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Perfect Man

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Edited by Helen Woodall. Photography and cover art by Les Byerley.

Electronic book Publication December 2008

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PERFECT MAN

Shawn Lane

Dedicated to all our perfect men

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Boy Scout: Boy Scouts of America

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Chapter One

"I have the perfect man for you, Alex."

"I'm not really looking for a man right now, perfect or otherwise," Alexander Nichols told his sister. He shifted his cell phone to his other ear and continued to type the email message to his client.

"Don't you think it's time you started dating?"

"It hasn't been that long, Jill."

Jill sighed heavily. "Travis broke up with you eight months ago. He's moved on. He's got a new boyfriend and Ken said he told him they are talking about moving in together."

Alex paused, his fingers poised over the keyboard. His ex-boyfriend's brother, Ken, also happened to be Jill's husband. It made things more than a little awkward at family gatherings. What few they'd had since Travis had dumped him. He winced and resumed typing.

"Whatever. What does that have to do with me?"

"The point is you seem rather pathetic because you haven't even gone on a single date since."

"How do you know?"

Silence greeted his question, but only for about ten seconds. "Have you?"

Alex was tempted to lie. He really was. A tiny white lie would shut his sister up. At least for a short time. Nothing ever shut his older sister up for good.

"Well... I had coffee with someone a couple of weeks ago." He had, sort of. The coffee place he frequented ran out of tables and an old man sitting alone at one of them invited him to take the vacant chair.

"Hmm. That's a start, I suppose. Have you seen him again?"

Sure, Alex saw the man all the time since he too frequented the coffee place. He shrugged. "I've seen him a few times."

"I still think you can meet my guy for a drink."

Alex rolled his eyes and hit send. "Your guy?"

"You know what I mean. I work with Craig. He's as handsome as sin, educated, owns his own home, drives a Mercedes. Charming and interesting too. I know a lot of women who wish he wasn't gay."

Alex stared at the window of his tenth-floor office in the Century City section of Los Angeles. It was early February and the sky was overcast. The weathercast had said a slight chance of showers. Still dry as far as he could tell.

"Alex?"

"Sorry, I zoned." He leaned back wearily in his chair. "It's been my experience that guys named Craig are all jerks."

"Yeah, okay, but you're meeting him," his sister insisted. "I told him you'd meet him at six thirty tonight."

"What? Jill..."

"Oh, calm down. It's a drink. And he's meeting you in the bar on the first floor of your own building so you don't even have to drive anywhere. See how convenient I made it for you?"

"I don't need my big sister to pick up men for me. I don't like blind dates."

Jill laughed. "Stop whining. I expect a call later tonight telling me how brilliant I am. He's perfect, Alex, trust me. Gotta run. Bye."

Alex frowned at his cell and tossed it on his desk. His gaze flew to the clock on his desk. Only forty-five minutes until he was supposed to meet this guy? Blowing out a heavy breath, he considered leaving work now and skipping the whole thing.

Coward's way out? Maybe, but he didn't even agree to meet this guy. He owed his sister big time for this crap.

* * * * *

Alex couldn't believe he was sitting at a corner booth in Max's Bar waiting for some man named Craig. He sipped his beer and checked his watch. His "date" was already ten minutes late. Swell, stood up by a blind date arranged by his sister. All right, so maybe he was pathetic.

"Five more freakin' minutes," he muttered out loud.

As if on cue a tall, dark-haired man in a pinstriped suit appeared in the doorway. He looked to be about twenty-eight, Alex's own age. He was gorgeous with his classic high cheekbones and chiseled jaw. Movie star looks is what they used to call it. He'd give his sister that much, she did know a good-looking man.

Too bad he was also one of the biggest pricks Alex had ever known.

Why in the name of all that was holy hadn't he found out Craig's last name from his sister? Craig Fucking Fontaine.

Idiot.

Craig glanced in his direction and approached his table with a beautiful perfect smile. Alex's cock betrayed him by growing hard.

"Alex?"

Craig did not remember him. Perfect. Figured.

"No, sorry. You must have the wrong person," Alex said.

Craig's killer smile dimmed for just a moment. "Really? You look just like the picture on your sister's desk."

Jill and her damn family pictures.

"All right, yes, I'm Alex."

"Sorry I'm late," Craig said, grabbing the empty chair and plopping his six-foottwo-inch frame into it. "Traffic was a bitch."

"Uh-huh. Look, um, Craig, I was just leaving."

"Leaving? Hey, I know was a bit late, but... Don't I know you from somewhere?" Craig frowned. "You look so familiar. Are you an actor or a model or something?"

Before he could reply the waitress came to their table to take Craig's order. He ordered a beer and turned back to Alex.

Alex sighed. "Ferguson is my sister's married name."

"So?"

"Her maiden name was Nichols."

"I don't follow you."

Dumb jock. Craig had always been a dumb jock. Gritting his teeth, Alex said, "I'm Alex Nichols. Didn't Jill tell you my name?"

Craig shrugged. "She just said her brother, Alex, but..."

"We went to high school together, Craig," Alex said very slowly.

Craig continued to frown as though deep in thought. He shook his head. "Alex Nichols? I don't think I remember...Alex Nichols?"

Alex waited for the waitress to set down Craig's beer. When she walked away, he took a large swallow of his own drink before responding.

"I came out my senior year in high school," he said, wincing a little at the stillpainful memories. Hell, it had been ten years, you'd think he'd get over it. "You did your best to torture me the rest of the time we were in school."

Craig opened his mouth and then shut it.

"You took every opportunity you could to humiliate me because I was gay. And now you're here claiming you're gay? Please." Alex snorted. "You probably found out exactly who my sister is and planned this whole thing just to play some fucked-up game."

"Whoa...Alex. No. Geez, that's not true. I didn't know who you were." Craig ran his long-fingered hand through his tousled dark hair. "Man, that was ten years ago. I can't believe you still even remember that."

Alex pushed aside the lump forming in his throat. This was just great. "Maybe because it was a shitty time for me, thanks to you."

"I'm sorry. Look, I asked to meet you. That's true. I saw your picture and I thought you were hot and your sister mentioned having a gay brother so I asked her if that was the guy in the picture and well, she set it up from there. I didn't realize you were familiar until I saw you in person and even then I didn't think about you being from high school."

Alex felt stupid for caring. How could it hurt after all this time? Maybe because in high school his fantasy man had been Craig Fontaine. They'd been friends before he admitted being gay.

"I'm really sorry, Alex," Craig said. "Whatever I said in high school. I don't know why I did any of that. Probably because I was questioning my own sexuality and it scared me."

Alex exhaled. "Yeah, um, forget it. I didn't mean to hit you with all this hostility. I was just surprised, I guess. Anyway, I should be going."

"What? No. Come on. Let me buy you dinner. We can start over, can't we? I saw a steakhouse on my way over here. We could probably even walk. Please?"

The gorgeous former man of his dreams was pleading with him? How could he resist that? Probably should. It could still be some dumb jock joke.

"Okay."

* * * * *

Craig glanced over the wine list, glad Alex hadn't turned down his invitation to dinner. He'd never met anyone as prickly as the man across from him.

He did remember Alex now, but he couldn't believe he was still hung up over something that happened so long ago.

Hell, the guy was a fucking god. Didn't he know he was every gay man's wet dream? Not surprising for a moment he'd thought he might be a model or something.

Had Jill really told him her brother-in-law had dumped this guy? Unbelievable.

He stole a quick glance at Alex, whose nose was buried in the menu. Alex had sandy brown hair with streaks of gold as though he spent a lot of time in the California sun. Though he wore a suit, Craig didn't miss the broad shoulders hiding under the suit coat. He could just imagine Alex's biceps. Slightly shorter than his own height, Craig would put Alex at about six feet or maybe six feet one inch. He definitely looked like he worked out and his skin was lightly tanned once again as though he spent time in the sun, but was not exactly a sunbather. His eyes were... He stared hard at Alex, willing him to look up.

Alex must have felt his stare for he glanced up from the menu. "Did you pick a wine?"

Gray! His eyes were gray like pewter. Wow. He really was a god. Craig shifted in his chair to relieve the pressure of his painful erection.

"Hmm?"

"Wine?"

"Oh, yes, would you rather have white or red?"

Alex shrugged, his broad shoulders stretching the coat. "I know you're supposed to drink red with steak but I personally like white. Sauvignon Blanc preferably."

"Then that's what we'll get. I like it too."

Craig ordered the wine from the waiter and then picked up his own menu. He hoped they were over the awkwardness of what had happened in high school.

He'd be the first to admit he wasn't always the nicest guy. Home life had sucked and he hadn't been lying to Alex when he told him he'd been struggling with his own

sexuality. At the time his father had been dying of cancer and his mother couldn't handle the emotional strain. Craig had kept a lot of shit inside.

"So what do you do for a living?" he asked without looking up from the menu.

"Jill didn't tell you?" Alex had set his menu down and was now buttering a slice of sourdough. "I'm a literary agent."

"Yeah?" He did lower his menu then. "Don't you have to be in New York or something?"

"Not anymore. A common misconception. There's this thing called the internet and email and the telephone. I make several trips a year, too, to meet with editors in person. It's no big deal anymore. Plus I handle several screenwriters."

Craig smiled when the waitress returned with the wine and offered him a taste. He nodded and she poured full glasses for both of them. After they'd ordered and she left their table, he said, "I guess you know I'm an accountant since I work with Jill."

"Yeah, I figured. I'm a little surprised though."

"Really why?"

Alex flushed. "Well, to be honest you sort of struck me as a dumb jock."

"Right. Because I played football I don't have a brain." Craig had been dealing with the stereotype most of his life. Athletes weren't gay either. Or so the stereotype went.

"Since you were a bit of an asshole to me I didn't really stop to analyze you too much," Alex said dryly.

Craig toyed with his wineglass. "Yeah. We were friends before you – "

"Came out? Yeah. Not like best buddies or anything, but we went to the same schools pretty much all our lives."

Craig felt his face heat. He really had been a jerk. He wasn't anymore...or at least he hoped he wasn't. But he didn't know if Alex would allow him to prove he had changed. At least he'd agreed to dinner.

"So," Alex said, taking a healthy sip of his wine. "I guess this is the part with the awkward small talk. Obviously you aren't in a relationship if you're going out on blind dates. Or are you?"

Craig winced at the accusing tone. He couldn't get a break with this guy. He was getting a little annoyed. "No, I am not in a relationship. I had a boyfriend two years ago but he died." The lie slipped out so easily.

"Oh." Now it was Alex's turn to blush. "Um, sorry. AIDS?"

"No. Not every gay guy who dies had that," Craig snapped.

"I know."

"He died of leukemia." Just like his father.

"Were you together long?"

Craig shook his head. "Just a year. It was only a few months when we found out he was sick. Anyway, what a depressing subject. How about you?"

"Well, Jill must have told you. I was dating her husband's brother."

"She said you broke up."

"He dumped me, actually," Alex said. "I was working a lot at the time. Truth is I didn't pay a lot of attention to Travis and well...he decided I was a workaholic and he needed someone who spent more time with him."

Dinner hadn't been so terrible, Alex thought, as they walked back to the parking garage holding their cars. Craig paid, though he'd protested.

It was cool out. The showers that threatened to fall all day had finally started. The cold made Craig's cheeks turn a very attractive shade of pink. In spite of himself, Alex found it charming. The man was still the finest-looking guy he'd ever seen. His cock thought so too, because as he approached the aisle his car was down, his erection pressed against his boxers.

"My car's down here. Where's yours?"

"Up two levels." Craig glanced toward the nearby elevator. "Listen, I really enjoyed meeting you...I mean meeting you again. I know I'm not your favorite person, but I'd like to see you again. Maybe a movie tomorrow night?"

"No."

Craig's expression showed his disappointment. He smiled a little crookedly. "Okay. Well, it was nice -"

"I meant no to the movie," Alex interrupted. "Tomorrow's Saturday. Why don't you come over and I'll make you dinner."

"I'd really love that."

Alex smiled for the first time that night. So he was taking a bit of a chance. He felt okay about it. Which was a good thing, he supposed.

"Give me your number and I'll call you with the time."

After they exchanged numbers, Alex waited until Craig got in the elevator before going into his own car.

"I hope I don't regret this," he said aloud.

* * * * *

"Whatever you're cooking smells amazing," Craig commented before taking a swallow of his beer. He was sitting on a stool at the bar just outside the kitchen. Alex, who stood in the kitchen stirring a large pot, wore an apron with a French chef appliqué.

Alex had a three-bedroom condominium in Santa Monica not far from the beach. He'd given Craig a tour when he first arrived. There was a great view of the ocean from the master bedroom on the top floor.

"Just spaghetti."

"That doesn't smell like jarred sauce."

Alex laughed. "It's not. I make it myself. I've always liked to dabble in the kitchen. At one time I even considered going to chef school."

"Really? I had no idea. So why did you become a literary agent?"

Alex shrugged. "I loved books and worked for a small publisher for a time. Then for a couple of years I moved to New York and worked for an agent there. I liked it. What made you decide to be an accountant? I never would have expected a CPA out of you."

"My father was one." For some reason it made him feel closer to his father after he died. A feeling of closeness he'd lost even before the death. It never got easier to talk about his father, Craig realized with a heavy heart. It hurt like hell.

