "Thank you for reminding me." After leaning over and pressing the green button, he noticed something missing on the table. "You don't have your coffee yet."

"Just bring it with you when you return the next hour." Foxx nodded.

Brice flashed a smile. "I see Mikki hasn't made you dye your hair yet."

"Sorry about—"

"I like redheads. Please, don't dye it."

Foxx smiled. "For you, Brice, I'll keep it red." Hot damn! Someone else who appreciated the beauty of redheads.

Brice sighed. "And take out whatever Mikki put down your pants. That can't be comfortable."

Foxx's stomach flipped. "All right." Nervously chuckling, he fished the napkin from his jeans and put it on the seat beside him.

"Is Foxx your real name, or did Mikki tamper with that, too?"

"One X," Foxx sighed in resignation. Did Mikki intentionally sabotage this first meeting, or was the guy just an idiot?

"Is that your first name?"

Foxx shook his head. "No, Matthew is my first name."

"May I call you Matt?"

Matt nodded. That would be his third or fourth name today. At least this one was a natural nickname for his real name.

"Nice to meet you, Matt."

"Nice to meet you, too, Brice."

Silence settled in the booth when Brice turned his attention toward the paperwork. Every time Brice blinked, his eyelashes brushed his lenses. Matt fidgeted and wondered if he should be doing something. Brice paid for an hour of "C" and they spoke for maybe five minutes. Matt felt like he was cheating the man.

Brice picked up a pen, flipped through several sheets of paper, and pulled out a line drawing of a pair of pants. Huge buckles ran down the sides of the pants and medium-sized keyhole cutouts spotted the legs. Brice set that picture to the side and fished out another picture—a drawing of a mesh T-shirt with a small decorative buckle near the left hip.

Matt picked up the drawing of the pants.

Brice hiked an eyebrow.

The hair stood on the back of Matt's neck. Mikki didn't say anything about touching or not touching Brice's papers. With Brice's eyes on him, he put the paper down. "Sorry." He tucked his hands under the table to hide his shaking fingers. Mistakedom—next exit on the Interstate of life.

"That's fine. Just surprising."

Maybe it wasn't such an egregious mistake. Matt lifted one of his hands and tentatively tapped the picture of the pants. "I was wondering who would wear that." Those pants tried way too hard to be trendy.

Brice put his elbow on the table and cradled his chin in his palm. "What makes you ask?"

"The buckles are so big they'd get caught on nearly everything, and they'd rattle." What if this was Brice's work? He'd be insulting the customer. Great. The bypass to Fired Town was coming up on the left. He shrugged and attempted to backpedal. "I'd find that irritating, but someone else might find it appealing."

Brice nodded. "What about the cutouts?"

"Well..." Technically this was conversation, right? Maybe that's why Brice had these pictures: a conversation piece. Who would pay for an hour of conversation and not have anything to talk about? "For club wear, they're fine as is, but I don't see anyone wearing these to go to the mall or dinner."

"You have a point." Brice picked up the picture and a red wax pencil. He wrote a big "CW" on the picture before setting it aside. "What about this one?" He pointed at the mesh T-shirt.

"How tight is the weave? Are we talking football jersey, or like a screen where you see more of a hint of color than skin?" He could do this. He could talk fashion. All right, Brice, you're getting your "C."

"Black. Tight and light weave. Silk."

Matt nodded. "For this, you'll want some stretch to it. This kind of thing is only sexy when it's tight. Silk doesn't allow for much movement."

"What about the style?"

"I like it." He smiled and looked up at Brice. "I'd wear this to a club or even a private party. The buckle adds a little

something to it, but isn't too big to be gaudy." He chuckled softly. "I'd probably prefer to talk to the guy wearing it than be the one wearing it."

Brice shifted in his seat and leaned a bit closer to Matt. "Why is that?"

Good body language. Hell, yeah! He *owned* this job. "So I could look at his nipples," Matt confessed. Feeling more flirtatious than informative, he leaned toward Brice.

Brice twisted and rummaged around in his bag. "Take off your shirt."

Matt's stomach flipped, and he started unbuttoning his shirt. "Yes, sir." Should he hit the yellow button? How much time remained on his hour?

Brice held up a large piece of cloth. "Don't call me 'sir'. Call me Brice..." His voice trailed off, and Matt watched Brice's gaze explore him. This wasn't the visual measurement that Mikki did. Those blue eyes looked hungry. "On second thought, call me 'sir' for the day."

Matt nodded and hit the yellow button. "Yes, sir." Good-bye, Mistakedom! Farewell, Fired Town!

* * * *

The senior lobby host did a double take when he looked at the podium. "Mr. Camden just went yellow."

Mikki shouldered the lobby host out of the way. "What?" Jealously put a bitter taste in his mouth. "Whatever. I don't care."

The senior lobby host smirked. "He never went yellow for you."

"Your implication is insulting." Mikki shrugged and ripped his gaze from the podium. "Foxx probably hit a wrong button." He stepped away from the podium, but a hand on his elbow stopped him. He turned and looked at the senior lobby host.

"No one interrupts a yellow."

* * * *

Brice held the mesh fabric against Matt's chest. He narrowed his eyes, looking at Matt's nipples. "You *can* see them if it fits tight enough."

Matt looked down his chest. "Yes, sir." Maybe he should play up the fantasy scenario a bit. "I was also thinking that this party would be at night and in the fall."

Brice fanned his fingers against Matt's chest and gently squeezed. His voice was soft and distant. "Your build is good for this material." He blinked a few times and looked into Matt's eyes. "Why is the party in the fall?"

"So that the crispness of the air would make my lover's nipples hard," he rushed to add, "sir."

Brice slowly nodded. "I see. It's sexier that way." He used his index finger and thumb to hold the fabric taut over one of Matt's nipples and scratched his free index finger over the nipple, bringing the pink nub to a firm point.

By the time Matt's other nipple was hard, he was squirming in his seat. "Yes, like that, sir." His voice went breathy. Heat from his nipples traveled through his body and arousal pooled between his legs.

Brice looked over his glasses at Matt. "You like that?"

Matt whimpered and nodded his head. Many men didn't enjoy nipple play, but some did and Matt was one of them.

"How much do you like this, Matt?" Brice started rolling and pinching Matt's nipples through the thin fabric.

Matt melted into the seat and moaned. The harder Brice pinched, the more Matt mewled and squirmed.

"Answer me, Matt." Brice clamped his fingers down around Matt's cloth-covered nipples, slowly pulling until the pink points popped from his fingers.

Two quick, sharp jolts of delicious pain shot into Matt's chest, forcing him to gasp. He'd be glad to answer if he could have control over his voice. Panting, he looked at his customer through half-lidded eyes. "I like it a lot, sir."

"How hard?" Brice ran the pads of his thumbs over Matt's nipples.

"As hard as you want to make it, sir." That was the truth. Matt had yet to be pinched, bitten, or clamped too hard.

"Well, then..." Brice released the fabric and curled his fingers around Matt's wrists. "Put your shoulders back and sit like you want me to play with them." He put Matt's wrists on the top of the circular seating.

"Yes, sir." Matt straightened his back and puffed out his chest.

Brice rubbed the fabric over Matt's chest. Matt looked down his body and watched Brice's hands explore him. His customer's fingers traced the muscular contours. The fabric, smooth and warmed by his body temperature, slipped over his skin. He heard Brice's breath quicken and looked up. A

blush of arousal washed across Brice's cheeks. Talking about fashion had been a wise move.

