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Trouble

TOP SHELF

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## CHAPTER ONE

Detective Zeke Henderson pulled up to the scene and killed the siren, letting the red light on the dashboard continue to pulse. He climbed out of his car and shivered, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets. It wasn't the coldest April night he'd ever had to come down for a murder, but it felt damp and he only had his suit jacket to keep him warm.

The yellow tape roped off the alley, uniforms keeping the gawkers at bay. He'd have thought it was too damned late to have this many onlookers, but murders brought folks out of the woodwork.

The grislier the better, it seemed. There was just something about human nature that drew people to violence. He'd leave the wheres and whys of it to the head shrinkers -- his job was to clean up the mess and find out what had happened.

He flashed his badge at a uniform so fresh the guy was still wet behind the ears, and the young cop quickly pulled up the yellow tape for him.

"It's pretty bad, sir."

"They all are. What's your name?"

"Benders, sir."

"Call me Henderson, everyone else does, Benders. You keep the crowd back -- they don't need to see this."

"Yes, sir."

Christ, they were either getting younger or he was getting a hell of a lot older.

He patted his pockets down for his cigarettes before he remembered he'd quit; he only missed it when he was on a scene. With a sigh, he dug his gum out of his pocket and put the stick of Big Red in his mouth as he slowly made his way deeper into the alley.

The Medical Examiner was already on scene, taking their pictures and examining the remains.

Jesus. There was blood splashed shoulder-high on the bricks, the two bodies split from crotch to throat. Two women - scantily dressed, one without even a pair of shoes. Shit, 'pretty bad' didn't

even begin to describe this. He had to give the kid at the tape props for not being greener at the gills than he was.

Zeke pursed his lips. You had to be pretty damned angry to do something like this to someone.

"Hey, Roger, looks like you've got the scene well in hand. There any witnesses I can talk to?" Not that he was squeamish, but Christ, he wouldn't be upset if he didn't have to keep looking at those women's insides.

"There's a stoner in the squad car. Completely zonked. Won't say a fucking word, but he's covered in gore."

"Zonked, huh?" Tweaked out on PCBs or even PCP, yeah, Zeke could see someone hopped up on something doing something like this and not even knowing it. But a stoner? Not very likely.

Still, covered in gore obviously put him at the scene of the crime. A scene Zeke was more than happy to leave to Roger. "I'll go talk to him."

"Good luck. Doc says it looks like Basic." Shit. That stuff just made a person flat, through and through. No emotions. No appetite. No hungers. Nothing.

"Thanks, Roger. I'll catch you back at the house." He headed back toward where the squad car was parked, breathing in the cold night air, clearing his head. He got rid of the gum in a trashcan on the way and climbed into the front seat of the car.

"Can I go?" The words were flat, unafraid.

"No."

The guy was in the shadows, but he got the impression of a slight figure with dark hair and clothes. Or that could have just been the gore; he wasn't looking too closely just yet. He took out his notebook and flipped it to a new page. "You got a name?"

"In theory. Which one do you want?"

Jesus, this was going to take all night. "Why don't we start with first and last?"

"My legal name is Gary Short. My pseudonym is Cole Manning. I go by Shorty."

Zeke blinked and wrote the names down. The thing was, both the legal and pseudonym rang bells. He was sure he'd seen them both before. He repeated them again in his head, saying them slowly, mind flipping back through cases.

Holy Shit! Gary Short.

He remembered that case. A gay couple'd been hit by a drunk driver and the passenger had been

killed. Gary Short had not been flat that night, hell no. It had been an ugly scene. Just a uniform back then, he'd been the first responder.

The guy had been beautiful, that was the rumor, but his face'd been smashed, torn open. But the boyfriend had survived. If being zonked out on Basic was surviving. Some people never survived losing their partner.

"Can you tell me what happened tonight?" He was more gentle now than when he'd started out.

"I was in the club, listening to the music. I went down to meet a friend and there was... something in the alley. I don't remember what. Something ugly."

"Did you go take a closer look?" Covered in gore, Roger'd said. He supposed he ought to get a decent look at Gary Short for himself.

"No. No. It hugged me. I passed out because I couldn't breathe."

One of Zeke's eyebrows went up. Damn, but Gary Short was Out Of It.

He turned on the overhead light and winced at the sight of the man. Covered in gore was right. Holy shit.

"Are you hurt anywhere?" If he hadn't seen the crime scene he would have thought there was no way Gary could be covered in that much blood and not be cut himself.

"I don't think so. I don't know." Bright green eyes stared at him, the only purely clean part of the man. "I need a bath."

Zeke snorted. "You got that right."

He shook his head and pondered his options. He figured his best bet was taking Gary down to the station, getting the guy cleaned up, maybe sobered up a little, find a coffee for the man and see if he couldn't get something, anything, coherent out of the guy.

"We'll go to the station. There's a shower there you can use, get cleaned up." Forensics would take the clothes anyway. Get pictures. All that happy-crappy.

He didn't get an answer, just a soft sigh, the green eyes staring and still.

Jesus, what made a man get so deep into Basic like that? Well, he knew, didn't he? The man had lost his lover the night of that crash.

"I'm going to go let the others know what's going on and get a uniform to drive you to the station. I'll meet you there." Because there was no way he was putting Gary in the back seat of his sedan; he'd never get it clean again.

He didn't get an answer, which didn't really surprise him.

Bracing himself for the damp, he climbed out of the car, slamming the door behind him.

"Hey, Benders, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take Gary Short back there to the station and get him to forensics. They'll get him cleaned up and then I'll interview him, k?"

The kid nodded and all but snapped him a salute. "Yes, sir!"

Zeke managed not to roll his eyes as he made his way back to Roger, who was still working the scene. "You still here?"

"Yup. Man, this motherfucker was strong. Pissed off, too."

"Yeah." He made sure he didn't step on any blood and surveyed the scene. It was still pretty shocking. He had a feeling this was one that wasn't going to fade away easily. He just prayed it was a one-time thing and not some serial killer.

"There's no way that little stoner did this. He's not tiny, but this took someone with way more size and strength. I'd like to know how the fuck he got covered in blood, though. He said something about it hugging him." Zeke shook his head. "I sent him to the station with Benders to get him cleaned up. I'm hoping he'll be more coherent when the crap works out of his system."

"Shit, then he'll be screaming and shaking. You're right, though, the guy in the car is too short to make this happen."

Zeke agreed with both points, but there wasn't much he could do about Gary. The guy wasn't making any sense stoned. Hopefully he'd get it together enough before he got too far into the shakes to tell Zeke what had happened.

"Have we got *anything*?" he asked. He hated having no leads.

"I'll get the bodies in, start working them up. They've been dead no more than a couple of hours."

"All right, I'll head in and see what I can get out of our witness. We'll compare notes in a couple hours."

He gave Roger a half salute and headed back toward his car, pushing past the press who shoved microphones and recorders in his face.

There was no other way to cut it; this one was going to be messy.

## CHAPTER TWO

He had written about it for years -- its fetid breath, the way its tongue slapped along the wet insides of its mouth, too long for the space that held it.

Its eyes -- a dull copper, like a penny mostly buried in the mud.

The vision was right behind his eyes. It had been following him for years now. Four years. Five. Since before Sammy died. Since before the accident. It'd been waiting to bite him and now it was back.

Looking for him.

Biting.

He stared down at his hands, the people swirling around him, rubbing this and that from him, taking his shoes, his clothes.

"Here, you can put this on." A soft pair of sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt were handed over.

"The officer said I could have a shower." The officer that seemed so familiar. So familiar. Maybe he'd been a student.

A fan.

"What officer?" The question was suspicious.

"That would be me." There he was, tall, broad, a kind smile on his face. "Does forensics have what they need?"

"Yeah."

"All right, Gary, why don't you come with me?" The clothes were taken out of his hands, a rough, fraying towel put in them instead.

"Are you going to beat me?" That might be interesting.

The officer stopped and looked at him. "Am I going to what?"

"Are you going to beat me? You know, police brutality and all that. I tend to think it's ridiculous, but I've never been an addict in a murder investigation before; the rules might have changed."

The man began to chuckle. Wow, nice smile. "No, Gary. There will no beatings. I'm going to take you to the shower, wait while you do something about the blood, and then I'm going to feed you coffee and ask you a few questions. I hope you're not too disappointed."

"I gave up fun beatings when Sammy died, but thanks. I'm good." He chuckled. He smelled like pennies tasted.

One eyebrow went up and the officer nodded to the towel in his hand. "You might want to put that around your waist until we get to the showers." The guy waited for him to do that and then led him across a hall and into a tiled room with a half dozen showers on the left and lockers on the right.

The water came on and he stepped into it, face lifted to the steam. The copper-penny smell went away; the heat pounding against him. He sank into himself, deep, deeper. Deeper.

"You gonna be all night, Gary? Because I have a case to work here."

"I've told you everything." There was a monster eating people. He liked it when Gary watched.

"You told me 'it' hugged you and you couldn't breathe. That's a far cry from everything, Gary." The water stopped and the towel went over his shoulders. "Come on and get dry and into the sweats. We'll go talk in an interview room where you can sit and take your time."

He dried himself, the stains on the towel fascinating, like words he couldn't read.

"Hey. Hey, Gary. Come on, now. Focus." The towel was tugged away, sweatpants pushed into his hands. They were faded, soft.

"Why?" He had been focused.

He had been.

"Because I need to talk to you. Find out what you know."

The sweatpants were too long, but the ankles were elastic so they didn't drag. A matching sweatshirt was thrust at him next. He hadn't thought he was cold. Was he cold? Or were the clothes just warm?

The officer grabbed his arm and led him out of the showers, across the hall again and into a different room. This one had a table and chairs and a wide mirror. He sat, knees up under his chin, heels propped on the edge of the chair.

Another man came into the room with a couple of coffees. One was set in front of him, the other in front of the officer.

"There you go, Zeke. Don't say I never do anything for you."

The two men laughed and then it was just him and the officer -- Zeke -- again.

The steam from the coffee looked like clouds.

Little stringy clouds.

Zeke cleared his throat, the sound loud. "So, Gary."

"Yes?" If he thought about it long enough, the clouds made words.

"Why don't you tell me again, what happened in that alley tonight?"

"I was at the club. There was music." He'd been writing.

Writing.

Gary frowned. "Where is my manuscript?"

"Your what?"

"My book. I had my book. My work. Where is my work? Did he take it?"

It was a simple blue notebook. Always a blue notebook. He'd been telling the story of the monsters that watched and waited, about how they attacked in the darkness, with their claws and fangs.

"Cole Manning! You're that writer! I knew both your names sounded familiar!"

"I am." That writer.

The writer.

The scary book writer.

"You write scary shit. Shit like what went down in that alley. You working with someone?"

"Working with someone? I write alone." He never even let Sam read his work.

"All right, you work alone. Then tell me what happened when you left the club. You went into the alley." Zeke's voice was so deep it almost reverberated in his chest.

"I did. I was..." He couldn't remember why he went. Did he follow someone? Did the toothy penny man call him? "I went down the stairs and the penny man was there."

Zeke leaned in. "The penny man?"

He nodded. "Eyes like moldy pennies. I could smell him, when he hugged me."

"He touched you? Why didn't he kill you?"

"He wanted me to watch."

"So you got a good look at what happened. I need you to tell me, take me through it. And then I need you to sit with a sketch artist and give us a description of this penny man. Does he have a name?"

"I don't know." If he did, no one had explained it to him, no one had told him.

"All right." Zeke had a pad of paper and a pen. "So he wanted you to watch. Tell me what you saw."

"There was blood. Everywhere. And his eyes were in the light. He smelled bad. He was tall. So tall. And dripping."

"Did you see him kill the women?"

"I don't think so. I don't remember *seeing* that." He remembered remembering it - the way the blood sprayed, sizzled on the streetlights.

Zeke sighed, the sound heavy. "Look, Gary. I want to help you here, I really do. But you're not helping me out any. You were the only person there with two dead women. You've got their blood all over you and you claim the person who did this wanted you to watch, but you can't give me a proper description of either him or the things he did."

"I told you. I went down, he hugged me, he left. Do you want me to invent things? I'm very good at that. Inventing stories."

"No, no. I don't want you to invent things." There was another heavy sigh. "Maybe we should revisit this in the morning."

"I can go home, then?"

"No, I'm thinking maybe you can stay here. We have nice beds in the drunk tank."

"You're arresting me?" He wasn't staying here. He wasn't. He'd cooperated.

"I don't want to." Zeke moved closer, eyes so blue, right there. "Give me a reason not to."

"Look at me. *Look* at me. I weigh less than a call girl. I have no defensive wounds. Not one. Who could kill someone and not get hurt?" He wasn't stupid and he wasn't staying. He'd call Linda, if he had to. She'd come get him.

"You sure know a lot about what we're looking for. Maybe you're working with the guy who did this. Choreographing things."

Choreographing things. Murders. Right. "I want my lawyer." Now.

"You don't need a lawyer -- you're free to go." Zake sat back and tossed his pen on the paper. "You think if I drop by tomorrow morning to ask a few follow up questions you'll be sober?"

"It depends on whether I get a hit tonight or not. My luck's not going well."

"I need you sober, Gary. Just a few hours, okay? I don't want any more dead women on my watch."

"I don't either. You think I like it? Knowing that he's watching me?"

"Now you're saying he's watching you?" Zeke drummed his fingers on the table. "I really need you sober, Gary. I need you to make sense for me."

Something too close to emotion starting crawling up his spine. Something like fear and anger. Something like pain. "I'm going home."

"I'll give you a lift."

"Okay." He stood, forced himself not to shake. "I live off Graves, near the water." Sam loved the water.

"I guess writing pays pretty good, huh?" Zeke's hand touched his back, guiding him to the door.

"It does." It had. Once. Now it paid amazingly well.

"Well then, let's get you home."

"Lead on, MacDuff." If the penny man was there, the nice police officer could arrest him.

Assuming the big asshole could see him.

## CHAPTER THREE

Zeke turned onto Graves, slowing the car. "So can you be more specific than 'off Graves near the water'?"

He was frustrated. He couldn't shake the feeling Gary'd led him on a merry chase through that deranged mind. The penny man. He shook his head. He was banking on a sober Gary being able to give him more real details.

Of course he had to get the guy home first.

Gary cleaned up pretty good. He wasn't rail thin, he wasn't even tiny, but he was a lot smaller than Zeke and damn it, stupid as it might sound, Gary seemed fragile.

"Where do I go next?" he tried, nudging Gary's shoulder.

"The blue house." He pulled up and stopped. Stared.

It was like a fun house or a prison or... not a house. No one *lived* there. The building was three stories tall, a huge fence surrounding it with row after row of steel bars on every surface.

"Shit, Gary, this isn't really where you live, is it?"

"It is." Gary slipped out of the car, punching a code in the front gate.

Uninvited, Zeke followed Gary up the walk. Shit, this was crazy.

The gate clanged behind him, Gary leading him up through a yard filled with scrabby grass. There were boxes and what looked to be statues scattered around, like a bad horror movie set. Had it always been like this, or had things gotten... bizarre after Gary's lover died?

Gary opened the door, slipped inside, showing him more of the same. The place looked like a warehouse of papers and mail, unopened boxes head high.

Zeke had never seen anything like it. Gary was a real head case. He wondered just how long the guy had been on the Basic.

"Would you like some coffee?" The question was so normal, so normal, that it threw him.

"Um... sure."

"The kitchen is this way." He was led through the stacks, the house seeming darker and darker. Jesus. He shuddered to know what the kitchen looked like.

"Do you have electricity?" The boxes made it feel like a warren.

"If I didn't, it would be hard to make the coffee."

Gary opened a door, the sudden brightness shocking, unnerving. It was a kitchen -- pure white and antiseptically clean, the lights almost blinding.

He blinked, feeling off center. This whole thing was so strange.

Gary moved into the pristine kitchen, filled a coffee carafe with water and pulled a container of coffee from the freezer.

Zeke watched, trying to put it all together. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Absolutely."

"What's with the Jekyll and Hyde rooms?"

"What do you mean?" The coffee was carefully measured out, added along with a filter.

"Well out there," he pointed toward the door they'd come through. "It's packrat central. In here is OCD heaven."

"This is where they can't see in."

He looked around, blinked. No windows. "Who are *they*, Gary?" He was starting to think, drugs or no drugs, Gary was nuttier than a fruitcake.

"The fans. The people wanting to see the crazy author. The media." Two white cups were placed on the counter.

"Oh." Okay, so maybe not completely nutty. "So the packratting back there is... camouflage?"

"The boxes?" At his nod, Gary shrugged. "They come and come. They never stop. They make good blocks."

"What's in them?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea. Sugar? Milk?"

"You've never opened them?" Gary Short was by far the strangest man he'd ever met. And he'd met some weird people in his line of work.

"Of course not." The coffee was poured, smelling so good.

"How come?" This conversation was starting to hurt his head.

"Do you open packages from strangers?"

"Yep." Or at least he had the bomb squad open them. "Are these from a stalker or something? I mean there's hundreds of them."

"I don't know. I haven't opened them." Gary handed him a cup of coffee, hands steady. "I don't want to know what they have in them. I don't want to touch what's inside them. You've seen the yard. They send horrible, ugly things."

He wrapped one hand around the hot mug. "You mean the statues? I have to admit they looked kind of creepy all scattered around and lying on their sides and stuff, but..."

"I don't expect you to understand, officer. You and I live in very different worlds." The man looked terribly sad for a moment, almost lost.

"It doesn't have to be that way, man." Running on instinct, he reached out and put his hand on Gary's shoulder.

"Of course it does. Do you think I chose this?" The man's muscles were jerking, shivering.

He curved his hand, turning his hold into a massage. "I think you didn't fight it too hard."

"You don't know anything about me. I'm just a nutcase that got hugged by a murderer."

"I know a little more than that," he said quietly.

The tremors got worse. "What do you know?"

"I was the first one at the scene that night."

Gary closed his eyes, skin going pale. It was funny, he hadn't noticed the scars after Gary'd showered, not until the man paled and the network of fine scars stayed red.

"That was a long time ago."

"I know. But I think you're still living it." He reached out with his free hand, tracing the scars.

Gary's eyes went wide, staring at him. "I'll never not live it. I have to live this until the Penny Man goes away."

"You think maybe this Penny Man is a figment of your imagination? Something you and the Basic have invented?"

"Wouldn't that be nice?"

"Yeah, it would." He took a sip of the coffee. "Hey, this is good."

"Thank you. Come into the family room." The coffee was put away and he was led in deeper, to another perfectly stark, perfectly clean room, this one done entirely in navy blue.

"How come no pictures or anything?" It was like an institution.

"I think, when I started, I was trying to avoid distraction. Then it just stopped being important."

"I would have thought you'd want distractions." He sat gingerly on the couch. Also navy.

Gary sat on a stuffed chair, staring over at him. "No. I wanted to remember everything."

"Why?"

"Because we forget -- we forget exactly what things looked or smelled or tasted like. We forget everything and I wanted to remember."

"Isn't that painful?"

"Nothing is painful anymore."

He wasn't sure he believed that. "No? Or is it just all buried under the Basic?"

"The Basic makes it go away, makes it bearable."

"You need to find something else, man. This isn't living." Not even close.

"What is it, then? You don't understand what I live with here, knowing that they're watching me. All the time. They're out there."

"Who? Who's out there? Who are 'they'?" Maybe if he just kept digging he'd get an answer he could use. An answer that made sense.

"I told you, the Penny Man. He watches me. He sends things. Things in those *boxes*."

"All right, look. Why don't we go open one of those boxes. It'll be okay -- I'm a cop. I've got a gun."

"What does a gun have to do with anything?"

Okay, nothing was likely to still be *alive* in those boxes, but still. It sounded good. "Well, if there's anything scary in the box, I can shoot it."

"Officer, I'm crazy and an addict, I'm not *stupid*. Go open whatever you'd like." He got a tilted head, a half grin.

He chuckled. "Yeah, so the gun is irrelevant. Come with me and let's see what's in some of those boxes. I won't let anything happen to you."

"Why are you curious? Is it just a part of the job?"

"You said this Penny Man sent them to you. I'm hoping maybe there'll be a clue to his identity or where he lives in them." Not to mention he was curious as heck as to what actually was in the boxes.

"They're everywhere. Pick one." Gary stood up, drew him deeper into the house. The stairway was purple, another room was red and bare. Then, toward the back of the house, the stacks of boxes started again.

He grabbed a box at random, searching for the To address, the From. This one was from California and the box was filled with papers. On the top was "Idolatry by Larry Owens". A manuscript.

"This is a manuscript." He pushed the box aside and took another one down, opening it.

That one had women's panties, the next had a doll with its eyes poked out. The third was heavy, rattled, and when he opened it, he found it filled with pennies, eyeballs painted on each one.

Jesus.

"Okay, Gary. I want to get all these boxes down to the station. We need to go through them, see if we can figure out who sent them, how they're connected to this murder."

"No. No, they have to stay here. They keep them out."

"They keep who out?"

"People. People who want to look in."

He was starting to feel like a hamster in a cage, running and running and only going in circles.  
"What if we cover all the windows?"

"They *are* covered!" Oh. Man. Passion. Look at that.

"Well then, *they* can't see in, right? So you don't need the boxes?"

"Stop it. You can't move the boxes! You can't!"

"Then I'll bring some guys down here and we'll go through them, catalog everything."

"No. No, this is my house. This is my place. This is mine." The cracks were starting to show and he wasn't seeing anger, he was seeing pure terror.

He reached out to hold onto Gary's shoulder. "Take it easy, man. I'm just trying to help get the Penny Man out of your life."

"He won't. He needs me."

Jesus.

"He needs to go to prison for killing those women."

Gary looked at him like he was completely crazed. "You think you'll find him? Honestly?"

"If he's real, we'll find him." Hell, they had a thousand clues, right here in this house.

Gary stared at him and just turned, walked away up a flight of stairs.

"Gary? Gary!" Christ. Just Jesus Christ.

His gut told him that Gary wasn't responsible for this, that he wasn't working with the Penny Man. But if he discounted his gut, it didn't look good for Gary.

The windows along the stairs were covered in sheets of metal, the stairs themselves painted bright purple. He stood at the bottom of them for a moment, and then, when it was clear Gary wasn't coming back down, he headed up after the man.