"I didn't know you lost your father, sorry." Alex pulled out a colander out of cabinet and set it in the sink.

"Yeah. Actually...he died while I was in high school." Craig cleared his throat and then took a swig of his beer.

"Man, I didn't know. I'm sorry. That had to be really tough."

Craig nodded and looked away. "That was a really bad time for me. Dad got sick and my mom didn't handle it well. Anyway, I don't really want to talk about that. It's too depressing."

"Dinner's ready. You want wine?"

"I'm okay with the beer."

"Terrific, then it's served."

Craig had gone on about how great the dinner was which made Alex smile. He hadn't stopped smiling, really, since his fantasy man had arrived. It worried him a little. He could easily see himself falling head over heels in love with Craig—again. Just like high school. Only if it ended just like his crush had ended in high school it would be much more painful.

Alex rose from the dining table and started clearing up the dishes.

"Oh, hey, wait, let me do that," Craig said. He swiped up a stack of dishes and headed into the kitchen. Alex's gaze followed him. His ass was perfect, just like the rest of him. He'd looked great in the suit last night but in the tight jeans...well...he made Alex's mouth water.

"You're a guest in my home, I should be cleaning up," Alex protested. He went to take the dishes out of Craig's hands but he neatly sidestepped and put them in the sink.

"Where's your dishwasher?" Craig asked, glancing around, a puzzled look on his face.

"I'm right here," Alex said with a laugh. "This place has been here for years. The previous owners never put one in and I thought about it when I first bought the place, but since there's usually only me it seemed ridiculous."

Craig threw him a glance like he couldn't believe anyone would do the dishes by hand. Shrugging, he reached for the bottle of dish soap on the sink.

"Oh, no, you are not washing dishes." Alex snatched the bottle out of his hand.

"Give me that. You cooked." Craig pursued him across the kitchen and pinned him against a counter.

Alex held the bottle away out of his reach and opened his mouth to say something when Craig pressed against him. Thoughts of washing dishes flew out of his head. His gaze drifted to Craig's lips.

Craig took the bottle of soap out of Alex's hands and put it down. His sapphirecolored eyes grew darker, flared with awareness. He held Alex's hands above his head, leaning into him.

Alex couldn't hold back a gasp. His cock was rock hard and pressing against his jeans. He desperately needed to relieve the pressure but Craig had his hands pinned.

Then Craig grasped his hands in only one of his and slid his other hand down to Alex's crotch. Craig's lips crushed his just as his hand gripped his erection through his jeans.

"Alex," Craig breathed against his lips. His tongue darted into Alex's mouth.

"Mmm." Alex sucked on Craig's tongue.

Craig released his hands to unzip Alex's jeans. Breaking their kiss, he knelt in front of Alex and pulled his jeans and boxers down all at once. Alex's hard cock jumped out and slapped Craig's cheek.

"Oh God," Alex moaned.

For a moment, Craig only stared. Alex could feel his hot breath on his erection. He began to wonder if there was a problem. He swallowed nervously.

"Craig?" His heart raced. A nagging sense of doubt entered his lust-filled brain. What if this was all some twisted joke and Craig suddenly started laughing at him? He would die of shame.

"I'm just amazed how beautiful you are," Craig said, his voice reassuring. "You have quite the presentation."

Alex laughed. "Um, glad you think so."

"I definitely do. I can't wait to taste it."

"What are you waiting for then?"

It was Craig's turn to laugh. "Okay, okay. I'll guess I'll admire its beauty later."

Alex closed his eyes. "Yes, please."

Craig's mouth closed over the tip and very slowly he sucked it in deeper. His knees buckling, Alex grabbed the edge of the counter to keep standing. Craig kept taking his cock in deeper, down his throat. God, was that what deep throating meant? None of his other lovers had been able to take his larger than average penis that far.

"Oh my God," he exclaimed. He threaded his fingers in Craig's dark hair, holding him to his cock. His balls tightened and he knew it wouldn't take him long to come.

Craig squeezed his balls and then pulled him all the way out and then pushed him all the way in. He repeated the process several times. The only sound in the kitchen was Alex's heavy panting. "I'm... I'm," Alex tried to form the complete sentence but couldn't. His body tensed, his balls pulled tight, and his cock emptied down his lover's throat.

Craig continued sucking Alex for a moment, then released him. He stood up and kissed Alex.

Alex tasted himself on Craig's lips. He could barely believe his dream man had just... Wow.

"Okay?" Craig asked, nipping Alex's bottom lip with sharp teeth.

"Oh yeah. I owe a huge debt to whomever you learned that from." Alex exhaled. "Give me a moment and I'll return the favor."

"Nope."

"No?"

Craig grinned. "I want to fuck you." He gestured with his head to the dining room table. "There."

Alex blinked. Lord, his cock perked up.

"Please tell me you have a condom and lube."

Alex kissed him. "I have something even better. I have a pre-lubed condom."

Chapter Two

Craig ripped the condom package Alex brought him and rolled the pre-lubed condom on his erection. His soon-to-be lover had removed his shoes and pants and had just pulled his t-shirt off. Craig couldn't help but admire Alex's fine abs. What did they call it? Washboard stomach. Oh yeah.

Next his gaze drifted to Alex's biceps. Good God, he could come just looking at him.

"Something wrong?" Alex asked, pausing next to the dining table.

"Hell no. You are just one beautiful man."

Alex rolled his eyes. "Get real. You're the gorgeous one. My sister told me all the women at the office lust after you."

"She exaggerates." Craig pulled his own shirt off. "You...on the table."

Alex complied eagerly, dangling his legs in front of him. "How do you want me? On my stomach or back?"

"Just as you are. Lean back." Craig knelt in front of the table and drew Alex across until his ass was on the edge. Since the condom was already lubed it wouldn't take him long to get Alex ready for his cock. Good thing, 'cause he was ready to explode. His tongue darted in.

"Craig," Alex gasped. He tensed up just a little.

"It's all right, babe, relax," Craig urged.

"Sorry, it's been a while."

Craig moistened two fingers and slid them into Alex's opening along with his tongue. He pushed past the tight ring of muscle and probed for his lover's prostate.

"Yes," Alex yelled, arching up.

Craig chuckled. "Well, at least you're more relaxed."

"Uh-huh. Fuck me."

"Love to." Craig stood and poised his cock at Alex's entrance. He pressed the tip in and gritted his teeth, trying to prevent himself from coming instantly. Lord, it wasn't his first time. But, man, his cock was so hard he could probably cut a diamond with it.

"More, I want more," Alex begged.

Craig clenched his jaw. A hot man begging him was impossible to resist. He slid in farther. Just a little more and he would be balls-deep.

"Oh God, yes, please, Craig."

"You have to stop that, Alex, or you're going to make this a real short fuck," Craig warned. He pushed in all the way and waited, getting himself back under control. Alex had one tight passage and his cock wanted to come so bad he could hardly stand it.

Sweat beading on his forehead, Craig withdrew halfway and then plunged back in.

Alex closed his eyes and started stroking his own cock. He did this little thing where he pulled his bottom lip with his teeth and Craig was transfixed by it. He snapped his hips against Alex again and again, increasing the pace and pressure as he thrust. The dining table squeaked a bit as he fucked Alex and Craig wondered briefly if they would break it.

Craig tried to think of something...anything...that would slow down the orgasm tickling his spine. It proved useless. He gripped Alex's hips as his balls tightened. Slamming again and again into his lover, with a hoarse shout, Craig came with an intensity that overwhelmed him.

Panting heavily, still inside Alex, Craig tried to remain standing. A trickle of sweat dripped onto his cheek. He watched Alex jerking his own cock faster and harder, watched that little lip pull. Alex's pewter eyes focused on him and with a cry of his own, his cock spurted out on those amazing abs.

Craig withdrew and leaned against a nearby wall, his eyes closed. His heart raced like it would burst through his chest.

"Stay the night," Alex said softly.

Craig nodded. "Okay."

* * * * *

Alex tried not to read too much into it, but if that wasn't the best sex of his life he didn't know what was. Two best, actually, because when they'd made it upstairs and into his bed, Craig fucked him again. Three if you counted the blowjob. Hell, he hadn't come so much in many, many months.

Even before Travis ended it with him they hadn't been very passionate lovers. Their entire affair had been comfortable. They'd hooked up in the first place because it seemed entirely natural that Jill's gay brother and Ken's gay brother got together. The sex was nice, but not mind blowing.

Craig had blown his mind. And he was worried. Alex didn't think Craig would take a joke so far as to sleep with him. No, he wasn't worried about that anymore. Craig was without a doubt gay. But Alex was afraid it wouldn't take very long at all for his heart to be fully engaged. Already his crush was back in full swing.

"Who was your first?" Craig asked in a sleepy voice.

Alex's head rested on his broad, muscular chest. He couldn't stop touching the man's chest. He was like Adonis from mythology, Alex thought.

"A guy in college. My college roommate actually. Pure sex, no feelings behind it." Alex's heartbeat raced. He prayed Craig wouldn't make some comment about how that's the way it was between them now. He cleared his throat. "You?"

"Well, the first time I had sex was in high school with a girl. You remember Becky?"

"Sure, your girlfriend."

"Yeah. I guess, really, that's when I first started to seriously think about it. Before that, you know I'd see some actor or athlete and think he was hot, but I kind of pushed

that idea away. It wasn't that unusual to be able to tell someone of the same sex was attractive. But when I had sex with Becky I had to think about another guy just to get an erection."

"Yikes."

"Anyway, it wasn't until I was twenty that I was with a guy. All my life I wanted to be a police officer. I almost entered the police academy, so my first guy was a cop I knew. We saw each other for a while, but it ended up not working out. It's hard for a cop to be openly gay even now."

"I didn't know you wanted to be a cop," Alex said, peeking up at him. "Why didn't you?"

Craig shrugged. "Like I said, my dad was an accountant. I guess after he died I wanted to honor him that way."

The way his voice sounded, almost like it was a rehearsed speech, Alex knew Craig hated being an accountant. He'd sacrificed his own desires to please his father. If things progressed between them, Alex fully intended to discuss the matter further with him.

"So how come you waited until you were twenty for your first guy?" he asked.

"When I first realized it back in high school things were crap. My dad was dying and did die and then my mom...she didn't handle it well. She'd always been a bit fragile and when Dad died my family had to have her institutionalized."

"Wow, I'm sorry. I had no idea."

Craig sighed. "It's not like I was sharing much then. Nobody knew. I had to move in with my grandparents for the remainder of school and they drove me there every day. But I wasn't close to my grandparents. They had their own lives and resented having to deal with me. I counted the days when I didn't have to ever go back to their house or school again. Needless to say, sex of any kind wasn't a priority for me for a while."

"What about your grandparents now? They still around?"

"No, they've both passed on now. Like I said as soon as school was over they pretty much disappeared anyway. They were my mom's parents and they liked to pretend otherwise because of her illness. They weren't warm, fuzzy people."

Alex's throat clogged. "I really didn't know. It's amazing how you can not know what the people around you are going through."

"Very true. You were going through stuff of your own and I didn't make it easier for you. I really am sorry, Alex." Craig ran his fingers through Alex's hair.

"It's okay. You're right. That was in high school. It's time to move on." Alex shook his head. "I used to dream of ways to get even."

"Even?"

"It sounds stupid now, but yeah. I'd have all these fantasies about how I could humiliate you."

"Alex-"

"Don't worry, Craig, I don't have them anymore. I was holding on to the pain for a long time. I don't want to hold on to that anymore. I like you. I like you a lot. And I hope you like me. Maybe we can possibly have something?" Alex was taking a big chance speaking his thoughts out loud so soon after they'd met. But you had to take a chance sometimes.

"Yes. I would really like that, Alex," Craig said softly. He yawned. "I'm afraid I'm falling asleep though."

"Sleep. We can talk later."

* * * * *

Craig jolted awake. His heart beat loudly and painfully in his chest. For a moment dark despair choked him.

Not again.

He sat up, being careful not to disturb Alex. The torment was so much to bear he rubbed his chest where his heart beat.

Craig had hoped meeting Alex, sharing with him, possibly developing something would make the demons go away. He blew out a heavy breath, more convinced than ever they never would. Was he really going to be like his mother?

What was he doing here? He didn't need the complication of someone he cared about and who might care about him. In the end he would only hurt Alex.

He should grab his clothes and make his escape now before he woke Alex. After all, he suspected he would only have to ignore the other man's calls for a few days. Alex wouldn't persist, that much Craig knew about him. It could be just a memory of great sex.

Swinging his legs out with as minimal movement as he could manage, he got out of bed. Alex had a large set of French doors leading out to a balcony. He'd explained he had replaced the regular sliding glass doors. The moon was full and from the doors Craig could see the moonlight hitting the ocean. What a great place this was.

He had his own house in Burbank. Actually it was the house he grew up in. Had been his parents' house. Naturally he felt their haunting presence there and never felt comfortable.

"You okay?" Alex's arms came around his waist and Craig automatically leaned back against him.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"I'm kind of a light sleeper," Alex said. He nuzzled Craig's neck.

All thoughts of leaving went away with the rise of his cock. Craig sighed and tilted his head a bit to give Alex even better access.

"You have an amazing view here. This place is great," he murmured.