Brice tucked the fabric between Matt's arms and the seating. "Look at my eyes, Matt." His fingertips traced Matt's nipples.

Two types of pleasure—fluttering softness and penetrating sharpness—mingled in Matt as Brice teased his nipples. He rocked his hips, trying to relieve some of the pressure in his cock. It was all he could do to keep his chest presented and his eyes locked with his customer's blue ones.

"Eye contact is very important." Brice continued teasing Matt. "Those green eyes of yours will tell me what your mouth doesn't." The pressure around Matt's nipples spiked, forcing him to whimper. "Ah yes, there's that look. The look that says you've had enough." He released Matt's nipples, trailed his hands down Matt's stomach, and massaged Matt's thighs. "Thank me, Matt."

"Thank you, sir." Matt's cock twitched inside his jeans. If Brice didn't want to go all the way, Matt would need a moment alone before meeting his next customer.

Brice lifted the bottom of the mesh, folded it at the middle, and held the fold against Matt's lips. "Hold this for me."

Matt bit down on the fabric, keeping his bare chest exposed while Brice twisted around and dug through his bag again. With a piece of burlap folded in his hands, Brice turned and brushed his lips against Matt's dark pink nipples. "They must be real sensitive now."

Brice's warm breath washed across his skin, and Matt mewed. He spoke around the mesh. "Yes, sir."

Brice flicked the tip of his tongue over one of his nipples. Matt hissed a breath through his teeth and closed his eyes. Brice bounced between Matt's nipples, seemingly not wanting to leave either one feeling neglected. Kisses, licks, and soft swipes from Brice's tongue made Matt crave more. He rolled his hips, praying the seam of his jeans would offer some kind of relief. The damn jeans denied him. Stupid fabric.

Brice brushed the tip of his nose against Matt's. "Open your eyes and look at me, Matt."

Matt tried, but he could only get his eyes to cooperate halfway. Brice removed his glasses, carefully folded them, and put them on the far end of the table. He shook his hair back over his shoulders and cut Matt with a gaze. Those eyes—beautiful behind glass and breathtaking naked. They called to Matt and devoured him. They were a deep rich blue—warm and inviting, yet teetering on intimidating.

Brice draped the burlap over his hands and touched his cloth-covered middle fingers against Matt's nipples. He started rubbing in small, firm circles.

Matt gripped the seat cushions. His shoulders jerked from the seating, trying to protect his sensitive skin from the bite of burlap. The texture grew rougher and warmer with each little rub. Friction and pleasure twisted inside Matt, making him whimper and vainly grind his hips. The seam in his jeans still betrayed him.

Brice whispered, "Don't give me that look yet. Take it, Matt. Expand your boundaries."

A bead of sweat rolled down Matt's temple and his skin flushed. Air rushed in and out of his lungs, making his head

spin and his moans short. Prickles of heat punctuated Brice's touch. Each circle further fueled his need.

"Just a little longer, Matt. You can take it."

Matt's erection strained in his pants almost to the point of causing pain. The heat around his nipples made him wonder if he was getting a friction burn. "Please, sir," he pleaded, but he wasn't sure what he was asking of his customer. Equally torn between wanting to stop and wanting more, he moaned. His eyes fluttered back.

"Look at me, Matt." Matt did his best to focus on the possessing eyes before him. Brice shook his head. "You just bought yourself five more minutes. Keep your eyes on me."

Matt groaned in frustration and resignation. Heat throbbed between his legs, and he could barely keep his ass on the seat. An ache took residence in his cock, and sharp darts of pain punctuated the rough attention to his nipples. "I..." His voice hid under a moan. "I..." he cried.

"You what, Matt?"

"I..." His voice cracked, and his hips jerked from the seat. "I can't take five more minutes."

Brice smirked. "I don't care." He leaned in and pressed their cheeks together. Brice's eyelashes fluttered against Matt's skin. Brice's voice dropped and firmed. "You're going to take it, even if you come in your pants. Got that?"

Matt hissed, "Yes, sir."

Come in his pants from nipple play? He wished he could do that. That would be a most enjoyable experience, but as it was, he was stuck with desire burning in his blood, an aching hard dick, and traitorous fucking pants!

Brice continued his attentions, seemingly relishing in Matt's squirms and moans. Matt's nipples turned from dark pink to red, growing darker with each rotation of the burlap. By the time Brice withdrew his touch, Matt was wholeheartedly moaning and had dropped the mesh from between his teeth.

"Thank me, Matt."

"Tha..." Matt's head spun and he couldn't capture his breath. First his pants and now his voice? Could he keep control over anything?

Brice brushed the tops of his fingernails against Matt's cheek. "Shh, take your time."

Matt closed his eyes and turned toward Brice's touch. He felt his fever drop and his breath calm. He kissed the inside of his customer's wrist and whispered, "Thank you, sir."

Brice ticked his gaze toward Matt's bulge. Out of curiosity, Matt looked down and saw the outline of his cock in the denim. It throbbed, refreshing the ache between Matt's legs.

Brice whispered, "You didn't..." He sounded a bit disappointed, though more toward himself than Matt, and moved the burlap toward Matt's chest.

Matt grabbed Brice's wrists. "Please, no." The mesh completely fell into his lap. Toward the end, the burlap started to get painful, and Matt was confident he couldn't take anymore and still find it pleasurable. How the hell was he going to finish his shift this sensitive?

Brice hiked an eyebrow and softened his voice. "No, really?"

"No, really."

Brice smiled. "Then 'no' it is." He freed a hand and started opening Matt's jeans. "I can't very well leave you like this."

Matt shifted his hips and helped work his pants off. He put them on the seat near his shirt. Finally! He was going to get some relief from the ache between his legs.

Brice's hand hovered over Matt's cock. Precum glistened in the slit. "You're already weeping."

Matt smiled. "You're that good, sir."

Brice shifted the burlap over his hand.

Oh, holy hell! His eyes grew wide when the burlap closed around his cock. The scratchy material made him wince. Having the burlap rubbing his nipples was one thing, this was too much.

Brice gently stroked. "Feel that, Matt?" He slipped one hand behind him and blindly felt for his bag.

Matt nodded and wished he couldn't. He sputtered, "It hurts, sir."

"Oh, it does?"

Tiny pinches traveled along Matt's cock. "Yes, sir." He tried to fight it, but the material made him jump and twitch.

"Does it hurt a lot?"

Matt nodded. "Enough to endanger my..." He glanced down.

"Oh, not the way I'd hoped to help it go down." Brice replied with a bit of mock sympathy. "Pity that you have to experience such a thing in order to truly enjoy this." He whipped a piece of satin from behind his back and quickly replaced the burlap.

Matt's mouth flew open and his head tilted back. The coolness of the fabric sent shivers down his spine and the smoothness made him melt in his skin. The contrast between the burlap and satin clashed in his mind. He started thrusting his hips, meeting Brice's strokes.

Brice brushed his lips against Matt's earlobe. "Is that good?"

Matt moaned in agreement.

"Then thank me."

Matt squeezed his eyes closed and felt his shoulders relax into the seat. "Thank you, sir."

"May I go further, Matt?" Brice offered Matt's cock one more long squeeze before stopping the strokes.