The second floor was completely black -- no lights, no nothing -- but there was a light shining on the third floor, so he went up. This floor was almost normal -- soft, padded furniture, lights, books and papers.

"Gary," he called softly, head poking into one of the rooms.

There was a huge bed, soft covers piled everywhere, Gary in the middle of them, eyes closed.

Well. Sleeping it off was a good thing, because Gary sure as hell didn't make a lot of sense high. Although Zeke was starting to get a picture. A rather abstract picture, but a picture nonetheless.

He went to sit on the couch in the outer room. He'd call and let Roger know where he was, and then he'd wait for Gary to wake up.

## CHAPTER FOUR

He could feel the Penny Man, slinking around the base of the house, peering in, trying to find him. Trying to get his attention.

Trying to get him to come out and play.

Gary moaned, hiding under the covers, trying to decide if it was worth coming out to shoot up, to let himself have what he needed. If Sam was here, Sam would help him. Love him. Make things go away. God, he missed that, missed the way Sam saved him. If Sam was here, he wouldn't be thinking about the black powder that he needed more than anything.

He crawled out of the bed, head screaming, heading for his stash, carefully set up in the bathroom.

"Hey, you're up. How're you feeling?"

The voice startled him and he jerked away, running for the bat he kept by the bedroom door.

"Hey, hey now." His arm was caught and he was brought up short. "It's Zeke. Remember?"

"Zeke? Zeke? I..." Oh. Oh. Police. Penny Man. Boxes. Blood Hugs. "Why are you still here?"

"Because I want to help you. And because you're the key to solving this case." The grip on his arm gentled, Zeke's hand almost hot against his skin. Okay, okay. He remembered. Big guy. Pretty eyes. Square jaw. Looked like a street boxer, all bulges and bumps.

"I have to... I can't deal with shit until I do my..." His morning hit.

"Actually, I'd like to talk to you before you do Basic."

"I... I'm not good at being clean."

"I'm not asking you to be good at it, hmm?" Zeke tugged his arm, pulled him out to the main room, sitting him down on the couch with the big cushions and pillows.

"I. I have to go to the bathroom." He needed a hit. His heart was beating.

"Because you have to pee or because that's where your shit is?" Man, Zeke was big.

"What does it matter? This is my house."

"It matters because I need your help on this case and I need you sober to answer a few straight questions for me!" Zeke shook him a little "Don't you give a shit about your life?"

"What is that to you? What the *fuck* do you care?" Rage bubbled up in him and he shook with it. "Ask your motherfucking questions!"

"I care because I can't shake the lost look on your face that night and I should have done more to follow up." Zeke stopped and cleared his throat, sitting back. The next words were bitten out.

"Who's the Penny Man?"

"He's..." Gary shrugged, not sure how to answer. "I don't know. He's a man. He follows me, my career. He... Sam thought he was a character of mine, or a bad memory, but he's not. He's real." The Penny Man was a monster.

"Does he have another name?"

"I don't know. I mean, he has to, doesn't he? I named him the Penny Man. We've never *spoken*."

"Have you actually seen him before last night?"

"Yes." Over and over.

"Has he ever hurt anyone before last night?"

"How would I know that?"

"All right, then, have you seen him hurt anyone before last night?"

"I... I didn't *see* him hurt them. I never do, not that I remember. I don't look. Don't you understand?"

"So these women weren't the first?" Zeke was so intense.

"What?" He didn't understand. He didn't get it.

"The Penny Man killed those women last night, right? Has he killed others?"

"I think so. He was there when Sam died. Standing on the sidewalk. Laughing." Laughing and laughing.

"You think he caused the accident?" Zeke sounded surprised by that.

"I do. I know, no one believes me. I don't care."

He couldn't read Zeke's face, didn't know if the man believed him or not. "So you didn't see him kill the women, but he was still there when you found them and he hugged you until you passed out?"

"I didn't pass out. I just... I couldn't think. I was high. I don't *know* what he did. I just know he wanted me to see." He stood up, shaking hard, needing.

"Hey, wait. One more question." Zeke stood with him, standing close, hands on his arms. "Tell me what he looks like, Gary."

"Tall. He smells bad. His eyes look like moldy pennies and his breath sounds like a train."

"Slight? Muscular? White? Black?"

"Big. Big. Big and... hairy. Dirty. He smells like... old museums." His heart was racing, pounding furiously.

"Anything else? Anything at all, Gary."

"He watches. He always watches. Please. Please, my head. I have to go to the bathroom." He couldn't breathe. He couldn't. Please.

"How about some aspirin or something for your head?" Zeke was still holding him, hands like bands around his biceps.

"Let me go. Let me... Can't you see I NEED?" Sam would see. Sam would know. Sam would help him.

"Yeah, but I don't think you know what it is that you need. You don't need the drugs, Gary. They're just masking the problem, keeping you in the grip of the Penny Man." Zeke was so close, eyes looking into his.

"You don't understand. You don't live in the same world as I do." Help me. Please.

"Sure I do." Zeke sat, dragging him down as well, keeping him close, touching him, those hands were so warm around his arms. The warmest shackles.

"What... what are you doing?" Why was this person here? What the *fuck* was going on?

"I'm trying to help you, Gary. Wouldn't you like to kick the Basic, to *live* again?"

"Why? Why, so they can get me? So he can show me, over and over and over? I hurt. I need out."

"We're going to catch him, Gary. *I* am going to catch him and then he won't be able to hurt anyone. Not you, not anyone."

No one could catch him. No one could.

"Let me get you some water and some aspirin and take you to breakfast."

"I. I don't. I don't know if I can, in the sunlight. I don't know." Why did this man care?

"Come on, let's give it a try, hmm?" Zeke stood up and led him back to his bedroom, hand still holding onto him. "Proper clothes, yeah?"

"I." What? He. Jesus. Okay. Breathe. "I have jeans in the closet." Jeans and black shirts.

Zeke brought him over to the closet and opened the door. "Wow, you have the same outfit for day after day of wearing."

"Uniforms. For going out."

"Okay. So you put one on and I'll wait outside the door, yeah?"

He nodded, looking to the bathroom door. That would work for him. So well.

Zeke must have caught the look or something, because his lips pursed and then he headed right for the bathroom. "You don't mind if I take a leak while you're getting dressed?"

"No. Go ahead." God damn it.

"All right. I won't be long." Zeke disappeared into the bathroom, leaving him cut off from his stuff.

Gary closed his eyes, counting slowly as he reached for a pair of jeans, slipped them on. The fabric was too rough, the zipper too cold. He heard the toilet flush, the sound of running water too loud. He was waiting at the door, foot tapping, shirt in hand, when Zeke came out. He needed. Now.

Zeke leaned against the door, blocking his way, and nodded toward his shirt. "Go ahead and put that on and we can go."

"I need in the bathroom." Move. Move out of my way.

Zeke didn't move. "I thought you were going to come eat with me before you took another hit."

"I hurt. Everything hurts. I need it. I know you don't get it, but I do."

"I know that if you don't stop doing it, that hurt's never going to go away. An hour, Gary. I'm just asking for another hour."

His eyes rolled in his head. "An hour. Okay. One hour." He'd lost his mind.

Zeke's smile was slow and went all the way to his eyes. "Good. Let's go." That warm hand was back around his arm, leading him to the stairwell.

He couldn't help looking back, staring toward the bathroom, his Basic. His lifeline. Zeke kept him moving, though, ever forward, down the first set of stairs, down the second set. The worry and burn started working on him when he saw the first boxes.

"You like pancakes or waffles better?" Zeke asked him.

"Waffles. Why?" He didn't know why it mattered.

"Ah, so you like things a little different, not uniform." Zeke gave him a wink. "Some people read tea leaves, I read breakfast food."

That surprised him, tickled him, and Gary caught himself laughing, the sound foreign and wrong, bouncing against the boxes.

"You've got a nice laugh." Zeke guided him inexorably through the warren of boxes, toward the front door.

"I don't know that I want to go outside today."

"It's hardly outside. I'll park near the door to the IHOP and we'll soon have waffles and bacon and eggs and sausages in us. And coffee. Lots of coffee."

"Coffee." He did love his coffee. He did.

"Oh ho! You *are* a fellow coffee fan!" Zeke grinned at him and opened the front door. "You take it black?"

"Yes. Yes, I do." It was bright outside. He held back, looking to make sure no one was waiting.

Zeke moved a little closer, hand moving to the small of his back and propelling him along. "It's okay. I won't let anything happen to you. The car's right in front of the house."

There wasn't anyone he could see and that frisson of dread that climbed up his spine wasn't there, poking him, so he followed, heading for the black sedan. Zeke saw him safely in his seat before closing the passenger door and walking around to the driver's side. He was bouncing slightly, eyes open, staring at everything.

The driver's side door opened and Zeke climbed in, slamming it shut again. Zeke gave him a smile and started the engine, the car giving a low growl.

"You have forty nine minutes left." He wasn't sure if it was a joke.

The look Zeke shot him was surprised, but it was followed up by a grin and a chuckle. "We'd better get there fast, then, huh?"

He caught himself smiling again, grinning back. It just wasn't... He shouldn't...

"A little music okay?" Zeke turned it on before he had a chance to answer, Louis Armstrong's deep, gravelly voice filling the car.

Gary closed his eyes, the sound resonating, echoing inside him. Zeke's hums wound round the music, one thumb on the wheel tapping out the beat. In no time at all they were pulling up into the IHOP parking lot.

He looked, but there weren't any crowds, no lines. Apparently people didn't want breakfast at 9:45 a.m. on a... "What day is it?"

"Thursday." Zeke's hand was in the small of his back again, guiding him into the restaurant. The hostess was given a wide smile. "Two, please."

"Sure, honey." The waitress looked at him like she thought she might know him, and he dropped his eyes. Nope. I just look like someone familiar.

Zeke's hand drew slow circles in the small of his back as they followed her, the touch strangely soothing. They sat in a corner, the white mugs of coffee appearing immediately.

"I'd like the Waffle Special, please. Eggs scrambled. You want the same thing, Gary?"

"Sure. Sounds great." He wasn't even sure he was hungry. He needed a hit.

"Make that two, please, and keep the coffee flowing." Zeke gave her a smile, watched her go and then turned that smile on him. "Nice and bright day, isn't it?"

"I suppose, yeah." He didn't go out much.

"And I very much doubt we'll be troubled by your Penny Man. Not out here in the open, in the light."

"No. No, he's much more careful in the light."

"Good. Then you and I can just sit back and relax. Enjoy our breakfast together." Zeke smiled, doing what he'd said and relaxing back against the booth.

Gary wasn't sure whether to smile back or not. Honestly, this seemed strange as shit. Why on Earth was he in an IHOP during the day with a police officer instead of lying in his bathroom, stoned and empty, listening to himself breathe for a few hours before he got to work?

Almost as if Zeke had caught the tail end of his thoughts, the man asked, "So what do you do on a typical day? You still writing?"

"I am. I have to. Otherwise it gets worse." Otherwise the world started to come after his brain.

"Have you always written to deal with the demons?"

"No. I usually write for money. The demons are a bonus." The snappy comeback shocked him and Gary chuckled, shook his head. He'd have to remember that one.

Zeke chuckled right along with him. "You always been a writer, man?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I think you have to be born to it." It wasn't something you *learned*, to make shit up on demand. It was something you *were*.

Nodding, Zeke took a mouthful of coffee, sighing happily. "That's how I feel about being a cop. I can't imagine doing anything else."

"You like hunting people?"

"I like helping people. I like solving puzzles. And yeah, I like hunting the bad guys, making sure they don't get away with what they've done."

"I can understand that." He could. Most of the time, his bad guys got what was coming to them. Most of the time.

"It's really a lot more boring than people think. We don't get so many cases like this one." Zeke shook his head. "I want this guy caught. I don't want him hurting anyone else. Ever."

Gary nodded, but he didn't think that wanting mattered with the Penny Man. He didn't think so at all.

Their food came and Zeke was all grins. "All right. I am starving. And you look like you could stand to put some meat on your bones."

Gary looked at his watch. They were almost out of time. "That's an interesting visual -- slabs of meat nailed on a skeleton."

"Ew. Eat your food before you put me off mine." Zeke pushed his plate closer to him.

Gary pushed the butter around the waffle, making sure each and every square had some butter in it.

"You want the maple syrup or the blueberry stuff?" Zeke was making quick inroads into his own meal, eggs already almost gone.

"Maple." He filled each square half full, looking at the way the brown syrup shone.

"That's a work of art you've got going there." Zeke pointed at Gary's plate with his fork. "Are you actually going to eat any of it?"

"Maybe." He cut a bite off, brought it to his mouth. Oh. Good.

Zeke didn't say anything else, just kept eating his own meal, obviously enjoying the food. He thought Zeke was watching him while he ate, but when he looked up Zeke was watching his own fork.

He managed to eat fifteen squares of waffle and two bites of bacon.

"I bet that's more food than you've had in days," Zeke murmured softly.

"Probably." He didn't know. He didn't really care. It was still good.

"I'm glad you came with me." Zeke looked like he meant it, too.

"Why?"

"Because you look better now than you have."

"They say need makes a man beautiful."

Zeke snorted. "Not need for drugs. But I'll bet you're pretty damn starved for touch."

"Touch? No. I got enough from that hug yesterday. I could shower again." In fact, he would. He'd go home, shower, take his shit and sleep.

"Yeah, I can see you wouldn't want any more of that. But what about from someone who wasn't meaning you harm? Someone who cared about you like your Sam."

Like that would ever happen again. "I... I don't think that'll happen. It's hard to love someone like me. Hard to touch."

"I'm not sure why you'd say that." Zeke reached out and touched his hand. "You seem easy enough to touch to me."

"It's an illusion." He closed his eyes, just let himself feel for a second. It couldn't last, but he could pretend.

The hand was warm on his skin, Zeke petting him gently. "Feels real."

"I know. That's the worst part of it."

"But it is real, Gary. This is your hand, and mine. Touching. It's not an illusion."

"You don't understand." He wasn't sure he did, but he knew that there were things out there, looking for him.

"Then make me understand, Gary. I want to. Really."

"Why? Why do you care? I'm a nutcase druggie author."

"Because I should have followed up eight years ago and I didn't." Zeke looked like he was going to say more, but he didn't.

"It was like a nightmare that went on and on."

"I'm sorry." Zeke's hand squeezed his.

"I am, too." He would have given anything for it to be him instead of Sam.

Zeke didn't say anything else, just kept holding his hand, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

They sat there, quiet, until the waitress came up. "Is everything okay?"

Zeke cleared his throat. "Yeah, sure. We'll just take the bill, please."

"Thank you for breakfast." He pulled his hand back, knowing it was time to get back to his life.

"You're welcome. We'll have to do it again some time."

"I don't know. I'd hate to make things worse for you." After all, he'd killed Sam.

"How is having breakfast with you going to make things worse for me?" Zeke put some money on the table.

"Sam died, didn't he?" He hunted for his wallet, offered Zeke some cash.

Zeke shook his head at the money. "My treat. You're still blaming yourself, then?"

"No. I'm just telling the truth." What else was he supposed to say?

"You're not responsible for the guy who got behind the wheel drunk."

"No. No, I'm not. But the Penny Man was there. I saw him. So I had to be involved." His fingers slid back to the scars on the back of his head. He did have to be involved, somehow.

"Maybe it was just a coincidence. Maybe he was following you and that's why he was there. He saw it happen, he didn't make it happen."

"Don't." Don't confuse shit with logic. Don't mess with him.

"Why not?"

"Because it's hard enough."

"You'd rather think you're responsible?"

"I'd rather not think anymore. I'd rather not hurt. I'd rather just let it be."

"Haven't you been doing that for eight years? Isn't it time you stopped?"

He laughed, the sound crystalline, bouncing around the restaurant like a deadly broken balloon. "Stop?" How could he stop? How could *anyone* stop?

"Yeah. Stop beating yourself up for his death. People do go on, you know."

He headed for the door. He knew. He did know. He'd heard from Sam a few times, felt the soft breath just brush his cheek. He hadn't felt it in a long time, though. Hadn't felt anything good.

Zeke was there when he got to the door, opening it for him. "I can be a pretty stubborn son of a bitch, Gary."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you haven't seen the last of me. I might have let you down all those years ago, but I won't do it again."

"You aren't required to rehabilitate the loony, Officer. It's okay."

"No, it's not. But it will be." The wind grabbed Zeke's words and swept them away. Zeke's hand found the small of his back again, warm and solid, guiding him back to the officer's car.

"Thank you for the breakfast." Polite was always easy. Always.

"It was my pleasure. I do love a big breakfast after the night shift." Zeke opened the car door and helped him in.

They drove, Gary looking down each and every road.

"Looking for something?" Zeke asked.

"Just looking. I worry." He worried about the things that waited and watched if you weren't paying attention.

"You worry a lot."

"I do. The Basic helps."

"Maybe if you had someone to talk to, you wouldn't need the Basic." Zeke glanced over and gave him a wry smile. "That stuff's going to kill you, Gary. Probably sooner than later."

"That's okay. I can live with that." Wait. Was that funny?

Zeke snorted. "That's my point. You can't."

"Asshole." He chuckled, tickled, deep down.

Zeke shook his head, but there was a grin there, too. "What am I going to do with you, Gary?"

"Take me home. Let me get high and remind yourself that users are hopeless."

"I don't believe you're hopeless, Gary. And I won't be abandoning you." Zeke pulled onto his street and slowly rolled the car into the spot in front of his place.

It looked so innocuous, in the light.

"I need my stuff, Zeke. Thank you for the food."

"Wait." Zeke fished a little card out of his pocket and handed it over in one of those big-as-a-ham hands. "That's my number. You call any time you need to, okay?"

"Okay. Okay, thanks. Good luck finding him. If you smell him, though, run."

"I'll remember that. And I may be back about the case, but I'll definitely be back about you. If you smell me -- don't run." Zeke gave him a wink.

He nodded, remembering that scent of gun oil and maple syrup, cologne and sweat.

He could do that.

He could.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Zeke went home and got some sleep. Or at least he tried to. His dreams were all twisted up and strange, full of images of the butchered women, of Gary and the Penny Man, the monster holding Gary down, smothering him as Gary reached out, mouth open in a silent scream, eyes pleading with him.

There wasn't much use trying to go back to sleep after that, so he got up and went for a run, shaking his head as he realized his feet had brought him to Gary's place. Their neighborhoods weren't actually that far apart.

He stopped and stared at the gate for a long time, wondering if he should knock on the door or not. He wasn't even sure Gary would open it if he did. He jogged around the block and this time, when he came up to the house, he punched in the numbers he'd seen Gary use and pushed open the gate, going in and hitting the doorbell. He'd take his chances.

There was a new box on the porch, this one without postage, sitting there, almost daring him to touch it.

Christ.

Gary wasn't insane.

He knew it.

He kicked the box cautiously as he rang the bell again. The box rattled, hurt his toes.

"What do you want?"

"It's Zeke." He debated opening the box. He was tempted to call in and have someone come down and document what was in it.

"What's wrong?" The door opened a crack, red-rimmed eyes staring at him.

"I was just out jogging and found myself here." He nodded to the box. "And this was here."

"Don't open it." His arm was taken and he was dragged in, the door shut and locked behind him. "Water?"

"Uh, yeah, okay. Thank you." He looked back and shook his head. "I should call someone down to open that. Log it."

"No. Don't open it. Maybe he'll take it away." He was dragged through the mass of boxes, into the white kitchen.

"I still think we can get something on him if we look through the boxes, Gary." He was betting there were a ton of clues in them.

"Don't open it. Maybe he'll take it away," Gary repeated. A bottle of water was pushed into his hand.

He sighed and grabbed Gary's hand, pulling the man close. "Why? What difference does it make if *we* take it away and open it somewhere else?"

"I... I don't know. I don't remember. I'm sure it's important..."

"I could get a warrant..." Maybe.

"I could get a lawyer."

He ran his hand over his head and sighed. "I'd rather you just let me take them. Open them. Find this asshole and arrest him. I really would."

"And when he comes for you? Because he will. You'll just tell him not to hurt you?"

"He's not coming for me -- I'm coming for him."

"I..." Gary looked at him and then turned away, obviously confused.

"Gary." Zeke followed his instincts, grabbing Gary's arms and tugging the skinny body up against his. "I can protect you."

Gary went still, staring, breathing softly. "I wish you could. I wish you could."

"And why do you think I can't?"

"Because he's like me. He's not from this place. I think... I think he made me not from this place."

"No. You're from this place." He pulled Gary tighter against him. "I can feel you."

"Can you? Sam could. Sam knew who I was."

"You've been lost since he's been gone." Without thinking about it, he leaned in and pressed his mouth against Gary's.

Gary gasped, those lips opening for him. Jesus. There was something about Gary. Something about this man that got to him. His tongue slipped into Gary's mouth and he deepened the kiss.

What the hell was he doing?

What the fuck was he thinking?

His cock wasn't thinking, neither was the alligator part of his brain that insisted that this was good, right, real. Jesus. He could lose himself in this kiss. Gary moaned, pressing close, seeming just as eager as he was.

The cop part of him was screaming this was crazy. He put it in a box and tossed it on top of one of Gary's piles.

There was something -- something inside him that seemed to open up, to scream that this was it. This was what he needed. This was *right*.

He pulled Gary closer, brought that skinny body up tight, hand sliding down to grab Gary's ass and hold on. Time seemed to stop. His hands kept running up and down Gary's body, dragging along the skin, tugging Gary closer. A low, needy moan sounded and it took a moment for him to realize it had come from him.

"Who... where did you come from? How did you find me?" Gary was shaking, cock hard as nails.

He bit his tongue when the first words that popped into his head were 'the Penny Man'. That murder was what had crossed their paths. No, no it wasn't. He should have followed up after being first responder at that accident. That's where their paths had crossed.

"I should have been here all along..." He reached between them, tracing that hard prick, the back of his hand rubbing his own hard-on.

"I... I don't know if. Oh, please." Gary moaned, hips bucking up toward him. Jesus, how long had it been since Gary'd been touched like this?

