

Waking up on Monday mornings wasn't high on Jeremiah Madigan's list of favorite things. It didn't even come close. The fact his mornings didn't usually start until nine o'clock in the p.m. notwithstanding, his routine on a workday no matter what hours he worked was always the same. A long, hot shower, a whole lot of hot coffee and then the drive to work.

Working the graveyard shift, or eleven to seven, was a habit Jeremiah fell into a few years back. He'd been hit with a bad case of insomnia after an even worse break up, and one thing led to another. Something about the shift appealed to him, and he never looked back.

So, while Monday mornings weren't on his list of favorite things, long, hot showers were, and sometimes, like today, they made it to the top of his list of all-time favorites. This brief thought managed to cross his mind before Jeremiah turned his face up to the falling spray, eyes closed as he just let the water cascade from the showerhead down onto his heated skin. His mouth was open, lips parted as he panted slightly.

The temperature of the water was hot, steam and mist rising about him, but not as hot as the lips that carefully followed the water's trail as it rolled down the muscles of his back to the crack of his ass.

One hand stretched against the wet tile of the wall in front of Jeremiah to keep his balance, the other wrapped tightly around the swelling length of his cock, not moving just yet, just enjoying the firm pulse and throb. Christ, but it had been so long.

He couldn't think, he couldn't move, Jeremiah could only groan as strong fingers held his hips in a tight grip and lips – those lips and a hot, greedy tongue burrowed between his clenched cheeks and found his center amidst a chorus of eager slurps and moans.

Heaven.

Goddamn but this was the closest thing to heaven he'd ever found. He didn't think he spoke aloud, and yet he could hear the soft chuckle, low and lean, almost as if it was in response to his thoughts, and then demanding thumbs spread him wider and that hot tongue lapped at the water that trickled over his small, puckered circle of nerves. Jeremiah groaned again.

Against his will his hand tightened over his cock, moving down to the base and then stroking upwards just below the plump head. His legs instinctively spread as he could do nothing but offer himself up to the feeling, and Jeremiah struggled to keep his balance and his control. But no matter how much he wanted to drag this out he wasn't going to last.

The thrust of his hips pushed him forward against the welcoming tunnel of his hand before Jeremiah pushed back against the knowledgeable tongue that was carefully driving him mad. His panting increased, harsh and urgent in contrast to the gentle sound of the water and he groaned yet again. This time the sound was deeper and more needy as a long finger stabbed into him alongside the agile tongue.

"Yeah, oh yeah." Jeremiah managed to suck in a gasping breath, his forehead falling forward against his hand and the tile wall that was the only thing holding him and his trembling legs upright as another finger joined the first. Good. Man, that felt good.

The fingers inside him turned slightly, curling in their search, and Jeremiah increased the speed of his fist on his cock as the sensations spread through him faster than a desert wildfire. His essence flowed freely from the reddened tip as he worked his hand up and down in rough, urgent strokes, but the lubrication wasn't necessary in the steamy, sudsy shower spray.

“Please.” Jeremiah whimpered in dismay as the fingers suddenly left his body and he was left empty and wanting. But the warm chest pressed against his back and the hot tongue was now lapping at his ear, biting at the sensitive flesh. His legs spread further apart, ass arching upward, feeling the pulse of the fat cock that snuggled happily between his cheeks and roughly jabbed against his loosened hole.

“Ready for it?” The voice was lower, rougher now, and shivers ran up and down Jeremiah’s spine at the words feathering his ear. “Ready for me?”

The sound of the voice, the words themselves proved too much for Jeremiah, and even before the entrance to his body was claimed his hips jerked as he shot his load onto the wall of the shower before falling forward and feeling the cold tile against his flushed cheeks.

Well, fuck. Jeremiah leaned heavily against the tile wall and struggled to catch his breath before he stood up slowly and turned to let the water rinse the evidence of his morning fantasy down the drain. He wiped his face as he let reality sweep back over him.

It had been too damn long since he’d done that for real, and somehow that knowledge proved that some Mondays were a bigger bitch than others.

Jeremiah finished dressing swiftly, refusing to let his sour mood further color his day. He needed to keep his head on straight to face the busy weekend coming up, and letting himself get distracted by dreams of what was missing in his life wasn’t going to help.

It’s not that he was unattractive, Jeremiah managed to garner more than his fair share of attention when he was out and about. It was just that he was, well, picky, he guessed would be the word. He didn’t

want the never-ending merry-go-round of dating and one-night stands. He wanted what he saw with his parents: the steady love and caring that came from a committed relationship.

He just couldn't seem to find anyone of a like mind to commit to.

A couple of cups of coffee and a short drive later Jeremiah pulled into the secured lot at work, flashing his ID at the guard at the gate.

"Hey Juan, how's it going?" He asked politely as his card was scanned.

"Not too bad, Madigan. How about you?" Juan winked back, the broad, flat face crinkling into a sea of wrinkles with his smile. "You ready for the weekend?"

Jeremiah shuddered. "Not even. How about you?"

"My favorite time of the year." The guard closed the fingers of one hand until they formed a loose circle and brought them in front of his mouth, bobbing his head for a moment in an unmistakably obscene gesture. "It's the one time the old lady has to shut up and put up, if you know what I mean."

"Great." Jeremiah was unenthused as he took back his card and drove to his assigned space. Juan might be looking forward to things, but it was Jeremiah's not-so-favorite time of the year: V-day. Jeremiah couldn't help but sigh. Valentine's weekend, actually, since the 14th fell on a Saturday.

It was going to make for one hell of a busy time at work. While the New Year was the busiest holiday he ever worked, St. Valentine's Day came a close second. The place was going to be packed with crowds looking to get away and inject some excitement back into their relationships, all courtesy a successful bit of retail strategy.

Before long Jeremiah was in uniform and in position on the floor of the casino where he worked the third shift. He looked up at the cameras set throughout the ceiling and gave a slight wave to his fellow employees keeping watch in the control room.

Unlike a lot of the other casinos, the security staff at the Thunder Crow swapped positions on an as-needed basis. Sometimes Jeremiah was on the floor watching the eager and dedicated crowds lose their money while keeping his eye peeled for trouble, and sometimes he was the eye in the sky watching from cameras positioned everywhere you could imagine and even some places you couldn't. Most of the time he never knew where he'd be working on a given night until he showed up.

Overall it was a sound practice. Not only did it keep him and his fellow security staff from getting bored and stale, but it also helped to prevent some of the more easily tempted from giving in and trying to plan something stupid. Let's face it; you couldn't plan trouble when you weren't sure where you'd be on any given night.

The crowd already seemed heavy, and Jeremiah walked carefully through the maze of slot machines as the hours passed. He was skilled at avoiding the guests who seemed overwhelmed by the spectacle around them and weren't paying attention to where they wandered.

It might look like organized chaos, but actually everything was carefully laid out to, first, psychologically appeal to the masses, and second, keep the guests just a bit off balance, adding to their thrill and the spikes of adrenaline that kept them playing.

In truth, no matter how spontaneous something might appear to the unknowing eye, every aspect of what went on in the casino was planned and developed based on years of study and analysis of human behavior. If you had a button to push the designers of the casino knew exactly how to push it.

He smothered a yawn behind one large hand and rested his hand on his duty belt, feeling the heavy weight of the weapon riding his hip. Jeremiah couldn't ever imagine having to use it in the course of a night, but it still had a reassuring feel. When he'd gotten out of the service, he'd found that while he didn't want to go the cop route, he'd worn a gun too many years to comfortably go without.