Matt's voice cracked when the pleasure stopped. He regained his bearings and nodded. "If you don't, I'll be forced to do it alone."

"We can't have you do it alone." Brice smiled and draped the burlap and mesh over the papers on the table. "Do you prefer to top or bottom, Matt?"

"I'm versatile, sir."

"That's lovely." Mischievously grinning, Brice patted the cloth-covered table. "On your back, please."

Before shifting onto the table, Matt pulled a condom and a tube of lube from his pants.

"I recognize this brand." Brice turned the condom over in his hand. "Mikki must have given you these."

Matt settled on the table. "Yes, sir." The burlap pressed against his back and his hips slid against the mesh. How did

Brice know Mikki's condoms? "I thought Mikki said you were conversation and coffee only."

"For him, I was." Brice smiled. "I don't respond well to someone tossing a condom on a table and asking me if I want to fuck."

"You've got to be kidding me." Matt chuckled.

Brice sighed and shifted so he could kneel between Matt's knees. "I suspect my coffee love affair made him jealous." He dropped his pants and unrolled the condom down his cock.

"I'll assume this isn't your first time."

"Do you want it to be?"

"I want the truth."

"No, it's not." Matt smirked. "Like I said: I'm versatile."

"Has it been a while?"

"Not long enough to need a whole lot of prep."

Brice grinned. Apparently, that's what he wanted to know. He coated his cock with lube and dropped the satin over Matt's hips. He hooked one arm under one of Matt's knees and used his other hand to guide his cock to Matt's ass.

"Ready?"

"Yes, sir."

Brice shifted his hips.

Matt squeezed his eyes closed and pushed his head against the burlap-covered papers. His body seemed to resist Brice's touch for a moment. Matt focused on relaxing and urging his body to accept what his mind craved. Finally, his body yielded to Brice's cock, and Matt cried out. The stretch of penetration reverberated through his hips.

Brice knitted his brow and moaned. "I should have prepped you."

"I'm fine." Matt's muscles twitched around Brice, simultaneously trying to adjust and coax him deeper. "Damn, you feel good." Hooking his free hand under Matt's leg and placing the soles of Matt's feet against his chest, Brice leaned forward a bit and wrapped the satin over Matt's shins. Matt fisted the mesh by his hips. Brice rubbed the satin over Matt's shins and feet in time with the movement of his hips.

Brice's strokes looked shallow, but in this position, Matt's muscles gripped his cock, making each stroke feel incredibly deep. The tightness also forced Brice's entire length against Matt's prostate. Pleasure rippled inside him. He wanted to buck against Brice and take his customer deeper, but he couldn't find the leverage.

Brice slipped a hand between them and pressed two fingers against Matt's satin-covered arousal. He couldn't reach enough of Matt's cock to give it a full fist stroke, but he rubbed what he could touch. "Maybe I can feel better."

The additional sensation against his dick sent Matt into a frenzy of moans. His head whipped from side to side. He couldn't move. He couldn't buck back. He couldn't twist or anything. Damn it! He wanted his back off the scratchy burlap, but all he could do was lie there and take it. The burlap poked at his back and made the smoothness of the mesh under his hips and the satin over his cock and shins all the more pleasurable. Somewhere in the mixture of primal noises that flew from him, he felt his orgasm start to build.

Brice had fallen into a comfortable rhythm. It almost felt arrogant. Almost as if Brice took joy in making Matt lose his damn mind while keeping himself collected.

Every time Matt took a breath or tried to move, he could feel his body milk Brice's cock. His toes tightened against Brice's chest, and his thighs started to shake. Pulses of increasing pressure gripped his cock with every stroke. His jaw clenched and tendons strained in his neck. Matt yelled when the pressure finally burst, and pleasure ricocheted around inside him as he came.

Below Brice, Matt danced a most delicious erotic dance. Brice moaned with every clench, quiver, and twitch from Matt's body. With a strained groan, Brice slumped forward and released himself.

Matt's legs dropped to either side of Brice's body and cream-colored satin spilled between the two men.

Brice twitched and panted against Matt's chest. He kissed his way up Matt's body and brushed his lips. Closing his eyes, Brice tenderly kissed Matt.

Sighing into the kiss, Matt felt his body go limp. His lips, tingling and numb, muted the kiss, but the tongue flicking around his wouldn't let that stop anything. His arms flopped to the table and he no longer cared about the burlap against his back.

* * * *

Mikki stared at the podium. The light for Mr. Camden's room finally went red, blinked for a bit, and then went out.

"About damn time!" They'd been in there for hours! It doesn't take that long to drink coffee. Shit.

Fully dressed, Mr. Camden made his way down the hallway to the lobby. He smiled at Mikki. "I'm taking him out."

Mikki felt the blood leave his face. "What?" He *knew* he didn't just hear that.

Mr. Camden repeated himself. "Matt, I mean, Foxx. I'm taking him out."

Mikki shook his head. "No, this is his first day. He's—"

Mr. Camden hushed Mikki with a wave of his hand. "I don't care. I'm taking him out."

The senior lobby host nodded and glared at Mikki before smiling at Mr. Camden. "I assume you know the cost."

"Yes, I do." Mr. Camden reached for his wallet. "One and a half million, right?"

The other lobby host nodded and accepted Mr. Camden's credit card. "And you know this isn't slavery. Once you pay his out, we cannot guarantee that he'll stay with you."

Brice smiled. "I think he'll stay, but it is his choice."

Mikki dashed down the hallway. Bullshit! Pure, unadulterated bullshit!

* * * *

The booth door opened and Foxx weakly waved at Mikki. He tried to figure out how to work the buttons on his shirt. He knew the little plastic thingies went through the hole, but they didn't want to behave.

"What the hell, Foxx!"

Foxx smirked. "He likes fabric." He gave up on the obstinate buttons and leaned on the table. "Did you ever ask him about his work?"

Mikki shook his head. "Fabric? Work? No, is he a fashion designer or something?"

Foxx laughed. "That's what I thought, too." He brushed the suggestion aside with his hand. "No. That's the best part. He's a patent engineer with a fabric fetish!"

Mikki crossed his arms over his chest. "Get dressed. You're getting an out."

"An out?" Foxx raised his eyebrows. "No, kidding? Brice is getting me an out?" Was Mikki pouting? Aww, look at that bottom lip—Mikki wasn't even cute when he pouted. Did the hair dye, eyeliner, padded bulge, and whatever else Mikki did for fantasy never earn him an out? Foxx found it difficult to feel sorry for the man who was probably no longer real with himself. Sincerity covered a lot of mileage on the road of life.

"Yes." Mikki nodded his head. "You don't have to stay with him. It's your choice. But once you have an out, you can't work here again."

"Don't have to stay with him? Are you crazy?" Foxx ripped off his name tag and slapped it on the table. The man known as Foxx was once again named Matthew. He scrambled over the table and barreled past Mikki. While he ran down the hallway, he screamed for Brice, meeting up with him in the lobby.

Brice smiled at Matt and extended his hand.

Matt took Brice's hand. "One thing: call me Matthew, please."

Coming Together With Pride
by Alessia Brio, J Buchanan, Lisabet Sarai

"Matthew it is."

Not only had Matthew Fox just become a millionaire, but he also picked up a great lover and reclaimed his name. Losing his job never felt so good.