"It should be for the price I paid." Alex's own hard cock pressed against Craig's ass. Craig spread his stance a bit. "Shall I get a condom?"

"Hmm, yes."

Alex let go of him for the time it took to reach into the nightstand drawer next to his king-sized bed. He tore open the package and rolled it on to his erection.

He wrapped his arms around Craig again. "You don't mind if I fuck you?"

"Mind? I may mind if you don't," Craig said with a chuckle. He pushed back against Alex.

"Well, some guys only like to top so I'm just making sure."

"Yeah, usually I do, but I won't complain either way."

Craig closed his eyes and leaned back, turning his neck enough to meet Alex's lips. When Alex's tongue plunged in to find Craig's, his fingers probed Craig's opening. It had been a while since he allowed anyone to fuck him. It was generally a loss of control he didn't permit, but for some reason tonight he wanted it.

Alex deepened the kiss, his tongue dancing wildly in Craig's mouth. "God, you have a great mouth. I think I could kiss you all night."

Craig shook with need. He grabbed his own cock and ran his hand up and down the length. Alex slid into his opening, hesitating only briefly at the tight ring of muscle before pressing in all the way. Alex thrust slow and deep.

It was a challenge to stay upright. Craig didn't think he'd ever had sex standing up before. Against the wall, yes, but that provided support. Alex held his hips in a vise grip, plunging in and out. He bit his lip. The slow pace was both frustrating and incredible at the same time.

"You're really tight," Alex said against his throat. His tongue darted out to touch Craig's pulse.

Craig increased the pressure of his hand on his cock, jerking himself off rapidly. He'd also never fucked in front of a window and though he didn't even know if they could be seen through the French doors, it still added an element of forbidden excitement.

"Alex," he breathed. His lover now pumped into him faster, his grip tightening so much Craig guessed he would have bruises in the morning.

"Come for me, Craig," Alex said directly in his ear. "Come with my name on your lips. I want you to scream it."

Lord, his legs almost gave out with that command. His balls tightened painfully and with a hoarse shout of "Alex", he came over and over.

As though he'd only been waiting for Craig to come, Alex groaned and tensed, finding his own release.

Craig bent his head and tried to get his breathing under control. His throat throbbed from yelling, but he managed to say, "Um, my legs feel really weak right now. Can we maybe lie down?"

Alex laughed and pulled out of him and discarded the condom in a nearby wastebasket. "Yeah, sorry about that, I got a bit carried away with you standing in front of the doors. But, man, that was amazing. I've never done it that way before."

Craig sat down on the edge of the bed. "In front of the door? Standing up?"

Alex grinned and sat down next to him. "Yeah, that too. I've never topped, actually."

Craig blinked. "Really? Never?"

"Nope. Travis was one of those guys who just wouldn't. It wasn't an option for me to do him. I don't know, maybe it made him feel less gay. Whatever. But even before him, I was always the one on the bottom."

Craig whistled. "Well, I would never have known. It was...what did you say...amazing. You're a natural."

"Thanks." Alex turned abruptly serious. "Are you all right? When I first woke up and saw you standing there, well, I thought maybe you were thinking of leaving."

"No, just had a bad dream," Craig said easily.

Alex leaned over and kissed him. "Let's go back to sleep. It's only three thirty. Tomorrow's Sunday so we can both sleep in."

"Okay." Craig scooted over to the side of the bed he'd been sleeping on. Temporarily the despair had fled. It never went away for long, though. He wouldn't think about it.

"You want to go out for breakfast or you want me to make it for you?" Alex asked, lying beside him.

"Let's eat in. I like the idea of spending the whole day being lazy and having sex."

* * * * *

He was going to have to buy more condoms if they kept this up. Alex added chopped onions, tomatoes and avocados to the omelet he was making. How many did he have? The truth was he hadn't needed to purchase any in months.

Craig still slept and Alex intended to bring him his breakfast in bed. After another bout of early morning sex he'd asked Craig what he liked to eat. Besides the omelet he was fixing O'Brien potatoes and had already poured a cup of coffee with cream and a glass of tomato juice.

Alex hadn't been able to stop grinning since he woke. He hoped he wasn't setting himself up for a big fall. Even if Craig was no longer the dick he was in high school it didn't necessarily mean they were destined for a happily ever after. They might not even be destined to anything more than last night and today.

For the first time that morning, Alex frowned. There was something troubling about Craig last night. He really had suspected Craig was going to leave when he saw him standing just staring out at the ocean. A strange restlessness had radiated off Craig. Alex couldn't quite put his finger on it.

So, would he be okay with a one-night stand? Or a weekend stand, he guessed. Alex didn't know. He hadn't expected to see Craig Fontaine after high school and when he'd first strutted into that bar Friday night Alex's blood pressure had soared. But then

Craig flashed the killer smile, apologized for before and had such a subtle hint of vulnerability, Alex found himself agreeing to dinner. And now look where he was. Cooking breakfast for his fantasy man.

The Perfect Man.

Jill didn't know how close she was when she'd made that statement over the phone. How many times over the years had he jerked off to thoughts of Craig? Even after high school. Hell, if he were honest to himself anyway, he often pretended his lovers were Craig.

Now the real Craig was here and Alex didn't want it to be a one-time thing. But he certainly couldn't resort to becoming pathetic and clingy. If this was all Craig wanted, then Alex would accept it. He wasn't about to be thrown into jail for being an obsessed stalker.

He plated the omelet and potatoes and set the plate on the tray with the coffee and juice and utensils. The way to a man's heart was his stomach, the old adage went.

Alex went up the flights of stairs and into his room. Craig was softly snoring. Good, he hadn't awakened yet. He put the tray down on a nearby dresser and stood to assess his guest.

The dark tousled hair, the long lashes resting on his pale cheeks. Alex loved the way Craig's cheeks pinked when he got cold or when he laughed. It was incredibly endearing. Approaching the bed, he lifted the sheet covering Craig's nude body. His lover didn't stir.

Alex inhaled sharply, taking in the sight of Craig's long, thick erect cock. He crawled onto the bed and scooted until his face was right next to Craig's hard-on. Licking his lips in anticipation, he closed his mouth around the tip, pulling it slowly in.

Craig tensed, his eyes flying open.

"Relax," Alex said. "I just want to make you come."

"Oh my God, what a way to wake," Craig said with a throaty chuckle.

Alex knew he wasn't as good at this as Craig had been. He cupped his lover's balls and drew him in farther. With lots of practice, he could improve. He smiled to himself. He'd like that chance.

Craig pushed himself deeper into Alex's mouth. Alex tried not to gag, determined to do this. He opened his throat muscles. Sucking harder, his cheeks hollowed.

"Yes, Alex."

Craig seemed to be really getting into it, so Alex sucked harder and faster, pulling and pushing on his lover's cock. The low grunts coming from Craig encouraged him.

Alex felt Craig stiffen just before he came in Alex's mouth.

"Alex!"

Grinning from ear to ear, Alex looked down on the flushed man. His cheeks had that little pinkness he found more and more appealing.

"Wow, good morning." Craig's sapphire eyes twinkled.

"Good morning. I brought your breakfast. I was afraid it would get cold, but as fast as you came, I think it's salvageable." Alex went over to the tray.

"Yum, I'm starved. I could really get used to this, Alex."

That was the idea. Alex merely smiled.

Chapter Three

"So, I hear you liked my brother," Jill Ferguson, Craig's coworker, said Monday morning. They were standing by the accounting firm's coffeemaker. Craig had just poured himself a cup.

He glanced briefly at the petite blonde before taking a sip of his coffee. "Sure, he was all right."

"All right? You spent the weekend with him, didn't you?" Her look was indignant.

Craig hushed her. "Do you mind? I don't need the whole office knowing my business."

He headed to his office and Jill followed after him, closing the door and taking the chair in front of his desk.

"Well?" she asked, arching a blonde brow.

"Do I ask you about your relationship with your husband?"

"My husband isn't your brother." She waved her hand dismissively. "Cut the crap, Craig. Did you like Alex or not?"

Probably too much. He'd spent most of last night thinking about Alex and wishing he'd just stayed at Alex's Santa Monica condo instead of going home.

"I liked him very much and we had a great time together."

Jill grinned. "I knew it! I talked to Alex last night and he sounded happy. Happier than I've heard him in a long time. I have to say you move a bit fast though."

"As it turns out, your brother and I knew each other from high school. Didn't he tell you?"

"You did?" She frowned. "Oh my God, you're not that Craig, are you?"

Craig flushed. "Guilty as charged, yes."

"Damn, I had no idea. He must be pissed at me." Jill's smile faded and now she glared openly at him. "Are you messing with Alex?"

He understood why she asked him, but still— "I'm not messing with him. Some of us actually mature from high school."

Jill stared hard at him. "Did you know it was him when you saw his picture in my office?"

"No. I didn't know it was him, I didn't remember him, until he reminded me about high school. It wasn't the best time for me, okay? I don't like to think about it."

"Yeah, well, you didn't make it the best time for him either."

Craig sighed. "I know. I already apologized to Alex. We've gotten past that. Maybe you need to talk to your brother about this."

Jill stood up. "I intend to. Are you seeing him again?"

"Yes. We have plans to see a movie tomorrow night as a matter of fact."

"Uh-huh." Jill continued to frown. "I'll see you later."

Craig rolled his eyes and turned to his computer.

* * * * *

"Hey, I meant to tell you I'm sorry my sister hassled you yesterday," Alex said. He handed money to the cashier after turning over the large bag of popcorn to Craig.

"It's cool."

"No, it isn't. It's not her business."

"She's your big sister." Craig shrugged.

Alex shoved his wallet back into his pants and they went to the hallway where the movie they were seeing was located.

"Well, I told her it wasn't her business just the same."

Damn Jill anyway. Ever since his interfering sister spoke to Craig, he'd been cool to Alex over the phone when they talked. And now at the movie theater Alex sensed the distance. Craig was definitely putting up some sort of block.

First she got them together, now it seemed she would break them up. Well, not that they were...anything...yet. Not exactly anyway. A weekend together didn't mean they were a couple, Alex reminded himself. Even if he might want it that way.

After choosing their seats inside the theater, Alex turned to Craig. "Look, I was thinking, um, would you like to come over again this weekend? I could cook again or even barbecue. It's supposed to be beautiful."

Craig wouldn't look at him. He shifted in his seat. "Alex, I don't think..."

The lights dropped and the previews started. Alex's stomach twisted painfully. It was impossible to concentrate on the movie waiting for Craig to finish his "I don't think we should see each other again" sentence. He knew that was what was coming.

Halfway through the movie, Alex excused himself to go to the bathroom and he actually considered leaving. They'd both taken their own cars to the movie so he wouldn't be stranding Craig. He didn't want to face the rejection and he knew he was a coward for it, but there it was. The theater lobby had a few chairs set out for people to sit and wait, so Alex sat for a bit, deciding whether to leave or not.

Jill had spooked him with her "leave my brother alone" talk. Great. He was an idiot, getting upset over what amounted to a one-night stand. Alex ran his fingers through his hair and decided he would just go. Yeah, he was a coward. Okay.

He made his way through the parking lot to where he'd left his car and clicked the electronic lock.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

A hand grabbed his wrist as he reached for the door handle. Alex looked up. Craig stood there holding his wrist, frowning, hurt in his sapphire eyes.

Alex cleared his throat. "I...uh...thought I'd do us both a favor."

"What? What are you talking about? Are you leaving?"

"Come on, Craig, we both know you want nothing more to do with me. You made that pretty clear. I just thought it might be easier for both of us if we didn't have to face the scene, that's all." Alex swallowed the lump forming in his throat.

Craig shook his head. "No, Alex, you're wrong. I do want to keep seeing you."

Alex opened his mouth but no sound came out. He stared blankly at Craig. The man looked completely serious. His heart started beating fast. Okay, so maybe Craig wasn't rejecting him.

"You-you sounded like, back there, I thought you were going to say you didn't want to see me this weekend." He sounded whiny and pathetic to his own ears. He couldn't imagine what he must sound like to Craig.

Craig smiled. An achingly beautiful, drop-dead gorgeous smile that made Alex weak in the knees. Oh, and rock hard, too.

"I was going to say I didn't think I could wait until the weekend to be with you again," Craig said in a low voice.

"Oh." Oh, shit. Wow, had he almost blown it or what?

Craig pushed him against the car until he was only mere inches away. He lowered his head and gazed directly into Alex's eyes. "I like you, Alex. I like you a lot."

Alex's gaze broke from those sapphire eyes to land on Craig's full kissable lips. He swallowed. "I like you a lot, too."

Craig nodded. "That movie sucked anyway."

Alex laughed. He felt almost giddy.

"What do you say we go to my place? I think it's closer than yours," Craig suggested. "You can either follow me or I can drop you back here in the morning."

Oh, yeah. His cock liked the sound of that. It pressed against his slacks, aching to spring out. *Cool it, Alex.*

"I should probably follow you so I have time to get back to my place in the morning for a change of clothes."

* * * * *

Strange how after all this time Craig still found it difficult to catch his breath when he first opened the door to his Burbank home. For a moment he stood in the threshold, willing the panic to go away.

Images of a young boy cowering in the corner flashed through his mind. A woman with wild hair and eyes holding an iron over his head. He'd often thought of selling the house, breaking free. But it had a grip on him he couldn't shake.