He popped open the top button of Gary's jeans. The scent of needy male hit him like a line drive. His own cock pushed at his zipper as if it was going to burst through, but he concentrated on Gary, got the zipper undone. That hard prick pushed right out into his hand and he wrapped his fingers around it. God, he wanted to do this for Gary. Maybe needed to in that same twisted, strange way that this felt so right.

"Oh. Oh, Zeke." Fuck. Gary *knew* who he was.

"Right here." He started jacking Gary's cock, the skin burning against his palm, so soft over such hardness.

"Uh-huh..." Those eyes went wide, desperate, and he *knew* the drugs were trying to stop the pleasure, trying to even Gary out to feeling nothing.

Shit, he didn't have a condom on him or he'd suck that orgasm right out of Gary. Instead, he slid his free hand up Gary's top, pinching one of Gary's nipples as he tugged harder on Gary's prick.

"Please..." Gary's belly went tight, eyes rolling.

"Yeah, Gary, come on. Take it. Come on." He scraped one of his nails across the head of Gary's prick, giving the man as much sensation as he could.

Heat sprayed over his hand, an almost pained scream filling the air.

He wrapped an arm around Gary, holding the skinny body up, holding Gary against him. "Yeah. There you go."

"Oh. Oh, I... Zeke." Gary looked almost scared. "Are you real?"

"Shit, yes. Solid. Real. Here." He wrapped both arms around the man and just held on. "I'm real. I'm here."

"Real." Gary hummed a little, relaxing against him.

"Yeah. Totally." A little freaked out, hard as nails, but damned real. He rubbed his hand up and down Gary's back.

"I. I haven't. I didn't know I could." Gary's hip moved against his cock, shifting slow and sweet.

Groaning, he rocked back a little against those movements. "Now you know."

"Mmmhmm." They kept moving, Gary touching him over and over.

"Sweet," he murmured, guiding Gary's hand down to his crotch.

"No. No, I'm not sweet. I'm... You're big. Oh, man. I haven't felt anything like you in years."

"You like it?" He covered Gary's hand with his own and rubbed, kept Gary there, touching him.

"Yes." That hand was fascinating, rubbing and sliding over his running shorts.

"Good." He groaned, grabbing Gary's ass and holding on. "Don't stop."

"Okay. Okay. Don't stop." Gary was watching him, eyes wide.

"That's right, baby. Don't stop." He pushed against Gary's hand -- God, it felt right.

Gary's breath was on his throat, soft, hot, coming in pulses with that touch.

"Skin?" He whispered the word, not wanting to push, but wanting more.

"You swear you'll stay?"

"I'll stay, Gary. I came back didn't I?"

"Yes. Yes, you did." That hand slipped into his shorts, touching him.

"Oh, shit!" His head dropped back, a rough groan tearing from his throat. It had been awhile since he'd had anything but his own hand.

"You feel... you feel so real."

"Real. I'm real. Faster."

Gary nodded, hand moving faster, harder. He tipped Gary's face, taking another kiss as his hips started moving, snapping into Gary's hand. Gary's hand moved faster still, thumb sliding over the tip. A shiver went through him. He was close. Damn close.

"It's good?"

"Yes." The word shot out of him and his eyes went wide as he came, heat flooding over Gary's hand.

Gary moaned, leaning against him. Staring.

"See? Still here." Still holding on, his hand still wrapped around Gary's ass.

"Good." He got a worried look. "Shouldn't you be asleep?"

"I had a couple hours before my run." Gary didn't need to know he'd been kept awake by Penny Man nightmares.

"Oh. I. I don't. I don't know quite what to do next, man."

"I wouldn't mind sitting. Holding you a bit, yeah?" He'd said he wouldn't just leave and he wouldn't.

"There are chairs in the blue room."

"The blue room it is." He tucked Gary back into his jeans, and tugged his own shorts up, grabbing a paper towel and cleaning up their hands.

They didn't say a word, just moved into the room and settled, the place cool, dark. Comforting.

It felt good, sitting there with Gary in his arms. Refusing to think about anything, Zeke leaned his head back, eyes closing. Gary curled up, sighed contentedly, and stayed.

It was peaceful. Something he wouldn't have thought he'd use to describe Gary or this place.

But his world view was changing by the second.

## CHAPTER SIX

Warm.

Warm.

He was warm and safe and...

It couldn't last.

It wouldn't.

He would come.

He would come and growl and whisper and...

Gary's eyes popped open, searching for those eyes, sniffing hard for the smell of copper and mold.

There was a low groan that vibrated against his chest and then blue eyes opened, Zeke blinking down at him. "Gary? What's 'a matter? Have a nightmare?"

"I. I need a hit, is all. It's been too long." It would ease him. Relax him.

"You just had one this morning." Zeke tugged him around so he was straddling the strong thighs. "How about a kiss?"

"It only lasts a few hours..." Oh, Zeke was warm...

"You should quit." Zeke winked at him and the next thing he knew those warm lips were on his own, tongue pushing between.

Oh. Kisses. He reached up, cupping Zeke's face, lips parting for that touch. Zeke's arms slid around his waist, pulling him against the flat belly and the solid chest as the kiss went deep. Tongue sweeping through his mouth, Zeke tasted him. He couldn't think; his attention was caught by that mouth, by the arms around him.

The kiss ended with a soft, smacking sound, a deep breath, and then another one started, Zeke's

mouth like magic. His body shook, breath huffing from him. One of Zeke's big hands landed on his ass, cupping, squeezing.

"Zeke?" He pushed back, the pressure wild and somehow perfect.

"What, baby?"

"I can feel you. It's so good."

"Yeah. Yeah, it is." That hand squeezed his ass again, and Zeke pushed their mouths together for another kiss.

His eyes closed and he dared to trust Zeke, just for this moment, just for now. The kisses rolled one into another, Zeke filling all his senses. His cock was filling, which made him nervous, excited, scared and incredibly fucking happy, all at once. The hand on his ass shifted, Zeke moving to push hot fingers into his jeans, sliding on his skin.

Touching him.

Oh, God.

Please.

He'd been needing.

Zeke got him rocking, pushing forward to rub his cock along Zake's hard belly, and then back against the hand pushing further and further inside his jeans.

His stomach burned and he moaned, pulled away from the kiss. "He might hurt you. If you don't stop."

"No, I'll take care of you, baby. You're safe." One finger slid into his crease, stroking, Zeke's eyes watching him.

"I just want you to be safe. He won't hurt me. He likes for me to watch." Oh. Oh, more. Please.

"I'll take care of myself, too." That finger licked at the edge of his hole, Zeke's tongue working the side of his mouth with the same slow touches.

"Oh. Oh." He groaned, caught there, staring.

"You like this, Gary? You want more?" Zeke's finger stroked and teased and pushed against him, almost but not quite going in.

"I. I haven't in so long. I need to. I want." He couldn't *focus*.

"You have any condoms here? If not I'll just do this." Zeke's finger breached him, pushing into him.

"I don't. I... Oh, please. More." Hurry, before something bad happens.

Zeke's fingers disappeared for a moment, suddenly sliding on his cheek toward his lips. "Shh. Shh. I just need you to suck for a second."

Two fingers slid between his lips. He opened, pulling hard, sucking, taking the flavor into him. He could feel Zeke's cock pressing against his inner thigh. He could feel it getting harder as he sucked. So good. His eyes flew open and he met Zeke's gaze. Good.

Zeke smiled at him, fingers pushing into his mouth now, fucking him. Zeke's other hand slid between them and began undoing his jeans. He moaned, his cock pushing out, begging for touches, for attention.

"Look at you," murmured Zeke. "So pretty. So hard." Zeke petted his cock, teased his hot skin.

He gasped, balls aching. The Basic made it hard to climax, hard to come, but he hadn't had a hit, and he wanted. Zeke's fingers slid away from his mouth and pushed down the back of his jeans, going right to his hole and wetting the outside of it. The man's other hand kept playing with his cock, the touches almost lazy.

"I want you." He blinked, surprised at his words. They were the truth.

"I'll have to bring condoms next time." Zeke winked and then suddenly one of those wet fingers slid into his body.

"Yes." Please. He could have a next time. He could.

Zeke's smile went all the way to his eyes. And then it was pressing against his lips, turning into a kiss instead of a smile as Zeke's finger began to fuck him, spreading him open. He started moving, bouncing on the touch and pushing up into Zeke's kiss.

"You're sexy, Gary." Zeke sounded almost surprised. A second finger pushed into him, Zeke's hand grabbing hold of his cock, stroking now instead of just teasing.

"I'm not. I'm not from here. You feel so *good*."

"You *are*, Gary. Can't you feel my prick?" Zeke bucked, pushing those fingers deep as the material covered prick slid against his inner thigh.

"Yes. Yes. You're so big. Thick."

"I want you. You make me need." He could hear it in Zeke's voice, the low tones gone all thick, growly.

He shook hard, his need ratcheting up and up. Those fingers pushed and pushed into him, Zeke's other hand continuing to tighten around his cock.

"M...more. More. Please. I want to..." He needed.

"You want to come. I'll help you." The fingers inside him curled, found his gland.

"Zeke. Zeke, again." Please. Please. His vision shattered, heart slamming in his chest.

Zeke hit that spot again. Then again. The pressure inside him grew and grew, his heart slamming in his chest.

"Is it good, Gary? Zeke's eyes looked at him, looked into him.

He couldn't answer, couldn't speak; he just nodded, throat working as he fought to breathe.

"Then just feel it, huh?"

Gary nodded again, the world spinning around him, his body going tighter and tighter. Zeke's fingers, around his cock, inside him, they kept moving, kept pushing. They were all he could feel. Spunk poured from him, the pleasure so sharp the world went gray.

When the world slowly came back to focus, Zeke was still there, holding him.

"Zeke." He reached out, hands on the man's face.

"Yeah. Yeah, Gary." Zeke nuzzled into his hand.

"Warm." He swayed a little, swallowing hard.

Zeke's arms wrapped around him, tugging him in close. A kiss dropped to his forehead and he could feel the heat of Zeke's prick against the insides of his thighs.

He moved his hips, fascinated by Zeke's body, that prick. A low groan answered his movements, Zeke responding, pushing back.

"Do you like to fuck? To play hard?" Sam had. Sam had kept the monsters at bay.

Zeke's eyes went wide. "How did you know?"

"I didn't. That's why I asked."

Zeke swallowed and nodded. "Yeah. I fuck. I play. When I find the right person."

"Oh." That wasn't him. It couldn't be him.

"You like to play hard? Ropes and shit?" Zeke was still moving, pushing that hard prick against him.

"I did. Once. Before Sam died. He kept the monsters away."

Eyes narrowing, Zeke asked. "How?"

"I don't know. He let me just feel. He wouldn't let me get lost. I don't..." He started to panic a little bit. He didn't want to fuck up again. He didn't want to forget.

"Hey, Gary, relax. I just want us both to feel good."

He met Zeke's eyes, reached for the man. "I'm sorry. I need a hit. It calms me down, makes me less nuts."

Oh, that made Zeke grin. "Actually... I'm not sure I agree." He was tugged back in close again. "Let me get off first, baby. Just let me rub up against you."

That was fair. And hot. And good. "Yeah. Yes. You smell so good."

"Gonna open my shorts, okay?" Zeke's voice was rough with need, sliding over his skin.

"You'll let me touch you?"

"Only if you want to, baby." Zeke got his shorts open, got his prick out. "Felt so good last time."

His hands moved before his brain engaged. So hot. So thick. He wanted it. He wanted that cock in his mouth, in his ass, filling him up. He wanted to be awake and moving and fucking.

"Yes." The word was little more than a hiss, Zeke groaning, hips pushing the thick prick through his fingers.

He settled back on the end of Zeke's knees, fascinated, watching that cock move in and out of his hands.

"Tighter."

"Yes." He licked his lips, sliding back farther.

Zeke's hand landed back on his ass, keeping him from falling off. It almost stung and he moaned, pressing back into the touch, hands moving faster.

"Oh, Jesus." Zeke's other hand moved to his lower back, and then the hand on the ass slapped against him again, harder this time. On purpose this time.

His eyes went wide, his lips parting. Oh. Oh, sweet fuck. He whimpered, doing his best to drive Zeke crazy with his touch.

"You really do like that. Oh, Gary." Zeke's hips worked with him, pushing through his fingers. Every now and then that hand came down hard on his ass.

The little sting, the burn, felt so big, so good. Made things so fucking clear.

Zeke's eyes met his. "Soon."

"Uh-huh." He wanted to see. His thumbs rubbed the slit of Zeke's cock.

"Gary!" Zeke shouted his name -- *his* name -- and came, white streaks fountaining out between his hands.

That was what he'd needed, just that. Just now. "So good."

Zeke collapsed back against the chair, hands pulling him back in close. "Yeah." The word came out on a pant.

The shutters rattled outside and he pushed closer. Not yet. He wasn't ready to ruin this yet.

"Must be a storm coming up." Zeke's arms were nice and warm, tight around him. "I'll have to go soon. Go in to work."

He nodded. "You should go before dark."

The Penny Man slept in the daytime, he thought. He was pretty sure.

"You going to be okay, Gary?" One hand stroked his spine. It was... comforting.

"I will." He'd stay in. The Penny Man wouldn't be able to see him and so there wouldn't be any murders.

"And if I come back tomorrow with, you know, condoms and lube and shit..."

"I'll be here." He grinned. Probably.

Oh, look how Zeke's smile made his eyes shine. "Good."

He nodded. It was. For now.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"Jesus, man, where the hell have you been?"

Zeke made a show of checking his watch. "I'm ten minutes early for my shift."

"Yeah, well you disappeared after driving the suspect home last night."

"He's a witness not a suspect, and I was following up on some leads." Christ, what had he been thinking, going back to Gary's, making out with the man?

He hadn't been thinking at all, no he'd been following his little head, which had been screaming how good and right and sexy it was.

"A witness? He was covered in their blood for Christ's sake. The DNA came back." Roger tossed a file at him. "So did his background search. Did you know he was the only survivor of a brutal family murder about twenty-five years ago?"

"What?" Zeke grabbed the file and opened it up.

Jesus.

There was a picture of an entire family -- mother, father, two kids -- all torn to pieces, and a wide-eyed little boy, covered in gore. He flipped through the paperwork. Gary'd gone to a mental hospital in a 'vegetative state' for almost a year, and then had entered the foster system.

God damn.

The Penny Man.

This had to be where that had started. Had to be.

He took another look at the pictures of the family and then passed them back to Roger. "Those bodies look familiar to you?"

Roger nodded. "Same MO. Same shit. You think the kid did his folks?"

He snorted. "Give me a break. If we've already determined Gary as a grown man couldn't do this,

there's no way a four year old did. Besides, they've got footprint evidence in the old case that puts another adult there."

"So what, man? Family? Sicko friend? These people weren't from up here; the dad was a Russian immigrant, the mother was from the deep South. They ran a fucking deli."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean, Roger? You saying the fact that they were immigrants had something to do with this? My mother came over with her parents when she was still a kid, man. Does that mean she's more likely to have some apeshit asshole murder her?" Shit, he had to get a grip -- he wanted to slug the man, the need to protect Gary rising up in his gut like its own entity.

Roger's eyebrow went up. "Dude. I'm brainstorming. There's got to be *some* connection, right? Nobody has this much bad luck."

"Oh, I agree there's a connection. I've been to his house. The place is full of boxes. I mean rooms and rooms of them stacked five high. He says they're all from someone called the Penny Man." Zeke pointed to the file. "I'll bet you a dozen donuts his 'Penny Man' is the guy responsible for this. The guy missed one and now thinks they're connected or something, you know?"

He chewed on his lower lip, putting pieces together. "Gary kept talking about this Penny Man following him and doing things for him, making him watch. I think he's been stalking Gary since he first missed the kid all those years ago."

"Why? I mean, man, how hard is it to kill a little kid or a stoner?"

He glanced through the report. "It says here they figure the kid hid in the closet. Maybe the fact that Gary survived the attack made the killer think they were connected somehow. You know how these sickos are."

What he wanted to know was why Gary hadn't told him about this, about where it had all started.

"Well, what do you want me to do, man? The psych ward? The cop that worked the first case?"

"You take the cop. This file is pretty fucking thin. I'll go to the psych ward." He had to figure out if they had probable cause now, too, to get a warrant for those boxes. Really, he wanted Gary to let them have them, or at least go through them there. It would be easier that way.

"I'm on it. You got a report from the ME yet? There wasn't a drop of Short's blood anywhere."

"He didn't do this, Roger." But Gary was the key. He closed the file with the pictures from twenty-five years ago. Shit, no wonder the guy was loopy.

"No, I don't think he could have, not without a scratch. Besides, there was skin under one women's nails. Lisa's working that up."

Thank God. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so relieved to have his gut backed up by the evidence.

"When you're done talking to the cop who worked the original case why don't you see if you can find any other unsolveds with this MO. Oh, wait. When you pulled the background on Short did you get the files on the accident eight years ago?" Maybe there were shots of the crowd among the crime scene photos.

"Uh... was he a suspect?" Roger started typing on the laptop. "I don't have him listed as having caused an accident."

"No, a drunk driver hit the car he was a passenger in head on. The driver was killed instantly. I was the first one on the scene. I don't know if it's connected, but no stone left unturned and all that, right?" He tried to keep it casual. If he told his partner he was looking for Gary's Penny Man among the crowd at the accident...

"Sure. I'll pull it up, too. Can't hurt to look at it."

"Exactly. I'm gonna go visit the hospital Gary was in. See what they can tell me. I have my cell if you get anything."

"You got it, man." Roger nodded, head bent back over the laptop.

"Thanks, man." He was going to have to talk to Roger soon, let his partner know exactly how involved he'd suddenly become with the only person they had connected to the case before someone else found out and it bit him in the ass. But he wanted to get as much information gathered on the case as he could before he did that.

He gave a half wave and headed back out to his car, dialing Gary's number.

The phone rang and rang and finally the answering machine picked up. "Leave a message."

"Gary? It's Zeke. Just checking in." He rattled off his cell phone.

The line went live. "I'm here."

"Hey, Gary." He found himself sitting in his car, smiling at the phone.

"Are you okay?"

"I am. Just wanted to hear your voice, you know? Make sure you were okay."

"I am. I'm staying inside."

"Good. I have some people to go talk to, but I might swing by after. I've got a couple questions for you, too. I don't want to wake you, though."

"You know where the door is." Gary's voice was flat, stoned. "I'll answer."

God, he had to get Gary off the Basic.

"If I come at the end of my shift, I can stay longer."

"I have coffee."

"Maybe I'll bring waffles." He could swing by someplace with take out on the way. He had a lot of time to put in before then, though.

"I like waffles." He thought he could hear Gary's smile.

"I know, baby." His voice dropped low. "I know a lot of things you like."

"Zeke." The sound of his name was just... sweet.

"It's going to be a long night waiting to come see you." He'd never been in so deep so quick. No. He'd never been in so deep, period.

"Just be careful. If he knows you're important, he'll notice you."

Oh, he planned on getting the Penny Man to notice him, all right. He was going to catch this asshole and give Gary his life back. "I will. I'll see you in a few hours. Call if you need me."

"I will. I'm going to write." The line went dead.

He looked at his phone for a moment, a little nonplussed at the abrupt goodbye. Then he shook himself and closed the phone, slipping it into his pocket.

He had a judge to see and a mental hospital to visit.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Zeke pulled up in front of Grandview Hall around dawn, wondering why they always gave mental hospitals names like that. Like it was a secret what type of facility it was. Everyone always knew.

He had a warrant in hand for the contents of Gary's files from his stay a little more than twenty years ago.

Zeke was lucky enough to have a friend sitting on the bench for night court. It meant he didn't have to wait to chase down warrants during the day. He had to admit, though, that he was heavy hearted about this. It sort of felt like he was digging into Gary's past behind the man's back.

It was an odd feeling. He needed to do this. He didn't need Gary's permission. But it still felt like snooping as much as police work. He was going to have to get a handle on this. Get his working and personal relationship with Gary separated in his head if he was going to make this all work.

He parked the car and headed to the front doors, pushing his warrant through the security slot at the front window and showing his badge.

"Good morning, Officer." A surprisingly sweet-looking woman smiled at him, nodded. "How can we help you?"

"I have a warrant for Gary Short's files. I'd like to talk to someone who was working here while he was here, too, please."

"Okay. If you'll come in and have a seat, I'll get my manager."

It didn't take long before a huge, burly man in a suit came lumbering out. "Man, you're working early."

"Late actually, I'm on the night shift." He stood and shook the man's hand. "Zeke Henderson."

"Dr. Peterson. You need a patient's file, I understand?"

"Yeah. From twenty-five years ago. I gave the lady a copy of the warrant; it has the details on it. I was also hoping there might be someone still working here who remembers the case." He knew that was a long-shot, but it couldn't hurt to ask.

"Twenty-five years? It's unlikely. I've been here twenty-one years and I'm the old one. Come with me, I'll do some checking." The big man walked through a series of locked doors, letting him follow. The place was surprisingly clean and bright. He didn't hear screaming or moaning -- nothing like he'd expected.

"This patient was part of a pretty high profile case. I bet the doctor who worked his case remembers."

"What was the name again?"

"Gary Short. He was just a little kid at the time."

"Gary Short... Russian boy whose family died, yes? I heard about him; incredibly intelligent and deeply scarred."

"That's him. He was covered in his family's blood when the police found him. He must have seen the murders." He wasn't looking forward to bringing that up with Gary, either.

"Damn. That's a rough start. He might still be in here, but he might not. The courts had us seal lots of records."

They ended up in a tiny office filled with books and drawings from children.

"Well, the warrant should cover that." He sat in the chair across the desk and flipped open his notebook, looking at the words Penny Man. He'd underlined it about forty times.

Dr. Peterson sat and started typing, teeth working at his bottom lip, which was mostly covered by a huge, thick, red beard. The man was going to look like Santa Claus one day.

"You have a lot of kids in here?" The thought made him sad, that there were little ones who needed to be locked up in a mental institution.

"Almost all the patients here are underage. We don't have any violent patients -- this is mostly people in a vegetative or catatonic state or in the releasing phases of a fugue state."

"Hopefully most of them aren't that way because they witnessed their whole family's murder..."

"No. No, not at all. Honestly, most of them are here because of head injuries -- accidents, falls, that sort of thing. That sort of severe trauma is, thankfully, rare."