* * * *

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Western Pleasure

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I'd been looking, not looking, for Gina all morning. Thought I caught the shimmer of her blonde braid near the fence line while I was trying to guide Sage up to the mailbox in the trail class. But Sage was tossing his head and snorting at the mailbox like he'd never seen one before. By the time I got his fat ass close enough that I could reach in and grab the paper out of the box, the plait of hair was gone.

By 4:30, when the fun classes were about to start, I still hadn't seen Gina. I was worried that maybe she hadn't come this year. Ten years straight we'd been meeting at this show. Never missed a one. I wondered if I should call her to make sure she was okay. Realized I didn't even have her home number.

Sage was rolling the bit in his mouth by that time, and I could tell from the way his hip jutted into my thigh that he had that back foot cocked. Either my low energy was getting to him, or he was tuckered out. I leaned over his sweaty neck, ran my fingers under his short grey mane.

"That's alright, boy," I said. "We'll skip sit-a-buck and call it a night."

I felt the horse next to me before I saw it: a shadow, a huff of air, Sage's neck cresting beneath my cheek. Gina's voice sang across to my closed eyelids.

"Why? You afraid Darlin' and I might kick your ass back to Montana?"

I slid up from Sage's neck. My heart thundered at the sight of Gina, blonde hair in double-braids, sky blue eyes, lips like a red apple split in two.

"Where in the hell have you been?" I asked.

I could barely keep from leaning over and taking her into my arms. Last time I'd seen her, she'd been naked, ass up, in my trailer, my hand making marks against that pale, pale skin, branding her until she'd cried just a little. Thinking about it made my stomach drop between my legs.

Gina put her big teeth over her bottom lip. She shook her head.

"Don't ask," she said. "We've had one of those summers."

She pointed down at Darlin's head, like the horse was a two-year-old who'd been throwing temper tantrums all day. Gina looked down at the reins in her hand and fiddled with the leather. "I think this is my last time here," she said. "It's a long way to come for a small show."

I didn't know what to say to that. We'd been meeting at this show for nearly a decade, laying our bodies down together. It didn't matter what was happening at home, who was dating who, or what else was going on in our lives.

Gina bobbed her head toward the ring and broke those red lips into a smile. "So, we doing this, or what?" she said.

"Hell, yeah," I said. I didn't want to think about her not coming back next year.

Darlin' pranced a little beneath Gina, ready to move on. "Good," Gina said. "Then prepare to get your ass kicked, sister."

I wrinkled my nose at Gina and settled my butt a little lower into Sage's bare back. "I doubt that," I said.

For the sit-a-buck class, you ride bareback. Just a fiver tucked between your thigh and your horse. And this particular sit-a-buck class always drew a crowd—it was a jackpot class, meaning if you could keep that bill under your leg, you got to keep the pot. And with the five dollar bills being a solid raise from the normal buck-a-pony, it was usually the fullest class of the show.

I had no worries, even with all that extra competition. Sage was steady as a tabletop, and about as wide—bills stuck to his back like a magnet. Darlin', on the other hand, was a dumb-as-they-come mare who had a reputation for being skittish around anything that shook, rattled, or wiggled faster than a fence post. Damn beautiful animal. Her coat was so shiny red in the sun that she looked more Corvette than horse. She had that fine Arab head, too, soft-as-satin muzzle and those big black eyes with eyelashes most women'd kill for.

But beauty's nothing if you don't have the brains to go with it. Last year, Darlin' tried to take Gina's leg off on a cloverleaf barrel after one of the judges snapped her gum on the sidelines. Gina's knee got all bloodied up from the lip of the barrel. I could have killed that damn horse.

But Gina was loyal if nothing else, and she believed in the good in things, including skittish horses, growling dogs, and hard-assed women.

"You're the one going down," I said.

The truth is, we didn't care who won. We weren't really there for the show. We were there for each other. Not that we'd ever admit it.

Gina gave a grin, that wide smile I'd fallen in love with the first time I saw her.

Darlin' spooked at something and tried to crabwalk into the horse in front of her. Watching Gina's ass in jeans work against Darlin's bare back was killing me. I couldn't tell if it was Sage's wetness seeping into my jeans or the other way around.

I let Sage's reins drop. Showing off his temperament. The way he'd stand still for hours just because I asked him to. "What's the matter?" I asked. "Get spooked by her own leg again?"

Gina twisted her lips sideways. She gave Darlin' a little pat on her prancing shoulder. "Won't say she's the first woman who's gotten spooked by her own leg," she said, looking right at me.

I gave Sage a soft kick, to get him in position. I didn't have anything to say to that.

I leaned over and tucked my five under my thigh. When Gina and I first started riding this class, it was only a buck, like most of them. If you won, and you were lucky, you might bring home a whopping ten dollars. The first year, Gina won, and she bought a bottle of Boone's and some crackers. She had me naked before we'd even opened the crackers.

The first time she took my nipple between her big teeth and twisted, I could feel the shock waves all through my body. Just that mouth on my nipple. She didn't have to touch

me anywhere else. She made me beg and beg until, finally, I had to bring my own hand down when I couldn't stand not being touched anymore. She'd sat back and watched the whole thing. It was the first time I'd ever done that with someone else's eyes on me.

I've won the sit-a-buck pretty much every year since and still buy that bottle of Boone's. Although we never open it now. We always leave it in the barn for some groom to help himself to after we're gone.

This year, the stakes were higher. Five bucks a pop meant seventy-five bucks for ten minutes worth of riding. That was something worth working for. You could buy a girl dinner with that. Or a shitty hotel room.

"Alright boy, here we go," I whispered. Sage turned one ear backward, game for anything.

I watched as Gina slid a bill beneath her jeaned thigh. I could practically feel the heat coming off of her and Darlin'. I could, if I squinted a little, imagine that I was that piece of paper going under Gina's leg.

Gina saw me watching, and she winked. Then she dropped her hand into her crotch and cupped it there, like it was just an innocent movement. Like she was reaching to touch Darlin's back. No one would even think twice about that. No one but me. All I could think of was her in the back of my pickup a few years ago, back arched, fingers digging into her lips, legs wider and wider. The shine of her pale skin under the stars ... Me just watching ... Unable to move until she finally, finally said my name, pulled me to her, with her fingers sticky and wet on my skin.

Sage lurched under me, and I realized we'd started. I squeezed my legs against his sides and kept my eye on the back of Gina's braid.

"Trot!" yelled the judge, and the circle stepped up. Sage had more of a rock than a trot, and I focused on just moving my body with his, hips forward and back, forward and back. It could have been Gina below me, me on top, one hand inside her, taking her backward and forward, rocking.

A few horses ahead of me, a bill fluttered through the air, and a man astride a dappled gelding moved to the inside. The rest of us kept going. Round and round. Canter. A hard gallop. Back to walk. Trot. Fivers fluttered down every couple of turns around the ring. The group of riders in the middle of the ring grew. Maybe thirty or forty bucks were on the ground now.

Ahead of me, Darlin's footsteps quickened. "Shit," Gina said as the bill fluttered from beneath her thigh. I watched the paper fall. Gina gave me a smile, no teeth, and ducked her head. The judge motioned for her to ride Darlin' into the middle. She headed that way, and then, quickly turned Darlin's head toward the gate instead. I watch as Gina talked to the man at the gate, her hands waving in the air. He shook his head. Leaving in the middle of a class wasn't allowed; I knew if she went through the gate, she could forfeit her right to compete in the future.