The radio on his hip buzzed, interrupting his thoughts, and Jeremiah hit the button on the side as he held it up to his ear to better hear over the din from the main floor.

"Next time you break, come up to the control room and check your messages. You had a call earlier." The sound was slightly tinny, but Jeremiah's ears were used to the bit of static and recognized the voice.

"Roger, that." Jeremiah looked at his watch and pressed the button on his radio again. "I'll see you in five."

He started the walk to the nearest exit, but it wasn't as simple as it sounded. Everything was geared to keep the guests on the floor where the action and the demand for their money was, especially the floor plan. Exiting the main floor quickly was practically impossible, but Jeremiah soon slid his coded key card through the slot at the security elevator and made his way to the top floor control room.

This was the most amazing part of the whole casino in Jeremiah's mind, and his favorite place to be. From this level there wasn't any part of the casino below that couldn't be observed or listened to. Technology was a wonderful thing.

He pressed his thumb against the biometric scanner and gained admittance to what they jokingly called the "Crow's Nest." Here were the main bank of closed circuit televisions that received their digital feed from the cameras below and the staff that worked them.

“Hey there, Jeremiah.” A couple of guys he knew noticed his arrival and said hello, but their attention stayed focused on the screens in front of them. He waved acknowledgment but kept walking through the darkened rooms to the seat at the back where he knew he’d find his buddy, Steve.

“How’s it going tonight?” Jeremiah asked as he gratefully slid his long frame into the soft-cushioned chair and put his booted feet up on the edge of the counter with a groan. A hazard of the job, it didn’t matter what he tried, anything over a few hours and it was always a relief to get off them.

“Nothing real crazy yet.” Steve yawned and fumbled around with the papers in front of him before handing him a piece of paper. “Here it is. I’m just gearing up for that magical weekend when love is in the air and sex is in every elevator we’ve got. Don’t these people realize that we’ve got cameras on them and pervs like me are watching and making discs to jerk off to later?”

“You’re sick.” Jeremiah couldn’t help but laugh. It was an old joke, but he knew better. The display feed policies were actually pretty strict, not that it kept anyone from joking about it.

“Amen to that.” Steve turned his attention back to the feed in front of him and waved absently at Jeremiah. “That’s one of the reasons why, unlike you, V day is one of my personal favs.”

“I don’t dislike it, really.” Jeremiah tried to defend himself. “I just think it’s overly hyped and marketed. I mean, aren’t you supposed to show the person you love your feelings all year long rather than on one arbitrary day?”

“Like you would know.” Steve laughed. “I think it bugs you ‘cause it reminds you what you’re missing. When’s the last time you had any passion in your life?”

“Fuck you, Mr. Home-Alone-with-my-DVD,” Jeremiah snapped back. “Besides, I’m not looking for any grand passion. Just a little romance would do me just fine.”

“Oh jeez, come on, Madigan.” Steve groaned. “You’re out there on the floor night after night, don’t tell me you don’t get offers. This place is crawling with people looking to get lucky in one way or another. And you want to hold out for romance?”

“I want something more than just a weekend hit and run. I want something real.” Jeremiah was thankful the lighting in the room was dim, hiding his face as he longingly revealed his secret.

“Seeing as how you work in a casino I don’t have to tell you the odds of that, do I?” Steve muttered back, his attention caught by a couple on the screen in front of him. “Look, check it out, ten to one they’re going to head towards the elevators.”

Jeremiah grunted at Steve’s response and pushed himself out of the chair.

“Hey.” Steve caught his arm. “I’m just yanking your chain, catch you on your lunch?”

“Yeah.” Jeremiah replied, unable to stay mad at his friend. He looked down at the note in his hand and a quick smile flashed across his face when he saw the name. Jonah! He’d not heard from his close friend in a while and hadn’t gotten around to calling himself.

He wandered into one of the staff lounges, nodded to those he recognized before sitting down and pulling out his cell phone with

anticipation. He and Jonah had grown up together and were closer than most brothers. He couldn't wait to catch-up.

"No. No, no, no." Jeremiah banged his head on the table in front of him. "Not this weekend, please?"

"Come on, man. You owe me." Jonah's distinctive voice couldn't hide his amusement at Jeremiah's response.

"I know I do." Jeremiah could hear the whine in his voice but couldn't seem to stop himself. "I can handle Gramma L., but Aubrette? Where's the other girls? Don't you know what this weekend is?"

"Hell, man, why do you think no one else can come? They've all been booked for a romantic weekend months before Grams got the itch to play the slots. Aubrette's the only one single. She's not even dating anyone right now, and you know that Grandma needs someone to keep an eye on her."

"Yeah, yeah." Jeremiah agreed before he whined again. "But Aubrette? Can't you and Rick come instead? It's been a while since we've gotten together."

It's not that Jonah's sister wasn't nice, all of his sisters were and over the years Jeremiah had come to think of them all as his sisters. The flaw was that somehow, Aubrette, the youngest, didn't get that memo. She also apparently didn't get the one that laid out Jeremiah's preference for the male of the species.

Either that or she simply preferred to ignore it. Jeremiah had given up trying to determine any particular pattern or logic to Aubrette's thoughts. He would have thought, given that he was one of Jonah's

closest friends, that something so simple would be obvious, but apparently not.

It helped that the other girls, being older, could remember when he'd been in past relationships. They tried to talk to her, but Aubrette refused to listen. Jeremiah still broke out into a sweat every time he remembered the last Christmas Holiday when Aubrette kept attempting to maneuver him under the mysteriously multiplying mistletoe.

Jonah started laughing on the other end of the line, the bastard; and Jeremiah knew he was remembering that same Christmas. Jeremiah was suddenly tempted to call Rick and tell him every deep dark secret he knew about his friend – and then maybe even make something up.

"It's not like I'm asking you to let her stay at your place. I know better than that. I just need you to keep an eye on them." There was a brief pause. "It's really important to me. I've made plans for the weekend, I'm ... I'm" There was another pause and Jeremiah could hear his friend swallowing on the other end of the connection. "I'm going to ask Rick to move in me."

"Whoa." Jeremiah was quiet for minute at the thought of his friend, Love 'em and Leave 'em Lavierge settling down. "Congratulations. That's some serious stuff. Uh ... you sure?"

"What's not to be sure?" Jonah's voice grew testy, and Jeremiah smiled. "The Doc's the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Well, you just sound a little nervous." Jeremiah couldn't resist prodding.

"Nervous?" Jonah replied indignantly before his voice lowered. "Fuck, man, I'm scared shitless."

It was Jeremiah's turn to laugh. "It'll be okay. You and the Doc are a good fit."

"There's just so much we still have to work out, you know?" Now that he had Jeremiah on the phone Jonah couldn't resist giving voice to a few of his uncertainties. "Do I really ask him to give up everything he's worked for? Wouldn't it be better if I tried to find a job where he is?"

"You guys will figure it out." Jeremiah was sure if the two men could make the long distance thing work, they could find a way to make this happen if they really wanted to. "Remember how last time we all had dinner together how excited Rick got talking about the research going on at the university by Grams?"

"You're right. It's just weird, you know? I still can't believe how this has all played out."