"Craig?" Alex spoke from behind him, still outside the house. "Is everything all right?"

The images faded and he flicked on a few more lights. The living room was awash in bright cheerfulness. The shadowed demons faded. He exhaled.

"Of course." Craig stepped aside to allow Alex in.

"It's amazing you still live in the house you grew up in," Alex commented, glancing around. "I sometimes drive by our old house. I think it's had like four owners since my folks sold it."

"I inherited the house when my father died and my mother was institutionalized. I guess I'm a creature of habit." He tossed his keys down on the coffee table. "Want a tour?"

"Only if it starts and ends with the bedroom," Alex said with an endearing grin. One of his sandy locks had fallen into his eyes. He was adorable and Craig couldn't wait to get him into his bed and naked.

His home was a single-story bungalow style so it wouldn't make much of a tour anyway. His room was the master bedroom at the end of the hallway.

"This way." Craig gestured.

Alex gave him a look.

"What?"

"You don't want to turn off all the lights first?" Alex looked perplexed.

Craig smiled. He would play it cool. "Nah, I get up in the middle of the night sometimes for water and I don't want to stub my toe or something. I always leave them on." Which was true.

Alex shrugged. "Okay."

Craig flipped the switch for the light to his room. He prayed his errant mind wouldn't stray to other times, not while Alex was with him. He glanced down at his fisted hands and forced himself to relax.

"You seem a bit tense. Want me to give you a massage?" Alex asked. He'd already started unbuttoning his shirt.

"That would be great." Craig grinned and tossed his navy suit jacket and tie he'd taken off before the movie onto a nearby chair. He only undid the first couple of buttons of his own light blue shirt before he pulled it off over his head. His undershirt followed. His fingers went to unfasten his belt.

"Wait!" Alex came to him and pushed his fingers aside. His lover grinned a little sheepishly. "Sorry, but I saw this online porn movie once where the guy never took his pants off. He just stuck his cock and balls out of the pants and fucked the other guy that way."

Craig laughed.

Alex blushed. "I know, I know, but...well...I've sort of had this fantasy since then."

"Fine by me." He undid the zipper of his dress slacks, reached into his jockey shorts and pulled out his erect cock and balls.

"Oh, yeah," Alex breathed. He went instantly to his knees and pulled the head of Craig's erection into his mouth. His tongue licked the heavy vein along the length of it. He pulled Craig's balls in.

"God, Alex, um, we'd better get the condoms quick. I've been thinking about this for two days. I'm not going to last."

Alex released Craig's balls with a popping sound. "Where are they?"

Um, yeah, where are they? Think. "Bathroom...medicine cabinet."

"And lube?"

"Under the sink."

Alex disappeared into the adjoining bathroom and returned with a box of condoms and two bottles of lube.

Craig raised his eyebrows. "Easy, Alex, I'm human."

"I was a Boy Scout." Alex pulled off his own pants and underwear. His erection bobbed out from a thick thatch of hair. He ripped open a condom package and slid the sheath over Craig's cock. "Hold out your hands."

Craig did as instructed and his lover squirted lube into them. He slicked up his cock while Alex inserted his lubed fingers into his puckered entrance.

Craig paused a moment to watch his lover fingering himself. He knew his jaw must be hanging open. "Hurry on the bed."

Alex smiled and scooted on the bed on his stomach, offering his ass up to Craig.

Craig gritted his teeth to hold back the orgasm threatening to make this real short. He followed his lover and poised his pulsing cock at Alex's entrance.

"Now, Craig, please," Alex pleaded.

He'd never had sex with his pants on before, Craig realized, just as he plunged in. Somehow his twisted brain wondered how he would explain the stains he was sure to have on his slacks to his dry cleaner. Shaking his head, he started moving within Alex.

Leaning down, he licked a trail up Alex's spine. His lover quivered under the assault. He closed his eyes and pounded harder and faster, his balls tightening almost painfully. The sensation of his pants rubbing against him and against Alex's ass was more erotic than he imagined it would have been.

"Oh my God, yes," Alex cried. "Craig, yes, fuck me, fuck me hard."

Alex had one hand on the bed to prop himself up and the other was madly jerking his cock. Craig dug his fingers into Alex's hips, ramming again and again. The room filled with the sound of his balls slapping against his lover's ass.

Lord, he could get used to this. Used to Alex tightening around him, urging him on. To always having the same lover. His heart raced.

"Craig, Craig, I'm coming."

Alex jerked underneath him. A tingle went up Craig's spine.

"Oh, Jesus," Craig yelled, pumping fast and furious, his orgasm exploding, his cock twitching in his lover's ass. Alex's arm gave out and he collapsed on the bed. Craig soon followed, collapsing onto Alex, their bodies still connected.

Alex sighed with contentment. The night might have started out piss-poor, but what a great end it had. Sex with Craig was the most mind-blowing experience he'd ever had. He could easily get addicted. Hell, he probably already was. The man was a god. A heavy god, though.

"Um, babe, could you maybe lie beside me instead of on top of me?" he suggested.

Craig chuckled. "Sure."

Alex felt his lover withdraw and for a moment the loss hurt. *Get a grip, Alex, you told him to get off.* He heard Craig rise—he was too content to lift his head to look—and remove the used condom and then his pants.

Craig pulled the covers up and lifted Alex a bit, then got in next to him and pulled the covers over both of them. Damn, the man was strong. A hand touched his bare cheek, lightly smacking it.

"Hey."

"That didn't hurt." Craig's laugh was low and sexy as hell.

"No," Alex admitted.

"Don't you owe me a massage? Where'd you leave the condoms and lube anyway?"

Alex blinked, swallowed hard. "I'm not going to get any sleep, am I?"

Chapter Four

Alex dialed Craig's office number and waited through several rings.

"Fontaine."

"Hi, it's me," Alex announced, turning his car around a corner.

"Hi, me." There was an unmistakable smile in Craig's voice.

"You busy?"

"It's tax season. I'm always busy."

"Yeah, should have realized that," Alex said. "But I'm by your office and thought we could have lunch."

There was a long pause during which Alex let his insecurities seep in. Things had been going so well. They'd spent nearly every night last week together and all weekend at his condo. He'd officially started thinking of Craig as his boyfriend.

"Craig?"

"Sorry, got distracted by an email. Um, lunch. Not going to invite your sister?"

"Hell, no. I don't need to see her."

Craig laughed. "How close are you?"

"About five blocks. Come out to the front of your building in like fifteen minutes and I'll swing by and pick you up."

"Okay, see you then."

When Alex pulled in front of Craig's building twelve minutes later, Craig was there waiting.

"Hey you," Craig said, getting in the car. He leaned over and gave Alex a quick kiss, then snapped the seat belt. "Where are we going?"

"Any objections to diner food?"

"None."

Alex smiled. "I saw one just a couple of blocks away I thought we'd try."

Okay, he felt good. Really good. Craig hadn't kissed him in public before. If a car counted as public. Anyone could see them, including people who worked in Craig's office building so Alex guessed it counted. His mood suddenly improved...a lot.

A short time later they were seated and perusing somewhat soiled menus. The diner had been there for years and hadn't changed the menu in all that time. Alex briefly wondered how many fingers had gripped the pages before him.

They both ordered burgers and iced teas from the waitress.

When she had gone, Craig studied Alex for a moment, then raised an eyebrow. "So what's up?"

"What makes you think there's anything up?" Alex asked, sipping his tea.

"I can't imagine what would bring you anywhere near my office for one." Craig shrugged. "Your office is nowhere near here."

"I could have been visiting a client," Alex suggested somewhat defensively. Well, the truth was, he did have an ulterior motive. He was just hoping he was more subtle than apparently he was.

"Uh-huh." Craig gave him an easy smile.

"Okay." Alex exhaled. "My sister's birthday is this weekend and the family is having a get-together and I thought maybe you could come."

Craig opened his mouth but before he could say anything, Alex quickly cut him off.

"It's too soon, isn't it? I thought about that. I mean I know we've only been seeing each other for a week and two weekends and already I'm saying to you, meet the

family." Alex ran his fingers through his hair. He was babbling. He always resorted to babbling when he was nervous. "Too much pressure, huh? I completely understand. Forget I brought it up."

"Alex." Craig grabbed his hand and held it. "I'll go."

"You... You will?"

"I'll go," Craig said again. "It's cool. It might be fun."

"Don't get your hopes up on that. You haven't met my family yet."

* * * * *

Craig took a long sip of his beer. Alex's family, which consisted of his mother, sister and little brother, were really cool. Alex's parents were divorced but his dad kept in touch via email mostly. Alex had told him his dad lived in New York and he saw him there whenever he was there for his job. Of course Craig already knew Jill, but Alex's mother and brother had greeted him like an old friend. It was nice.

Craig studied Alex's ex-boyfriend from across the room. The party for Alex's sister was at her house and Travis being the brother of Jill's husband...well, here he was. He'd just come in the front door with his new boyfriend. At least that was who Craig guessed the tall, skinny guy with Travis was.

He dumped Alex to get together with this dude? Craig shook his head. He was glad that Alex was in the kitchen with his mother and sister at the moment. It gave him free rein to assess the man.

Craig decided he wasn't impressed. Travis was okay looking. Certainly not even close to being as fine as Alex. He was short and sort of stocky with bleached blond hair. A surfer type. Together with his tall, gangly boyfriend who had almost black hair they made an odd pair.

At that moment, Travis looked over at him, a question in his eyes. Wondering who the hell was that, no doubt. Craig shrugged. He guessed it wouldn't take long for the

ex-boyfriend to make his way over. And here he came. Craig took another sip of his beer.

"Hi, I'm Travis, Ken's brother."

Craig shook his hand. "Nice to meet you. I'm Craig." He paused for dramatic effect. "Alex's boyfriend."

Travis dropped his hand and blinked. "Oh. I didn't know Alex had a new boyfriend."

"This is my official introduction to the family."

"Oh." Travis' cheeks flushed. "Um. Well, how did you two meet?"

Craig noticed Travis' boyfriend glancing their way with a frown on his face. Probably wondering if surfer dude was making a play.

"I work with Jill, actually. Is that your boyfriend giving us the evil eye?"

"What?" Travis glanced over. "Yeah, that's James. James, come here, I want you to meet Alex's new boyfriend."

James brightened at once and rushed over.

Alex couldn't be more pleased with the way the day was going. His family welcomed Craig with open arms, clearly happy for him. Alex felt such contentment. Amazing in just the short time he'd been seeing Craig. He'd been afraid at first they would make his lover uncomfortable for the days in high school, but to Alex's relief they hadn't even brought it up.

Earlier he'd come out of the kitchen just in time to hear Craig introduce himself to Travis as Alex's boyfriend. Okay, that was fucking fabulous. He couldn't care less what Travis thought anymore, but hearing Craig refer to himself that way...wow. Now Alex was as horny as hell and trying to behave himself.

"Hey, Alex, you look incredible." A hand clasped the back of his neck in a strikingly intimate gesture. One Alex didn't appreciate at all.

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"Travis, how nice to see you." He took a step back and Travis released his hold. "I'm glad Ken invited you."

"Are you?" Travis looked uncertain. "I was a little worried about it, honestly."

"Really? Why?"

"Well, I know you were really hurt by my choosing to break up with you," Travis explained. "I know you still had feelings for me."

Get over yourself. That was what Alex wanted to say, but he was far too polite to be that rude. "It's cool."

"Are you sure?" Travis frowned, lowered his voice. "I know you were devastated by the breakup. Ken said Jill was really worried about you for a while. Looking back on it, I probably didn't handle it right. I could have let you down easier."

Oh brother.

Alex smiled. "I guess I'm not devastated any longer. I saw you meeting Craig."

Travis' gaze traveled across the room to pick out Craig. Alex's man was engaging both his sister and mother in a conversation and they were both laughing at whatever Craig said.

"He doesn't seem your type, Alex. I was surprised when I saw him."

"Sinfully gorgeous, well-endowed men are always my type, Travis," Alex said with a wink. *Take that, you egomaniac.* "Truth is I can't remember being this happy in a relationship before. It's great."

"He doesn't mind you working all the time?"

Alex shrugged. "He works pretty long hours himself. And anyway, we make time for each other."

Travis' ears had turned red and he shifted uncomfortably. "Alex, the truth is I've wanted to call you for a while now. I think I might have been too hasty—"

"There you are, babe." Craig put his arm around Alex's shoulders. "I was just telling your mom about the other night when we cooked the lobster."

Alex laughed. "You mean tried to cook the lobster. Did you meet Travis, Craig?"

Craig smiled wolfishly. "Yes, I met him earlier. And his boyfriend, James."

Alex didn't miss the slight emphasis Craig put on boyfriend.

"I was just wondering if you might be ready to leave," Craig said, reaching up to toy with a lock of Alex's hair. Deliberate, Alex guessed. "I'm getting kind of tired."

"Definitely. Let's go say goodnight."

* * * * *

"You okay?" Alex asked, glancing sharply at Craig. His lover had leaned his head back in the car and closed his eyes as soon as they drove away from his sister's house.

"Sure. Just a bit tired."

"Thanks for today. Everyone loved you."

"I doubt that," Craig said dryly. "Something tells me Travis wanted to cut my heart out."

Alex chuckled. "You weren't jealous or anything, were you?"

"Nah, not really. Though he was your ex."