Sage and I went around the ring again. I held my breath, tightened my legs around Sage so hard that he tried to speed up beneath me. Then Gina slid off Darlin's back and opened the gate herself. She led Darlin' through, not looking back.

In front of us, another bill fluttered. Another horse went to the inside, but I barely noticed. I was watching Gina's back, so tiny next to Darlin's hind-end, walking away. I'd seen her walk away so many times—at the end of each show. I'd never stopped her. And now maybe she was going for good.

The judge had us slow to a walk. My heart kept moving. I could barely feel Sage beneath me for all the thumping up in my throat. I lifted my thigh just a little. The fiver under it stuck for a moment. Sweaty.

I gave it a shove with my finger until it fell onto the ground. The judge gave me a curt nod. I felt the others waiting for me in the middle. Instead, I followed Gina's vanished back as if by radar, through the still-open gate and down toward the place I had last seen her.

Gina was cooling off Darlin' behind the barn by the time I found her.

"You all right?" I asked.

"I will be," she said.

Gina gave me that damned smile again, those little dimples on each side, her teeth sticking out just a bit. I always got the insane urge to lick them.

"That was about the fastest win I've ever seen," she said.

I slid off Sage's back. Started walking him out beside her, as close as I could get to her without Darlin' freaking. My nipples were tight beneath my shirt, moving toward her, already begging for her touch.

"There are still half a dozen idiots back there, duking it out over a fistful of paper," I said. "I couldn't wait. Didn't want to wait."

Suddenly, getting it out there, putting the words in the air for her to respond to or not, I felt better—my heart pounding but no longer galloping in panic.

Gina reached over and took my hand without saying anything. We walked the horses silently for a while to cool them off, the horses' breath slowing, swish of their tails against their thighs, crunch of hooves through the grass.

Wherever I am, those sounds remind me of Gina; the way her nipples bloom into soft, sweet buds when you touch them, the way she tosses her head back when she's about to come, the way she was so damn far away from me that I couldn't remember her taste on my tongue.

We stalled the horses then stood in the sunshine for a minute. I guess I was waiting for a sign, something to tell me what do next. Gina reached her callused palm out to my face, ran it down, scratching my cheek just a little. "You got a piece of hay there," she said.

Those red, red lips came closer. I couldn't bear to close my eyes. I wanted to watch her there, lips against my lips, until I went old and blind.

"Don't stop coming," I said, when our lips came apart.

Gina looped her finger through my belt and pulled me right against her. Gave me that big toothy grin.

"How could I?" she said.

* * * *

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Freedom to Serve

© Nicole Gestalt

In the silence that followed the crack of the whip, Jane sighed in pleasure, the kiss of the lashes still tingling throughout her body. She felt Marcus' strong hands gently caressing the welts that marked her now warm buttocks. A finger traced her spine followed by his lips kissing her neck, her body slick with perspiration.

"You did well today, my love"

Jane beamed with happiness at hearing his words and collapsed into his arms as he released the restraints that had been holding her up, her legs no longer able to bear her own weight. He lifted her effortlessly and carried her to the bed.

* * * *

Sitting down cautiously, Jane looked around at the other suited men and women around the table and sighed, wishing she hadn't had to work today. The welts had gone down a little, but there was still just enough of a tingle to remind her of her night with Marcus. She smiled to herself, and then caught herself wishing she didn't work in a place that seemed to be full of people who never allowed themselves such a small luxury. All eyes in the room turned expectantly to the rather large man at the head of the table. Mr. Linderallman was the head of the company, as his father had been before him, although the one or two people who had worked there long enough to remember the first Mr. Linderallman would

openly admit that the youngster didn't really fill his father's shoes.

Standing at the end of the table in a suit that looked a size too small for his rather large body, he looked at each and every department head, Jane included. This had been an impromptu meeting, and no one was sure why it had been called, although there had been rumours for some time that the company was haemorrhaging money. So, it was no surprise the faces looking back at him wore expressions of extreme anxiety. Mr. Linderallman took a deep breath, and Jane unconsciously winced in expectation of his jacket buttons flying off. After pausing briefly to wipe his brow, he spoke.

"I know some of you have heard rumours that Linderallman & Hops has been under-performing of late, and I'm sure some of you will have seen the various people being shown around the building. I called this meeting today to say that I have sold the company to Mr. Sullivan. Each of you has a packet in front of you; inside it are details of the changes that will occur. Some of the departments are no longer needed, and I expect you—as heads of those departments—to let everyone know. From this moment on, I am no longer your employer, and I bid you all a good day."

With that final, cold statement, he stepped backwards and, before anybody had recovered enough to say something, silently departed. The room was deafeningly quiet, everyone looking at the unopened envelopes in front of them, and nobody wanting to say anything. It was likely that they had

all lost their jobs, and Jane could do nothing but wonder whether it was entirely legal.

Jane's department was one of the ones being dissolved, and she started the grim task of letting everybody who worked under her know they would soon no longer have a job. She had a month to get everything in order before she also had to leave, and in that time, she was methodical about everything.

She knew she didn't have a job at the end of it all, but she had always been proud of her work and was damned if she was going to let standards slip right at the very end. As she left the large multi story grey building for the last time, she felt a little sadness. She would miss some of the things that had been part of her life there, although she realised that she felt more a sense of freedom than anything else. As for what she was going to do next, both she and Marcus had decided it would be best if she took some time off and just enjoy life. Money wasn't an issue, as the severance pay was enough to leave her comfortable for a long time, and Marcus's job was still bringing in more than enough. So, on her first day as a jobless woman, Jane went shopping.

* * * *

Dressed in the corset and stockings she had bought earlier that day, Jane lowered her head and stood in a submissive pose as Marcus walked around her admiring her clothes. It was the first corset she had ever bought. Although Marcus and she often discussed different clothes he would like to see her wear, they had never gotten around to buying them. So

when Jane discovered it in the shop window, she decided enough was enough and bought it.

She watched Marcus's feet every time they passed around her. Each time he seemed to move slower, and she felt very exposed but at the same time excited and thrilled at the attention being lavished upon her. She knew Marcus was in charge, but she also knew that she had power over him in the form of her safe word. No matter what occurred, she had but to utter the word, and everything would stop. Knowing this, she was able to submit to Marcus completely as they had often done in the past year of living together. It had become more intense of late, and Jane had even brought up the possibility of them doing it full time—not just in the bedroom. She loved having Marcus as her Master and had never wanted any man more.

"Follow me."

His voice was as soft as velvet, and Jane quickly followed him, eager to obey. He led her into the spare room that they had transformed into a dungeon full of toys and rugs. Everything they would ever need to use during a session was in the room, and Jane always felt a glow of pride when she entered.

A wall on the right of the door held a shelf. From its edge, the various floggers and whips they had obtained over the past year hung. On the shelf's surface lay various restraints and blindfolds. It was these that Marcus picked up. Jane stood in the centre of the room and let her hands be drawn behind her back. She felt the ropes tightening around her wrists such

that, although no circulation was being cut off, she was unable to free her hands.

"Bend over"

The command came as a surprise; as they usually started off with Marcus telling her exactly what he was going to do to her. She obediently bent over. If her hands had been untied, she would have used them to steady herself on the floor. Being flexible, she instead widened her stance and steadied herself that way.