Jeremiah could hear the happiness in his friend's voice and felt a brief pang of envy. "Do do I wish you good luck or what?" Jeremiah determinedly thrust aside his feelings, ashamed at himself.

"I'll do the same for you."

Jeremiah cursed as Jonah laughed again before hanging up the phone. Valentine's weekend and Aubrette.

Great.

Before Jeremiah knew it, Friday was there and so were Gramma L. and Aubrette. He had to wake up earlier than usual to make the long drive to the airport so he could pick them up and take them to the hotel attached to the casino where he'd pulled some strings to get them a room. Not an easy task on such a busy weekend.

Traffic was light and Jeremiah yawned as he drove. He'd worked late, and it didn't help that he'd tossed and turned all week. He was happy for Jonah and Rick but disappointed at the solitary direction his own life seemed determined to take. The end result had been long nights, and a late wake-up and a rotten start to his day, a day that didn't seem destined to get any better. The flight was delayed, and Jeremiah had to sit around the airport drinking coffee until his kidneys rebelled in protest. Usually he enjoyed watching the crowds and making up stories for each person's coming and going, but the longer he waited, the more he dreaded seeing Aubrette grow.

By the time their flight was called and he was standing by the small doorway that led off to their gate and walkway to the plane, Jeremiah was feeling fidgety. He took a deep breath and ran his hand nervously around his neck. He had no problems taking down a drunk twice his size, but ever since the day he'd been faced with the sight of Aubrette in her first training bra he was forced to acknowledge that when it came to the petite brunette he was at his wits' end.

Jeremiah had to admit Jonah's sister was a good-looking woman as she strolled off the plane and threw herself into his arms. She was all made up and dressed up and with the coloring of her eyes and hair she was a female version of her brother, sharing the same dark magnetism that snared him so much attention. But, since Jeremiah had never really been attracted to Jonah, the appeal was lost on him as he awkwardly hugged her back.

"Dang it, Aubrette! Unhand Jeremiah and let him greet me properly." The attendant had wheeled a blanket-wrapped bundle up behind them, the elderly voice piercing through the folds and tufts of gray hair sticking out from the top.

Aubrette pouted when her grandmother poked at her with her cane but released Jeremiah so he could press a kiss on Gramma L.'s

papery-thin, wrinkled cheek in welcome. "It's good to see you again, Gramma L."

Jeremiah meant his words despite the circumstances. The old woman and her family had been the brightest part of his growing up and a safe refuge when things in his own family had fallen apart.

"You are well and happy, Jeremiah? Things are good for you?" Trust Gramma L. to get right to the point.

"Good enough." Jeremiah shrugged, amazed as always at how the old woman could always seem to know what was on his mind.

"Jonah is settling down, will it be your turn next?" Even from under her covering of blankets Jeremiah could feel the weight of her gaze upon him.

"I guess not. Not unless you know something I don't." Jeremiah didn't want to sound like a sulky two year old, but damn if that wasn't how she made him feel.

"I want to see my boys happy and loved. We'll see what I can manage." The matriarch of the Lavierge clan winked at him and patted his cheek, dark eyes so like Jonah's still sparkling with a zestful enjoyment of life. "You worry too much, but you always were a good boy, Jeremiah." She muttered. "It's not good for you to be alone."

"You make him sound like a puppy, Gramma L." Aubrette was sulking at being ignored and pressed up against his back. "Jeremiah's all man."

The husky words made Jeremiah cringe, and he quickly moved away from Aubrette.

"I'll just ... uh ... go get your luggage."

One thing Jeremiah couldn't accuse Aubrette of was stupidity, and she could obviously tell Jeremiah was uncomfortable with her blatant interest. So he was relieved when she scaled things back and let him arrange for Gramma L. and pickup their luggage in peace.

Aubrette was willing to catch him up on all the family gossip while the old woman snored in the back seat, and the drive back passed quicker than Jeremiah imagined. When she dropped her sultry pose and let her inner tomboy shine through Jeremiah could remember the years past when Aubrette was much younger and followed him and Jonah around. The result was that he was relaxed and smiling as he escorted them up to their room and caught off guard when she cornered him against the closet door.

"It's really nice of you to get us this room and all at a discount, Jeremiah." Aubrette's voice was low and husky all of a sudden, and she put her carefully manicured hand on his arm as she thanked him, all her intensity back and focused on him with laser precision.

"The least I can do for family." Jeremiah dropped her suitcase and tried to sidle away discreetly, but her grip only tightened to prevent his escape. "It's such a busy weekend I don't know if you guys could have come up with a reservation on your own."

"Such a romantic weekend, you mean." Aubrette's painted eyelids lowered over her eyes, and she moved even closer to Jeremiah's side. "I'm looking forward to a chance to thank you, personally."

"Uh ..." Jeremiah could feel the sweat breaking out on his forehead. Oh hell, now what was he going to do?

"Aubrette!" Despite her age, Gramma L.'s voice could still make a man's spine straighten like a steel rod had just been inserted and Jeremiah felt his instinctively snap to attention with enough force to

knock his teeth together. Too bad it didn't seem to have the same impact on Aubrette.

"Turn loose of that boy, and let's get down to where the action is." The old woman pounded her cane on the floor in front of her for emphasis. She was rested from her snooze on the drive over and ready for fun.

"But Grams,..." It did Jeremiah's heart good to hear the whine coming from the rouged lips.

"But nothing. I could die tonight, and if that's the case, I want to do it with that metal handle in my hand. Plenty of time when I'm gone for you to bother Jeremiah."

Aubrette turned her dark eyes on him, and Jeremiah knew this is where he was supposed to jump in and swear it was no bother. Instead he tried not to show his eagerness as he unfolded the rented wheelchair from the closet and brought it up behind Gramma L.

"I'm working a double tonight, but I'll be sure to swing by and check on you two, make sure you're having fun." Jeremiah helped Gramma L. into the chair, surprised at the sharp feel of the bones beneath his hands. As vital as her spirit was she was losing weight again, that wasn't a good sign.

"A lot of fun I'm going to have, sitting on my ass with a bunch of old buzzards slinging quarters." Aubrette said petulantly, crossing her arms over her chest and shifting from one hip to the other in her heels. "Can't you call in sick or something?"

"It'll be a lot more fun than chasing after a man that's got no use for the equipment you got." Her grandmother scolded.

Jeremiah could feel his cheeks flush at the old woman's blunt words but they didn't seem to faze Aubrette. She just pouted some more and fell in behind him as he pushed the wheelchair down the corridor to the elevator. He swore he could feel her eyes on his ass and hoped like hell the weekend would pass quickly.

God damn, but it had been a crazy shift. Jeremiah lay sprawled on one of the lumpy couches in the staff lounge and let his eyes close. Friday night had passed in a blur and it was now early Saturday, although really, inside the casino it was hard to tell. Without any clocks or outside windows time seemed to lose its meaning, and all that mattered was the buzz of his radio as call after call came in over the din of the crowd and the constant and melodic clanking of the machines.

Just like Jeremiah had anticipated, the crowd was rowdy and restless, and he needed to keep his wits about him. There were always a few drunks who had to be roused, as quietly and competently as possible. Sometimes they'd give in without a fight, most times not. It helped that he'd worked with most of the other security staff before and they knew what to expect.