"Yeah. One dead family is one too many." He tapped his pen against his notebook, trying not to let the place get to him. It was far nicer than he'd expected, but it still was what it was.

"Yeah. Okay, the files are in the basement. I'll have them pulled and brought to you, but the warrant won't let you remove them from the premises."

"That's fine, I can make notes. How long will it take to bring them up?"

"Hopefully not more than twenty minutes or so. Files that old are in boxes and will have to be pulled by hand. There's a pleasant conference room, though, with coffee, etc."

"Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate your help. Do you happen to have the name of the doctor in charge of Gary's case in your computer there?"

"Doctor Victoria Lesserby. She left here about ten years ago to teach in Miami."

"Miami? Damn." Still, he could make a long-distance call.

"Yeah. She's a brilliant lady, fought cancer and then decided she hated the winters up here."

"Good for her. One last question -- would you be able to tell if there are any employees who started working here shortly after Gary was admitted and then left soon after he was dismissed?"

"That would be a challenge -- those employee records aren't even housed in the state, if they still exist. We're only required to keep them ten years."

"All right." He made a note in his book. "I'll leave it for now and get back to you for any leads on tracking them down if it turns out I really need them."

The big man nodded, that ham hand offered over to him. "I hope whatever you're investigating works out."

"I hope so, too. I don't want any more dead people on my watch."

Dr. Peterson's laugh rang out. "Then you'd be out of a job, wouldn't you, Officer?"

"Yep. That doesn't sound like such a bad thing." It would never happen, though. He knew that.

"No. No, it doesn't. I have to make my rounds. Let me show you the conference room. I emailed down to records; someone should be working on it."

"Excellent. I do appreciate your help, Doctor, thank you." He followed the big man back down the hall.

"Can I inquire about the case? Has the patient become a suspect?"

"No, but I'm not really supposed to discuss ongoing cases."

"Right. Sorry. Well, good luck to you. If someone hasn't come in half an hour, let me know."

"Will do. Thanks."

He settled at the table in the conference room with a cup of surprisingly decent coffee and his phone, trying to figure out how to work the world wide web section to see if he could find Victoria Lesserby's current phone number.

Before he could figure it out, a young guy came in with a box, all dressed in scrubs, dreadlocks bouncing on his shoulders. "You the cop that's needing the info?"

"I am." He backed away from the table with his coffee, giving the guy room. "Thanks."

"No sweat." The box slid across the table. "You need anything else?"

"There any donuts to go with the coffee?" He gave the man a hopeful look.

He got a grin, a chuckle. "Dude, that's like such a cliché and shit..."

"Hey, it's a cliché for a reason and I haven't eaten since..." Shit, a long time. "I can't remember."

"Damn. Yeah. Okay. There's a box in the employee lounge. Two doors down on the left. Bathroom's the door after that."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

He followed the guy out and went in the opposite direction, grabbing himself a couple of donuts before heading back and opening the box.

Zeke took a breath and opened the first file.

The first folder was just physical mumbo-jumbo -- blood work and weight, levels of this and bits of that. Nothing that really made sense, except that Gary'd been in a coma, not moving, not eating and losing weight.

For nearly a year. Christ.

Four years old and witnessing his whole family brutally butchered. Looked like now he knew what that would do to a person. There were a number of therapies tried, but it seemed almost miraculous when Gary just woke up.

"The patient woke, speaking English (note: patient was primarily Russian-speaking in the home) and claiming to remember nothing but what we can assume is an imaginary friend, 'the Penny Man'."

A chill went through Zeke. He was right. Gary's Penny Man had been responsible for his family's murder *and* had been around for a long time. The monster wasn't just in Gary's imagination. He was very real.

This also explained why Gary hadn't said anything about the original murders. He didn't remember them.

Jesus. Twenty-five years of something he couldn't even understand on top of no family, no memory. It was amazing Gary was as sane as he was.

And it was about time this Penny Man got what was coming to him.

Zeke was just the man to give it to him.

## CHAPTER NINE

"Gary."

"No."

"Gary, come outside."

"No."

He could hear the whisper, sliding under the boxes, slipping under the door.

"Come watch."

"I won't."

He stumbled to the bathroom, leaving the lights off, turning the water on as icy cold and hard as he could bear.

He could hear pounding now. "Gary! Come on, I'm getting worried now!"

"Zeke?"

He fell out of the tub, freezing, shaking. "Zeke? Are you real?" He crawled down the hall, down the stairs.

"Gary? Is that you? It's okay to come to the door. It's Zeke."

"Okay. Okay, I'm hurrying." His hands wouldn't work, his heart was trip-hammering, but he got the door open.

"Christ, Gary!" Zeke pushed in, gathering him up against the solid body. Oh, God, he was so warm.

"Zeke." He pushed the door shut, locking it tight. "Away from the boxes."

"Are you okay?" Zeke kept him close, moving into the center of the house.

"He kept trying to get me to come outside and it isn't time for another hit so I was drowning him out." Warm. Warm.

"In *cold* water? Your skin is like ice!" Zeke stopped at the staircase. "Kitchen? Your bedroom? Where do you want to go?"

"Bedroom. Bedroom under the covers." He pointed upstairs to the bedroom.

They went up, Zeke's arm tight around him, holding him.

"You're warm. You were safe? All day?" He hadn't come to hurt Zeke?

"I'm here, aren't I? Safe and sound." They got to the bedroom and Zeke dragged him down, pulling the covers around them.

"Yes. Yes, you are." He buried his face in Zeke's throat, humming low.

Zeke's hands rubbed all over him. "You're just so cold."

"I am. I'm freezing. You're warm."

Zeke's mouth met his, breathing hot air into him. His eyes flew open and he pushed closer, his moan yanked out of him. "Warm you up," murmured Zeke, pushing back into the kiss.

Wrapping around Zeke, Gary held on, moaning, flying. Happy.

"Help me get my clothes off, baby. You'll warm faster skin on skin."

Naked. He could do naked. He worked open buttons and zippers, pushing the cloth away. As soon as Zeke was naked, he tugged them back together again, pulling himself up against all that warm skin.

"Oh..." He stared, needs that he'd hidden for years flooding him.

"Not all of you is cold." Zeke rubbed against him, their cocks sliding.

"No?" They were naked. In his bed. Together.

"No. There's this hot spot." Zeke licked at his lips, hips sliding them together.

"You. You're hungry." He liked hungry. He liked remembering hungry.

"You make me hungry." Zeke rolled them, pushing him beneath the big, strong body, pressing him into the mattress.

It should be uncomfortable, scary, bad, but it wasn't. It wasn't. It was hot and heavy and safe. Good.

Zeke's head lowered slowly, face coming nearer, those eyes on his.

"Zeke." Please be real.

"Yeah." Zeke's mouth covered his, hot and hard. Strong hands grabbed his wrists, pulled them up over his head so he was stretched out beneath Zeke's body.

Yes. Real. He tugged, not fighting, but testing. Needing. Please, don't stop. Zeke's hands didn't let him go, didn't let him curl up, they tightened on his wrists as the strong hips pushed against his. He shook, cock filling quickly, almost too fast, almost hurting.

"You want me to stop, baby?" The words slid against his lips and into his mouth.

"No. No, please. I need. You don't know how badly I need." What Sam had given him.

"If we're going to do this we need a word." Zeke bit his bottom lip. "A word that means stop."

He groaned, eyes rolling. "Promise me you're real." Sam had said those things to him. Sam had been real.

"If I wasn't real you wouldn't need a word."

"I need a word." He nodded. Please. "Icicles."

"That's a good word. Don't forget it. It'll stop everything." Then Zeke nosed along his jaw to his earlobe. "I'm real. Feel how real. "

"Yes. Yes, I. I feel you." He could cry from pure joy, pure hunger.

"Me, too." Zeke's lips wandered back to his, kissing him suddenly. The heavy hips circled against him, Zeke's cock leaking hot, burning drops against his belly.

Closing his eyes, he could see each and every drop, shining on his belly. The kiss got deeper, harder, one of Zeke's teeth nicking his lower lip. He opened up, tongue pushing into Zeke's mouth, the kiss going deeper. Zeke's hips ground his into the mattress, humping hard against him. Making him hot.

He stared up into those dark eyes, caught, his breath trapped in his chest.

"Gonna come for me, baby?"

"I want to. I want to so bad."

"Then do it." The hold on his wrists tightened.

"I... What if I can't?"

"You can. You will." A biting kiss nipped at his jaw.

"I... How do you know?" Tell me you'll make me. Please. I want to fucking hear that.

"Because I said you will."

"Yes." Yes, he would. He could.

"I'm going to make you scream with it. Gonna make you come so hard." Zeke's voice was low and growly, vibrating right through him.

"Oh. Oh, please. Please. Yes." He could feel himself shaking, feel the long-missed ache of his balls.

"I brought stuff. This first." His wrists were pushed into one of Zeke's hands, the other pushing between them to grab their cocks, Zeke stroking them together.

The world shuddered, went white-hot and molten. Gary dove into the pleasure, into the touch.

"That's it, baby. Feel me." The hand around their cocks tightened, the pace quickening.

"Yes. Yes. Feel." He nodded, breath caught in his chest, almost burning.

"Yes." Zeke's hand was relentless, tugging him over and over, the heat of that heavy cock pressed so tightly against his own.

His eyes went wide as he shot, surprised, needy.

"Mmm... oh yes. Smell you."

He blushed dark, staring into Zeke's eyes. "Good."

"Yes. The bag of stuff's by the door. I'm going to go get it. You stay here."

"You don't... You don't want to come?"

"I do. Inside you. And for that I need lube and condoms, baby. I won't hurt you."

Baby. He wasn't sure if that was hot or insulting. He leaned toward hot.

Bending, Zeke bit his right nipple, the sting sudden and sharp. "I'll be back before that stops stinging."

He reached for his nipple -- stroking it, then pinching it again and again, trying to make the sensation bloom again.

Suddenly the other nipple was grabbed between two thick fingers and pinched. "I'm back."

"Back." He blinked, staring at the heavy fingers on his chest.

"You want me to tie you down while I take you?" Zeke asked, fingers twisting his nipple.

"I... You won't let him in. You can't let him in. You have to promise."

"I'm not letting him in or anywhere near you," growled Zeke.

Part of his brain knew he had no reason to believe. The rest did believe, wholeheartedly. He held his hands up, offering himself. Zeke had simple rope and looped it around his wrists, tugging them up over his head and tying the end to his headboard.

Then the man climbed up onto the bed between his legs. "Now all you have to do is feel.

"I want to. You make me want to."

"That's the idea." Zeke's fingers slid over his body, pushing here and there, making him feel it.

Gary found himself relaxing, moaning, losing himself in sensation. Zeke touched his nipples, bent and bit at them both, fingers sliding down to wrap around his cock, and further to hold his balls.

"More. More, please." He'd never needed anything so badly. Not since he'd known what he was missing.

"You'll have more." Big, slick, warm fingers slid past his balls and rubbed over his hole.

That mouth focused on his nipples, teeth tugging and pulling, biting and stinging and driving him mad.

"Gotta find my nipple clamps." The words were hot against his skin, and one of Zeke's fingers pushed right into him.

The ropes kept him from pushing back, from fucking himself on the touch.

"Jesus, you're tight." That finger pushed deeper, wriggled inside him.

"It's been a while." Since Sam. Since his... That finger moved again and he moaned. "Zeke."

That finger hit his gland, making him jerk. "Say my name again."

"Zeke. Zeke." He stared into those pretty eyes, so sure. "I know you. You're real."

"I am." Another finger pushed into him, moving, spreading and stretching him.

"You *are*." Oh, feel that. In him. In him and pushing deep.

Groaning, Zeke pulled his fingers out. "I can't wait, baby. I have to have you."

"Yes. Yes, please. In me." He tugged at the ropes, head tossing. "In me."

Zeke didn't tease, didn't make him wait. Blunt heat pressed against him, slowly spreading him wide. He kept his eyes open; he watched every second. This was Zeke. In him. Real. Zeke's cock kept pushing, filling him up and up and up.

"Talk to me? Tell me this is good?" He needed to know, to hear.

"It's good." Zeke still inside him, buried deep. "You're tight. And hot. And good." Zeke groaned and touched his face, fingers tracing his features so softly.

"Zeke." His entire body rippled, caught by this amazing man.

"Right here." Bringing their mouths together, Zeke kissed him.

Then Zeke started to move, big cock sliding inside him. They moved together, rocking faster and harder, tongues pushing and sliding in time with their bodies. Zeke's fingers plucked at his nipples, pinching and twisting without any discernable rhythm, the touches keeping him on edge. The sharper touches made him gasp, made him grunt into the kiss.

"So responsive. Jesus, Gary, you feel every little touch." His bed began to creak; Zeke's thrusts had real power behind them.

"Everything." That's why he needed the drug. He felt everything.

Zeke shifted and found his prostate, nailing the little bit of flesh with every thrust. He twisted, almost screaming with it, body instinctively trying to escape the overwhelming pleasure. Zeke's hand landed on the center of his chest, pushing down, holding him there. Once found, Zeke kept hitting his gland, not giving him any quarter.

"I. I can't. Help me. Zeke. It's so *big*!"

"*Come*."

His body jerked, going so tight, and he screamed as his balls emptied.

"Gary!" Zeke repeated his name over and over, pushing into him until his name was shouted and Zeke froze. They stayed together, staring at each other, panting, for a long time. Finally Zeke reached up and undid his wrists, big fingers sliding on his skin, massaging.

"I. Thank you. Do you want coffee?"

Zeke got rid of the condom and tossed the rope out of sight, pulling him in close and petting him. "How about breakfast? I missed supper and have only had a couple donuts to get me through."

"I like breakfast." He licked at Zeke's throat, enjoying the salt.

Zeke groaned at the touch of his tongue. "Yeah? There's a diner just around the corner from here..."

"He's close. Watching. I have eggs." Maybe. Somewhere.

"Well, I have the car. I can take you somewhere farther. I was going to pick up some stuff to go, but I wound up being later than I was planning and decided to come straight here." Zeke's fingers slid over his skin, exploring.

"I just... I don't want him to see you. I don't want him to hurt you. I heard him. Talking to me. Wanting me to come outside to him."

"I've told you he won't hurt me. I have my gun. I'm on the lookout for him."

"I don't think we can be shot." He was pretty sure it was a monster.

"We?"

"I told you, we're not from here. I don't have the same life that the other people have."

"I'm pretty sure I could shoot and kill you, Gary. The Penny Man, too."

"I don't think I'd want you to try." That was honest, if nothing else.

Zeke chuckled. "No, baby. I'm not going to shoot you. As for you know who, well, him I'll reserve judgment on." Zeke's stomach rumbled loudly. "Let's go get that breakfast. I don't care *where* we eat, but I'll faint on you if I don't get food."

"No fainting. You're ginormous and I'd have to roll you down the stairs."

Zeke started laughing, face all lit up, eyes crinkling. It was such a happy sound. "Oh, baby, I can just picture it."

"Thump, thump, thumpity thump." He chuckled, pressed close. "Oh, you're so going in my next book."

"Rolling down the stairs?" Zeke laughed harder, holding him close as the wide chest shook.

"Yep. Thump. Thump. You'll be the hero."

Zeke howled, clutching him close. Finally Zeke wiped his eyes, and smacked his bottom. "Up. Breakfast. No thumping down the stairs."

His ass tingled and he nodded, heart thrumming. "Breakfast."

Basic.

Zeke got up and hauled him out of bed as well, giving his bottom a pinch this time, aiming him at his dresser.

"I have to... It's time, Zeke." He knew Zeke didn't approve. It didn't matter.

Zeke knew what he was talking about. "After breakfast. Like yesterday."

He sighed. "You're messing with my schedule."

"Good." Zeke got dressed, eyes on him, though, as the clothes slid up over muscles.

"Not really. I need it." Dark shirt. Jeans. Shoes. Breakfast sounded good.

"No, you don't." Zeke's arm came around his shoulders, and he was led down the stairs.

"Let me go out first, so he doesn't hurt you."

"No, I think we can go out together. Besides, it's my job to protect you."

He started bouncing a bit. "He'll hurt you." He'll make me watch.

"I can take care of myself, Gary. He's not going to hurt me or anyone else. Not any more." Zeke opened the front door for him. "See? There's no one out here."

There was another box, though.

"Do you get one of these every day?" Zeke looked at him intently.

"No. Sometimes not for weeks and weeks."

"This is two in a row, though. Can I open this one?"

"Not out here. He'll watch. Don't you understand?" Gary tensed up, knowing he was out there, watching.

Zeke looked around. "I don't see him, Gary."

"I don't care. He'll watch."

Zeke took a long look at the box. "Okay, okay. We'll just leave it here and deal with it after breakfast."

"Okay." He tugged Zeke through the yard. "Waffles." Waffles, then his hit. Then a few hours at the laptop.

Zeke got him seated and off they went. "There's a place on the other side of town that'll do you waffles and the coffee is out of this world." He was given a long look when they stopped at the light. "You mind if I ask you a few questions about the Penny Man?"

"I don't know much." He needed to add Zeke to his current novel -- a secondary character, perhaps. Someone to save the girl.

"Do you remember when you first saw him?"

"No. He and I came together, somehow." Sometimes he thought there was a time rift, or a split in a dimension. Other times he thought maybe they were just born together, partially grown.

Zeke nodded like that made sense to him. "And he's never tried to physically hurt you?"

"No. No, he wants me to watch. He hugs me sometimes, but he needs me to watch him."

"That would freak me right out," murmured Zeke. "I wouldn't let him hug me. No way."

"I don't let him. I just... I can't move. It's like a freeze ray or something." Like magic. Like something out of his books.

Zeke's reply echoed his thoughts. "That sounds like something out of a book."

"It does, doesn't it? Sometimes I write about it, but it doesn't make sense in my head. He's not imaginary, though, I swear it."

"I believe you, Gary." Zeke pulled into the parking lot and turned to look him in the eye. "I do."

Something in him relaxed, down to his bones. "Sam did, too. Sam saw him."

"Yeah? Why didn't Sam do anything about him then?"

"I can't talk about that." He couldn't talk about the long week trying to tempt the Penny Man out into the open, the involved plan they'd had to trap the monster and stop him. About the head that they had found on the doorstep in a box. Someone Sam had known. That's when he'd stopped opening the boxes.

"Okay. Let's talk about something else then." Zeke came around and opened the car door for him. "Tell me about your family."

"I don't have one." That was the hard part, and the easy part.

"No?"

"No." There wasn't an easy answer to that. If there had been, he'd have used it. "What about your family?"

"Got an older brother, my folks are retired in Florida."

"I like Florida. It's warm and there's something about all that blue water."

Zeke chuckled and they went in, Zeke asking for a seat away from the windows. He settled in, comfortable and quiet, surprisingly hungry. They ordered and Zeke fiddled with his coffee cup.

"What's the matter?" He curled his legs up underneath him, looking over at Zeke, really looking like he was going to write the man into a book this afternoon. Strong and square, almost blocky and too male to be beautiful, but Gary found him fascinating.

"You know that as the only witness at the scene, and given you were covered in blood, we had to run you through the system, right?"

"You said. I was in there. Sam died in an accident and they had to prove it wasn't us."

Zeke nodded. "Yeah, that's right. That's not all it pulled up, though."

"I have been honest with you. I'm a user." Besides that, he'd never hurt anyone.

"No, that's not what I'm talking about. There was stuff in there. From when you were little."

"There couldn't be. I never was."

Zeke chuckled. "Of course you were little once. We all were -- you just don't remember."

"No. I wasn't. I know it sounds ridiculous. I *know* it does." It was true. There wasn't anything before school. Pencil on paper. Words. Dick and Jane.

"Well, I've seen a picture of you. You did have parents, Gary. But it was so long ago you've

forgotten. Anyway, I wanted to let you know because it felt like I was hiding something by not telling you what I knew."

He looked at his coffee, thinking about his hero in his book. Jack. Jack would just smile and move on.

"Gary?" The waitress came back with two big plates of breakfast, interrupting anything he might have said. When she was gone, Zeke reached out and squeezed his hand. "We okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, we're fine. It's okay. It's hard, to be a stranger."

"Well I don't want to be a stranger with you, Gary. Just the opposite, yeah?"

He nodded, swirling the cream in his cup. "For a while, hmm? Until things get too weird."

"Things won't get too weird." Zeke sounded like he believed it. Gary knew better.

"The waffles are better at the other place. This bacon is better, though."

"Yeah? I'll pick waffles up to go from the other place tomorrow. We can eat in bed." Zeke's voice had dropped low, those eyes dark.

His body responded eagerly, cock jerking. "We could. Lots of syrup."

"Oh, ho!" Zeke's look became even more heated. "Whipped cream," Zeke added, eyebrows wiggling up and down.

"My name's not cream." Did he just say that?

"Oh. Gary..." Zeke leaned in, voice low, needy. "Have you got any? Whips I mean."

"No. No, I... I have a flogger. In the closet. I have a chest. Of toys."

"Jesus Christ, baby. That's one box we're definitely opening."

His cheeks went hot, one foot sliding on his ankle.

Zeke looked down at his food. "Eating. We're supposed to be eating."

"Uh-huh. Bacon."

Waffles.

Coffee.

"Yeah." Zeke gave him a grin that was still heated, and then began shoveling in food.

He ate all his bacon, part of the waffle, enjoying the food, drinking it down.

"The food's good without the Basic in your system, isn't it?"

"Yes. Of course, with the Basic, you don't care."

"Don't you want to care, Gary? About food? About making love?"

"Sometimes." Sometimes he just needed to be blank, empty. Silent.

"I'd like you to not take it while I'm around. I want to be with the real you."

"I'll think about it. I won't promise, because I'll fuck up."

Zeke reached out and rubbed the back of his hand. "Thank you, baby."

He turned his hand over, enjoying that touch.

"Tomorrow's my last day before my weekend. I was thinking maybe you could come over to my place. Maybe bring a change of clothes and your toothbrush?"

"Oh. Oh, I." Would they be safe? "You don't think he'll follow us?"

"He might. But I live in a very safe house." Zeke's hand tightened on his. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"I'll try, but if he comes, I'll have to go. I don't want to see you get hurt." Torn. Smashed. Killed.