Her ass jutted into the air, and she gasped as she felt Marcus' hands caressing it. He ran a hand up her thighs and between her legs, cupping her and making her moan, getting wet in anticipation. Marcus placed a hand on her back, and in the moment that followed, she felt the movement of air. Marcus' other hand made contact with her vulnerable rear. Her instincts were to stand up, but with Marcus' hand on her back and the training she had received from him in her mind, she knew she had to remain as still as possible.

His hand flew down onto her a couple more times until she could feel her ass tingling. She knew he was warming her up, and in the silence that followed, she tried to figure out by the sounds which instrument he selected. She heard the creak of leather and knew it must be one of the newer whips. The others had been used so much that the leather cords were softer and more supple.

She heard the swish of the cord as it flew through the air and felt its sweet caress upon her. Although she found it strange at first, she had grown to adore the pain and pleasure

that came from being whipped, especially with Marcus behind it.

She lost count of the number of times she felt the sweet caress of his whip. Her breathing had become shallow, and all her senses went into overtime. She could hear every movement Marcus made behind her, as well as every stroke of the whip in excruciating detail. As she entered sub-space, everything grew blurry. She was aware of only pleasure and all noises seemed to come from very far away as if drifting to her through a dream.

Through the mists of sub-space, she felt Marcus moving her, then the edge of a bed, and then—in one swift motion—he entered her. She sighed, feeling his full length deep inside. She never felt full and complete unless he was within her. She felt his warmth and loved how her pussy gripped him as he moved. With Marcus thrusting in and out, Jane remained floating in sub-space, allowing her body to relax. She never felt so fantastic, and she willed her body to give in to his needs, knowing that he was likewise focusing on her pleasure.

When she finally came out of sub-space, she found that he had placed her on the bed and was holding her to him, just as he always did when they had been through a session. Although it had been quick this time, she knew that they would have plenty more encounters before the night was through, and perhaps tonight they would make it a full-time thing. Perhaps he would become her Master all the time.

She knew with all her heart it was what she wanted. With a Master like Marcus, who needed a job?

Coming Together With Pride
by Alessia Brio, J Buchanan, Lisabet Sarai

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Past Perfect

© Alessia Brio

The ease with which Jacqueline Manceaux breezed through life provided a perpetual source of annoyance for Denise. She shone like the sun, even in her darkest hours, and to be fair, she had more than her fair share of them.

In contrast, Denise felt like an ogre in Jacqui's company. The leggy blonde epitomized sexy and had enough smarts not to need good looks to succeed in the business world. To add insult to injury, she had the nerve to be one of the nicest people Denise had ever met. No one, not even Mother Teresa, deserved to be that close to perfection.

Jacqui strolled past her office carrying her typical bagel and coffee. She lifted the foam cup in a *g'morning* salutation and gave a megawatt smile that might as well have been nails on a chalkboard for its impact on Denise's mood. The glass walls allowed Denise to follow her progress down the hall.

Denise hated the fact that she spent so much time trying to find fault with Mademoiselle Manceaux, some chink in the "charm" that would enable her to legitimately despise the bitch. Shaking herself from the vortex of her thoughts, Denise returned her attention to the day's schedule.

Busywork made the morning pass quickly, and Denise's stomach reminded her that she'd skipped breakfast. She tidied her desk, signed off her computer, and retrieved her purse from the bottom desk drawer.

"You look nice today," a dulcet voice called from the doorway accompanied by a one-knuckle knock. Even Jacquí's vocal chords evoked envy. When Denise looked up, she continued, "Well, you always look *nice*, but I especially like you in green. Brings out your eyes. Um, sorry to interrupt, but can I talk to you for a minute? It won't take long."

In spite of herself, Denise beamed. To be first complimented, then wanted—for whatever reason—by the ultra-smooth, ultra-savvy woman made her ego momentarily swell. It didn't take long, however, for the inner cynic to squelch that elation.

"I'm on my way to lunch." She enjoyed the flash of disappointment on Jacquí's face. Unable to maintain the brusque dismissal, Denise capitulated, "But you're welcome to join me. I'm just going down to the cafeteria for a salad. I have to show an apartment at one on the other side of the city."

Jacquí grinned. "Let me grab my purse. Be right back." With that, she scurried down the hall as fast as her butter-cream Prada pumps would carry her. Denise forced herself not to admire the retreat.

Before she could count to twenty, Jacquí returned with her matching butter-cream Prada handbag. Denise tucked her Coach knock-off under her arm. She felt good about the purchase when she impulsively dropped forty dollars on it last weekend. Now she just felt like as much of an imposter as her bag. Without matching faux-Coach shoes, she even failed as a competent fraud. The urge to compete was strong, but Denise knew that she could spend every spare moment at the gym

and every spare dollar on clothes and still not even come close to stealing Jacquí's thunder.

They shared idle chit-chat in the elevator and as they wove through the lunch line. More than once, Denise wondered what was up. Jacquí declined several invitations to join other groups, opting instead for a small two-person table against the far wall. Once seated, she decided to cut to the chase.

"So, what did you want me for?"

Jacquí raised a perfectly-plucked eyebrow but didn't otherwise react to the unintentional innuendo. "You know I just moved into a new place, right? The Garden Towers on sixty-fifth?" She paused to allow Denise time to nod in recognition of the exclusive luxury condos. "Well, I'm having a little dinner slash housewarming party on Friday night—just a dozen or so friends. Nothing fancy or anything, just come-as-you-are. And, well, I was hoping you'd come ... as you are, of course. Do you have other plans?"

Denise attempted to decide if microwave popcorn and a stack of rented DVDs qualified as *other plans* and concluded that, yes, it did. She must've hesitated a bit longer than she realized, though, because Jacquí spoke before she was able to formulate a plausible excuse for declining the invitation.

"Did I do something to offend or upset you? I get the feeling that you don't..." Jacquí paused, apparently struggling to form the words for such a foreign concept, "...like me."

"No, Jacquí, you haven't done anything to offend me." *Other than exist*, she wanted to snarl. *Other than to grate on my every nerve with your face and your body and your hair and your clothes and your success and your sparkling fucking*

personality. Green, Denise decided, was not her color despite Jacquí's earlier compliment.

"Then you'll come?"

It was Denise's turn to raise an eyebrow, and she gave Jacquí an "A" for *Aplomb* in the face of it. Such composure should be rewarded, even if grudgingly. "Sure. I'll stop by. Can I bring anything?"

"Do you have any of that wine left from the vineyard property you sold last month? I heard through the ... um, *grapevine*," she chuckled at her little play on words, "that the sellers gave you a case as a bonus. I'd really like to try it."

Denise agreed and, with that business settled, they finished their lunches over light office gossip.

* * * *

As the week progressed, Denise hoped that Jacquí would forget about having invited her to the *dinner slash housewarming party*. Making small talk just wasn't Denise's idea of a good time, and Jacquí's friends were likely to be a gaggle of Manceaux wannabes. After all, what woman in her right mind didn't want a killer body, successful career, seemingly effortless beauty, style, social grace, wit, and brains?

She did her best to avoid contact with her *objet d'envie* throughout the week. Four closings and a slew of showings for a new listing kept her out of the office most of each day. While at her desk, Denise kept the door closed—the agency's standard *Do Not Disturb* protocol.