Harder to deal with were the couples who always seemed to fight just to have the thrill of makeup sex. Jeremiah really hated dealing with that kind of mess. Toss into that mix the members of the newly broken hearts club intent on drowning their sorrows, and it was one hell of a night. And, just like any other busy time at the casino, the usual petty crooks were out in force. This kind of crowd was heaven for a pickpocket and the drunken, celebratory crowds made easy marks.

Didn't people just come to have a good time anymore? Jeremiah wondered, ducking to avoid a flying cellphone as he broke up a fight between another supposedly happy couple. As he listened to the crying woman with the mascara streaked across her face curse out her

boyfriend, Jeremiah could only shrug. Happy Valentine's Day, buddy. No way are you getting any tonight.

Jeremiah couldn't help but long for a simpler time when the guests just played a few slots, lost a few bucks, and then went and screwed themselves blind in their hotel room.

At the end of his first shift Jeremiah decided he was dog-tired.

At the middle of his second shift Jeremiah decided he was more than tired. He was absolutely beat and he still had hours to go. Hell, maybe he was just old. A double shift didn't used to leave him feeling this drained.

Sending thanks to heaven when it was time for his break Jeremiah waved to his replacement, taking only a few minutes to fill him in on the last few hours of activity on the floor before heading gratefully for the closest staff lounge and the waiting couch.

He'd stopped by Gramma L. and Aubrette a couple of times during his shift to make sure they were settled and having fun. Not a problem there. He wasn't sure where they got their energy, but Gramma L. had a real killer instinct when it came to the slots and Aubrette had been busy tossing back drinks and working a nearby group of guys with almost as much fervor, at least until she had spotted Jeremiah.

Jeremiah could feel the cold sweat at the base of his spine once again as he remembered the welcoming glint in Aubrette's eyes. Things were going to come to a head this weekend; it was just going to be his luck. And he could tell already it wasn't going to be pretty.

But what was he supposed to do? Throw himself on the sacrificial altar of heterosexual sex just to keep Aubrette's feelings from being hurt? He could only think he was some kind of youthful fantasy she'd not yet

outgrown. Really what she needed to do was find somebody that would catch her attention and get him off the hook.

'Course, he just needed to find somebody who would catch his attention as well. Jeremiah shifted on the couch and sighed as he remembered his morning shower from earlier in the week. Unlike the crowds that jammed the casino this weekend, he didn't need any fancy type of wooing or a lot of money being spent.

No, just a little quiet romance; a heated glance across a room maybe or the soft touch of a hand on the middle of his back. Just a few moments like that and the promise of a whole lot of hot sex and he'd be a much happier man.

Jeremiah rolled onto his side, pressing his face against the rough cushions and tried to just get his mind to shut off. He only had an hour and needed to get some rest, not spend his time dreaming about what he didn't have.

It seemed like he'd just dozed off when the crackle of his radio startled him awake. He fumbled for it; his fingers not yet awake enough to work and finally managed to drag it up to his ears as he struggled to sit up. Just in time for the low crackle to change to a brief whine and then boom directly into his ears.

"415 in progress – main floor. 415 in progress – main floor. 11-99. Repeat 11-99."

"Hell." Jeremiah sat up quickly, already off the couch and moving for the door before he realized it once he heard the radio codes. He mashed the buttons on the side of his radio even as he headed out towards the casino proper, his gait hitching a bit as he worked the stiffness out. That couch really sucked.

“Madigan.” He croaked, his throat dry as he peered as his watch, his lunch wasn’t up yet so he hadn’t been asleep that long. “What’s up?”

“Looks like one hell of a dust-up, Jeremiah. We’ve called in the Tribal Police to give us a hand.” It was Steve’s voice on the other end, and Jeremiah frowned at his words. Calling in the local law meant things were more serious than he thought. Then again ... Jeremiah had arrived at the main floor and he could see it for himself.

“Roger that.” Jeremiah clipped his radio back on his belt and began wading into the fracas before him.

Good Christ almighty! Jeremiah thought as he moved deeper into the crowd. This wasn’t just a disturbance, it was an all-out war. There were bodies flying, purses flying, curses flying and behind it all was the ever-present ching of the slot machines as the die-hards refused to give up their spot even with the free-for-all taking place around them.

He pushed past a couple of girls doing the hair-pulling, nail-scratching thing and tried to work his way closer to where he’d last seen Aubrette and Gramma L.; Jonah would never forgive him if something happened to them on his watch.

The crowd seemed thicker here, and Jeremiah didn’t see any other security this far in. They appeared to be working the edges of the crowd, hauling folks away while leaving the center a mass of whirling confusion. If it wasn’t for Gramma L. and Aubrette, Jeremiah would have joined them and just waited for the Tribal boys to get a handle on things.

The noise was deafening, and Jeremiah kept having to duck in an effort to avoid wild punches when the scrambling chaos suddenly began to make horrible sense.

“Oh, hell!”

Jeremiah cursed as he looked up and saw Aubrette standing on a stool beside the slot machines. She was drunker than she’d been earlier, teetering on her heels as she tried to balance on the top of the small stool, tossing silver coins from a huge bucket in her arms out into the crowd, and yelling encouragement as they fought and scrabbled for each shiny handful.

He couldn’t see Gramma L. anywhere, and his heart almost stopped at thought of the old woman at the mercy of the mindless crowd. Jeremiah’s face was grim as he muscled his way to Aubrette and reached up, pulling her down off the stool and into his arms.

“Jeremiah!” Aubrette squealed into his ear, rouged lips leaving a gummy film on the side of his cheek. He struggled to stand her upright, giving her a rough shake as he did so.

“What the hell’s going on?” Jeremiah demanded. “Where’s Gramma L.?”

Aubrette waved an arm out to one side, barely missing clipping the guy beside her. “Over there.” She smiled drunkenly up at him. “I won! I won big! And I’m sharing! Did you see?”

“I saw.” Jeremiah tried to keep his temper under control. “Let’s go.” He took Aubrette by the arm and tried to pull her out of the crowd that was starting to disperse now that the silver wasn’t flying.

He could see Gramma L. now; the old gal was still sitting in front of her slot machine, one hand clutching her cane while the other was busy feeding quarters in at a steady pace, uncaring of the activity around her. He closed his eyes in relief, and Aubrette used the momentary lapse to pull away.

"I'm not going any ... nowhere." Aubrette rocked on her heels, pulling Jeremiah back up against her. "I want to celebrate." She twirled around for a second, her skirt flying out, showing more than Jeremiah wanted to see and sloshing more coins out of the bucket she was clutching. "Do you wanna see my good luck charm?"

"I'm not kidding, Aubrette." Jeremiah tried to grab at her arm again only to find his way blocked by a wall dressed in denim. He let his eyes travel upwards over the bulk of what seemed more mountain than man, and Aubrette poked her giggling head out from under one beefy arm.

"This is Mike. He's my good-luck charm." She beamed at Jeremiah and picked up "Mike's" hand, an object the size of a dinner plate and waved it at Jeremiah. "He likes me. He likes women." The beaming smile changed to a frown. "He doesn't like you."

Jeremiah's gaze finally found the top of the mountain and realized from the glare directed in his direction that she was serious.

"Fun time's over, Aubrette. We need to get you and your grandmother back to your room." Jeremiah tried to move around the man in front of him, but a low rumble was the only response. He stretched an arm out, intending to take Aubrette by the arm once again but she just danced back away from him, hiding behind Mike the Man Mountain once again.