"He's not going to hurt me, Gary. I know he's out there. I know what he can do." Zeke pointed to his half-eaten waffle. "You going to finish that?"

"Nope. Go ahead." He stole the half piece of bacon left on Zeke's plate.

Zeke finished the rest of the waffles and drained his coffee, sitting back with a groan. "Ah, I needed that."

"It was good." He leaned against the side of the booth. "Thank you. I enjoy being out."

"I'll take you someplace nice for supper on the weekend. I'm not much of a cook, I'm afraid. Frozen dinners and take out. You like Italian? Steak? Japanese?"

He considered that. "I like Chinese food. I like eating with chopsticks."

"Oh fun. I'm not very good at them -- my fingers are too clumsy, but as long as I have a fork to fall back on I'm good. We can do that. And play with the stuff in that box of yours."

He could be in trouble. Deep trouble.

Perfect trouble.

He hoped he was.

## CHAPTER TEN

The blood on the scene that didn't belong to the victims turned out to be a match for the suspect in the murders of Gary's family.

They had a serial killer on their hands.

And if Zeke's working theory was right, this guy had been stalking, haunting, whatever you wanted to call it, Gary ever since. They were just lucky the old murders had been so long ago the papers hadn't picked it up yet. A serial killer would be big news once it got out and that would make his job more difficult.

So far, that was the only piece of good news they'd gotten. They'd found no other sign of the perpetrator. Zeke figured if they had nothing new by the time his weekend was up, it would be time to go through Gary's boxes. He just wasn't sure how to do that without freaking Gary the hell out.

He decided not to worry about it. He was on his way to Gary's to pick the man up for the weekend. Zeke was looking forward to it way more than he should have been.

But he'd always liked to play a little rough, a little dominant. As long as it got his lovers off, too, it was a big turn on. But he'd never known anyone who shone from it the way Gary had. Jesus, he was hard just thinking about it.

No thinking about it. Driving with a hard-on was dangerous.

Instead, he thought about his phone call yesterday evening with Linda, Gary's agent. God, she was a pill. Strident and aggressive, she'd told him in no uncertain terms that Gary was innocent, that he had deadlines and if he missed any of them by the smallest fraction, she'd sue the entire police department, himself and his progeny. Man, that woman could swear like a dockworker. Zeke would be very happy if he never had to speak to her again.

He'd have been happier if he'd thought that any of her concern over Gary's involvement with the police was for Gary himself, but she'd made it abundantly clear that her concern was for the bottom line, for the money that Gary's books brought in. It made him wonder if there was anyone at all in Gary's corner. It made him sad and angry, both.

He pulled up outside of Gary's, shaking his head as he saw another box on the porch, half hidden by the gate. God damn it.

He parked and then wandered over to where Bruce and Dawson were sitting in their unmarked, munching on burgers.

"You guys see who dropped that box off?"

"Shit, man. Like anyone can see *anything* in that freakshow of a yard. Especially since it backs into the river."

"So that's a no?" He grunted unhappily. "All right, let's call this off. This guy's had twenty five years to perfect not being seen unless he wants to be. We'll regroup on Monday and figure out what we're gonna do."

"Good deal. You actually taking a weekend off, man?" Bruce grinned over, stretching a little.

"Why is that so surprising?" He gave the man a wink, knowing full well he had a reputation for working all hours. All work and no play, though... Christ, he hadn't been this excited about a weekend with someone in a long time.

"Because you're a fucking workaholic psycho, man."

"No, not a psycho." He wasn't anything like this man who was stalking Gary. Of course he'd been here every day for three days now, hadn't he?

"Yeah, yeah. Okay, we're gone. Page me if you need us, huh?"

"Will do. Thanks guys." He stepped back to give them room to pull out into the street and head back to the station.

Zeke looked into the yard, looking at the statues, the huge, oddly shaped people. Jesus. Where did those things *come* from?

He waited until the unmarked was gone, and then he punched in the gate code and strode up to the front door. It was almost creepier out here in the daylight than it was in the dark. He rang the bell, feeling like he was being watched, like there were eyes on him.

Gary opened the door, tugged him in. "Come on. Come in."

Yeah, today he could understand that urgency, the feeling of wanting to have the door solidly closed behind you. He left the box where it was and pushed in, closing the door with a good, firm shove.

"You ready to go?"

"Yes. Yes, he's close. I've heard him all day while I was working. I got eight thousand words."

"Hey, that's great." He paused a minute. "That is a lot, right?" For all he knew, Gary usually did eight thousand words before breakfast.

"It's not bad. Can we leave? Now? Before it gets dark?"

"Yeah, let's go. You got a bag with your stuff?"

"I do. I... Did you. I mean, there was that chest..."

He nodded, not able to help the smile that pulled at his lips. "There was indeed. Where is it, baby?"

"I pulled it out. It's in the blue room."

He headed that way. "We should clean up your front yard one day. Buy some plants and stuff."

"We should?" He got a shocked look, a stunned look.

"Sure. You need shrubbery out there. Tulips in the spring and forget me nots."

"Forget me nots..." Gary looked over. "Maybe. Maybe when he's not watching."

"Yeah, that works for me." He wanted those creepy statues gone. Christ, those things had made *him* feel like the Penny Man was watching.

The chest was easy to spot, sitting on the low table in the middle of the room. He picked it up. "Oh, heavy enough, there's more than just a flogger in here."

"Yeah. I think so. It hasn't been open in a long time."

"Hopefully they haven't mated in there." He gave Gary a teasing wink.

They headed back toward the front door, the warrens of boxes making it seem like going through the trenches.

"It's going to be dark soon, we need to hurry."

He could feel it too. The threat. The pressure. "You have everything you need?" It wasn't like Gary needed a lot -- he was planning on lots of naked activities with breaks for food.

"Yes. Yes. Please, Zeke."

He nodded, relieved as they got to the front door.

For a half second he froze, his hand on the doorknob. He couldn't move, he couldn't open the

door and go out there with the Penny Man watching. And then the feeling was gone, the brief, sudden panic drained away and he shouldered his way out.

Gary moved him quickly, heading for the car, fast as he could. He put the chest in the back seat and settled in the front, making sure Gary was belted in before starting the engine and heading off. He shook it off as they drove. "I don't know how you live there, Gary. That house is spooky." How else could he explain how he'd felt?

"I know. I keep trying to..." Gary sighed, shook his head. "It's better if I stay."

"He always finds you, huh?" Twenty-five years the Penny Man had been haunting Gary. It was amazing Gary was functional at all.

"He doesn't like it when I move."

"He makes things worse, huh? Why do you think he killed those women? What happened to set him off?"

"I think he was bored and... I'd been going out more. Getting my fix. Seeing my editor. He doesn't like that."

"Uh-huh." If the Penny Man hadn't liked that, he was gonna hate Zeke.

"I think once is okay, though. It's so soon after the last." Gary reached over, patted his thigh.

"It's not right, Gary, that you're trapped like this." It needed to stop. The Penny Man needed to be taken out. For good. He slid his hand over top of Gary's and squeezed. Gary's fingers twined with his and, fuck, it was good.

He pulled into his driveway, his one-story condo looking nice. His lawn was grassy, his flower beds currently dormant aside from the tulips and crocuses. It wouldn't be long though before they were bursting with life. "Home sweet home."

"It's nice." Gary stared. "It's very nice, Zeke."

"It's mine." He squeezed Gary's hand again. "Come on, come see the inside -- it's even better."

"Absolutely." Gary nodded, smiled at him nervously. "I haven't spent the night with someone somewhere else in a long, long time."

Reaching out, he cupped Gary's face. "I'll take care of you, baby."

Gary's moan almost made him cream his fucking jeans.

"Right. Inside. Before I have to arrest myself for lewd and lascivious behavior." He got out and grabbed the chest, heading up the front walk.

Gary hurried behind him, stopping to admire the flowers.

"You like my beds, baby?" He waggled his eyebrows.

"I do..." That grin just snuck out, made Gary look younger, brighter.

It drew a laugh out of him and he got the front door open, inviting Gary in. "I'll give you the five cent tour."

A nickel pressed into his palm. "Sounds fair."

He looked down at it, and then at Gary, chuckling. Then he pocketed the nickel and put down the chest. "Well this is the hall and you've seen the front door."

"And the yard."

"That's right. Over here on the right we have the living room. It has the TV and the leather couch of much indulgence." It felt good, teasing Gary, the mood light.

Gary applauded, even if the man stayed away from the windows. He looped his arm around Gary's waist and showed Gary the little kitchen which he hardly every used, and then the den, the little bathroom, and finally his room with its king sized bed and his en suite bathroom.

"Oh, look. It's charming." Gary walked around, touching bits and pieces -- his bed, the dresser.

"You're going to look good in my bed, baby."

"You think so? It's big enough for both of us."

"It certainly is. And there's posts to tie you up to..." He could picture Gary there, straining at the bonds, needing, hard, thinking of nothing but where the next touch was coming from.

"There are." Gary's hand slid down one, almost like he was jacking it off.

It made Zeke's cock twitch. "You need the bathroom or anything, Gary?"

"No. No, I'm good." That hand kept moving, sliding, rubbing the wood.

His eyes were glued to the movements. "You're making me hard."

"Isn't that what I'm here for? At least partially?"

"Well, yeah, I wanna make love to you. I want to tie you to the bed and flog that pretty little ass of yours. I want to get to know you better, too, though, and spend some time away from the shadow of the -- you know."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know." Gary stepped forward, face lifted for a kiss. "I want to pretend I'm real, too."

"No pretending, just be real." His lips touched Gary's, tongue coming out to taste.

Gary's hands wrapped around his shoulders, holding on tight. It felt good, having Gary hold onto him, lean into him. He started walking them over to the side of the bed. He'd worried Gary would tense, would panic, but that lean body trusted him. Wanted him.

He slid one hand down to that sweet ass, grabbing hold of it. Gary arched back, bucking into his touch, pushing back toward him. He was so hard his balls ached and he humped against Gary's belly, hand holding the skinny body in place.

"You want my mouth?" Gary licked at his bottom lip, staring at him.

"Yeah. To start with." He wanted it all, every part of Gary. He wanted to make Gary so crazy with lust and need that the Penny Man never even entered Gary's thoughts.

Gary nodded, sliding down between him and the edge of the bed, fingers working his jeans open. Just look at that, the man on his knees. Jesus. Zeke groaned and swallowed, hand reaching down to stroke over Gary's hair, his face. Gary was going to look even better with his cock spreading those sweet lips wide. He loved the sharp angles of that thin face, the sweep of dark hair, the heavy wings of eyebrows.

Much as he wanted Gary's mouth *now*, he didn't push. He kept tracing Gary's features, thighs hard, legs tight, holding himself still. Those fingers tortured him as they worked his pants open. Gary kissed the base of his belly, tongue sliding on his navel, then headed south as those fingers pushed his pants down. A shiver went through him, the touches better than anything he'd felt in a long time.

"Feels good," he said, not having the words to express how much better than good it was.

"Mmm." Gary's mouth was heated and hungry, almost desperate as that tongue flicked and slid around his prick.

"Oh, God." He slid his hands over Gary's head, fingertips mapping the shape of Gary's skull.

That tongue moved down, touching the base of his balls, each one getting a sweet, soft kiss before one was sucked into that hot mouth. He tried to spread his legs, but his jeans were in the way and he could only groan and hold on, let Gary use that hot mouth as he wanted. And it felt like Gary wanted slow and torturous -- sucking here and licking there, tongue flicking around the head.

It was obvious Gary was enjoying himself, which was almost as good as what the man was doing. Almost.

"Sweet Jesus, you're going to kill me," he whispered as Gary's tongue flicked at his slit.

"No." Gary stopped, looked up at him, so serious. "No, Zeke. I am not."

"Oh. Oh, baby, I know. It's just an expression, yeah? Means it's so damn good I can't say."

"I know. I just... I had to tell you." Then Gary's lips dropped over his cock, the suction sudden and sharp.

Any answer he might have had went the way of the dodo as his entire focus narrowed to his cock and Gary's mouth. He cried out, hips moving blindly, pushing himself deeper. Gary's mouth was fucking heaven, the lips clinging as that throat worked around the tip.

"Gonna blow. Oh, shit! Condom, baby." He pulled out, gasping.

"Mmm." That tongue flicked and pressed at his slit.

"Christ!" He cried out, hips jerking as he pumped the air, coming all over Gary's face.

Gary groaned, tongue flicking out to taste.

He pulled off his t-shirt and carefully wiped Gary's face clean. "You shouldn't, baby. Not unless we get tested."

"You still taste good, Zeke."

He chuckled, heat blooming in his belly. "Thanks. I want to taste you, too. We should go get tested next week."

"You like to go a lot."

"Not more than most people, I bet." More than Gary, though. It sounded like Gary had good reasons to stay home and not go anywhere.

Gary reached up, stroking his belly.

"Mmm... you ready to play, baby? Or you need a little something first?"

"I can play. I can."

"Then get on the bed, baby." He had ropes. He had a plug or two and some dildos. He wanted to see what all Gary had in his toy chest.

Gary's ass swayed side to side as the man crawled on the bed for him. Zeke reached out and swatted that sweet ass. Gary gasped, stopped, hips rolling back toward him.

"Someone likes that." He did it again, not holding back.

"Oh." Knees sprawling, Gary spread for him, sweet as pie.

"Take those pants off, baby. This'll feel better skin on skin.

Gary tugged the belt off, the fly open, those pants sliding over Gary's fine little ass.

"Yeah, that's what I want to see." He climbed up onto the bed behind Gary and started feeling up that amazing ass.

Gary leaned down, put his chin on his hands.

"You need so beautifully, baby." He slid his hands up and down, fingertips just barely touching Gary's balls between those legs. Then he smacked that pale ass again, watching that skin pink up in the shape of a hand.

His hand.

"More. More, please." Gary begged like no one else.

"You'll get more. But you don't come until I say you can."

"I. Okay. Okay, Zeke. Okay."

He gave Gary's ass another hard smack as a reward. Then he set up a rhythm, hitting one cheek and then the other, the tops of Gary's thighs, too.

"Zeke." Gary shuddered, bucking up against him.

"Right here, baby. I *know* you can feel me." He rubbed his hands over Gary's skin and reached between those thighs to touch the hot little balls. Christ, but Gary was damn sexy.

The lean spine curled up, bowed. Gary's balls drew up, so tight, so hard.

"Tell me how badly you need to come." He wanted to hear it, wanted to know Gary was *here* feeling it, not lost in the Basic.

"I want to, but I don't. I want it to go on and on, Zeke."

"It will," he promised. He had a cock ring. Christ, he probably had two or three.

He climbed off the bed and started stripping as he searched through his side-table drawer. He pulled out condoms and lube and sure enough, he found a metal cock ring and a leather one. He tossed them both on the bed.

Gary turned, looked. Moaned.

He reached out and rubbed Gary's red ass, groaning at the heat. His own prick was already hard and needy again. "Turn over and lie on your back."

Gary turned, cock hard and red, dripping on the flat belly. Groaning, he slid his hand through the slick pre-come on Gary's stomach, rubbing it into the smooth skin.

"Zeke. Zeke. I. Oh..."

Yeah.

He took the leather cock ring and wrapped it around the base of Gary's cock, making sure it was fairly tight. His fingers traced where the leather transected skin, groaning at the amazing heat. Gary bucked up, humping into his touch, crying out over and over. Zeke kept touching, fingers exploring the heat of Gary's cock and the soft skin of the man's sac.

Gary was fucking beautiful -- caught in pleasure, moaning and crying out for him.

"Put the other one on me." He handed the metal ring over to Gary.

Gary's fingers were warm, careful, stroking his cock to full hardness.

"Oh, baby." Zeke groaned and steadied himself with his hands on the mattress. That touch was trying to make him lose his mind.

"Mmmhmm." That touch kept on and on, Gary petting and pulling at him.

"The ring," he managed to gasp. "Before it's too late." He didn't think he'd get it up a third time and he wanted to play all evening long.

"Uh-huh." The ring slid on, hard and tight, holding his prick.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's right. Gonna last for you."

Gary sat up, tongue sliding on his slit.

"Jesus. Love your mouth." Gary was going to be the death of him. Best way to go.

Gary hummed, fucking his slit, slow and easy, pushing in. It was a damn good thing he had the ring on.

Groaning, he pushed Gary back. "Baby. It's time for you to fly."

Sprawling, Gary moaned, reached for him. He lay on top of that lean body, letting the man feel his weight.

"Zeke." Gary melted for him, lips open, body relaxed.

He circled his hips, rubbing their bound pricks together. That earned him a soft little happy moan, Gary's lips parted, open. He slid his tongue between them, fucking Gary's mouth, continuing to make those little circles.

A car passed by outside and Gary gasped, going still.

"It's just a car, baby." He bit at Gary's lower lip, demanding his lover's attention.

"I. You're sure." Gary looked up at him, heart starting to beat faster. "I don't know if... I might need a hit, Zeke. Just to relax."

"I don't think so, baby."

He rolled off to one side and picked up the rope. Grabbing up Gary's right wrist, he tied it to a bedpost. He was starting to know what the man needed.

"Zeke. Zeke, please. I'm... I don't know. I might..."

"You might what? Feel something?" He grabbed up Gary's other hand and tied it, too.

"I can't. I can't feel too much."

"You can feel what I make you feel." He didn't tie up Gary's legs -- he was going to take that sweet ass soon enough.

"I can't. I can't think. Please." Oh, sweet, panicked love.

He pressed a kiss to Gary's throat. "You're not supposed to be thinking, baby."

Gary's whisper filled the air. "I'm scared."

He lay back down on Gary and stared into those big eyes. "I'll take care of you, baby. I promise."

"He'll hurt you and it'll be my fault."

"Nobody's going to hurt me." He put a stop to the conversation with his mouth, lips pressing hard against Gary's, tongue shoving in, fucking Gary's mouth with quick, hard strokes.

Gary arched, eyes rolling, hips bucking up against him. Yeah, that was it. Focus on the sex, on

the slide of hot bodies pressing together. He bit at Gary's lower lip, hard. That cry was sweet, sharp. His.

Groaning, he slid his body along Gary's, his prick dragging against warm, smooth skin as he bit his way along Gary's neck. He was headed for one tiny nipple, the little bit of flesh already drawn up and hard for him. Tomorrow they would be red and bruised, so sensitive that Gary would feel the barest breath of air. It was a good thing he was wearing the ring around his prick or he'd come just from the thought.

He made his way to Gary's right nipple, sucking it gently between his lips at first. Then he used his teeth to abrade the skin before sucking hard, pulling the skin away from Gary's chest. Gary was almost screaming for him, begging him for more, harder, please. He gave it, moving to Gary's left nipple and biting hard, his fingers tugging at the right nipple. That skin would be burning, aching, bruised by his teeth, and Gary had to feel it.

He twisted once more and then slid his hand down, teasing the bound cock before sliding his hand down to Gary's hot, reddened ass. He squeezed the abused flesh in his hand.

"Yes. Yes, I need."

"I know." He pressed his thumb against Gary's hole, and then in.

Gary grunted, pushed back against his touch. He grabbed the lube and slicked up his thumb, pushing it back into Gary's tight little hole. That was all his lover needed to start riding his thumb, bucking. He watched, Gary taking his breath away. The skinny body arched and stretched, hands bound up above him. He slid his free hand over Gary's belly, dragging his fingernails along the pale skin.

"Need you. Need you. More."

He knew that, too, but he also knew Gary needed him to be in charge. "I'll say when you get more." He pushed his thumb in as far as it would go, the rest of his hand rubbing against Gary's ass. So hot, both inside and out.

Twisting his thumb inside Gary, he used his free hand to tug on one abused nipple. Gary arched up hard, eyes wide with a fierce, hungry need. Yeah, that was better than more. He twisted the other nipple as he pulled his thumb out of Gary's body and replaced it with two fingers. Stretching, twisting, he searched for Gary's gland. That earned him a jerk, a tight squeeze, a cry. Then Gary's legs drew up, trying to get the touch again.

"I say when it happens again," he murmured, fingers sliding over Gary's cock, touching the wet slit and spreading the liquid over the head.

"Zeke." It sounded like a motherfucking prayer and damn, it made him hot.

He pulled his fingers out and moved between Gary's legs, rubbing the head of his cock against

the top of Gary's crack. Fuck, Gary was hot and damp against him, the skin slick and so ready to be taken. He pushed right in, moving in closer until Gary's ass rested against his thighs, his cock buried deep.

"Oh. Oh, I. I feel you."

"I sure hope so, baby." Groaning, he inched a tiny bit forward, pushing deeper. "I feel you, too."

"Yes. I'm real. Right now. Right now, Zeke. Fuck." Gary's legs wrapped around him, held him tight.

"Yes. Yes." He started to move, coming out halfway before pushing back in.

Those pretty, warm eyes stared at him, held onto him like a laser. He moved slowly, pushing in hard every time. His hips slapped against Gary's ass, the sound filling the air.

"Good." Yeah. Yeah, it was and he fucking knew it.

The ring he wore bumped against Gary's stretched hole, making them both gasp Gary began to shine for him, skin glistening with sweat as they came together over and over.

"I want... I want so much. You give me, so much."

"Tell me. I'll give it to you." He had plans.

"I... I don't know how. I write and write and I don't have the words."

"Then I'll just give it to you." Gary'd tell him if he did anything the man didn't want.

He pushed a little harder, cock bumping against Gary's gland every time he pushed in. Gary's body rippled around his cock, squeezing and clenching. If he wasn't wearing the ring, he would have shot. Instead, he let his arm swing, smacking Gary's thigh.

"Zeke!" Yes. Yes, more.

He slapped Gary's thigh again, matching it with a thrust. Gary jerked against the bonds, trying to reach him, trying to reach for him. He alternated, hitting one thigh and then the other, his hand starting to sting, his balls aching. Through it all he held Gary's eyes, made sure the man was right there with him. Fuck, he wanted that sharp-eyed interest, that hunger. He wanted it all the fucking time.

Zeke grabbed Gary's prick with one hand, stroking, knowing how sensitive it had to be right now. Just like his own. Everything went tight around him, Gary crying out, pre-come pulsing from the slit. He wanted it to last all night long. He knew it couldn't, but he was going to give it his best shot.