Late Friday afternoon, Jacquí dropped by her office to remind her about both the party and the wine. Over a few minutes of idle chatter about the party menu, it dawned on her that Jacquí didn't really need the wine. She had simply used it as a hook to ensure her attendance, knowing her ultra-reliable colleague wouldn't renege on a commitment. *Smooth*, Denise admitted to herself. *Very smooth indeed*.

"See you at eight-ish. I've got a million and one things to do before then." With a twinkle of her French manicured fingertips, Jacquí was gone.

Impulsively, Denise paged a delivery service and met the courier in the parking garage. Offering one bottle of the dry white as a tip, she instructed him to deliver the rest to the posh apartment on 65th street.

That commitment satisfied, she could now bail on the party without guilt if she chose. The maneuver bought her some measure of calm, knowing she had an out. She took her time on the evening commute and, once home, unwound with a glass of merlot and a single bong hit. The combination provided the perfect mood adjustment. Both mellow and self-confident, she shed her work attire and dove into her closet.

"Come as I am, eh? We'll just see about that." She pulled a short denim skirt from its hanger, followed by a soft, white blouse. She knew better than to expect Jacquí to look anything less than perfect, regardless of what she wore. No use even trying to compete.

Mellowed by the wine and the weed, Denise deftly wove her waist-length hair into a loose braid and slipped her bare

feet into a pair of well-worn penny loafers. The macramé belt was an afterthought, but it blended well.

Her nerves resurfaced when the taxi pulled to a stop in front of Jacquí's building. She resisted the urge to stop in the lobby's restroom to primp, instead moving directly to the elevators. Seventeenth floor. Not quite penthouse level, but well above the city streets.

The walk down the hallway to Jacquí's apartment seemed unnaturally long, distorted by anxiety. Denise felt as if she was stepping into a social situation that would make her feel even more awkward and inadequate, hob-knobbing with the upper echelons of beauty and success.

Strains of classical music seeped through the door of 17-C, which opened just as she lifted her hand to ring the doorbell. Jacquí stood there grinning. Barefoot, in torn jeans and an off-the-shoulder sweatshirt, she reminded Denise of a cast member from the movie *Flashdance* ... only sexier. Her hair, worn up during the work day, rested on her bare shoulders in soft waves.

"When the wine showed up by courier, I figured you'd be a no show. I'm glad you're here. C'mon in." She threw open the heavy door and gestured. "You're the first one here. Make yourself comfy. Can I get you something to drink?"

Denise looked around in awe. Eclectic décor screamed of expense coupled with a non-conformist's taste. That earned a smile from Jacquí, whose toenails sparkled with a fuchsia polish that matched her fingernails and lips.

"You like? I did it all myself—against the advice of ... well, of damned near everyone. It's not like me to be so rebellious,

but I love this space. It's my haven. Know what I mean? Here, let me show you around. Can I get you something to drink?"

It took Denise a moment to realize that she was referring to her interior decorating rather than the fuchsia cosmetics. The aimless chatter seemed out of character for the typically-composed beauty. She followed her down the hallway, only half listening to her ramble about where each piece of artwork or furniture originated.

"There's no one else coming tonight, is there?" The clarity leapt at Denise, impulsive but fully formed. She just ... *knew*.

Jacquí turned. Her mouth hung open as if stunned by the accuracy of a gypsy's fortune. The expression told Denise all she need to know.

"I'll be going now," she murmured, shaking her head as she turned toward the door.

Silence followed her. As heavy as the mask of tomorrow's humiliation, it curved around her body and molded itself to her frame. Denise took a deep breath and willed her feet to move, to take her away from the embarrassment of being played for a fool.

"Please," Jacquí whispered. Her voice echoed in the corridor. "Stay. I'm sorry for..."

"For *what* exactly? You're sorry for luring me here under false pretenses?" Denise spun and stepped toward Jacquí, her shoulders squared and mind blazing. "You think you can just jerk people around this way? Make them do your bidding 'cause you're so fucking perfect? Well, cross me off your list of acolytes, Ms. Manceaux. I don't play that way."

Jacquí sighed, but she stood her ground with a defiant expression on her face. Denise fought the urge to slap it, to make her feel the sting of anger that threatened to escape. Her hands twitched at her side.

"I just wanted..." Jacquí reached out, her fingers brushing Denise's forearm. The touch sparked the release of pent-up emotion, and Denise wrenched her arm away, unintentionally catching the underside of Jacquí's chin with the back of her hand. She watched in shock as Jacquí's head snapped back, colliding with the wall.

Before she could speak, though, Jacquí righted herself and shook it off. She looked sideways at Denise, eyes narrowing. "Go if you're going. I won't try to stop you."

"Why?"

"Why?" Jacquí rolled her eyes. "Because even though this is my house, and even though I invited you here, I can still be charged with battery. Because..."

"No. Why the *dinner slash housewarming party* story? Why the elaborate ruse?"

Sighing, Jacquí slumped against the wall. "I didn't lie about the party, y'know. I just ... um ... exaggerated the number of guests."

"Why?"

"Would you have come otherwise?"

Denise shook her head, not as a negative reply, but at Jacquí's misunderstanding. "No, why *me*? What do you want from me?"

A small frown line formed at the bridge of Jacquí's aquiline nose. Rather than speak in reply, she opted to act. The feather-light kiss caught Denise completely by surprise.

"You, of course," Jacquí whispered when she pulled away. "I want *you*. I've been trying to get your attention for months."

Of all the things Jacquí could have said, that had to be the last thing Denise expected to hear. It was so far outside the scope of her thoughts that it took several moments for it to register. Her body responded well before her mind, fueling her anger and adding another dimension to her sense of betrayal. When the shock released her vocal chords, she howled with incredulous laughter.

It soon had her doubled over, holding her stomach and gasping for breath. Each time she thought she'd gotten it under control, the improbability of the situation would bubble up, and the giggles would again erupt. It wasn't until Denise saw the hurt expression on Jacquí's face that she was able to stem her laughter.

"I'm sorry." She dabbed at the corners of her eyes with the backs of her hands. "It's just that ... well, *you* wanting *me* ... when you can have anyone you choose ... male *or* female ... is just ... too ... rich." In spite of her resolve, some residual chuckles punctuated her speech.

Jacquí pushed off the wall and stormed past. "Fuck you," she called over her shoulder. Reaching the front door, she threw it open. "I think you should leave now."

Denise crossed the distance in a few long strides and slammed the door closed a bit more forcefully than intended.

Its impact rattled the umbrella stand and knocked over the vase of fresh flowers on the small table nearby. "I don't think so," she growled, pinning Jacquí to the door with her body. "You *think* you want me, eh? We're gonna get past perfect and find out."

The intensity of their first real kiss surprised Denise with its bruising ardor. She tasted blood but couldn't tell if it was hers or Jacquí's, and she sucked hard on those fuchsia lips while her fingers wove through her loose blonde locks.

Parting the taller woman's legs, she pressed her bare thigh against Jacquí's sex, eliciting a moan that vibrated on Denise's tongue. The heat emanating from the worn, threadbare denim caused a reciprocal reaction between her legs, and Denise felt the crotch of her thong grow wet.

The harder she pushed, the more enthusiastically Jacquí responded.

"Manipulative bitch," Denise spoke into her mouth. "You play people to get what you want. In return, they get to bask in your divine presence for a little while. Didn't work with me, did it? That had to bug the fuck out of you."