"Nope!" Aubrette swayed away from Jeremiah's grasp. "I'm staying here with Mike. Do you know he wants to marry me?"

Jeremiah rolled his eyes. "He's just met you Aubrette. Wait until he gets to know you."

Aubrette stuck her tongue out at him. "You're being mean to me, Jeremiah." She said before ducking back behind Mike.

It was almost comical in a silly sort of way. The only thing he could compare it to was reaching around a tree trunk while trying to take hold of a rabid squirrel. Jeremiah played along for a few more minutes before he stepped back and pulled out his radio in disgust. Even as he pressed the button to call for assistance the radio was plucked from his hand and crushed into bits of broken plastic and electronics before his eyes.

Jeremiah looked up. Yep. Mike the Man Mountain was grinning down at him. Not good.

“Now you’ve made him mad.” Jeremiah could hear Aubrette giggling in the background, but all his attention was directed on the behemoth in front of him. He let his gaze drift over a few pressure points, debating for scant seconds on which would be the fastest way to bring this to a swift end when one of the plate-sized hands doubled into a fist and made its way straight for his face.

Jeremiah managed to block the punch by instinct but the pile-driving force behind it let him know things were worse than he thought. *Well, fuck.* Jonah was going to owe him for this one. Big time.

“Look, Grams, they’re fighting over me!” Aubrette let loose with a high-pitched yodel of excitement.

Jeremiah pushed Aubrette’s drunken giggling to the back of his mind and settled down for a serious throw-down. He sent a couple of quick punches into the wall blocking his view and grimaced as his fists just bounced off the thick abdomen.

Mike the Man Mountain just gave that low rumble that Jeremiah was beginning to understand was a laugh.

Jonah was *really* going to owe him for this one.

Before things could get too serious there was a loud squawking and Jeremiah was horrified to realize that Gramma L. had given up her seat at the slot machine and hobbled over to where their little bit of machismo was taking place and tossing in her two cents.

Jeremiah didn't know what shocked him more – the chance she could get hurt or the fact she'd actually left the slot machine. At least before he died at the hands of Mike the Man Mountain he knew just how much Gramma L. loved him.

“Jeremiah Madigan.” Gramma L. scolded. “Behave yourself.”

Then again ...

“Aubrette!” Jeremiah yelled with new determination at the sight of Gramma L. waving her cane around. “Stop your screeching and get your Grandmother out of here, dammit!”

Jeremiah settled back down into his stance. He was only going to get one shot at this. Before he could take it there was sudden sharp pain and a throbbing in his head. As he went down the shocked looks on Gramma L., Aubrette, and Mike the Man Mountain's faces swam hazily in his vision before everything went completely black.

The light was bright and sharp and Jeremiah instinctively squinted as he tried to turn his head away from the source.

“Easy now.”

He didn't recognize the voice but it was ... nice, Jeremiah decided. It almost reminded him of his dream lover's voice, deep and pitched just low enough that it couldn't be directed to anyone else but him. It was

soothing and Jeremiah wanted to sink into it and not think for a little while.

A warm body leaned over his, the clean scent of soap filling his senses, but before he could really start to enjoy it rubbery hands gently touched his face and pulled his eyelids open, one after another and there was that bright light again.

“Hey!” Jeremiah exclaimed indignantly as he struggled to pull away, and he heard a click as the light shut off and then those hands, warm even through their latex covering were touching him again, soothing and petting his chest. Oh, that was nice.

“It’s okay. You’re okay. No sign of concussion.”

The last words were louder and directed away from him but the hands remained steady on his chest, rising and falling with each of his breaths. Jeremiah couldn’t figure out why they were wearing gloves though and an old saying made its way through his mind.

No glove. No love.

Jeremiah giggled slightly. The saying had always struck him as silly. He remembered that poster; it had been hanging on the wall in waiting room of the hospital he’d been taken to in Houston after he’d been shot. He thought it was one of those AIDS prevention things that seemed to be everywhere for a while. But this was good, right? Those nice hands that belonged to that nice voice were wearing gloves and if there were gloves that meant that ...

Jeremiah’s mind continued to play connect the dots in a hazy sort of way. Somehow jumping from gloves and the waiting room he could remember to the pain of his bullet wound, back to the bloodstained gloves his surgeon had worn and then to love and then to holidays and then to Valentine’s...

Waking up with a paramedic leaning over him and shining a light in his eyes was a real bitch. Waking up with a throbbing head and not knowing what happened to Gramma L. and Aubrette was even worse.

And why did he keep thinking about a mountain?

Jeremiah ignored the fact that the paramedic leaning over him had really nice brown eyes framed with thick, dark lashes that seemed strangely familiar and struggled to sit up as the events of the last few hours came trickling back.

“Oh shit!” He exclaimed as the world swam around him before he’d even made it halfway upright. “What happened?”

“Hold on.” The paramedic moved those hands from Jeremiah’s chest to steady him, and Jeremiah unconsciously let his body relax into the supportive grip, appreciating the size of the man that held him so close.

“Where’s Gramma L.? Where’s Aubrette?” Jeremiah couldn’t decide if he wanted to puke because his head hurt or if he wanted to puke because he’d somehow ended up down and out and left them to the mercy of the crowd.

“We’ll worry about them later. Right now I need you to tell me how many fingers I’m holding up.”

There was an awfully nice smile to go with the big brown eyes and Jeremiah hung there, suspended in the grasp of one strong arm while he looked past the latex clad fingers and into those eyes.

“Brown,” he whispered softly.

“Close, but no cigar.” The teasing words were said with a smile. “Try again.”

It really was a great smile, Jeremiah thought to himself. Warm and inviting, lips curling up at the corners ...

“Fingers?”

They waggled in front of his eyes, and Jeremiah tore his gaze away from paramedic’s face. Now wasn’t the time to be thinking about big, brown eyes or the solid comfort to be found in a pair of strong arms. He had Gramma L. to worry about.

Sometimes responsibility really sucked.

“Ask someone who cares.” Jeremiah forced himself to growl as he pushed his way out of the paramedic’s arm on to his feet. He ignored the way the earth swayed around him and scanned the small crowd.

Okay, he was still in the casino. So far so good.

Jeremiah could remember the disturbance call that had brought him out onto the floor during his lunch. Hell, he could even remember the sight of Aubrette dancing around tossing silver into the crowd like it was beads at Mardi Gras.

So where were they?

“Anybody here want to tell me what the hell’s going on?” Jeremiah pushed the good-looking paramedic’s hands away from him once again. “Not you.”

He liked those hands, he probably liked them a bit too much, but right now he just wanted to find Gramma L. After the earlier events he might pass on Aubrette.

“Do you want the version before or after you went down like a pole-axed steer?”

Mr. Brown Eyes had his arms folded across his chest now and that nice smile had dissolved into an irritated frown.

“Very funny.” Jeremiah looked around for any of the other security team. “Thanks for the checkup, but I need to find somebody.”

“Checkup’s not over yet.” If anything that frown deepened.

“Sure it is.”

“Nope. Not until I get you over the hospital and we get your thick skull looked at.” A firmer note had replaced the soft, soothing tone of voice.

“I just heard you say that there was no sign of concussion.” Jeremiah tried to walk around the man to where he spotted a couple of guys, but the paramedic just moved back into his path, blocking his view once again.

“We need to be sure and that’s going to require a CAT scan, possibly an MRI.”