"Please. Zeke. I need. *Need*."

"I know. Me, too." He gasped the words out, thrusting harder, tugging harder. "Gonna go as long as we can."

"Gonna... you're gonna chafe." The word surprised him, made them both laugh.

"Extra lube," he suggested when he finally found enough breath to talk again. He slowed, re-lubing himself so he could go just a little longer.

"Mmm." They were slowing down, the fucking making his eyes roll a bit, but not so much he ached.

He started running out of energy and he groaned, pulling out and removing the ring, putting on a new condom. He pushed back in again before undoing Gary's cock ring. "Okay, baby."

"Oh. Full of you." He nodded at Gary's words, cupped Gary's ass with his hands and slid his thumbs inside with his cock. "Oh!"

"Come on, baby. Give it up for me."

Gary nodded once and then shot, body tight as fuck around him. He held back long enough to watch Gary's face, watch the need transform into pleasure. And then he groaned, pushing in one last time and filling the condom as he poured himself out his cock.

Everything went still, quiet, both of them caught in it and each other.

He slowly lowered himself, eyes holding Gary's, unable to look away.

Lord, he was so very screwed.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gary.

He shook his head, knowing it was a dream.

Gary. It's time.

He sighed and shivered a little, his nerves firing. Time for a hit. Time for a...

Wait.

Wait. His hands were tied.

And something warm was curled up around him, a hot hand patting his hip.

"I... I need a hit. I need up. I need."

"I've got you, baby." Zeke nuzzled into his neck, tongue licking his skin.

"Untie me." He leaned into that heat, heart pounding hard.

"Mmm... I don't think so." Zeke's lips wrapped around skin, pulling hard.

"Zeke..." He moaned, eyes rolling, caught by the sudden, unexpected sensation. Teeth scraped over his skin, the sensation sharper than Zeke's suction. His cry filled the air and he tugged at the bonds, just lost in the waves of sensation. "Please. Please. It's too big! I need my hit!"

"Not yet." Thick fingers slid over his chest, finding one of his nipples and making it burn.

Gary jerked, gasped. "Listen to me." Fuck, that was huge.

"I'm listening, baby." His other nipple was pinched, Zeke's fingers then moving down toward his belly.

"You're not. I need it. I need my hit."

"No you don't."

One finger tapped the top of his cock.

"I *do*." He twisted, gasped, not sure what to do, to think.

"This first." Zeke pinched the heat of his cock, and then slid down to grab his balls.

First.

First.

Oh, Zeke was going to let him use. He relaxed, breathing easy, thighs parting.

"Christ, you smell good." Zeke slid down between his legs, breath hot on his thighs, on his balls.

"Zeke? What are you doing?"

"I want to taste you." The hot breath against his hole was his only warning before Zeke's tongue slid across him.

"Oh. Oh." He jerked, bucked under that hot, wet touch.

It came again, Zeke's tongue rubbing over him again and again. His eyes closed, every nerve firing, the pleasure almost painful. The licks changed into short stabs, Zeke's tongue pushing into him.

"Zeke!" Gary jerked, overwhelmed. "I can't. I don't know how. Help me."

"All you have to do is feel, baby."

"I don't know *how*."

Zeke only hummed, tongue pushing deep inside him. He jerked himself up by the bonds, body shuddering. Big hands grabbed his hips and tugged him back onto Zeke's tongue, the wet heat pushing in, fucking him. Everything went white-hot and odd and he screamed, shaking and bucking, completely lost.

That tongue disappeared, replaced by two fingers as his cock was swallowed down. Gary sobbed, entire body drawing tight, balls aching. The suction around his cock grew stronger, Zeke's fingers finding his gland.

He came, shorting out, heat pouring from him endlessly.

Zeke swallowed around him, fingers sliding away. That warm, wet tongue cleaned him, and then Zeke kissed slowly up over his belly and chest. He moaned, floating, just held quiet and happy, right there. A low hum slid into his mouth along with Zeke's tongue, the kiss lazy, belied by the

hard prick that burned against his hip. It was so easy, to open up and sink into the kisses, tongue twining around Zeke's as he moaned.

Zeke rocked slowly against him, the hard prick sliding on his skin. He relaxed completely, humming into Zeke's mouth. It stayed soft and lazy, one drugging kiss after another passing between them. Zeke didn't seem in any hurry at all to come, moving against him like they had all the time in the world.

Gary may have dozed; he absolutely was melted, happy. Warm. The heat of Zeke's come spraying up along his hip came with a low, deep moan.

"Oh, baby."

He smiled, licked at Zeke's lips.

Good.

So good.

Zeke's leg slid over his, hand holding his hip.

"Mmm. Morning. Is it morning?"

"There's light coming from under the window shades, so I'd say yes." Zeke chuckled. "It's been ages since I lost track of time."

"Is that good?"

"I think so, baby. I like being wrapped up in you."

He nodded, finding himself dozing again, surprisingly comfortable. Settled.

Safe.

He woke up again to the smell of coffee and toast, of bacon and eggs.

"Zeke?" He wiggled, tugged at the ropes. "I need to pee."

"Okay, baby." Zeke untied the ropes from the headboard, but looped them together, keeping him bound.

"I... My hands." He leaned, just a little off-balance.

Zeke was there to hold him up, help him to the big en suite bathroom. "You don't need them."

"I do." He needed to go. He needed a hit. He wanted some bacon. "It smells good."

"Full breakfast." Zeke whispered. "I had it delivered." He was led to the bathroom, Zeke standing behind, letting him lean. Then one of those big hands grabbed his penis, aimed it for him.

He groaned, closed his eyes and relaxed. So intimate. So close. So very odd. Zeke didn't fuss, just held him until he was done, shook him off and then moved him to the sink, reaching around him to wash the big hands.

"Back to bed and breakfast."

"I. You said I could have a hit, love." The bacon smelled so good, though. So very good.

"I don't remember saying that. Besides, breakfast is no fun if you're out of it on Basic." Zeke led him back to the bedroom and laid him out on the bed again.

"You did." He remembered.

"We need to eat first, baby." Zeke sat him on the bed, ropes going back to the headboard. "I want to feed you. Doesn't it smell good?"

"It does." He'd said that. The bacon smelled like heaven.

Zeke grabbed a tray with two take out containers on it and brought them to the bed. He opened them up, revealing scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, home fries, toast and pancakes. There were also two Styrofoam cups that must have been coffee, 'cause he could smell it.

"I think we'll start with the bacon." Zeke picked up a piece, bit off the end and then offered the rest over to him.

Gary opened up, humming over the salt and crisp flavor of it.

"Look at you. I like watching you enjoy yourself, Gary."

His cheeks heated and Gary blinked a little. "You do?"

"I do. It makes me happy." Zeke gave him a sheepish smile. "Makes me hard, too."

That smile melted him and he leaned hard, stretching for a kiss.

"Mmm..." Zeke knew just what he wanted, mouth closing over his. The kiss grew harder as it continued.

The kiss went on and on, bacon and coffee flavored, and Gary moaned, cock trying to rise again.

Zeke finally pulled away, rubbing their noses together before sitting back up. "How about a bite of pancakes?"

"Syrup?" He loved the syrup.

"Yeah. Lots." Zeke took the little container and poured about half of it over the pancakes, and then he spilled some onto Gary's cock.

"Zeke!" He jerked, laughing as the syrup slid into his curls, sticking them together.

There was a wicked glint in Zeke's eyes and then Zeke bent over, licking at his curls first, and then his cock, tongue lapping up the syrup from his flesh. The nerves in his lower belly tingled, his cock waking back up, growing hard easily without the Basic to hinder it.

"I love the way you taste." Zeke nibbled on his cock. "I want us to get tested. I want to be able to fuck you and not worry about anything."

"I... I would. I can." Gary moaned, nodded. He would try.

"Thank you, baby." Zeke's mouth slid over the tip of his prick, the suction fierce for a moment and then those lips slid away, Zeke spearing a forkful of pancakes and feeding them into his mouth.

He wasn't sure if he liked this -- this constant feeling, this constantly being awake. He loved the pancakes, though. One bite after another, Zeke fed him, teased him, played with him. All of Zeke's focus was on him. Gary actually forgot, for a moment, about what he needed.

Some bites were simply fed to him, others were passed from Zeke's mouth to his. At one point, both of his nipples were covered with the little coin shaped pancakes, Zeke's tongue lapping at his skin as they were eaten up. They both laughed, not talking about anything serious, simply enjoying each other. Before he knew it, the food was gone, Zeke clearing up the containers and leaving them out of the way on the dresser.

"I'm going to go get your toy chest now, Gary. I want to see what's in it."

"Oh!" He'd forgotten about that, forgotten about bringing it. Forgotten about everything but Zeke.

Zeke gave him a kiss, mouth hard and hot. "Be right back." Then Zeke disappeared out the door.

Like he could go anywhere. He stretched out, cheek sliding on the pillow, drawing his legs up to work the muscles.

"Mmm... you really are sexy, Gary." Zeke leaned against the door, chest in those arms, watching him.

"I was stretching."

"I know." The chest was placed at the foot of the bed, and Zeke pointed to his hard-on. "That's what you do to me."

His hands tugged against the ropes, wanting to reach, to touch.

"Let's see what goodies you have in here. I seem to remember you saying something about a flogger..." Zeke opened the chest.

He craned his neck to see. He hadn't seen in for so long. There were plugs, dildos, cock rings, a paddle, floggers, cuffs. Even a little collapsible leg spreader.

"Oh, look at all this." Zeke's fingers slid over the toys, picking up this dildo and that paddle. "You've got a great collection here." Picking up a short, solid flogger, Zeke slid the cool leather over his cock.

"I used to... Sam and I did... I never thought I would again."

"I'm glad you like it." The flogger slid up his body, running over his nipples and sliding across his neck.

Groaning, he nodded, entire focus caught by the soft touch.

Zeke ran the flogger over his lips. "Taste it."

"What?" His lips opened, the leather sharp and almost salty.

"Does it taste like power?"

"It's salty." He pondered that for a moment, the taste of power. The idea of power being flavored.

"So's skin." Zeke dragged the flogger back down his body, flicking it against his hip.

"Does skin taste like power?" He groaned, jerked a bit.

"Yeah, I think it does." Another flick of the flogger snapped against his hip.

"Oh. Oh, I. Do it again?"

His request was granted, the leather landing on his hip with a heavy thud. "Spread your legs for me."

Gary nodded, legs spreading, sliding on the sheets.

"Perfect." The flogger hit the inside of his thighs, one side and then the other, back and forth.

The sting made him pull away, made him curl his legs up. That gave Zeke access to the backs of his legs, and the man took full advantage, thudding the flogger against one side and then the other.

"Zeke. Fuck." He gasped, the sensation huge. Burning.

The blows came again, and then again. He spun, twisting the ropes, his body overwhelmed by sensation. Zeke's hand encouraged him to expose his backside, the flogger immediately beginning to work his ass cheeks and the tops of his thighs.

"Zeke!" Fuck. He pushed back up into that broad hand, lights swirling behind his eyes.

"Your skin is beautiful with my marks." The flogger came down harder, the hits deep, his muscles beginning to ache.

"Stop. Stop. He'll hear. He'll come. Please."

"You're safe here, baby. No one's coming. It's just you and me." The next thud shook him, settled deep inside his balls.

"I'm scared." If he kept saying it, maybe Zeke would hear him.

"I know." Zeke's breath was hot against his ear, lips hot where they nibbled. "Let it go, Gary. You don't need to be scared right now."

He moaned, leaning into Zeke's strength. "I don't know how."

The flogger hit the back of his thighs again, Zeke managing to both hit and hold him at the same time. "I have you, baby. I have you."

"What can I do?" He shook, gasping, groaning.

"All you have to do is feel." Zeke tossed the flogger away in favor of rubbing his abused muscles.

"Zeke..." Oh. Don't stop. So good.

That big hand squeezed his ass, massaging, every now and then giving him another smack. The world faded away, his heartbeat slowing as he melted into the mattress. Zeke's mouth slid over his back, nipping at his spine, adding bites and licks and more heat to the sensations raining over his skin.

"You... you're making me nuts." Crazy. Happy.

The laughter tickled his skin, Zeke's teeth scraping over him

"I... how long will this go on?"

"Until you come."

"I can't. Not again." Could he?

"You saying I'm going to have to do this forever?"

"Forever is a very long time."

"I'm not sure it's long enough." One of Zeke's fingers pushed into him.

His words deserted him; his knees drew up under him. In no time at all, Zeke was behind him, pushing into him slowly, spreading him wide. This time, Zeke just filled him, so carefully, so deep. Once Zeke was all the way in, the big, warm body leaned over him, hot skin pressing against his. The solid arms wrapped around him, holding him.

To his utter shock, tears started rolling down his cheeks.

Zeke let him cry, hands sliding over his skin, buried deep inside him and pressed close against his burning, aching skin.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Zeke."

"Shh. Shh. It's okay, baby. Let it all out." Zeke rocked, cock pushing deeper. It pushed more tears from him, and then they faded away, leaving him empty except for the cock inside him.

Zeke kissed the back of his neck and began to move. Long, slow strokes filled him over and over. Deep sounds left Gary's throat with each thrust, like there was no room inside him for anything but Zeke. One big hand wrapped around his cock, Zeke's thrusts sending it sliding along the hot palm.

Please. His eyes were open wide, seeing nothing, knowing nothing but the pleasure and pressure all around him. Zeke pushed and thrust and stroked and it felt like forever. It felt like its own time and place.

Then Zeke pushed harder, faster, hand tightening on his cock. He felt his orgasm building inside him, undeniable, just rushing through him. "Yeah, baby. I can feel you. Come on. Do it."

All he could do was nod and come, entire body shuddering with it. Zeke shouted, hips jerking, cock throbbing as it filled the condom inside him.

Gary let himself go, let himself sink into a deep, dreamless sleep, lost under the waves before the aftershocks had passed.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Zeke pulled up in front of Gary's house and smiled at his lover.

He'd managed to keep Gary distracted enough with sex and food, and mostly sex, that Gary hadn't had a hit while they'd been together. He figured it was the first thing Gary was going to do when he left, but he was going to take it as a win, anyway.

"That was the best weekend I've had in a long time, Gary. Thank you."

"It was lovely." Gary leaned over, kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

If it was so good, why did this feel so much like a goodbye? "Let me walk you to do the door."

He got out and grabbed Gary's bag and the toy chest, meeting up with Gary as the man climbed out of the car.

"Are you sure? He could be watching..." They stepped up into the yard and the sudden smell of decay hit him, hit them both. Gary's eyes went wide and Zeke got shoved back out the gate. "Go. Go, now."

"No, I don't think so." Whatever was there, he wasn't going to make Gary face it on his own. He put down the chest.

"Go." Gary got the gate closed between them, shaking fingers trying to work the lock.

"Gary! I can help you." He learned his weight against the gate, pushing with all his might.

Gary stumbled back, body slamming into one of the dozens of bizarre, black statues, head bouncing off the stone. Suddenly, weirdly, the place went silent and Zeke could swear the statues were staring at him.

Threatening him.

"Shit! Gary!" He pushed the gate open and ran for Gary, trying to ignore the creepy sensations going up and down his spine.

Gary blinked up at him, eyes spinning wildly. "The Penny Man."

He nodded and grabbed Gary's arm, half dragging, half carrying the man to the front door. "Get inside."

There was a dog on the front porch, splayed open and decomposing. Gary jerked, head turning away from it. "The Penny Man. He knows. He knows I was gone."

"Don't touch it. I'll call it in once we're inside." He shielded Gary as he waited for the man to get the door open. That sick bastard needed to be caught.

"You'll be next. You or someone else. He's mad at me."

"This has to stop. He has to be stopped." He hustled Gary inside as soon as the door was open. Damn it, this was becoming a habit -- running from that monster.

"He can't. Go away. Just go." Gary headed through the boxes.

"I need to call the station to get the... carcass taken care of." He followed Gary. Jesus. He'd enjoyed the lack of crazy over the weekend. A lot. And he wanted it back.

"Okay. You know where the phone is." Gary began to run, heading for the monochromatic rooms, for the safety.

Zeke shook his head, the feeling of dread lessened now that there was a door between him and Gary and that God forsaken creeped out yard. He grabbed his cell and dialed the station.

It didn't take long at all before he had Roger on the line, organizing forensics and heading over. "What were you doing over there, man?"

He mulled it over for a half a second. It was time to spill the beans about him and Gary, and Roger deserved to hear it first. "Gary spent the weekend at my place."

"Like as in spent-spent? Man, what are you thinking?"

He rubbed his face with one hand. "I wasn't really. Thinking, I mean."

"Oh. Man, you're going to have to pull yourself off the case, man. You know you are."

"I don't know if I can. This is Twilight Zone here, Roger." The truth was, he knew what they were really up against.

"You won't have a choice once it gets out." Of course, it didn't *have* to get out, did it?

"I'm going to be in the middle of this either way, Roger. Gimme a fighting chance here." He hated begging, but Roger was a good guy, and Zeke needed the chance.

"I think you're making a mistake, man, but you know me. I got your back, no matter what."

He sagged a little from relief. "Thanks, man. I'll keep you in the loop. Let me deal with this dead dog shit and I'll come in and give you what I've got."

"I'll come out with the guys; you can talk to me in the house. You think the guy's close?"

"I do. You should have felt the vibes when we found the dog, man. He was watching us. It was creepy as hell."

Roger was a good guy. "That's fucked up. I'll get surveillance."

"Good deal. Okay, I'm going to go make sure Gary's okay. I'll see you when you get here." He rattled off the gate code and hung up. Maybe they could start going through all these boxes. There was sure to be clues in among them.

The door to Gary's bedroom was locked, the house quiet.

Zeke knocked softly. "Gary? Let me in, baby?"

"I'm sorry..." Gary's voice came from the floor, breath hitching.

Jesus.

"Gary, come on now. Let me in. I'm not mad at you."

"It's my fault. Please. Please, you're so special. Please just walk away."

"You are not responsible for that monster's actions, Gary. And I'm not going anywhere. A forensics unit is coming to deal with the carcass on the porch. I need you to let me in now, Gary." His hand slid on the door like he was touching Gary.

Long, pale fingers slid under the door, shaking.

He bent down, touching Gary's fingers. "Come on, baby. Let me in."

"I don't want him to hurt you."

"He's not going to hurt me, baby. Let me in." He had pulled the pick kit out of his back pocket when the lock turned. He slipped in, grabbing Gary's arm and hauling the man close. "Hey. It's okay. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

Gary looked at him, eyes rolling, just panicked. He shook his head and pressed their mouths together, dragging Gary's focus onto something else. Gary sobbed into their kiss, fingers in his hair. That was it.

He held on, owning the kiss, not letting Gary go. The Basic was right there on the floor, the syringes, the powder.

He ended the kiss and looked into Gary's eyes. "Have you used yet?"

"Not yet. I have to. I can't. I don't. Zeke. Love." Gary looked completely lost, like someone that had just lost everything and didn't know quite how to cope with it.

"The forensics team is coming to deal with the dog. Wait until they've gone." Wait forever.

"Okay. Okay, I should hide it. I don't want to get you in trouble."

Flushing it down the toilet sounded good. But he just nodded. "Quickly, and then we'll go downstairs. I could use some coffee, yeah?"

"Yeah. Yeah, okay. I make good coffee."

"You do. Make a lot, the forensics people will appreciate it."

"I... Okay. I can try. Yes."

Zeke kissed Gary's forehead. "Okay, get rid of this stuff, they'll be here any minute."

He wasn't going anywhere until Gary'd cleaned the shit up, either. Just in case the man was tempted to take a hit. The paraphernalia was gathered into a fancy lacquered box, slid into a little table right inside the bathroom. He wanted to smash it into a million pieces and make Gary see how damaging it was, to be hiding behind the drugs for all these years.

Instead, he held out his hand and led Gary down the stairs, into the kitchen.

"I think it would be a good idea for the team to start inventorying some of these boxes, Gary." It had to happen and he really didn't want to have to get a subpoena and do it against Gary's wishes.

"Do they have to? It keeps him from seeing in."

"They do, baby. Would it help if I went and bought you some empty boxes and stacked them the same way?" It was whacked out, but then so was twenty-five years of mind games.

"I... Yes. I would try." For him. Damn, that felt good - even as fucked up as the situation was, it felt damned good to know that Gary would try for him.

"That's great. It really is." He was sure there'd be clues to the Penny Man's true identity. He'd sent enough stuff.

Gary was silent, pale, quiet, moving like a ghost.

"We had a good weekend, didn't we?"

Those pretty eyes stared at him, suddenly awake, aware. "We did. *So* good."

"Yeah." He couldn't help grinning, and he tugged Gary in close, took a long, soft kiss.

"Awesome, even."

Gary held his gaze, nodded. "Awesome, love."

Zeke stroked Gary's cheek. Jesus. He was in fucking love. Gary leaned into his palm, eyes closing. He was so screwed. Tugging Gary closer, he held on. Gary could make coffee when forensics showed up.

"I hate knowing he's watching."

"It's creepy. It needs to stop."

"It does." For the first time, Gary seemed to agree.

Leaning in to take another kiss, he was interrupted by the doorbell. "That'll be the crew. Why don't you stay here and make coffee and I'll go deal with them."

"Okay. Don't let him see you."

"I'll try, baby." He kissed the top of Gary's head and went to answer the door.

"Hey, man. There anything in the house or are we just doing out here?"

"There's a shitload of boxes in here, too. He'll let us take them if we replace them with empties." At the woman's look, he shrugged. "It's a long story."

"Empty boxes..." The little tech tilted her head, stared. "Are you calling the captain?"

"What for? We can send someone to get the boxes and get started or we can go waste our time with a subpoena." He looked at his watched. "I'm not sure we'd get it until tomorrow... maybe you'd like to tell the captain *that*."

"I mean about the empty boxes?"

"Just send someone to go get them."

"Sure, boss."

He stepped out onto the porch, making sure to stay away from the carcass as he scanned the statues and other crap on the lawn. Something was different. He didn't know what, but there was

something... He couldn't put his finger on it, so he started to wander, taking a good look at the creepy statues.