"If you want me, you're gonna have learn to be a lot more direct." She took a step back and reached for the hem of Jacquí's sweatshirt, whipping it over her head in one swift movement.

Jacquí brought her arms down and crossed them over her breasts, eyes blazing.

"Hands at your sides. Now."

Denise didn't miss the tiny smirk that teased the corner of Jacquí's mouth as she complied. Taking her time, she studied

Jacqui's breasts. Perfect, of course. Comfortable handfuls of firm flesh topped with oval, tea-stained nipples that puckered invitingly. Denise's hands again twitched, but for an entirely different reason.

"Yes, they're gorgeous." Denise confirmed the challenge in Jacqui's eyes. "But you already know that. Touch them."

Jacqui nodded.

"No, not me. *You*. Put your hands on your tits. Show me how you want me to touch them. Show me how you touch them when you think of me."

Her expression went from one of confident defiance to one of apprehension.

"You must not want me as much as you claim, then. Get out of my way. I'll be going."

One fear must've overridden the other, for Jacqui's hands slowly traveled up her body to cup her breasts. She paused there, fingertips poised over her hardened nipples. Denise held her gaze until those fingertips began to pinch, and Jacqui's eyes fluttered closed.

When she stopped and opened her eyes, Denise prodded. "Keep going. Your hands are mine. Show me ... and don't stop unless I tell you to."

Jacqui leaned against the door and resumed teasing her nipples. Her eyes again closed and her mouth dropped open as the sensations intensified. Fighting the urge to take over, Denise snuck around the corner and grabbed one of the chairs from the dining room. As quietly as she could, not wanting to interrupt Jacqui's focus, she parked the chair about five feet from the door and straddled it, arms folded

atop its back and chin resting on her forearms. She knew when Jacquí opened her eyes, she'd have an unobstructed view of her wet panties.

"Touch your pussy," Denise instructed in a firm, but barely audible, whisper.

Jacquí's eyes shot open, fear flashing briefly until rebellion overtook it. "I never imagined you'd be the dominant type."

"Don't give me that bullshit. You're getting exactly what you wanted. The sooner you admit that, the sooner we can stop pissing around and get on with it. Now, put your damned hand in your pants."

Denise had no idea if Jacquí had any sexual experience with women. She attended all company functions with a male escort, but that was hardly surprising. Someone as business savvy as Jacquí would undoubtedly have a beard for such purposes. Since they didn't cross paths in other social venues, and Denise didn't partake of the racier office gossip, she realized knew next to nothing about the sultry beauty's private life. Not that it really mattered in the moment.

She watched as Jacquí unbuttoned her jeans and slipped one delicate hand into them, her wrist remaining visible above the waistband of a pair of brilliant blue panties. "Push your jeans down. I want to see your fingers working. Better yet, take them off."

With her head cocked to one side, Jacquí shrugged out of the tattered denim. She kicked the garment aside and, taking a couple steps forward, propped the ball of one foot on the chair between Denise's legs. Perfectly pedicured toes teased the hem of the skirt as it stretched taut across her spread

thighs. The spice-tinged scent of Jacquí's arousal filled the space between them, and Denise licked her lips.

"Continue."

The exhibitionism tested the boundaries of Jacquí's composure, and Denise enjoyed the expressions that flitted across her fair features. At first, her fingers moved tentatively, but soon embarrassment surrendered to intense desire aided by dogged determination. Denise waited until she believed Jacquí to be fully absorbed in her own pleasure before again speaking.

"Stop."

Roughly pushing Jacquí's foot from the seat of the chair, she stood and spun it around. While her hands unknotted her belt, she instructed Jacquí to kneel. Denise repositioned herself on the chair, facing forward, and scooted her bottom to its edge. Trailing the ends of the coarse rope belt across Jacquí's bare back, she said, "You know what to do."

The eyes looking up at her held both contempt and gratitude as their face moved between Denise's legs. A hot tongue pushed her thong into her crevice, and teeth pulled it out. Again. Denise wove the fingers of her free hand through Jacquí's hair and yanked her head up to find eyes drunk with passion.

"Take them off."

Jacquí obeyed and immediately returned her mouth to its task, murmuring her enjoyment as she did so. The first swipe of the rope across her ass caught her by surprise, and she grasped the legs of the chair with both hands as she braced for more.

"You eat pussy like you've done it before," Denise growled, delivering yet another stinging blow. The growing welts on the tanned and toned flesh did as much for her arousal as the oral attentions. Perfection marked by pain. It seemed to stir Jacquí as well, for each blow increased the vigor with which her mouth attacked.

Jacquí used the legs of the chair to pull her face harder against Denise's sex, and the repeated impact of the rope drew forth moans that resonated through her clit. Every time she started to slide into bliss, however, her guard would go up. Still wary of Jacquí's motivations, she couldn't quite relax enough to come. The spanking helped, but she still sensed that she was being used for some unknown purpose—something beyond sex. Jacquí surrendered far too easily, and Denise felt she was missing a critical piece to the erotic puzzle.

Without that understanding, she refused to give Jacquí the satisfaction of making her come. The physical release would only bring emotional vulnerability. Denise realized, in that moment, there was only one outcome that would bring her any measure of comfort.

"Stop."

* * * *

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This story is also available at Clean Sheets

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Coming Together With Pride
by Alessia Brio, J Buchanan, Lisabet Sarai

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About Coming Together

Coming Together is about giving and about sex—a tantalizing combination in any context. Conceived online in the Literotica[®]com Authors Hangout, a forum for erotica writers, Coming Together is the passionate product of many talented individuals. It's grown way beyond its original borders.

We were all amateurs when the first erotic cocktail was served. In the three years since the inaugural volume hit the cyber shelves of Café Press, many of the original contributors have become successful professionals: authors, poets, editors, and artists. Traditional, small press publishers have picked up most of the self-published titles, and Phaze has continued to pour our philanthropic elixir into its catalog.

To date, Coming Together has compiled eight collections, with three more in the works. I am thrilled with and humbled by both the quantity and quality of the submissions received. Support from publishers and booksellers has been exemplary, as well. The critical acclaim is the cherry on top.

In each volume, we strive for an inclusive mix, embracing the diversity of desire. The causes we champion cross all demographic groups, and so does Coming Together. While each individual intoxicant may not suit the tastes of every reader, the savory cocktail is sure to stir every imagination.

Note, however, that these pages may contain stories in which the characters do not practice safe sex. Everyone involved with the publication of Coming Together encourages

Coming Together With Pride
by Alessia Brio, J Buchanan, Lisabet Sarai

its readers to act responsibly and to take appropriate precautions against both unwanted pregnancy and the transmission of disease.

All proceeds from the sale of this edition of Coming Together will be donated to AVERT (avert.org) to fund research toward the prevention of and cure for HIV/AIDS.

Bottoms up!

peace & passion,

Alessia Brio

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With Special Thanks

As I once commented in an interview: *Giving is just plain sexy!* There are some damned sexy people involved in the publication and promotion of Coming Together.

I'd like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all our wonderful authors. Please visit their sites and support their work. There are website addresses immediately following each story or poem.

To Pat, Candi, and Shari—the proofreaders from Phaze who volunteered their services: Thank you!

To James Buchanan, who helped me read and evaluate almost half a million submitted words: I couldn't have done it without you.

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In addition, each of the following has gone above and beyond to help ensure the success of Coming Together. Please find a way to show your appreciation for their generosity:

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