“I’ve got bigger things to worry about right now.” Jeremiah couldn’t help the exasperation coloring his voice. Any other time he’d admire the man’s persistence and his fine build but right now wasn’t that time.

“Bigger than your brains leaking your ears?” As Jeremiah rolled his eyes at the sarcasm the paramedic proceeded to list other, more realistic side effects. “Or a damaged vein causing blood to pool in your skull, increasing your cranial pressure until it ...”

“Anyone ever tell you what a pain in the ass you are?” Jeremiah held up his hands to halt the descriptive flow of information.

“All the time,” came the quick reply accompanied by a wink that made Jeremiah stare. “Not to brag, but usually for a much different reason.”

“What?” Before Jeremiah could react to the suggestive comment, Mike, his shift supervisor came by to check on him. The rest of the chaos was already tidied up nicely with only a few chairs being righted by the janitorial staff to show it had even happened.

“Everything alright here, Madigan? You were out for quite a while.” Jeremiah gave the man credit, he did actually look concerned.

“It will be as soon as we transport him to the hospital for further observation.” Those latex-covered hands were now resting on a slim pair of hips, and Jeremiah couldn’t help but let his eyes follow and appreciate what they framed. Huh, looked like the other man hadn’t been bragging after all.

“Really, I’m fine.” Jeremiah caught the supervisor’s arm and yanked his eyes upward to give the suddenly smug-looking paramedic a glare. “I just need to find out what happened here. I had a couple of family members out on the floor I’m concerned about.”

“You’re refusing treatment then?” Those big brown eyes just glared back at him, refusing to be intimidated.

“He can do that?” Mike looked on with interest, his concern now making sense as he was obviously wondering if there was anyway to get Jeremiah back to work.

"I can do that?" Jeremiah couldn't help the question that slipped from his mouth. "Damn right I am!"

Jeremiah manfully turned his back on the best-looking thing he'd seen in this casino in ages. "It's Gramma L., Mike. You know, Jonah's grandmother? She was here in the thick of it, and I haven't seen her since...well, since whatever happened happened."

"Yeah, we need to talk about that." Mike looked uncomfortable and Jeremiah tried not to watch as the paramedic with the big brown eyes apparently washed his hands of Jeremiah and bent over to pack up his gear.

"After I find Gramma L." If his head didn't hurt so bad Jeremiah might have wondered why he couldn't seem to steal his attention away from the uniform-clad ass in front of him.

"Well, see, the Tribal Police came through and cleared everyone out."

Jeremiah nodded impatiently, not willing to look at Mike if it meant moving his eyes from the flexing muscles before him. Maybe he'd been hit on the head harder than he thought. "Yeah, so that should make her easier to find. She's ninety-seven and definitely doesn't move real fast."

"Uh, Jeremiah?"

"What?"

"Old woman, carries a cane, was using a wheelchair?"

There was something strange about Mike's voice, and it was only with effort that Jeremiah finally looked back up at his supervisor and gestured with frustration for the man to just spit it out.

“She was one of the ones the Tribal Police took away. She, uh, she’s the one that knocked you out, Jeremiah. First she was waving that cane around, and then there was the whole resisting arrest thing and well....”

Jeremiah thought his head was going to explode. He really did. It’s not that he had high blood pressure or anything, all his physical activity kept him lean and in far better health than he deserved with his eating habits. But the way this weekend was going ...

It was just going to be the death of him.

Jeremiah stood there between Mike, his shift supervisor and the obviously disgruntled paramedic with the big brown eyes and the finest ass he’d seen in quite a while and tried to have everything he’d just heard make some kind of sense, difficult what with the way his head was feeling.

But before Jeremiah could process the fact that not only had Gramma L. and her cane been the cause of the his pounding head but she’d been arrested by the Tribal Police while he was lying passed out on the casino floor (and no, he really didn’t want to explain that to Jonah) there was a crackle from the shoulder unit the paramedic was wearing.

“Dispatch calling Unit 634. Status?”

With an annoyed flash of those brown eyes at Jeremiah the paramedic closed his case of supplies and stood up, pressing the call button on his radio as he did so.

“Unit 634. Reports patient refusing additional treatment and transport.”

“Roger.” The radio crackled again. “Unit 634, if you finished at the casino we have a situation out at the police department. Please proceed code 2 and coordinate with the unit on site.”

“On my way.” The latex gloves were peeled off with a snap, and Jeremiah watched as that long form leaned down to pick up his case. “You come to your senses anytime soon you know where the hospital is, right?”

Jeremiah reached out and grabbed at the uniform-clad arm. “Let me come with you,” he urged. He didn’t want to confess that he just might have had some confusion when it came to the number of fingers and the way he was feeling he really didn’t want to risk driving. But he really needed to find a way to where Gramma L. was and make sure she was okay.

“What?”

His arm was shrugged off, but Jeremiah pressed his case. “Gramma L. is at the police station and for all I know that call is about her. I need to come with you and see what’s going on.”

“Law says the only way I can transport you in the rig is if you are a patient.” The glance that came his way was calculating. “Of course since you’ve refused treatment”

Even as the voice trailed off and the hands spread wide in a “whatever can I do gesture” Jeremiah knew he was just going to have to suck it up. At least the brown-eyed paramedic was nice enough not to smirk at the resignation in Jeremiah’s voice.

“You let me come with you to the police department, and I’ll agree to let you take me to the hospital when we’re done.”

Mike had sent one of the other guys to Jeremiah's locker to get his gear, and despite his protests that he was fine, it wasn't long before Jeremiah was ensconced in the surprisingly comfortable front seat of the ambulance.

Maybe the pain showed in his eyes, or maybe his driver was just feeling kind, but before they got started a chemical cold pack had been silently handed over. Just as silently Jeremiah had gratefully taken it and pressed it up to his throbbing head.

"Thanks." He finally managed to spit out gruffly when the throbbing had lessened a bit.

"You're welcome." Brown eyes flashed in his direction before turning their attention back onto the road ahead of them. Not that there was a whole lot of traffic between the casino and the small town where the Tribal Police Station was located.

"Don't you guys usually work in pairs?" Jeremiah looked around the interior and all the equipment that did God knew what. He might not know anything about what all the bells and whistles he could see were for, but it didn't seem like things would work real well with only one attendant.

"Normally." The response came courtesy of a rueful laugh. "But Valentine's weekend is usually quiet on calls and heavy on demands for time off. I'm still considered the new guy, only been on the job here a few months." He shrugged. "So, here I am pulling a solo."

"Huh." Jeremiah's head was starting to feel better, and he told himself he was only making conversation to be polite. It wasn't that he was thinking about the rear view of the man beside him. Not at all. "No plans for the weekend?"

“Hard to make plans when I’m solo in that area as well. How about you?” There was that slightly flirtatious tone again and for a brief, delusional, head-injury induced moment Jeremiah wondered just what were his chances.

“Naah.” Jeremiah didn’t want to get into the whole Hallmark Holiday song and dance again or any of his personal history so he looked over at his attractive driver for distraction. There was something about that profile. “Do I know you?” He blurted out finally.

“Depends.”

“Depends on what?” Jeremiah sighed. Normally he’d be irritated if his date acted like this. What was it with this guy? Wait a minute, Jeremiah reminded himself, this wasn’t a date. He tried not to think about the fact that despite the semi-nauseous way he was feeling he was enjoying this more than he had his *last* date.