They all looked the same -- vaguely human, black, thick -- weirdly shiny. It was bizarre and he couldn't figure out why the Penny Man would have brought them. Of course, he didn't get the stacks and stacks of boxes, either. There were more than statues -- there were buckets and pots, dead flowers and odd wire... things.

Jesus, his Gary *lived* in the middle of this.

A clean up and planting project was definitely needed. If they got rid of all this crap, it could only help Gary's mental state.

He went back to the porch. "How's it going here?"

"It's going. Standard shepherd. No tags. Guttled. Been here approximately thirty-six hours."

"Christ. Is the gutting the same pattern as with our two lady victims?"

"It could be. We won't know for sure until the lab looks."

He didn't need the lab results to know, but they needed to do everything by the book. He wanted an iron-clad case.

"There's a couple of boxes that were propping up the body. Should we take those?"

"Yes. And as soon as someone comes back with those empty boxes, you can start taking the ones from inside the house, too. Everything needs to be catalogued. Everything."

"Do we need to arrange visits with the suspect?"

He folded his arms across his chest and tried not to growl. "You mean the witness?"

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry." She wasn't really paying attention; she was taking pictures and measurements, doing her job.

"Cassie." Another young woman came up, eyes wide. "Do you know whose house this is? It's Cole Manning's."

"The guy who writes those scary books?"

"Yeah."

"You a fan?" he asked her. He'd bet there wasn't a single member of the police force who hadn't read at least one.

"God, yes. He's a mysterious guy -- never does appearances or anything."

No kidding, not with the Penny Man hanging over him. "Well, I think he's making us all coffee as we speak. I'm going to go check."

"Oh, dude. He's *home*?"

"Yeah, but remember, he's a private guy and you don't want to freak him out."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm not going to stalk him. I just want to bounce a little."

Zeke winced at her choice of words. Gary didn't need another stalker, that was for sure. "Well, maybe he'll serve the coffee himself." Though he sincerely doubted it.

In fact, he needed to get out to the kitchen now and see how Gary was doing with all these people crawling over the grounds of the house. He nodded and headed back in, following the lines of boxes up to the white kitchen where there was a full pot of coffee and a tray of cups. No Gary.

Damn it. Zeke shouldn't have left him alone so long.

"Gary?" He headed for the stairs and called up them. "Gary!"

The bedroom door was closed, but he didn't find Gary in there, either. He could hear something in the office -- that stark, blood red room, and he headed that direction. That door was closed, too, a note taped on the door.

A note.

Taped on the outside of the door.

Fuck him. He put his hand on the butt of his pistol, thumb popping the holster as he stepped forward and looked. The paper looked old, torn from a piece of newspaper, Gary's picture there, covered in blood, the twisted remains of a Toyota behind them. And...

Jesus. That was him in his beat clothes, working the fucking scene.

Him.

Across the picture was a note, deliberately written in odd, block-shaped letters.

*He's Working, Officer.*

"Fuck."

He spun around, eyes feeling dry in his head, searching the blank, empty hallway. How? How could the son of a bitch be here. There wasn't anything. Nothing. Nowhere to fucking hide.

Not unless that bastard was in there with Gary.

Not unless Gary had let the Penny Man in.

Zeke growled, shook his head at the thought. No. No, goddamn it. Gary had problems, but the man was...

Was what? Scared? Stoned? Fucked up? Possibly harboring a killer?

Maybe it was Gary's idea of a sick fucking joke. God knew the man hadn't had the most normal socialization. Yeah. Yeah, maybe that was it. There were cops everywhere. Gary'd just put the note up for him and he'd just let the man know that wasn't fucking funny.

Yeah.

When he reached for the doorknob, his palm slapped against the painted penny balanced there. Jesus Christ! That motherfucker. Playing fucking games with them while they'd all been milling about the front yard.

He grabbed the doorknob again, pushing it open. "Gary? You okay?"

Gary looked up from the laptop, fingers still typing. "Yeah. Yeah, I needed to work."

"Yeah, I get that." He prowled around the room, trying to keep it casual as he checked the place out, his fingers itching to grab his gun, but he wasn't going to freak Gary out.

Gary turned back to the computer, shoulders hunched.

"Okay, sorry to bug you -- I just wanted to make sure you were okay. Thanks for the coffee. I'll get out of your hair." No way in hell he was telling Gary that the Penny Man had been inside. Was possibly still inside.

"Be careful. I feel him."

"You, too, baby." He took one last look at Gary hunched over his laptop and closed the door. Fishing a tissue out of his pocket, he carefully took the sign off the door. There could be fingerprints on it.

Zeke hightailed it back to the front, handing the paper over. "See if you can find anything useful on that." Then he turned to one of the uniforms by the front gate. "Williams! I want you to go around the outside of the house, see if you can find anyone creeping around or watching the place."

"You got it, man."

"Zeke. Man. What's up? Jesus, this place is creepy." Rog came up, nose almost twitching.

"Yeah, very. Those fucking things on the lawn? The guy Gary calls the Penny Man brought them. Left them here." He pulled Roger over to the side. "The man was in the fucking house while we were out here." He handed over the penny. "I went in, Gary was in his office, the door closed, and *that* was on the door knob along with a note on the door that said 'he's working'. A dozen fucking cops all over the front of the house and he was *inside*."

"How? How, man. You've got people all over. Are you *sure* there's some guy?"

"There's no way Gary got that penny to balance on the doorknob himself. And he was with me all weekend, man. Not out of my sight. Someone else left that dog. There's a real guy and he's been stalking Gary for twenty-five years."

"Jesus." Roger shook his head, stared. "Twenty-five years?"

"You remember how Gary's folks were killed? The bodies looked just like those two women we found in the alley. And when he left the mental hospital he claimed he had a friend called the Penny Man. It's the same fucking guy, Rog. He's been stalking Gary for twenty-five years. Anytime Gary does anything to try to get away from the guy he does stuff like that dog. Like the women."

"So... let's take him out of here."

"I'm working on it, man. He's been living with this for twenty-five years -- he doesn't know what's real anymore, and just taking him away is going to mess with what coping strategies he does have."

"No. No, I mean right now. Get him out and into a place the guy can't hide in. Somewhere where our perp has to try for attention."

"It's going to make him crazy, man." Even as he said it, he realized that if he wasn't involved with Gary, if he didn't have personal feelings, he'd have just done it the minute Rog suggested it. Hell, he might have come up with it himself. He rubbed his face and nodded. "All right. Where?"

"Hotel? Maybe the Hilton downtown? Somewhere public, but not enough that we make it easy."

Zeke nodded. "What happens if he goes after a couple more women instead of Gary?"

"What makes you think having the guy with you all weekend wasn't going to do it? We'll have cars here, cars there. We'll catch him."

Jesus, he was off his game on this one. He just couldn't pull himself off the case, though, not

until he was sure everyone believed this guy existed, that he was stalking Gary big time. If he was the only one who was truly on that page, then he had to be on the case. It was as simple as that.

"All right, you set it up. I'll go get him."

"Have him pack and everything. We want this son of a bitch to see."

Zeke nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, we need to get this guy."

He headed back in, wondering just how much Gary was going to resist this. It was a good plan, though. Hell, maybe he'd even be able to keep Gary off the Basic a little longer.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"What? No. No, just go. You have to work." Gary shook his head and headed for the bathroom, his fix, his peace of mind.

No.

No. This was his place.

The Penny Man would get him.

The Penny Man would get Zeke.

No.

No.

"This *is* my work, Gary. We need to expose the Penny Man. Once he's out in the open, we can get him." Zeke caught him on the landing, hugging him to the solid body. "Besides, you and me in a nice hotel. It could be fun."

"I need to. I can't. I. I. I." He stopped, shorting out a little. Too much. This had all been too much.

"Shh. Shh." Zeke's hands slid up his back and over his shoulders. The touch was warm and gentle. Then Zeke cupped his face and tilted it up. "I won't let anything bad happen to you, baby." The words were whispered against his mouth, sliding over his lips.

"It's not me. It's not me."

"I'm not letting anything happen to *me* either. Okay?"

"I wish you were right, love. I wish you could be. He's not from this world..."

"We'll see about that. Come on. We'll get a bag and pack up a couple days worth of clothes, your toothbrush. Maybe a dildo, yeah? We can play a little while Roger and the others watch."

"I don't want them to watch."

"They won't watch *us*, baby. They'll keep watch for the Penny Man."

Gary blinked at him, confused. "Oh! But... you told people? About him?" Oh, God. Oh, God. "He's going to be so mad."

"Let him be mad. It's not right, Gary, the way he makes you do stuff. Now it's our turn. We're going to make him come out from hiding." Zeke wrapped him up in a hug, holding him against that so-solid body. Zeke felt so real.

"More people will die. He wants me to see it." The whispers got louder and louder, every day.

"We're not going to let that happen, Gary." Zeke took his face between the big, warm hands. "Look at me, baby. It's time for this to stop."

"It can't. It's *always* been."

"We're doing this, Gary. I know you're scared of what he'll do, but we need to do this. And we're doing it now. Roger's making the arrangements. All you have to do is pack and come with me." There wasn't a hint of doubt in Zeke's voice, but he didn't know. He didn't know at all.

"What if I say no? I'm not under arrest. I'm not. I don't have to." Did he?

"Please, baby. I'm asking you to do this. It could be fun -- don't make it hard."

"I... Zeke. Zeke, I... I need a hit. I can't think. I don't know what to do. I can't." The edges of his vision grayed out and he reached for his lover.

Zeke was there, holding him close. "You don't need anything but me."

"Help me." He just clung, knowing he was weak and horrible and stupid and scared, but he couldn't do this.

"Okay." Zeke picked him up, carrying him down the stairs and out through the maze of boxes.

He blinked and stared, absolutely stunned as they headed toward the sunlight.

"Do you want to walk to my car, or do you want me to keep carrying you?" Zeke waited at the front door for his answer.

"I'll walk. I need my computer. I need my box. I need my clothes..."

"I'll have someone get them for you." Zeke stood him back up, arm around his waist to steady him.

Gary walked, not looking around, not thinking, moving on autopilot. Scared.

Mad.

Worried.

Watched.

He stopped. "He can see us."

"That's the idea, Gary. Keep walking." Zeke nodded to an officer on the porch. "He needs his laptop and a change of clothes."

"Sure, Zeke. No problem." The woman stared at Gary, reached out to shake his hand. "I'm a huge fan."

Gary shook her hand, nodded. "Thank you." The Penny Man would take her next.

"You're popular among the law enforcement types." Zeke smiled at the woman.

"Yes." He wanted to tell her to be careful, but he couldn't.

"Come on, Gary. Time to get in the car and to the hotel." Zeke led him up the walk toward the front gate.

He stopped at the gate, took a deep breath. "He wants the woman I touched. I know he will. You should know that." Gary could almost feel the Penny Man's fury.

"Okay." Zeke waved a heavy-set man over. "Gary, this is my partner Roger. Rog, this is Gary Short."

"Hello, Roger." He kept his hands at his side.

"You wanna keep an eye on Delaney. Gary thinks the Penny Man is going to go after her."

"Yeah?" Roger looked him up and down, face expressionless. "I'll send her back to the station."

He didn't say a word. He couldn't do anything but apologize.

"Come on." Zeke's arm was around his waist, tugging him out of the gate and across to the car.

"I thought I was going to come home..." He could have stayed with Zeke forever.

"As soon as we have the Penny Man, you can go home. If that's where you want to be."

"I hate that house."

"Then you don't have to stay there, Gary." Zeke settled him in the passenger seat and walked around the car. Once the engine had started, but before they moved off, Zeke turned to look at him. "Maybe you could live with me."

What a dear, wonderful strong... He smiled, patted Zeke's leg. "I couldn't do that to you, but thank you."

Zeke's eyebrows shot up. "What do you mean couldn't do it *to* me?"

"Live with you. I couldn't do that to you." He was... impossible at best.

"Baby, if you don't want to move in with me, that's okay. You can just say so."

"I would." He would, he just couldn't.

He got a long look from Zeke, and then they were moving out onto the road. "Have you ever stayed at the Hilton?" Zeke asked.

"No. Not here. When I traveled, I did. It was lovely, as a rule. There were some that weren't, but most were."

"This one's a nice one." Zeke grinned at him. "We'll have fun. Play a little."

"So this is a vacation?" He hadn't had one of those, not in a long time.

"Yeah, you could think of it that way."

"That wasn't very convincing, Officer."

Zeke shot him a wry smile. "Wait until we get there. I'll convince you then."

"I'm sorry." Sometimes he thought the world would have been better if...

If...

If he hadn't come.

"For what?" Zeke asked, turning the car. They were almost there.

"All of this. For the Penny Man. For disrupting things." For not being dead.

"None of this is your fault, baby. It's all on the Penny Man."

"No. No, it is on me." It had to be. The Penny Man *wanted* him to see.

Zeke shook his head. "He's a psycho, Gary. You're not responsible for the things he does. He wants you to think you are. But you're not."

He looked out the window, watched the city fly by. "It's going to snow soon."

"You think?" Zeke slowed and turned into the hotel parking lot.

"Yeah. It smells like it."

Zeke turned off the engine and sniffed. "It does?"

"Yes. Can't you smell it?" It smelled of... well, snow.

Chuckling, Zeke shook his head. "Nope. I'll just have to take your word for it."

"It's true. Can we just go in?"

"Of course." Zeke got out and came around to help him -- always so gentlemanly, like a throwback -- and slid an arm around his waist, guiding him to the front desk. It was open all the way -- anyone could see them. The Penny Man could see them.

They went in -- the lobby was open and bright, glass and metal and water everywhere. Beautiful. The Penny Man could see.

"I need a room with a queen sized bed, please. For two night to begin with, possibly more." Zeke was speaking louder than usual. "For Zeke Henderson and Gary Short."

He headed toward the wall, away from the light. No one could have followed them so quickly, but still...

Zeke frowned and motioned him to come back. "Gary."

"What?" He came forward, staying toward the wall.

"Stand with me. It won't take long." Zeke's arm lifted. There was a him shaped space by Zeke, he knew it.

"I. Okay." He waited until the concierge stepped away, chuckling. "Will they bring my box?"

"I asked someone to bring your stuff for you." Zeke signed the paperwork.

The concierge returned with a keycard. "Room 1702, on the seventeenth floor. The elevators are on your left."

"I meant the... toy box. Not the bathroom box."

"Oh." Zeke looked pleased. "I'll make a call when we get to our room."

He felt his cheeks heat and he headed toward the bank of elevators.

"They won't know what's in it." Zeke grinned and pressed the up button. "I'll tell Rog it's personal and he'll make enough of a connection on his own that he won't dare open it."

"And you're comfortable with that?"

"He knows I'm gay and he knows I'm with you. He's not going to dwell overmuch on the details - it just isn't his style." The elevator doors slid open and Zeke stepped in, hand warm on his lower back, fingers rubbing ever so slightly. "Are you okay with it?"

"I have a lot of things to be ashamed of. You're not one of them."

"Baby..." Zeke's smile was so warm, and so were those hands as they cupped his face. He could tell Zeke was going to kiss him, right there in the elevator.

Then Zeke's lips landed on his. The world slowed, the kiss stealing his breath. It was soft, Zeke's lips yielding, opening and inviting his tongue in.

"Zeke." He moaned into the kiss. Someone would see.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened, and only then did Zeke break the kiss. Gary found himself blinking, staring. Chuckling, Zeke led him out of the elevator and down the hall. Zeke's hand was warm, solid. There.

"It's like a cave, like my house."

"Yeah, I guess in a way it is." Zeke stopped in front of the right door and slipped the key card in.

The room was bright, clean. Simple. Up high enough no one could watch him. "Oh."

Zeke closed and locked the door, checked out the cupboards and the bathroom. "It's clear."

"It's bright." He headed to the bed, leaning on it.

"It is." Zeke went to the window. "Nice view, too." Zeke's look moved deliberately from the window to him. Then he was given a wink, Zeke pulling out his cell phone.

Gary stretched out, closed his eyes. "I need my computer, my box from the bathroom." He had been without the Basic for too long.

"The toy box and some clothes." Zeke hit a button and put the phone to his ear, wandering back to the window and speaking quietly into the cell.

He didn't bother paying attention, just allowed himself to float and wander.

The bed dipped, Zeke's warmth all along his side, and warm fingers stroked his cheek. "That's it. All checked in. We have nothing to do now but enjoy each other."

"That seems like a dream."

"Does this seem like a dream?" Zeke's fingers slid down his throat and over his chest, all the way to the bottom of his t-shirt. Pushing it up, those fingers made the return journey directly on his skin.

"Like the best dream."

"How about this?" Zeke's mouth slid against his neck, and then Zeke blew against his skin, making a rude noise.

His laughter rang out, feeling so good. Zeke tugged his t-shirt off and proceeded to blow against his skin in random attacks. His wrists were gathered and held together over his head in one of Zeke's hands.

"Zeke." His cock was hard enough to pound nails.

The blowing turned into kisses, working their way down his body. Zeke's free hand reached for his knees and slid slowly up the inside of his thighs, warm even through his jeans.

"You... I..." He swallowed, blinking up. "Zeke."

"Yeah, baby." Zeke's chin rubbed against his prick.

"Why do you want me?"

"Your eyes, baby." Zeke mouthed him through his jeans. "It started with your eyes."

"My eyes?" He arched, rocked up into the heat.

"Yes." Zeke popped his top button and pulled down his zipper.

"I wanted to know you. I needed to."

"Good." Zeke looked up at him, looked into his eyes. "We're good together."

"We are. I'm sorry I'm so odd."

Zeke chuckled, the warm breath ghosting over the skin of his belly. "Maybe that's why we work, baby."

"I don't know, but we can hope." They both stretched, moaned.

Zeke pulled his cock out of his pants, tonguing the tip.

He sat up, eyes wide. "I feel you. I. I don't know if I want to feel good. If I deserve to."

"You've been stalked by the Penny Man for twenty-five years -- it's about time you got some good, Gary. You *deserve* some good."

"But it's my fault..." He didn't know how to make Zeke understand.

"No, baby. It isn't."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm a detective. I've done the research." Zeke kissed him softly. "Besides, if I believed it was all your fault I'd have already arrested you."

"Would you now? If you thought I was a killer? Would you still want me?"

Zeke shook his head. "I don't know. Before I met you I'd have said no."

He stopped, looked. "That's okay. Before I met you, I would have said there was no hope for me."

"Oh, I have a lot of hope for you." Zeke's fingers moved on his cheek and then those lips were on his, the kiss hard.

Gary wrapped around his lover, needing more than anything to believe in that, to trust in it. Zeke's hands moved on his skin, warm and, more importantly, *there*. He was pressed back down onto the mattress, Zeke's weight coming down on him. Oh. He wasn't horny, but he craved the connection -- the touch, the attention. It was addictive.

Zeke kissed him forever, tongue sliding in his mouth. He found himself floating with it, eyes closed, focus captured, caught. He didn't know when Zeke started moving against him, but he slowly realized that Zeke's hips were circling slowly, rubbing them together.

"Do you want my mouth?" He knew Zeke worried about diseases; but he wouldn't give Zeke anything.

"Is that what you want, baby?"

"I like to... Sucking is something I... Damn it. I *write*. Why do you make me tongue-tied?"

"Because I'm such a stud." Zeke winked, the words obviously meant to be teasing.

"I knew there was a reason." He laughed, the sound just pouring out of him.

"You've got a great laugh."

"I just have a laugh. I try to keep it quiet."

Zeke's fingers started to work his ribs. "I want to hear more of it."

"No. No tickling. He'll hear us!" He twisted, the chuckles bubbling out of him.

"He can't hear us up here. He can't see us up here." Zeke nosed the skin of his neck. "You're free of him here."

"Swear it? That he can't get me?" His chin lifted, heart pounding. He could just stay here, forever.

"I swear, Gary." Zeke's eyes were so serious.

"Okay." Then maybe he... Maybe he could just stay.

There was a knock on the door, making him jump.

"It's okay. That'll be someone with our stuff, I bet."

Zeke got up and straightened his clothes. "Who is it?" he asked at the door.

"Roger. Open up."

He got up, shifted off the bed and into a chair. He wasn't sure what to think about Roger, what Roger thought about him.

Zeke let the man in, grabbing the box of doughnuts and three cups of coffee in a cup container that was sitting on top of the toy chest and setting them down on the table. Roger dumped the toy chest and two bags into the closet by the door.

"So that's clothes for a couple of days for the two of you. I got the good doughnuts."

Gary headed over, looking for his Basic. He could feel the itch, right under his skin.

"How're things going?" Zeke asked, handing over one of the coffees to Roger and opening the doughnut box.

"Quiet so far. You two may need to stay put a couple of days."

"Yeah, we'll manage."

Roger snorted. "I think that's my cue to go."

He started shifting clothes around, lips pursed. Where was it?

Zeke chuckled. "Thanks, Roger. Keep us in the loop, yeah?"

"Yeah. You need anything, just let me know."

Roger and Zeke did the man-hug thing, and then Zeke locked the door as soon as it was closed.

"Doughnuts and coffee, baby."

"You forgot my box in the bathroom."

"I thought it would be better if the cops weren't involved in transporting that, so I didn't ask them to bring it."

"Oh. Can I go back and get it?" Of course he could. He wasn't under arrest, damn it.

"We need to stay here, Gary. Don't worry, I'll keep you busy." Zeke gave him a wink.

"I need it, though. It's been almost three days without a full hit, only the one little one."

Zeke took a bite out of a doughnut and offered it over. "Bite?"

"I don't think I'm hungry. Thanks, though." Zeke wasn't listening.

"I know, baby, but I was thinking maybe it would be a good distraction."

"I need to... You don't understand."

Zeke finished the doughnut and put down the coffee before dragging him back over to the bed.

"Then explain it, baby. Explain how you can go a whole weekend with me and not need it and now you do."

"I needed it then! I asked you and you kept promising I could!"

"I kept saying you could later. You still can. Later." Zeke nibbled at his nose. "Didn't it prove you could go without it?"

"It's been three days."

"Let's make it four, baby." Zeke's hands slid around his waist, holding him tightly, fingers digging in as Zeke kissed him.

He couldn't. He ached. He felt. He *couldn't*.

"Let's get naked, baby. We do well naked."

"What?" Zeke made him dizzy.