"Believe me, you have absolutely nothing to be jealous over."

Craig yawned.

"You sure you're okay?"

Craig smiled though he didn't open his eyes. "I've been working too hard, that's all. Extra tired."

"Oh." Alex wondered, with a definite sense of disappointment, if that was Craig's way of telling him there wouldn't be any sex tonight. Did Craig want to go home to his house? Alex'd picked him up from Burbank and had just assumed he would spend Saturday night at his condo. But maybe he was assuming too much. "Did you, um, want me to take you home then?"

"Hell no. Why would I want to go there?"

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Craig's voice had gone strangely cold and hollow. He was definitely in a strange mood.

"Well, good," Alex said, trying to sound cheerful. "It's the perfect night for a fire. We could cozy up by the fireplace in the living room."

"Sounds like a plan."

Craig tried to concentrate on Alex's fingers massaging his bare shoulders instead of the darkness threatening to ruin an otherwise great day. It hit him just as he was finishing his lobster story to Alex's mother and sister. He managed to get the words out and then even managed to seem casual and together when that weasel, Travis, tried to make a move on Alex. Craig was no fool. Travis wanted Alex back.

It had taken everything in him not to smash Travis' damn face in. He made it out to the car before it really started hitting him. Probably he should have had Alex take him home. His mood was shit now. Unfortunately he was still as turned-on as hell and he wanted to fuck Alex.

Keep it together, Craig. After all, this was just the start. It usually wasn't so bad until a day or so into it. He could get through the night with Alex. In the morning, he'd go home, have laundry to do or something. Then he could just say he was busy with taxes for a few days until the episode was over. Alex didn't need to know.

"Hmm," Craig moaned. "That feels amazing."

Alex nuzzled his neck, then nipped at Craig's pulse. "You know I've been thinking."

"Uh-oh."

Alex laughed. "Yeah, yeah. What I mean is...well, okay, maybe this is too soon."

"Spill it." Craig shook his head. "Poor choice of words. Don't spill it yet."

Alex nipped him again. "I was wondering if we should get tests."

Craig tensed. His breath seized. Cool, Fontaine.

"Sorry, that is too soon, huh? Smacks of too much commitment, doesn't it?" Alex asked.

Craig exhaled. "No, no. It's all right. I think it's a good idea."

"You do?"

"Yeah. Seems like we're pretty serious, don't you think, Alex?"

Alex kissed his ear. "I know I am. But I don't want to rush you, Craig."

Craig turned his head so he could reach Alex's lips. They kissed for a moment, their tongues entwining. He pushed Alex down on the floor in front of the roaring fireplace. He stroked his hands over Alex's naked chest. "I love the feel of your muscles."

Alex quaked, arching up to feel Craig's wandering hands.

"I love the feel of your nipples under my fingertips," Craig murmured, flicking Alex's nipples. "You like that, don't you, babe?"

"Yes," Alex groaned. "Touch me, Craig, touch me everywhere."

Craig crawled down Alex's body, then lifted his ass in his hands and plunged his tongue into his lover's puckered opening. He laved and sucked Alex's entrance until he was wet and ready. Reaching for a condom, he tore open the package and rolled it on his pulsing cock.

"Yes, fuck me, fuck me," Alex begged.

Craig gritted his teeth then as a wave of the darkness slithered in. He fought back a gasp of despair. No, not now.

"Babe?" Alex's gray eyes were a mixture of raging lust and concern.

Tightening his jaw to the point of pain, Craig thrust into Alex. "Wrap your legs around me," he ordered harshly.

Alex complied, his legs grabbing Craig's waist in a viselike grip. Craig moved in and out, his thrusts alternating between long and short. Hard and gentle.

Alex jerked his own cock frantically, beads of sweat appearing on his furrowed brow.

"Come for me, Alex, shoot all over me," Craig commanded.

Alex bit his bottom lip and whimpered low in his throat. His cock swelled and then spurted all over Craig's stomach.

"God yes!" Craig shouted. He plunged harder and harder, ramming Alex's ass, pumping through his own orgasm. Blood rushed from his head and he barely pulled out before he lost consciousness.

"What is this?" his mother demanded. Her dark frizzy hair was a wild halo around her head. Spittle stood out on her red-lipsticked lips.

Craig's gaze went to the paper clutched tightly in her fist. Her manicured hand shook. "I don't know, Mommy."

"You don't know? You don't know?" she screamed. She smashed it in his face. "It's your report card, you worthless piece of shit!"

Tears pricked his eight-year-old eyes. He'd nearly forgotten it was report card time. Meant to get the mail before she did and give it to his dad.

She ripped the paper into tiny little pieces and flung them in the air. "That's what I think of that. You got a B in science."

"The rest were As," Craig said in a small voice.

"Fuck the rest." She grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "You lazy, worthless boy, what is the matter with you?"

He stared at the bits of paper that once were his report card. "You're supposed to sign that so I can bring it back to school."

"Sign it?" She laughed hysterically. "Why would I sign a piece of shit like that? You're not working hard enough, Craig."

"I...am. Science is just hard and I—"

"Boohoo," she said mockingly. "You make me sick. Crying like a baby. You're not working hard." She pulled a hunk of his hair. "You are going to come straight home

every day and you will spend every minute before bedtime studying science. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mommy."

His mother struck him hard across the face, snapping his head back. "Don't ever bring home a B again."

"Craig? Craig? Babe?"

Alex was shaking him, gently touching his cheek, trying to revive him. He blinked his eyes and focused on his lover.

"Craig, thank God!"

"What happened?"

"You fainted or passed out or something. I was about to call 9-1-1."

Craig sat up and rubbed his hand across his face. "No, I'm okay."

"Are you sure? You looked a little frantic."

Craig forced a smile. "I'm sure. It's just been a stressful day. And I'm really tired."

Alex nodded. "Okay. Let's get upstairs and into bed. Do you want a cup of tea or something?"

"No. Thanks, Alex." He kissed his lover.

Alex smiled and rustled his hair. "I love you, Craig. Come on, let's go to bed."

Chapter Five

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Craig asked for what seemed the tenth time the following Saturday.

They were heading into the private facility Craig's mother had lived in for the past ten years.

"Yes, I told you." Alex glanced around the grounds as they made their way up the walkway. The lawn was well-manicured and green with lots of leafy trees and bright, cheerful flowers.

After the strange incident last weekend when Craig passed out it was a few days before Alex heard from his lover. He didn't want to push Craig so he waited through those few days without contacting him. Alex had been worried he'd said those three dreaded words too early. Finally on Thursday, Craig called.

Craig spent Thursday and Friday night with him, not mentioning he'd practically disappeared for nearly four days. Alex didn't want to read too much into it, but he was actually pleased when Craig brought up visiting his mother Saturday morning.

He knew Craig's mother was mentally ill and had been for years, but somehow Alex thought there was more to what happened with Craig's family. He couldn't quite put his finger on it and he didn't think Craig was ready to share whatever it was. But someday he hoped they would be able to talk about anything.

Craig went first through the double automatic doors. Alex noted he kept his sunglasses on when he removed his own. A way of hiding. Pretending it wasn't real. Another career Alex had considered was psychiatry. It ended up being more work and money than Alex wanted. Chef, psychiatrist or literary agent. He smiled at his own idiosyncrasies.

They approached a security desk and the uniformed guard looked up.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Fontaine. Brought a guest with you?"

"Yes, George. This is Alex Nichols."

George nodded. "Can you sign in, please, Mr. Nichols?" He handed Alex a visitor's pass.

"This way," Craig said, gesturing to a long hallway after Alex signed in.

Their footsteps echoed on the shiny linoleum floor. Craig walked a little ahead of Alex and he couldn't help but admire the man's perfectly sculpted ass in his jeans. Probably a bad time to be admiring his lover, but, damn, he was fine. Craig stopped midway and turned to Alex.

"You don't have to go in, Alex."

"I want to meet your mother, Craig," Alex said patiently.

Craig frowned. "She isn't like a normal mother."

"I know, babe." Alex touched his arm. "It's okay, you know? I'm a grown man, I know everything isn't *Leave it to Beaver*."

Craig nodded brusquely. "More like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Look, she's usually pretty out of it. Heavily medicated. Sometimes she doesn't even recognize me."

"Okay."

His lover exhaled and glanced down the hall, worry creasing his brow.

"Hey," Alex said and grasped Craig's jaw in his hand and turned his face to meet his gaze. He removed Craig's sunglasses. "I'm not going to freak out on you because of your mom. I'm here with you because we want to be together. Remember?"

"I know. Everything you say makes total sense. But she...says things sometimes if she isn't out of it. She might make references to our sexual preferences and I know that bothers you."

"I admit I'm a little sensitive to name calling. But I think I've made progress in getting beyond that. I was just a kid, Craig. I'm an adult now with a successful career and a boyfriend I'm crazy about." Alex smiled and kissed him.

"When we first met in the bar you hadn't gotten past it," Craig pointed out.

"That was different," Alex insisted.

"How?"

Alex sighed. "Do we have to talk about this now? Because I was in love with you in high school so the things you said hurt worse. Okay?"

"Alex."

"Come on, let's see your mom. What happened then is over. I don't want to go backwards. Do you?"

For the first time that morning Craig gave him a tiny smile. They started walking again and turned right at the end of the hall. Alex noted it was very quiet and he hadn't seen more than one or two people wandering the halls.

Coming out of a door about three down on the left was a middle-aged woman with dyed red hair. She waved at Craig.

"Hi, Mr. Fontaine. I knew you'd be coming today. She's dressed and sitting up by the window."

"Thanks, Doris. How is she doing?"

"Not bad today. A couple of nights ago she had a psychotic episode. She heard voices too."

On the way over Craig told Alex his mother had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. Sometimes, she became violent, he was told.

"She's sitting quietly now. But you let me know if you need me. I'll just be doing some paperwork over there." Doris gestured to a small nurses' station.

Craig paused in front of the door, his hand poised to turn the knob. Alex's gut twisted. It tore him up seeing what visiting his mother did to Craig. He hated this. More than anything he wanted to make everything better for Craig. An impossible wish, but one Alex had nonetheless. He wanted to turn the knob for his lover, but Alex decided it would be best to let Craig take this his way.

At last Craig turned the knob and opened the door. Slowly as though he expected someone on the other side to jump out and yell "boo". God, was that really what it was like for Craig? Alex swallowed the painful lump in his throat.

"Mother, I'm here," Craig announced.

In a chair by the open window sat an old woman who perhaps weighed a hundred pounds. She wore her gray hair in a long braid falling down her back and was dressed in a thin hospital gown. The woman was the picture of harmless, but tension came off Craig like lightning bolts.

Mrs. Fontaine's gaze strayed over to them. At first her eyes were vacant, but then slowly she focused more on her son. "Craig?"

"Yes, Mother." Craig took a few steps closer to her, but Alex noted he stayed just out of reach. He crouched down to the level of the chair. "Doris says you're doing well today."

"I'm feeling pretty good, honey. The doctor came by to see me this morning." She smiled.

"Dr. Hennessey?"

She nodded. "I've taken my meds the last two days."

"That's good. That's really good."

"Why don't you come a little closer and let me touch you, honey?" She glanced suddenly at Alex. "You brought a friend?"

"That's my boyfriend, Alex. He wanted to meet you, Mother."

She smiled in Alex's direction. "How wonderful. You haven't brought a boy to see me before."

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Fontaine," Alex said from by the door. The tenseness from Craig, the way he stayed away from his mother scared Alex a little. He didn't want to admit it, but now Craig had him on edge.

"Is he a policeman too?" she asked, turning to look at Craig again.

"No. I'm not a policeman, remember? I'm a CPA."

"But you wanted to be a policeman since you were a little boy," Mrs. Fontaine said, scrunching her face up in confusion.

"Yes, but it didn't work out that way," Craig reminded her gently.

"Oh." She sighed. "Come here, honey. I want to touch you."

It was then that Alex noticed Craig was shaking like a leaf. Holy shit. Alex didn't like this at all. The man was petrified of his mother. A sense of protectiveness he didn't know he had overwhelmed Alex. No fucking way was she going to hurt Craig. He walked over to Craig and pulled him to a standing position.

Craig blinked. His sapphire eyes were filled with a deep sorrow and fear. Alex grabbed his hand in his and squeezed, then pushed Craig behind him and went close to Mrs. Fontaine, crouching directly in front of her.

"Craig's got a cold right now, Mrs. Fontaine. He doesn't want to make you sick. You can touch me instead," he offered.

She smiled at him and reached out her gnarled hand and stroked his cheek. "You're a very handsome boy."

"Thank you."

"How long have you two been married?"

Alex shook his head. "We aren't married, Mrs. Fontaine. We're just dating."

"Oh, I see." She nodded. "Do you think you can convince my son to give me a hug? He never lets me hug him. Thinks he's too big for that, I guess."

"Well, he would, but he has a cold," Alex said softly.

"But just a hug won't hurt me? Please? Just one?" Her voice was small and pathetic. Alex normally would feel a great deal of sympathy for her except he knew there had to be a real reason Craig was afraid. And the nurse had said she had a psychotic episode just a few days ago.

"It's...all right, Alex," Craig said from behind him. "I'm okay."

Alex stood and Craig took a few paces toward his mother. He'd lost a lot of color, but was no longer shaking like he had been.