“On whether being the one to patch you up last month at the Silver Dollar counts as knowing. You were my very first call, by the way.”

“Oh.” Jeremiah could barely remember that night. He hated to admit it but he’d gotten a little too down and a little too out and tried to drown his sorrows a little too much. He could remember the aftermath though. Six stitches and one hell of a hangover. Whatever had happened before that still a blur.

“That was you?” He could feel himself flush. That hadn’t been one of his better nights. Kind of like tonight.

“That was me.” There was a knowing smirk on the attractive face. ‘I have to say, is it just me or do you really not like hospitals – you refused to go that night, too.”

"It's not you." Jeremiah felt a little foolish as he couldn't remember much but what he could, well, let's just say he'd hadn't been on his best behavior. "In that case, thanks again and sorry about anything I might have said or done. I have to confess I'm still drawing a huge blank when it comes to that one."

The ambulance's radio crackled to life and both men quickly straightened. "Unit 634, respond."

"Unit 634." The joking tone had been replaced by one that all business.

"Cancel that code 2 out at the police station. Repeat, cancel that code 2 out at the station."

"Roger that cancellation."

"Guess that makes you done for the night, Hon." Business taken care of the dispatcher's voice shifted to a more personal note. "We'll see you on Wednesday."

"Wednesday it is."

The radio was switched off and the man's shoulders seemed relax and settle back. Jeremiah looked up worriedly.

"Don't worry." Before Jeremiah could say anything the driver smiled over at him. "A deal's a deal. I'll still take you by there so you can check on your grandmother. I want to meet the old woman that was able to knock you out!"

"Very funny." Jeremiah grimaced. "I really do appreciate it. She's not really mine, but in a way ... well, just thanks."

“You’re welcome.” Jeremiah was momentarily the recipient of a beaming smile at his good manners. “Not to change the subject, but I’ve always wondered why you never called the next morning like you said you would.”

“What?” Jeremiah sputtered and sat upright quickly, the ice pack falling off his head and down into his lap. Surely not? Could he have really forgotten? Had he been that drunk?

Oh shit!

There was more of that fine laughter. Jeremiah had to admit the man had a nice laugh, deep and rich. Nothing half-hearted there. It must have been the hit on the head, because Jeremiah was liking this guy more and more.

“Sorry.” One hand left the wheel to wave lazily in Jeremiah’s direction. “I just couldn’t help myself.”

“Ass.” Jeremiah grumpily settled back down into his seat and tried to ignore the teasing smile directed toward him. Although he guessed that little exchange answered the important question.

“That was an opening big enough to drive a truck through. It was just too hard to resist, you know?”

“Sure.” Jeremiah wasn’t willing to forgive and forget that easily. “Take advantage of a wounded man.”

This time the glance that slanted in his direction was more heated. “If I ever take advantage of you, Jeremiah Madigan, you’ll know it.”

Oh. Jeremiah sat there in silence for minute while he digested those words. He coughed slightly to clear his throat. Did that go under

the heading of a promise or a threat? “Not real fair that you know my name and I don’t know yours.”

“Pete Mitchell.”

A large hand was thrust out in Jeremiah’s direction, and he took it carefully in his. He could still remember how good this same hand had felt touching him earlier.

“Nice to meet you, Pete Mitchell.”

“The pleasure’s been all mine, I’m sure.” Another wink and then the ambulance was slowing down.

Jeremiah winced when he gingerly ran his hand through his hair as they pulled in front of the station. This whole day had spiraled totally out of control and while there some aspects he’d admit to enjoying he just knew Jonah was gonna kick his ass if anything happened to his family. Hell, Jeremiah was ready to kick his own ass.

“You sure you’re ready for this?” Pete asked quietly, somehow sensing Jeremiah’s unease.

“Nope. I’m really not.” Jeremiah opened the door. “But what the hell.”

The two men walked up to the glass door together, and Pete put a hand in the small of Jeremiah’s back to steady him slightly as they climbed the stairs. Jeremiah tried not to think about good that bit of support felt and how nice it was to have Pete by his side and how much it pained him that this surely wasn’t more than the man doing his job.

But the more he tried not to think about it, the more he did, and by the time he pushed the door open and walked to the front counter, his mood had gone from bad to foul.

And he was looking for someone to vent it on.

“Can I help you?” The uniformed clerk at the desk was an older blonde woman, almost as tired looking as Jeremiah felt, but he was too worked up to cut her any slack as she stood up and slowly made her way over to the counter.

“Yeah, I’d like to talk to whatever asshole thought it was a good idea to arrest a ninety-seven year old woman and haul her off in the local paddy wagon!” It felt damn good to smack his fist on the counter.

“Pardon?” Jeremiah gave her credit; she barely blinked at his bellow, so all it did was hurt his head.

Before Jeremiah could gather the energy to try this once again, Pete stepped forward and rested his hand on Jeremiah’s arm.

“Sorry, but it’s been a heck of a night.” Pete looked at the nametag on the ample bosom firmly harnessed and uniformed before them. “Trish.”

Jeremiah watched, fuming as Pete directed his brilliant smile to the gal behind the counter after calling her by name. She leaned forward just a bit and smiled back, ignoring Jeremiah totally.

“Boy, do I know what you mean. We’ve had nothing but trouble this whole shift. Right now we got us a couple of real die-hards locked up in the back, if you know what I mean.” Trish gave Pete a wink that sent Jeremiah’s head to pounding once again. He shifted forward, pushing his shoulder into Pete’s chest and moving him away from the counter – and Trish’s reach.

“That’s just swell, Trish. But I’m looking for a ninety-seven year old woman and her granddaughter, and I’d really appreciate it if we could get moving.”

There was just a hint of a flounce in Trish’s step as she stepped back and grabbed her logbook and Pete shook his head at Jeremiah’s rudeness. But there was also a hint of a twinkle to be seen in his eyes at Jeremiah’s display.

“Jealous, much?” He leaned forward to whisper in Jeremiah’s ear.

Jeremiah just ignored him, but he couldn’t help the flush that covered his face. Okay, he was busted. That little maneuver had nothing to do with anything other than he didn’t like Trish and the way she was responding to Pete. Not that he had any claim on the other man, but still.

“Well, the only ones we got that would fit the bill are some folks from over at the casino.” She wrinkled her nose and squinted down at her handwriting.

“That would be them.” Now they were getting somewhere. “I’d like to see about getting them released.”

“You’d have to talk with the Chief about that.” She transferred her squint to Jeremiah and paused.

“Well, Trish.” Jeremiah tried, he really tried to keep his tone even. “Do you think I could see the Chief?”

“He’s kinda busy right now.” Trish hooked her fingers in her belt. “You know, you don’t look so good. You feeling okay?”

Lord love a duck, this just wasn’t his day. Unable to help himself Jeremiah found himself looking over at Pete for some help. Hell, he thought he’d even managed to suppress the pathetic whimper that

wanted to cross his lips, but he wasn't sure. Whatever he did or didn't do, the result was that Pete rested that nice, large hand in the small of his back once again and took over the conversation.

"Naah, he's really not. He was just in that big bust up over at the casino, and we were on the way over to the hospital when we got that code 2 to head over here." Pete looked around curiously. "What was that about, anyway?"

Trish just giggled the noise grating on Jeremiah's nerve endings. "Well there was a small problem with that newly engaged couple we got locked up in the back?" She jerked her thumb like they knew where she was pointing. "They'd started fighting and it looked like a couple of the deputies were gonna get messed up, so I just kinda called that in to be proactive, you know?"