"There's my boy," Mrs. Fontaine said with a big smile. She stood and held out her arms. Craig walked into them and she pulled him close. "You smell so good, honey. And you're so handsome."

Craig stood rather stiffly, not embracing her, but allowing her to embrace him. After a moment, she pushed him away from her enough to look at him.

"Pull up a chair and sit next to me, Craig. I want to talk to you."

Craig grabbed a folding chair from the far wall and brought it close to his mother. His tall frame looked a bit odd sitting in the child-sized chair.

Mrs. Fontaine reached for his hand and clasped it in hers. "You remind me of when I first met your daddy. He was just the most handsome man in the world. You look just like him."

Craig gave her a little smile, but did not reply.

"I'm so glad you came to see me today, honey. I've been thinking." Mrs. Fontaine licked her lips. "Do you think if I keep taking my medicine every day I can come home and live with you?"

Alex waited for Craig's reaction to that. At first there was none. Craig's expression was completely blank as though he hadn't heard her or didn't understand her question.

Then he squeezed his mother's hand a little. "I'm not sure, but I can talk to Dr. Hennessey and see what he thinks."

"Thank you." She smiled. "I've been here for so long."

"I know," Craig said softly.

"I just want to... Maybe things could be different for us. I know I wasn't a good mother to you." Her bottom lip trembled. "Honey, you're the only good thing I've ever done. The only good thing."

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"You okay? You want me to drive?" Alex asked Craig as they approached his Mercedes.

Craig tossed his keys to Alex. "Yeah, thanks."

Alex started the car and glanced over at him. "That's a nice place, at least. I'm guessing you pay for it?"

Craig nodded. "At first the money my dad left paid for it, but private facilities like that are pretty expensive so that ran out a while ago. I've paid for it for years now. Another reason I became an accountant. A cop's salary would never pay the bills."

Alex backed out of the parking spot. "You want to talk about it?"

Craig closed his eyes and leaned back against the leather seat. "No. I can't. At least not now."

"Okay."

Silence descended over the car for a mile or so, but Craig was aware questions were very much ready to pop out of Alex's mouth.

"She was actually pretty good today. That's the best I've seen her in a long time," he said.

"How often do you visit?"

"Third Saturday of every month. I call every week too and talk to both her and the doctor. I used to visit more often but her doctor thought she was getting more agitated the more I visited so we agreed to one day a month."

Alex fell silent, but pensive. After a few more blocks, he glanced briefly at Craig. "She's gotten violent with you before, hasn't she?"

"Alex."

"I know, I know, you don't want to talk about it. But I'm not blind, Craig. I saw how you didn't want to get close to her."

Craig sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Yeah, a few times when she wasn't doing well she attacked me. Once she pulled out a huge hunk of my hair and caused my scalp to bleed. Mostly she just balls up her fists and swings, though. I don't get too close until I know how she is going to act. Like I said she was okay today."

"Man, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. I'm hungry, are you?" And he was. His stomach growled.

"I'm starved."

"Great. Let's go have a nice seafood dinner at the beach."

Alex grinned. "Sounds like a plan."

Craig flicked on the radio, glad to change the subject at last. The dreaded visit was over for another month. He could relax and enjoy his new and happy relationship with Alex. Feeling better than he had in days, he sang along with the song on the radio even though he had a terrible voice.

* * * * *

Alex really did have a great home. Craig smiled and took a sip of the Sauvignon Blanc Alex had just poured him. He stood on the balcony outside the master bedroom, gazing out at the sea. The sun had nearly set. It was that time just before the time change when the days were longer but the clocks did not yet reflect it. Only a week or so.

The evening had been great. Such a relief after the afternoon spent visiting his mother. They'd walked to the fish restaurant, shared a bottle of wine and then spent a short time walking on the beach. Yes, he could get used to living so close to the Pacific.

Craig suspected it wouldn't be long before Alex asked him to move in with him. The vibes were there. And when he did, Craig would say yes. He'd rent out the Burbank house. It would be good to have an investment and the truth was Craig was practical. If someday things ended with Alex he didn't want to be out a house.

The French doors opened and Alex joined him on the balcony.

"There you are."

"Yeah, sorry, my sister was jabbering away. Couldn't get her to hang up," Alex said. He held his own glass of wine. "She's expecting their first baby."

"That's great, congratulations on being an uncle. I guess I'll have to congratulate her at work on Monday."

Alex smiled. "Thanks." He leaned on the balcony. "Have you ever thought about it?"

"About?"

"Having kids."

Craig shrugged. "Not really. I'm not marrying a woman in order to have a family."

Alex studied him, then looked out to the sea. "There are other ways."

"You mean like adoption? It's still pretty difficult for a gay couple to adopt. I don't want kids that much to put myself through it. And no, I am not going to start asking my female friends to be a surrogate either." Craig sighed. Besides, what sort of parent would he be considering his own childhood? "I hope this isn't putting you off or anything, Alex. I really feel strongly about not having kids."

Alex turned to him, his expression serious and Craig's heart plummeted. God, he'd never considered Alex might want children. Okay, maybe the living together wasn't going to happen after all.

"It's okay, Craig," Alex said after a moment. "I don't want kids, either. I just thought, maybe we should have talked about it before this. You know? I know I've been moving pretty quickly here and it just occurred to me when I was talking with my sister we should have discussed it. Look, I like my life. I love my life now, actually. I like my beach life, my sports car, being able to go to New York when I need to for a deal. I like the money, I like the freedom. Children change all that. I'm too selfish to want to raise a child."

Relief flowed through Craig. "Good. Excellent. I'm glad to hear we both feel the same way."

"Speaking of... I got my test and I'm clean," Alex said.

"I had mine last week as well. Clean." Craig turned back to the setting sun, wondering if he should just bring it up. Hell, he spent almost every weekend here anyway.

The truth was they'd only been seeing each other about a month. It was probably too soon and people would surely talk. No doubt Alex's family wouldn't think it was a good idea. Craig didn't have to worry about his family because there was only his mother. Alex had dated that guy Travis for months and they never did move in together. Maybe Alex didn't really want that much of a commitment. Some guys were the independent type.

Then there was the plain fact he'd not yet told Alex he loved him though Alex had said it the night he'd had the blackout. Not since though. Craig supposed he couldn't blame him. It was probably hard to want to say it again when there was no response the first time.

Craig honestly didn't know how he felt about Alex. He liked him a lot and the sex was amazing. But love? Was it even possible to feel normal love with the way his family was? His mother was schizophrenic and violent and his father...wasn't exactly the father from the old television show, *My Three Sons*. Then there were his own blackouts and dark episodes. And while he was thinking crazy thoughts...well, there was that too. He'd heard and read conflicting reports on whether schizophrenia was hereditary. Did he want Alex to go through that if something happened to him?

"Penny for your thoughts?" Alex asked. He had moved very close to Craig and was frowning.

Craig smiled. "Not sure they are worth even a penny. Just thinking about things. About our relationship and stuff."

"How can I convince you to think about sex instead?" Alex winked.

Craig laughed. He appreciated Alex lightening the mood. "I think I can be convinced pretty easily actually."

Alex twisted his mouth between his teeth and then glanced toward the bedroom. "I'd kind of like to... That is if you don't mind. I want to do you."

Anticipation raced through Craig. His cock hardened and pressed against his jeans. "I don't mind. But unless you want to make out on the balcony I suggest we go back inside."

Alex pulled open the French doors and they entered the bedroom. He took both their glasses of wine and set them down on the nearby dresser. "Maybe we should take a shower together. I could use one after the walk on the beach. What do you think?"

"I think it's a great idea." Craig pulled off his polo shirt and tossed it on the bed. He kicked off the flip-flops he'd put on earlier and headed for the bathroom. Another great thing about Alex's house was he'd put in a standing glass shower in place of the tub-shower combination in the master bath. The glass shower was very roomy and would allow them ample space.

Alex followed him in, carrying a box of condoms. He looked at Craig. "I know we're both clean. I didn't know if you wanted... I know it's a huge commitment to go bareback. I totally understand if you aren't ready for it."

Craig nodded. For a moment his lungs seized. It was a big step. It was an enormous one. It meant complete and total commitment. No one else. For a very long time if ever. He exhaled. No pressure or anything.

Alex removed a packet from the box. "I'm cool with it, Craig. No need to freak."

"I'm not freaking." Not really, anyway. "Let's do it."

Alex raised a sandy eyebrow.

"No condom," Craig clarified. He felt his face redden, so he turned away to remove his jeans. Now was a fine time to be embarrassed, but hell...he was. He didn't know why.

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Alex's hand touched his naked back. His fingers spread out in a caress. "Are you sure? You won't hurt my feelings."

Craig turned to face his lover and quickly noticed Alex had divested himself of his own clothing. He took a short moment to admire Alex's toned body. Craig had never cared for a particularly hairy chest so he loved the fact that there was only a smattering on Alex's.

He wrapped his hand around Alex's neck and pulled him in close for a kiss. "Enough talk. The shower. Now."

Alex threw the package in the nearby wastebasket and opened the shower door. His cock stood erect.

Craig pushed him into the standing shower and pushed him against the tile. He reached over and turned on the shower spray.

"Hey, I thought I was going to fuck you," Alex protested just before Craig crushed his mouth with his.

"Ssh, in a moment," Craig said against his lips. He reached down to enclose his hand around Alex's cock.

"God," Alex gasped. He shuddered in Craig's hand. "Careful, babe. I really want to be inside you. I'm already so turned-on I can barely stand."

"Not a problem," Craig murmured and with his hands on either side of Alex's hips he lifted him up off the shower floor. He scooted between Alex's open legs. "Wrap them around me. I'll hold you up."

"Craig..."

He knew Alex wanted to take control of their lovemaking, but he couldn't seem to stop from being the aggressor. Didn't want to stop. His slid his cock back and forth along the crack of Alex's ass. He growled low in his throat. God, he wanted to fuck Alex now. He pulled hard and fast on Alex's erection.

"I'm going to come," Alex moaned. His balls tightened in Craig's hand.

"Easy," Craig soothed. For a moment he stopped his assault on the man's penis and grabbed a gob of shower gel and soaped up Alex's chest. "Is that better?"

Alex closed his eyes as Craig rubbed his chest. "No, 'cause now you're stroking my chest."

"I'm washing it," Craig insisted.

"Uh-huh."

Craig fanned his soapy fingers over Alex's nipples and flicked. Alex shuddered. Oh yeah, he liked that.

"I don't know why we've never showered together before," he said. He touched his lips to Alex's in a brief kiss, then trailed his mouth down to the pulse at his lover's throat.

Craig's own cock was so hard if he hit it against the shower tile it might break. He soaped it up and aimed for Alex's entrance.

"Hey," Alex whispered, but his protest sounded weak and he made no move to stop Craig from pushing in.

"Hmm, later, you can do me later," Craig promised. Gritting his teeth, he passed through Alex's tight ring of muscle. Resting his forehead against his lover's, Craig gave them both a moment to adjust.

"Uh, babe," Alex rasped. "Move."

Craig chuckled and happily obliged by pulling all the way out and then pushing all the way in. Alex moaned and he repeated the action faster the first time, then slower the next. He alternated his thrusts, fast, slow, fast, slow.

Alex wrapped his arms around Craig's neck and leaned his head back against the tile. The shower spray splattered on his perfect face. Droplets clung to his nose and cheeks and eyelids. It was an amazing turn-on.

Craig's balls tightened. Biting his bottom lip, he whispered, "God, you're so sexy."

Alex opened his eyes and met Craig's gaze. Craig felt the splash of cum against his stomach as Alex came. "I love you, Craig."

"Ah," he said, pouring into Alex.

Later, they lay in Alex's large sleigh bed, their arms wrapped around each other. Alex brushed his fingers through Craig's hair.

"Babe?"

"Hmm?"

"Move in with me," Alex said softly.

Craig smiled in the darkness. "Really?"

Alex kissed the top of his head. "I've wanted to ask you for a while now. I didn't want to move too fast. I think I probably am anyway." He laughed. "Will you?"

"Yes," Craig said, contentment flowing through him. "Yes, absolutely."

Alex hugged him. "Great." He paused. "I'm going to have to get you in the middle of the night while you're sleepy and vulnerable in order to get to fuck you again, aren't I?"

Craig cleared his throat. "Um, yeah, sorry about that. I couldn't seem to help it. Are you mad?"

"Nah. But next time your ass is mine."

Chapter Six

"Fontaine," Craig said into his cell's hands-free headphone. He leaned over slightly to press the button on his car radio.

"Hey, babe, it's me. Don't you have caller ID?"

"Hi, yes, I was changing the radio station and wasn't looking." Craig made a right turn. He loosened his pale yellow tie. "What's up?"

"Nothing much. I was just wondering when you'd be home."

"I'm on my way home now. Just left the office."

"Cool."

"Okay, what's up?" Craig asked again.

"Nothing's up." Alex was trying to make his voice sound casual. Failing miserably too.

"Uh-huh. I moved in two weeks ago and this is the first time you've called me to ask me when I'm coming home," Craig said. He pushed a different radio button. "You want me to grab takeout or something?"

"No."

"Well?"

Alex sighed. "All right, I have a surprise for you, that's all."

Craig smiled. "A surprise? What is it?"

Alex's rich laugh filled his ears. "If I told you it would spoil the surprise."

"Hopefully it's you waiting naked with a ribbon tied around your cock."

"Um, no," Alex gasped around his laughter. "But I'll keep that in mind for your next surprise."

"Okay, well, I—" Craig's cell beeped indicating another call was coming in. "I've got another call, Alex. I'll see you in a bit."

"Goodbye."

Craig glanced at the caller ID. His mother's sanitarium. Great.

* * * * *

"Are you almost finished?" Alex asked the workman.

The man, dressed in overalls with the department store's name emblazoned on them, glanced up from the kitchen floor. "Yep. Just have to turn it on to make sure everything's working."

Alex watched the workman stand and flip a switch on the brand-new shiny dishwasher. Water instantly began to gush in.

"Okay," the workman said, producing a clipboard. "Everything's set. If I could just have you sign this, Mr. Nichols."

Alex signed the form and felt ridiculously pleased with Craig's surprise. All right, so it wasn't wine and roses, but he knew his lover would be happy he put in an automatic dishwasher. He'd been grumbling about washing the dishes by hand since they first met. Craig claimed it was un-American not to have a dishwasher.

Alex walked with the workman to the front door, thanked him and closed it. He still had a little bit of time to clean up and get dinner started before Craig would arrive home.

Alex glanced at the clock about an hour later and frowned. Craig wasn't that late, but generally he was a pretty punctual guy. Of course traffic being what it was in Southern California—hideous—it could be he was just caught in it. He was just getting impatient. Nothing to worry about.

Yet...his heart screamed something wasn't right. No matter what his mind tried to rationalize. It wasn't like he had some psychic connection with Craig.

Alex dialed Craig's cell phone. A simple call would end his fears. It rang a few times and then went to voice mail.

A knock sounded on the door and relief flowed through him. He wrenched open the door. "Did you forget your key?"

Travis raised both brows. "I don't have a key. You never gave me one, remember?"

Fuck. He did not need to see this asshole right now. Not when he just wanted to see Craig.

"Can I come in and talk to you, Alex?" Travis asked. He was dressed very casually in a thin t-shirt and ratty old jeans. His hair stood on end as though he'd been constantly running his fingers through it and there were dark circles under his eyes.

"Um...sure. I'm waiting for someone, though." Alex stood aside to let his former boyfriend inside.

"Well, that happens to be part of what I want to talk about." Travis brushed past him and into the house.

Craig, where are you?

Travis turned to face him. His hands were on his hips. "My brother told me this Craig guy you've been seeing is the same son of a bitch from high school. Says your sister told him. Is that true?"

"I'm not really sure why this is any business of yours, Travis."

"Is it true?"

Alex shrugged. "Yeah. So?"

"So? My God, Alex, you hated that guy. Don't you remember what he did? What he said?" Travis shook his head and ran his hand through his hair. "He's nothing but a prick. I mean, geez, Alex, what the fuck?"

"Things are different now, Travis," Alex said quietly. "Neither Craig nor I are the same as we were in high school."

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"Bullshit. If that were true why did you tell me about it when we were together? Because you were still hurt by it. Has it occurred to you that this dude is messing with you? Screwing with your head?"

Alex just wanted Travis to go away. His heart was thundering loudly in his chest and he couldn't stop wondering where Craig was. Something was wrong, damn it. He didn't give a shit what this punk had to say.

"I thought about that at first but no one would carry on a game like that for this long." Alex managed to focus on the conversation with effort. "We've been together for a while now and he moved in with me two weeks ago."

"He's living here now?" Travis asked, incredulous. "You wouldn't even think about that when I asked you."

"I know. I think that's pretty much proof that we weren't meant to be, Travis. Look, I appreciate your concern, but Craig will be home any minute." *Please, let him be home any minute.*

"That's just it, Alex," Travis said, coming to stand just a foot away. "I think I made a big mistake."

"A mistake?"

"Yes. I gave up on us too soon." Travis shook his head. "This thing with James isn't working because I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. How good it was between us." He stopped, licked his lips and dropped his gaze to Alex's lips. "I know you liked it when I fucked you. It can be good again. We can take it slowly."

Alex sighed and took a step back. "No. Travis, I don't know how to say this any other way. I'm in love with Craig. We're building a life together. I'm sorry you have regrets over our breaking up and the truth is I did at first too, but now I think it was the best thing for both of us. Maybe your relationship with James isn't working because he's just not the one for you either. Honestly, only you can decide that. I wish you the best of luck with whoever you have in your life."

"Alex..."

Alex's cell phone rang. His heart leapt. Craig! He frowned, looking at the number. It was not familiar.

"Hello?"

"Alex Nichols?"

"Yes."

"I'm Officer Graves with the California Highway Patrol. Are you the partner of Craig Fontaine?"

Keep it together, Alex. Don't freak.

"Yes, is Craig..."

"There's been an accident. They've taken him to UCLA Med Center. He asked us to call you."

* * * * *

"Alex Nichols?"

Alex, who'd been sitting on a very uncomfortable waiting room chair, stood at the approach of a white-haired man wearing glasses and a doctor's coat.

"I'm Dr. Goldstein," the man said, sticking out his hand.

Alex shook his hand numbly. "Craig?"

"He's resting comfortably. Considering he hit a pole it's a miracle his injuries aren't severe. He's got a slight concussion and some bruising from the airbag. I'd like to keep him overnight just to be sure and then he can go home with you tomorrow."

Relief almost brought him to his knees. Alex swallowed. "Can I see him?"

Dr. Goldstein smiled. "Sure. It should be all right for a few minutes. He'll probably be in and out of it. We gave him some pain medication. He's in room three down that hall."

"Thank you," Alex said. He practically ran to Craig's room.

Once he reached the door, he opened it slowly. He didn't want to disturb Craig if he was sleeping. But God, Alex needed to see him. Touch him. Make sure he was still real. Tears pricked his eyes. He had been so close to losing him.

Craig lay in the hospital bed, tubes all hooked up, dressed in one of those horrible hospital gowns. Alex wiped at the tears now freely streaming down his cheeks. He stepped over to the bed and looked down.

Sapphire eyes stared back. Blinked, then focused. Craig's lips curved in a slight smile. "Hi."

Alex snatched the hand closest to him and kissed the long fingers. "Hi yourself."

"I feel really strange," Craig whispered.

"The drugs they gave you, no doubt. You scared the shit out of me."

"Yeah. Sorry. Spoiled your surprise, huh?"

Tears pooled in Alex's eyes again. "It's okay. I'm just glad you're going to be all right. I-I was really scared."

"When do you get to bust me out of here?"

"Not until tomorrow."

Craig groaned. "Figures. I don't need to stay here. They just want the insurance money."

"I'm glad they want to watch you," Alex told him. He held Craig's hand tightly.

"What's the surprise?"

"I put in a dishwasher," Alex said, feeling a little foolish now.

"Hey, cool. And about time too." Craig closed his eyes for a moment. "I'm getting a little tired."

"You should get some sleep. I'll come get you in the morning."

"First thing, okay?"

"Yes, I'll be here bright and early, babe," Alex promised.

Craig's blue eyes opened again and fixed on him. "I guess the Mercedes is history, huh?"

"Afraid so. Cops said totaled."

"Premiums will go up," Craig muttered.

"Ssh, don't think about it now. We'll worry about all that and getting you a new car later." He brushed Craig's hair off his forehead. "Go to sleep. I love you."

"Love you, too, Alex," Craig whispered, his eyes drifting closed again.

* * * * *

The next night as they lay in bed, Alex prepared to give Craig a massage. His lover lay on his stomach naked and Alex straddled him. Alex was trying to remind his errant cock Craig had only gotten out of the hospital that morning. Unfortunately he was so hard it ached.

"Hmm, that feels great," Craig said into the pillow.

Alex agreed. His hard cock rubbed against Craig's ass cheek as he leaned over to massage his lover's shoulders. He still couldn't get over the fact that Craig had escaped such a horrendous accident with hardly any injuries. He'd thanked God for it several times since, too. And the fact Craig told him he loved him.

"Somebody's happy to see me," Craig said, chuckling, raising his hips just a bit and bending his legs. Alex's cock perked up even more.

"Yeah, sorry about that. Can't seem to stop it."

"Why are you sorry?"

Alex blushed and shrugged. "You just got home and...well."

"I'm fine, Alex. Fuck me."

Shit, that sent a jolt through his cock. Closing his eyes, Alex rubbed his erection along the crack of Craig's ass. Oh, but he shouldn't.

"No," he said through gritted teeth.

"What? No? Put that cock in my ass now," Craig ordered.

"You just got out of the damn hospital, babe."

"I hit my head, not my ass. I'm fine, do it."

Alex bit his lip and allowed the tip of his cock to press at Craig's hole. It felt incredible already, but surely clearer heads ought to prevail.

"Craig."

Craig sighed. "Am I going to have to flip you over and fuck you or what?"

Alex laughed. "Oh, no, not this time." He slapped Craig's bottom. "If anyone's getting fucked, it's you."

Alex reached over to the nightstand and grabbed the bottle of lube. He poured a generous amount on his fingers then pushed two of them into Craig's entrance.

"More," Craig said on a moan. "I want more."

Alex slipped a third finger in and moved them around. With his other hand he slicked lube onto his rock-hard cock.

"Now, Alex, now."

Alex withdrew his fingers and poised his cock there. "Are you sure?"

"Grrrr."

Laughter bubbled out of Alex. God, he loved this man. He pushed the head of his cock in. Had anything ever felt so good? Okay, well, maybe when Craig was inside him, but really, it was damn close. Jolts went through his penis, his balls tightened almost painfully.

"All the way, Alex," Craig urged.

"I will... I'm just about to come, for Christ's sake," Alex protested. He slid in ballsdeep. Stopped, his lungs seizing. *Don't come yet*. Craig clenched around him. "Oh, my God. Stop that, stop that now."

Craig chuckled. "Like that?"

"Like it?" Alex rasped. "I'm going to scream my fucking head off in a second." He pulled all the way out and then pushed all the way in, hitting Craig's prostate.

"Yes," Craig moaned.

Alex thrust in and out, increasing the pace, rapidly sending himself right to the edge. Sweat beaded on his forehead, then dripped into his eyes. He didn't care. Pumping in and out, both panting heavily. The bed creaked and groaned as he drove over and over into Craig's ass.

Leaning over, Alex nipped at Craig's neck, then his ear. "Love you."

"I love you too," Craig responded. His body tensed under Alex and then the smell of semen assailed Alex's nostrils.

Alex pounded in a few more times, his balls slapping Craig's ass. "Yes," he shouted, his cock emptying into Craig.

He allowed himself to collapse for a moment on his lover's back, but mindful of his own weight and Craig's injuries, Alex eased out and off and lay beside him.

"Wow," he breathed. "That was...amazing."

Craig turned over to lie on his back. He rested his arm over his eyes. His breathing was still shallow. "Yeah, it was. You were pretty intense there."

"Did I hurt you?" Alex leaned up on one elbow and studied Craig.

"No, not at all. I'm not fragile, Alex."

"Normally, no, but you just had an accident."

"I'm okay, Alex. Really."

Alex smiled. "Good. Because I want us to be together for a very long time. Until we're old men who just remember what it was like to get it up. Forever actually."

Craig moved his arm from his eyes and met Alex's gaze. "I want that, too."

"Excellent." Alex yawned.

He decided he would pretend not to see the sorrow in Craig's eyes, but he had seen it. Something troubled Craig. Something buried very deeply and whatever it was, it scared Alex to death.

Chapter Seven

Hey, have you talked to Craig today?

The instant message from his sister flashed on his computer screen. Alex frowned.

No, not since this morning. What's up?

His cell phone rang and Jill's work number popped up.

"Hello."

"Hi. Hey, it's probably nothing, I didn't want to freak you out or anything, but I just wondered if he told you about Travis stopping to see him this morning," Jill said.

Son of a bitch. "What the hell did that weasel say to him?" Alex flushed with anger.

"I don't know, really. I just saw Travis leaving. That's why I wondered if he told you. I'd ask him myself but he's had his door closed and he hasn't been answering his phone."

Fuck. Just fucking great. "Okay, thanks."

Alex pushed the button for Travis' number. He'd been meaning to delete it. Now he was glad he hadn't. Son of a bitch!

"Alex?"

"Yeah, it's me. What the fuck did you say to Craig today?"

"Whoa, slow down. You might want to say hi or something first."

Alex gripped the phone tightly, imagining it to be Travis' neck. "Cut the bullshit. You've interfered with my life for the last time. What did you see Craig for?"

"To get his recommendation for a tailor?"

"I'm not amused, Travis."

Travis sighed heavily. "Fine. I went to see him to suggest you were only with him to get your revenge on him for high school and eventually you would admit it and dump him."

"What?"

Travis chuckled. "I also implied we started seeing each other on the side again."

"You bastard. Why would you do that?"

"Because, I figure if he breaks up with you, you'll come back to me."

Alex let out a heavy breath. "In your dreams. Forget it, Travis. What I have with Craig is forever. Don't contact either of us again."

"Alex-"

Alex pushed end call. Anger nearly blinded him. He needed to calm down before calling Craig and telling him they were all lies. Deep down Craig would know it, but it might take him a bit to figure it out.