Pete just nodded like he understood what she was saying, but Jeremiah wasn't real sure he did.

"Anyway, that all got straightened out and everything's fine so we cancelled that one and now things are settled down in the back and the Chief and the rest of the guys are ... busy." Trish settled up against the counter, in Jeremiah's mind the only thing keeping her from falling right into Pete's lap.

"I can see that. Still I've got to get this one over to the hospital, but with his grandmother missing and all, you know how it is. Is there anything you can do to help us out?"

There were times when life absolutely wasn't fair, Jeremiah decided sourly. Watching that smile of Pete's put Trish's hormones on a slow simmer was one of them.

"Well, the Chief said not to disturb him, but seeing as how it is his grandmother and all ..."

 Obviously unaware of her mimicry of Pete's

words Trish's voice trailed off as she began that slow lean over the counter towards Pete once again.

"You're a dear." Pete pushed Jeremiah forward until they were behind the counter and next to Trish. "We'll just say we pushed our way past you. Which room is he in?"

"They're all in the back interrogation room." Trish shook her head. "He's not going to be real happy about this."

"We'll make sure you don't get in any trouble." Pete wasn't losing any momentum and while Jeremiah was tempted to slow down just to feel more of that lean frame pressed up against his back he kept reminding himself about Gramma L. and Jonah and pushed on.

They hesitated outside the steel door in the back, looking at each other in surprise at the sound of raucous laughter that was clearly audible through the closed door.

"Doesn't sound like any interrogation I've ever seen on TV." Jeremiah grumbled before he pushed open the door and surveyed the room and its startled inhabitants.

Well, make that startled inhabitants save one. The Chief, easy to spot by his age and bulk and three deputies all looked up and gaped at Jeremiah and Pete as they stood in the doorway. Gramma L., well, she just kept dealing out the cards and grumbling at the delay in play.

"If you two boys aren't playing that just have a seat and let us finish this hand." Her small hand, wrinkled and spotted with age hit the top of the table with a loud smack. "Chief! You in or you out?"

"In. In." The Chief coughed and stood up, struggling to reclaim his authority. "Can I help you two?"

Jeremiah could feel his head start to pound again. "I'd heard Gramma L. had been picked up for assault and resisting arrest." He looked around the table and the cards. "'Course, doesn't exactly look like any holding cell I've ever seen."

Gramma L. waved her hand at him. "Oh, that was all just a little misunderstanding, Jeremiah. That's all straightened out, and I've been showing the Chief Brewer here and his boys a few of Grandpa L.'s poker secrets. Might come in handy next time they stop by that casino you work at."

Jeremiah stiffened. "You won't show those to me and Jonah, but you'll show them to complete strangers?" He glared at the men holding the cards. "And how come you whacked me upside the head anyway?"

Gramma L. looked up. "Now don't you be getting in a snit, Jeremiah. A little tap like that shouldn't have hurt a bit as stubborn and hard-headed as you are."

Jeremiah pretended to ignore the soft "Amen" that was spoken by the man beside him.

"Who's your friend?" Gramma L. gave Pete a wink and Jeremiah knew, just knew without looking that he gave her one right back.

Without waiting for his answer she dealt two cards to the Deputy to her right. "'Sides, I couldn't let you mix it up with Aubrette's new fiancé. That's no way to welcome him to the family. Just think how uncomfortable that would make Thanksgiving." The old woman peered across the table. "You holding?"

As Jeremiah slid slowly into the chair Pete held out for him, he told himself that his momentary weakness was purely the result of his head injury. "She just met him, how in the hell can she be engaged to him?"

Gramma L. slid a couple of cards across the table. “Now, don’t you be a dog in the manger, son. You don’t want her, don’t be getting in the way of her finding happiness.”

Jeremiah let his head fall back against the hard wood of the chair. “Where are Aubrette and Mr. Wonderful anyway?” He mumbled while looking up at the ceiling. He really was going to get Jonah for this.

“Oh, well, seems like the charges against them aren’t able to be dropped. Some fool at the casino decided to press charges – seems like he got a silver token in the eye and when he took off after Aubrette, Mike took off after him.” She paused admiringly. “That boy has got a damn fine right hook on him, makes me all tingly to think about it. Anyway, I started playing the boys here to make their bail money.”

The old woman looked cagily at Jeremiah. “I don’t suppose you could come up with it and I could just play these boys for fun?”

It was late Sunday morning and Valentine’s Day was long over before Jeremiah was finally allowed to walk out of the hospital. Pete had driven him there in sympathetic silence once they’d left the station. He’d even given Jeremiah another cold pack for his head and ignored his muttering. But that was the extent of his sympathy. Nothing Jeremiah could say would dissuade him from holding Jeremiah to his end of their bargain and delivering him to the local emergency room.

As he thankfully exchanged his backless hospital gown for his disheveled uniform Jeremiah contemplated the injustices of his world – and boy, were there plenty. None the least was the surprising dismay he’d felt at saying goodbye to Pete. Of course, being poked and prodded by various hospital staff soon threatened to supersede that.

But after being tested and looked at and woken at various points during his stay, they'd disappointedly declared him fine except for his headache and bad temper and were finally sending him out the door. Of course, Jeremiah had no idea how he was going to get back home but he once again he was too damn tired to care. Surely there was somebody he could hitch a ride from.

Jeremiah knew he was going to be getting a call from Jonah once the weekend was over, and he had to admit that leaving Aubrette and Mike the Man Mountain in jail was perhaps not the best way to foster future family relations, but he'd out and out had enough. Let Jonah come and straighten it all out.

Chief Brewer had promised to look after Gramma L. and even offered to put her up with his own grandmother once the game was over. Jeremiah had to smile at that. If he knew Gramma L. they were still playing and the Chief and his deputies had lost everything but their socks.

As for Pete Mitchell, well, Jeremiah's smile faded. The man was obviously long gone, and Jeremiah couldn't honestly blame him. Even if he hadn't imagined the bit of interest in those brown eyes surely the exposure to his surrogate family was more than enough to chase him away. If nothing else Jeremiah would have a face now to go along with his extracurricular shower activities and that was just going to have to do.

Jeremiah sighed as he signed the paperwork at the desk and nodded his understanding at the directions he was given for the fifth time before he reached down for his gear he'd dropped by his feet at the counter.

"Need a hand with that?" The voice was deep and pitched low enough not to be directed at anyone but him. Jeremiah looked into the big brown eyes, stunned as Pete took the bag in his large hand.

"Pete?" he questioned in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"I figured you might need a ride home." The other man shifted his feet for a second. "I took the rig home and got my truck. They told me you might be a while."

"You've been waiting?"

"Well, yeah." Pete looked uncomfortable for a minute. "Shouldn't I have?"

"No. I mean, yes. I mean" Jeremiah stopped and squinted up at the other man. "My head hurts." He confessed, giving up everything but his pleasure at seeing Pete once again.

Pete just smiled at him. "I figured it might. Let's get you somewhere you can get some rest and we can talk later." He threw Jeremiah's bag over his shoulder and took put his hand in the small of Jeremiah's back, the small gesturing supporting and warming Jeremiah from the inside out.

The weekend was almost over and another Monday was on its way. This time, though, Jeremiah thought he just might be looking forward to it.

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