Finally he called Craig's office number. It went immediately to voice mail. Next he tried his cell phone. Same thing.

"Damn it," Alex said out loud. He might be overreacting, but he decided he was going to get in his car and drive over to see Craig. If everything was cool they could even have lunch.

Craig's administrative assistant had gone to lunch when Alex arrived at his office. He knocked on the closed door, but there was no answer. For a moment, he leaned his forehead against the door and told himself to remain calm. The same eerie feeling something was wrong he'd had on the day of Craig's accident had returned.

Alex twisted the knob, but he was met with immediate resistance. Locked. Okay, now he started to freak. It was entirely possible Craig went somewhere and wasn't even in his office. Sure, it was possible. But Alex didn't believe either he or his assistant locked his office during the day.

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Swallowing heavily, Alex went to the assistant's desk and scanned the top for any sign of keys. When he didn't see any he tried the top right drawer. Yeah, he was prying in someone else's desk. So sue him. He didn't care.

A set of two keys twinkled out at him. He snatched them up and put the first one into the lock. The lock clicked and he turned the knob.

"Craig?"

No answer. Alex stepped into the office and froze. His blood ran cold. His heart plummeted.

Craig's office window had been flung wide open. Outside the window was a narrow ledge, just wide enough for Craig to sit on, his back leaning against the wall of the building. His office was on the fifteenth floor.

"Oh my God, Craig." Alex stood rooted to the spot. The only acknowledgement his lover had even heard him was a tiny turn of the head in Alex's direction, but his gaze remained focused straight ahead.

Shock coursed through Alex. His body started shaking. He couldn't be seeing what he was seeing.

"Hello, Alex," Craig said softly.

"Craig, please come back inside the room." He forced himself to take a few steps closer. He was next to Craig's desk now.

"I've been sitting here for over an hour, you know. Unable to do it." Craig's voice was hollow.

"Do what?"

"Jump."

God, no. Alex clenched his fists. No, no, no.

"That should tell you that you don't really want to, babe. Come back inside. We'll talk about it."

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Craig looked at him then. His blue eyes were cloudy with tears. "I'm so tired, Alex."

"I know. It's okay. Craig, you know I love you, don't you?"

"Nobody loves me."

"That isn't true. Listen, what Travis said was a lie. I'm not trying to get revenge and I'm not seeing him. I love you. I've always loved you." Alex's own eyes filled with tears. It was so much worse than he'd even imagined. Why hadn't he insisted Craig get help? What the hell was wrong with him? He'd seen the signs.

"Travis is an idiot," Craig said. He shrugged and returned to staring straight ahead.

"That's right. He is. Babe, come inside. Please."

Craig leaned his head back and closed his eyes. "The car accident. It wasn't an accident."

"What do you mean?"

He laughed, low and sorrowfully. "I crashed my car on purpose. I tried to end it then."

Alex closed his own eyes. Pain slashed through him. "Why?"

"The sanitarium called."

His mother. It always went back to her, Alex realized.

"What did they say?"

"She's dead."

Alex had not expected that. He exhaled. "I'm sorry."

Craig laughed again. "I'm not. Do you know what I thought when they told me?"

"No."

"Thank God the bitch is dead. That's what I thought. The bitch is dead." Tears streamed down his cheeks. "My own mother and I was glad she was dead."

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"I know you must have gone through a lot because of her, babe. Why don't you give me your hand and come back inside and tell me about it? I want to hear everything."

Craig looked at him. "You don't think that makes me a monster?"

"Never."

"Even though she was sick?"

Alex shook his head. "I know it was difficult. I saw you with her, remember? But we'll take care of it. We'll give her a nice burial and -"

"It's too late. I buried her already. Three days after the accident. It was just me and some of the people from the sanitarium."

"Why didn't you tell me? I would have been there."

"I didn't want anyone there, Alex. Not even you."

"Okay. It's all right." Alex stepped closer to him and reached a hand out toward him. "Come on, Craig. Don't break my heart."

Craig stared at his hand for a moment. "You don't understand."

"No. But I will if you talk to me about it. I love you. You said you love me. Did you mean it?"

"Yes."

Alex nodded, relieved. "Good. Then don't leave me. Please, don't you dare leave me. Not like this."

Craig looked down for a moment and gave a shuddering breath. When he looked up again, he nodded, and stuck out his hand. "Okay."

Alex took Craig's hand and then his arm and pulled him from the ledge. He grabbed him into a tight embrace and allowed his tears to flow freely. Craig hugged him back, though not quite as hard.

Hiccupping, Alex pulled away slightly. "Now we're going to sit down on this floor here and talk about it. You sit down there. I'm going to close this window and then the door."

Craig obediently sat down and leaned his back against the wall a few feet from the window. He kept his gaze focused on Alex now.

Alex smiled a little and tried to force his heart to return to normal beats. He closed the window and locked it. He would have double- and triple-locked it if he could. Next he closed the door so they could have privacy.

Plopping down on the floor next to Craig, Alex grabbed one of Craig's hands and threaded his fingers through it.

"Tell me about her," he said softly.

"I was never good enough. No matter what I did. Once I brought home a B on my report card and...well, she went ballistic. She never told me good job when I got all As either. It was expected. What else should I have gotten? When I played quarterback in football she expected that, too. It was the star position. What else should I be? I used to think she was just mean. I didn't know as a kid she was sick."

"What about your dad, did he know?"

Craig shrugged. "Maybe he suspected something before she was diagnosed. I'm not sure. She hid a lot of things from him in those days. She used to watch all the neighbors and think they were stealing from her. Me too sometimes. And when my dad did come home from work he was always cool. I used to think...well, at least I have one parent who loves me and treats me well."

"Yeah, that's good," Alex agreed.

Craig laughed that same strange, hollow, sorrow-filled laugh. "Once I broke this vase she had. I don't remember even how I did, just clumsy I guess. But she had been ironing nearby and when I broke it she just went...nuts. I knew she was mad, I saw the rage and I freaked out and tried to run away. But she grabbed me and started whaling on me with the iron."

"Oh my God."

"Yeah. I kept crying, 'Mommy stop,' but she didn't. I lost consciousness after a while. It's a wonder she didn't kill me then. Probably would have if my dad hadn't got home while she was still hitting me. He stopped her and brought me to the hospital. I had to get sixteen stitches in my head."

Alex's stomach twisted painfully.

"After that my dad paid a little more attention to what she was doing. But he still didn't take her to see anyone or anything. I started having these dreams where she was hitting me with irons and other stuff. I'd wake up screaming." Craig sighed. "I was twelve when I tried it the first time."

Alex trembled. "Tried what?"

"I slit my wrists." Craig pulled his hand out of Alex's and undid the cuffs of his dress shirt and pushed them aside. "The scars are still there though they're very slight and most of the time I cover them with makeup."

Alex stared at the slash marks he'd never noted before. True, they were faint, but they were still there. God, he was an idiot.

"My parents found me before I did any real damage. The doctors told them I should see someone so they just told me to talk to our priest. I never did. I just pushed it away. Eventually the dreams went away, but every once in a while I'd go back to moments like the iron or whatever. It was weird like I was reliving it. It was happening all over again.

"When I was in high school my dad finally had my mom seen by a psychiatrist and that's when we found out about the schizophrenia. I was afraid I had it too. I still am."

Alex shook his head. "I don't think that's true, babe. I'm sorry, I had no idea you were going through all this during school."

Craig nodded and closed his eyes, squeezing tears out. "It's hard for me to accept anyone loving me, Alex. Nobody ever has. My own parents didn't love me."

"I'm sure that isn't true. And certainly your dad did. And what about your boyfriend you told me about who died a couple of years back?"

"I made him up," Craig admitted. "I never had a regular boyfriend before you. I just went from sex to sex to sex."

"Well, that doesn't matter. You have me now, Craig, and I am not going anywhere. I love you. I've always loved you. I've loved you since high school."

"What if I'm crazy?"

"What if you are? I don't think you are, babe, but I'm not going to leave you because of that." Alex leaned over and kissed his wet check. "But there's more, isn't there?"

"Yeah," Craig said in a small voice. He looked down at their hands which were once more entwined. "You know my dad got sick. It was right around the same time as we found out my mother was schizophrenic. Anyway, he kept getting weaker so he went to the doctor and they told him he had leukemia."

"That must have been so hard for you. The only parent you felt close to at that point."

Craig stiffened and seemed to scoot closer to the wall and draw into himself. "I really did feel close to him and thought he loved me. I was wrong."

"Craig?"

"I had begun to realize I was gay. I knew I couldn't tell my mom, but I thought...well, that my dad would listen. I told a counselor at school and she even suggested I talk to my dad."

"He didn't take it well?" Alex asked gently. He wanted to pull Craig into his lap, but he had a feeling Craig needed to tell him his way.

"I made sure to tell him when my mom was seeing her doctor. I didn't want to have to deal with her saying anything." Craig ran the long fingers of his other hand through his hair. "I really thought it would be all right."

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Alex's heart beat painfully. The sorrow, the raw pain in Craig's voice tore at him. He wanted more than anything to make it better.

"He called me every name you can think of," Craig said, his voice breaking. "Faggot, homo, worthless piece of shit."

"Oh, babe."

"I couldn't believe it. I sat there pouring my fucking heart out and he just started yelling at me. He told me I wasn't a son of his and I made him sick. To get away from him." Tears flowed down Craig's cheeks. He sniffed. "Everything I said about you in school? He said it to me. It was all from him."

"I'm so sorry."

"No, I'm the one who is sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you," Craig said, sobbing.

Alex did pull him into his arms then. "Oh, ssh, it's okay, Craig. I forgave you for that a long time ago."

"It was horrible."

Alex stroked his hair and kissed the top of his head. "I forgave you. But you know what? You never forgave yourself. You need to."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can. You will. We'll get you help, babe."

"You do think I'm crazy then?" Craig whispered.

"No. I don't think you're crazy or that you have your mom's illness. But I do think you might have what's called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder."

"I'm not a soldier."

"No, but soldiers aren't the only ones who get it. Abuse victims can, too. And you certainly were abused by both your parents."

"Why couldn't they just love me?"

Alex's heart almost did break in two then. "I don't know. But I do know it wasn't you, it was them. They were the ones who were the problem, Craig. Not you."

"I became an accountant to make him proud. Like he would look down from heaven or something and say, well, I know you're still a fag but at least you've done something right. Stupid, huh? When they called me to tell me my mom died I lost it for a second," Craig said, resting his head against Alex's chest. "I just... It was happening all over again. She was bashing me over the head with that iron again. And then someone honked and I started driving, but I couldn't shake it. It just hurt too much. So I saw the pole and drove into it."

"Thank God for your airbag. What happened today? Why did you climb out on the ledge? Was it Travis?"

"That's what started it. I knew he was an ass. I shouldn't have listened. Then it started to make sense. Why would you love me? No one ever did."

"I love you so much, Craig. We'll get you help. I promise. Everything will be all right. But you have to stay with me, babe. You can't leave me like that. It's too awful."

"I'll try, Alex."

"Travis is a prick and a liar. If he ever comes near either of us again we'll get a restraining order against him."

"I love you, Alex. Thank you for loving me."

Alex tipped his chin up and kissed him. "You deserve to be loved, Craig. You deserve everything."

Epilogue Six Months Later

Craig looked around his empty soon-to-be former house. He'd be handing over the keys to the escrow company tomorrow. He stood in the middle of what used to be his living room. He expected to feel the same anger and pain he'd felt these last many years. To his great relief, he felt peace. The doctor had been right about selling the house.

"Craig?" Alex asked, coming into the front hall from outside. "Everything okay?"

Craig grinned. "Everything's great. I'm just saying goodbye to this old place."

Alex glanced around. "I can't imagine you'll miss it. Not considering what went on here."

"Nah, it's okay. I used to really hate this house. I had so many memories of what happened here with both my mom and dad. Now...it's just a house."

"That's great. Need to do anything else here?"

This house had once been the hope of a young family. A wife and a husband and their son. A wife and mother who perhaps had loved her husband and son once before the illness overcame her. A husband and father who may have loved his wife and son before they proved to be all too human.

Now it would be someone else's hope. Another young family full of dreams. Craig felt good about that. Very good.

"Babe?" Alex now frowned in his direction. Always worrying, that Alex.

"It's cool, Alex."

Craig might not have had a family who cared about him and accepted him growing up, but Alex and his family welcomed him and gave him a lot of love. It was incredible to have a sense of normalcy. He'd talked about that lot with his doctor. These last few months getting to know Alex's family and knowing they thought of him as belonging with them. Not thinking he was worthless.

He walked to the front door and glanced back one last time. A simple bungalowstyle home. A living room, a dining room, a kitchen and a hallway with three bedrooms. His parents never filled that third bedroom. Probably a good thing even though he would have liked having a sibling.

"You want to have Thanksgiving with the family at our house? Mom called a little bit ago and I told her I'd check with you," Alex said, following him outside.

"I'd love to." Craig locked the door. He grabbed Alex's hand. "And I love you, you know."

Alex returned his smile. "Me too. You ready?"

"Yes. Let's go home."

About the Author

Shawn Lane believes love and passion know no boundaries. Shawn writes both erotic love stories involving men in historical or contemporary settings and interracial romances between men and women. Shawn is always looking for new stories and new characters to create while holding down life in California.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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