His shirt was tugged up over his head, Zeke's fingers sliding warmly on his skin. "I want to make love to you."

"Why?" He shuddered.

"Because you turn me on. You make me want to do things to you. Sexy, dirty things."

He blinked, shuddered, shook. "Like what?"

"I want to tie you to a rack and whip you." Zeke nipped at pieces of skin as he spoke. "I want to fill you with a plug and make you spend the day wearing it."

"Zeke." Could they... Would Zeke? He. Oh.

"Yeah, baby. It sounds good, doesn't it?" Zeke's mouth latched onto his shoulder, lips sealing and pulling at his skin. His jeans were opened, pushed off his legs.

"It does. God, it does. I want to so much." He wanted to just break free, be taken from this.

"We've got what we need in that box of yours, baby." Zeke's tongue slid up his neck, teeth nipped at his ear.

"I want to be..." What did he want? The image of Sam, loving him, making him fly, crossed his mind. Then the image of Sam's eyes, empty and dead, blood filling one up, invaded his mind and he stilled. "Oh. I can't. I. Let me up. He'll kill you. Let me up."

"No one's going to kill me. Gary, look at me. You can have this. You can have me."

"He'll kill you. You'll hurt and die and bleed and it'll be my fault again and I can't do it anymore! I can't be the one who *did* it!" He couldn't breathe.

"Gary, you're not listening." Zeke moved to sit on the edge of the bed, pulling him over the solid thighs. The smack of Zeke's hand on his ass was loud.

"I *am*! I am! He'll come for you! I don't want you to hurt!" He bucked up, groaning low, ass stinging.

Zeke's hand came down again. "He's not going to hurt me, baby."

Again and again, Zeke spanked him, making his ass burn. He screamed out his anger, his frustration, his fear.

"That's right, baby. Louder. Louder." Each word was punctuated with a slap.

"I HATE HIM! I WANT HIM TO GO AWAY AND LEAVE ME ALONE!"

"Yes, baby. Good." From his butt cheeks to the top of his thighs, Zeke warmed his ass.

The sound tore from him, hurting his throat, hurting his heart, hurting his belly and leaving him raw and empty.

One more smack landed on his ass, and then Zeke gathered him up into those strong arms, rocking him. "That was good, baby. I'm so proud of you."

He held on, sobbing softly, heart aching. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Shh. No more apologies, baby." Zeke's lips were warm and soft on his face, kissing his skin, licking away his tears.

He found himself clinging to Zeke's strong shoulders, lips open against his lover's skin. Zeke lay back against the bed, bringing him down on that solid chest, hands moving on his skin. Gary rested, trusting in Zeke's hands, in Zeke's need, knowing, for right then, he was safe.

One hand found his ass, digging in and making him burn.

"Mmm." Perfect.

"Yeah," Zeke murmured, squeezing his ass again. "Want you."

"Now?" He was relaxed, easy in his skin for the first time in his memory.

Zeke chuckled. "Now. In an hour. Yesterday. Tomorrow."

"Is it all right with you if I need you for a while?"

"It is. It's all right if you need me for a long time." Zeke's mouth closed over his, hand sliding on his ass.

He opened, tongue sliding against Zeke's, tasting that sweet mouth. Zeke's chest swelled beneath him, one deep breath after another punctuating their kisses. It was so easy to just get lost, moaning and tasting, letting Zeke love him for a moment. Sucking on his tongue, rubbing his ass, Zeke let one of those big fingers slide along his crack.

Spreading, he let Zeke in, let those fingers touch him, open him. Zeke's groan vibrated against

him, finger pushing into him, hips bucking up against him. His cock swelled, filled, the tip bumping against Zeke's belly.

"Mmm..." Zeke began to fuck him with that finger, hand landing against his hot ass.

"I need you." If he kept saying it out loud, maybe he could understand it.

"You have me, baby." Zeke pushed a second finger into him. "You can ride me."

"I can." He shifted, pushed up to his knees.

"We need a condom," murmured Zeke, fingers going deep.

"I trust you." He didn't care.

Zeke groaned. "Baby... "

"I'll get one." He knew what Zeke meant. He was a druggie. He was insane. He wasn't trustworthy and he never would be. Never could be. He got up, moaning as he slipped across the room.

He could feel Zeke's eyes on him, Zeke sliding out of his clothes. "We'll get tested this week. I want to feel you without anything between us, but I won't risk hurting you, baby."

"We both know it's not me that'll get hurt."

Zeke shook his head. "You don't know that. You don't know my history at all. Hell, I get bled on by suspects and crap all the time."

"You're not a user. You're not a bad man." Not like he was.

"Oh, baby. You're not a bad man, either. Now get over here so I can make you forget your own name."

He arched an eyebrow, grinned a bit. "That's not really too difficult with me, Zeke."

Zeke shot him a look and then started to chuckle. They grinned at each other, and then the laughter started. Zeke grabbed him up as soon as he was close, tugging him onto the bed and rolling on top of him, laughing against his skin. It felt so good - almost better than the actual sex.

The sheets were cool against his ass, Zeke's body hot, as were the fingers that slid along his cheek, and down over his chest. His skin was singing with the touches, with the pleasure that Zeke gave him.

"God, so sexy." Zeke's voice growled over him, fingers tweaking at his nipples.

He gasped, jerking and shifting under Zeke's touch. Zeke got the condom on and then pushed two fingers back into him, testing him.

"I can take you. I need you."

Nodding, Zeke pulled his fingers away and lined up, covered prick hot and thick as it pushed into him. He groaned, the pleasure sharp and sudden and right.

"Baby. Shit, yes." Zeke kept pushing in until his hips were pressing hard against Gary's sore ass, the pressure so good.

Gary burned, ached, and it was so easy to open himself up to it. Pushing his legs up, ankles nearly at his ears, Zeke began to move, thrusting into him with hard strokes. They slammed together, hips bucking, skin slapping. Then Zeke slid those big hands beneath his shoulders and tugged him up so he was spread across wide thighs. Grunting, Zeke simultaneously pushed up into him and pulled him down.

"Oh!" Fuck, yes. Deep. Again. "Harder, Zeke. Fuck me harder."

"Yeah, baby." Zeke brought him down hard, cock pushing deep and spreading him wide.

He threw his head back, throat working, body bouncing as his prick bobbed up and down. Zeke's mouth latched onto his throat, teeth biting his skin. He pulled away, that sting rocketing through him. Growling, Zeke pulled him back, slamming him down hard on that cock even as Zeke's teeth found his throat again.

"Fuck." Hot. So fucking hot. He squeezed, bearing down.

One large hand wrapped around his cock, sliding on him as the other kept tight hold of his hips. The bites made him grunt, made him jerk up, eyes rolling. Zeke's moan vibrated along his skin, hot tongue pushing on the mark and making it ache.

"You marked me." He groaned, squeezed again.

"Gonna do it again." The words were a promise, and followed up by another bite, teeth sharp on his skin.

His body jerked away, he couldn't help it. As badly as he wanted it, his body... moved. Zeke hauled him back in, pulling him onto that thick cock and sucking hard on his neck, even as the hand around his cock kept tugging. Sounds poured out of him -- raw and sour and hungry and more than a little desperate. The flame seemed to just rush through him.

"Come for me, baby. Want to feel you."

"Uh-huh..." Another bite and he screamed, balls aching as he shot.

Zeke kept pumping, hips snapping as he was filled over and over by Zeke's hard prick. And then Zeke shouted and he could feel the pulses of the big cock as it filled the condom.

He melted down, panting, moaning against Zeke's skin. And Zeke held onto him, arms strong around his body, and so warm.

"Mmm... that was just what you needed. What I needed, too."

Gary didn't have any words left, none at all, so he just slept. Soft kisses pressed along his neck, Zeke's fingers tracing his spine, up and down along his back. It was all he needed, at least for now.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Zeke settled Gary on the bed and kissed his temple. "Stay there."

He got rid of the condom and found a cloth in the bathroom, cleaning himself up before rinsing it in warm water and going to do the same for Gary. Carefully, he spread Gary's legs and wiped his crack and then around his hole, letting the terry-cloth scrape across the sensitive skin. Gary groaned, the swollen, pink hole clenching, tightening. He teased it a bit more and then bent to flick his tongue across the tight and wrinkled skin.

He could smell the muskiness of Gary's skin, and a faint hint of latex. He pressed one finger there, watching Gary's skin slowly stretch around the tip. "Gonna fill you with a plug."

"I thought I was sleeping." Oh. Little shit. It was going to be a big plug, something Gary would remember.

"You sleep, baby. I remember exactly what I want out of that chest for you and I'm going to just go get it." He bit at the inside of Gary's thigh, hard enough to leave a mark.

Gary jerked and jumped, groaning, thighs spreading a little. Nice. He patted Gary's thigh and headed for the closet where the chest had been left. It felt a little strange, being butt naked in a place that wasn't home, but it felt sexy, too, and he went with that, wriggling his ass a little as he bent over, giving Gary a show.

There were a few plugs in the chest, including one that had to be twelve inches long comprised of what looked like little half inch beads one on top of the other. He wanted to play with that later, but for now he chose a thick plug consisting of five cylinders on top of each other. The top and bottom were only about an inch across, the middle had to be nearly three. Not as big as his fist, Gary would still know the plug was inside him every second it was there.

Groaning at the thought of putting his fist inside Gary, Zeke grabbed the thick plug and closed the chest. He went back to the bed, dragged the plug along Gary's cock and lightly slapped the man's balls with the tip. Gary groaned, thighs spreading, hips bucking up, damn near begging for him.

"Yeah, that's what I like to see." He slid the tip of the plug behind Gary's balls, rubbing it over that sensitive, wrinkled flesh.

"I'm sleeping." There was that wicked, playful sense of humor, that edge of need.

Grinning, he got his fingers all lubed up and slid his thumb up and down over that sweet little hole. "Well, don't let me wake you -- I'm just going to stretch you open and fill you up."

"What if it doesn't fit?"

"Oh, baby, it's going to fit." He pushed his thumb into Gary.

Gary's hips rolled, that sweet body taking him in deeper. So wanton, so needy. That was one of the things that made Gary sexy. He pushed his other thumb in, too, spreading Gary wide. He looked at the tiny ring of muscles, more than a little fascinated. Hot and soft inside, it was amazing the way the tight muscles yielded, let him in.

It would let him all the way in, too. His hand, spreading it wide, buried deep -- that was what he wanted.

"How asleep are you?" he growled, changing his thumbs for three fingers, pushing them deep.

"I'm not." Gary rolled for him, tight little ass pushed right back on his fingers, the flesh still red and hot.

"Good." He wouldn't do this without Gary being *right there* with him.

He lubed up his fingers some more, slid the three back in along with his pinky and he'd be damned if Gary didn't open right up for him and beg wordlessly for it.

"You're going to fill me up."

"I am." He met Gary's eyes.

Gary nodded, head resting on his hands. Smiling, holding Gary's eyes, he folded his thumb against his palm and pushed.

"I..." Gary gasped, shoulders lifting from the mattress.

"Yeah, baby. I've got you." He did. He pushed his hand in farther, moving slowly but surely, not stopping.

"Zeke. Zeke, I can't breathe."

Stilling his hand, Zeke moved to cover his mouth, kissing him hard and then pushing air into his lungs. "Yes, you can. In and then out."

"I can't... Oh, you. You're so deep."

"Yes. Keep breathing." Zeke started moving his hand again, going even deeper.

"It's too full. So big. I can't."

"Yes, you can." Zeke's mouth covered Gary's again, stealing what little breath he had until their lips parted, both of them gasping.

"Love." The word was almost bitten off.

He held Gary's eyes, not looking away. "Yes." Then he started moving his hand again.

Gary's eyes rolled, the man's heartbeat pulsing around his wrist.

"Just keep breathing, baby." His hand moved with each breath Gary took. Or maybe it was the movements of his hand that reminded Gary to take each breath.

"You... you have me."

"I've got you, baby. Right here. Right now. I'm holding you." In the palm of his fucking hand. Unbelievable. Amazing. "And I'm not letting go."

"Swear it?" Gary's head tossed, throat working.

"I swear, baby. You're mine and I'm not letting anyone else have you." The words came out of him on a guttural growl and he barely recognized his own voice. The words themselves, though, they rang truer than anything else in the room.

"I hope you're right."

"I am." He pressed their lips together again, fingers curling into a fist inside Gary, moving inside the tight heat.

Gary's cry pushed into his lips, hot and desperate and more than a little wild. He encouraged the kisses, hand moving, fucking Gary with it. There was nothing here but Gary and him, and he wanted to stay right here forever. The look on Gary's face just made him burn, made him jerk and push deeper.

"Come for me," he told Gary. "I want to feel you come on my hand."

"I don't know if I can. It's so fucking big. You're so big."

"You can." He nuzzled into Gary's neck, lips and tongue pressing against the marks he'd left earlier.

Gary's body rippled, jerking on him, and then heat spread between them. His hand was held in a vise grip as Gary came, and then the heat squeezing him so tight released as Gary relaxed, going limp beneath him.

"Mmm..." He could smell Gary, could smell their sex.

"Uh-huh..." Gary was melted, blinking slow.

That was one of his favorite looks on Gary. Knowing he'd put it there made him feel awesome. Giving Gary a slow, easy kiss, he tugged, slowly pulling out his hand.

"I... I have you."

"Yeah, Gary. You do."

His hand slipped away and he pushed the plug inside so Gary wouldn't feel empty. Then he wrapped himself around the skinny body, holding Gary close.

Gary clung to him, heart pounding. "I have you, too."

He nodded, pressing one soft kiss after another on Gary's lips, cheeks and forehead. "You have me, Gary. Hold on."

"I will. Promise."

He was going to hold Gary to that promise when all hell broke loose.

Which he had a feeling would be any minute now, given that he'd taken Gary right away from the Penny Man.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Someone was waiting for him.

Staring.

Growling.

Gary groaned, twisting, reaching for something to hold onto, for some help.

A big, warm hand patted his hip. "S'okay, baby. I'm here."

"Zeke? Zeke, he's waiting for me."

"No. There's no one here but you and me." Zeke rolled him onto his back, the plug inside him shifting as Zeke's weight pressed him into the bed.

"I could feel him." He pressed closer, the warmth and weight settling him.

"He wasn't here, baby. You were just remembering."

Before he could answer, Zeke's mouth covered his, the kiss hard and sure. His mouth opened, letting Zeke in deep. Zeke grabbed his hands, sliding them up over his head. Something clicked, metal cold against his skin.

"Zeke. Zeke, I. He'll come. He'll come and hurt you."

"No. That's not going to happen. And I'm going to keep saying it until you believe it." Zeke's teeth nipped at his lips.

"I can't. It's the... Oh. Oh, harder. More."

Chuckling, Zeke pulled hard on his lower lip, teeth scraping. "I went through the chest while you were sleeping." Zeke said it like it was a warning, and then all of a sudden the tiny teeth of a clamp bit into his right nipple.

"Oh!" He arched, heels digging into the mattress.

"That's right." Zeke's breath slid across his lips, and then his other nipple was clamped as well.

His toes curled and he tugged at the cuffs. Zeke was warm, his smooth, light touches a contrast to the bite of the nipple clamps.

"Stings. Please. I." What? What did he need?

"Need this." Zeke's fingers grabbed his cock, stroked it, fingers sliding across the tip. A strip of leather wrapped around the base of his cock, Zeke tightening it up.

His legs sprawled, feet sliding on the sheets as the need in the pit of his stomach flared. Each motion moved the plug inside him, but that obviously wasn't enough for Zeke, because those big fingers slid between his legs and jostled it, making it bump against his gland.

"Stop. It's all too much. I'm not ready."

"I'm not stopping." Zeke took his bottom lip between those sharp teeth again, worrying it, biting at it. Buffeted by sensation, by need and fear and an odd pleasure, he wasn't sure he could do this, survive it, *do* it. Zeke's biting, stinging kisses moved along his jaw, all the way back to his ear. "You love it," Zeke whispered.

"I." His earlobe was bitten and his cry rang out.

"Love that sound. Make it again." He thought Zeke was going to bite his earlobe again, but instead, the clamp on his right nipple was flicked.

"Zeke!" He jerked away, the chains rattling.

"Right here." Zeke's strong fingers slid over his skin, one hand wrapping around his hip, gripping him hard enough he knew there would be bruises.

"I don't know what to do." He pushed into the touches, eyes rolling back into his head.

Zeke chuckled. "Baby, you don't have to do anything at all."

"I can't do *nothing*!" He was going to scream.

"You haven't got a choice." One of the nipple clamps released and then bit down on him again.

His eyes rolled back in his head, feet kicking out, heart slamming in his chest. Zeke's tongue slid around the left nipple, soothing and intensifying his flesh at the same time. He began to babble -- mostly nonsense about his need and his pain and how he needed this, needed more.

Zeke let his words flow unchecked, tongue and lips and teeth busy making marks and soothing them, tongue so hot as it slid on his skin. The words slowly dried up, his body relaxing, focusing on Zeke's touch and tongue. So clear. So good. His brain felt suddenly like he could imagine anything.

Anything at all.

"I found the cat," Zeke murmured.

Before he could figure out what that meant, something hit him, a lot of little bites across his thighs: the cat 'o nine tails. The cuffs jerked, tugging against the bedposts as he tried to pull away.

"Those little knots leave the most beautiful marks on your skin." Zeke's voice was low, intimate, sliding across his nerves like a touch.

"I. It stings. Why are you doing this?" His legs moved restlessly, almost like he was trying to escape.

"Because it makes you glow. And because you need it." The cat hit his belly, his nips, narrowly missing his prick.

"How do you know? How do you know that I need?" He curled up, drawing his legs in.

The cat hit his ass. "Because I do."

"Fuck you! That's not an answer!" Oh. Oh, that felt good, to fight back, to *feel*.

"No?" Zeke got the backs of his thighs this time.

"No." Burned. Burned so fucking good.

"You're mine, baby. I know exactly what you need." The tails slid over his ass, danced in the small of his back.

"Fuck." He squeezed the plug, groaning as electricity shot up his spine.

"See?" The tails kept hitting him. It didn't matter how he turned or shifted, any newly exposed skin was caught with the hard little knots.

"Stop it. Stop it and let me breathe." Don't stop. Please.

"You're breathing fine, baby." More hits landed on his back, peppering across his shoulders.

"I am *not*!" He threw his head back, gasping for air, flying.

"Listen to you. You're loud, baby. Who knew you could be so loud?" The cat fell across his chest, one knot catching the right nipple clamp.

"He's not here to listen." The clamp popped off and Gary's back bowed.

"He's not here at all, baby. It's just you and me." The tails landed more softly now, hitting his cock and balls, but without the power of the earlier hits.

"Just us. I haven't. I haven't been without him for so long."

"Feels good, doesn't it? Feels like you're free." The tails drove him crazy, dragging over his genitals, teasing, the occasional flick reminding him of their power.

"I... Please. Please don't. I don't want to remember how to feel."

"It's time." The other nipple clamp was removed, blood pouring back into his nipple.

"No..." He took a deep breath, eyelids clicking as he blinked good and hard.

"Yes." The word was a growl, and Zeke's lips wrapped around his nipple, sucking hard.

His body tried to orgasm, the cock ring stopping it, heat flooding his body and pushing him into desperation.

"Sexy," muttered Zeke, fingers reaching between his legs to play with the base of the plug.

"Zeke. Zeke. Fuck. Fuck." He groaned, spreading wider.

"Mmm... you want that, don't you? Want me to fuck you." Zeke pulled the plug out, slammed it back in again.

His entire body rippled, muscles clenching. "Fuck." The plug pushed into him again, Zeke hitting his gland this time. His eyes flew open, his heart feeling like it was going to stop. "Please."

"Beg me again." Zeke took the tip of his cock in, plug pushing deep once more.

Ice water flooded him and he pulled away, eyes rolling in his head. The Penny Man. The Penny Man. The Penny Man.

"Help me!" He yanked at the cuffs, the metal digging into his wrists. "Run! Run, Zeke!"

"Gary. Baby." Zeke's hands cupped his face, the big body pressing him down into the mattress. "I'm right here and I'm not going anywhere."

"Help me. Help me." He couldn't. He. "Please."

Zeke's fingers pressed against his nipple, the pain sudden and sharp. "Look at me."

His eyes flashed up to Zeke's, the panic coursing through him.

His other nipple was pinched hard, taking his breath. "Just you and me, Gary. You and me."

"He says that. He says that to me and I beg and beg and it doesn't matter! It doesn't matter, Zeke!"

"Okay, baby. Okay." Zeke's mouth closed over his, stopping the flow of words.

He cried and shuddered, the emotions driving him mad. Through it, Zeke was there, solid. Sure. Kissing him. While they kissed, the plug pulled away, Zeke's cock -- Zeke's bare cock -- pushing into him, hot and solid.

Gary moaned, moving, allowing Zeke in deep, allowing Zeke to help him. The kisses stole his breath and fed it back to him, Zeke's cock bumping into his gland. He cried out, hips rocking, Zeke in that spot again and again.

"That's it, baby, just like that." Zeke growled, fingers finding the marks left by the cat, pressing against them.

"Yes. Yes, so good. Don't stop."

Zeke's hot, thick cock pushed into him over and over, hands moving on him, sending him flying.

Finally he could open his eyes again, breathe, believe. "I need to come. Please. I need it."

"Not yet." Zeke kept moving, thrusting and touching, giving it to him.

"Why?" Head tossing, he watched, eyes open.

"Because I'm not ready for it to be over."

His chuckle surprised him, escaping him, making them both smile. "You're driving me crazy."

"A good crazy, yeah?" Zeke's hips kept punching into him.

"Yes. Yes. A good... Oh. Oh, Zeke. I want you. I want you over and over."

"Yes. And over and over." Zeke groaned, hand sliding between them.

"Yes..." Oh, please. Please, let me come.

The leather was unsnapped, the pressure building enormously in his balls. "Okay, baby"

"Zeke!" His entire body stopped a moment, the world screeching to a halt before he shot, entire body spending.

His ass squeezed Zeke's cock. With a shout, Zeke came as well, filling him in long pulses. He whimpered, nodding as he slumped onto the bed. Still buried inside him, Zeke was hot and heavy and good.

Gary opened his mouth to apologize, to thank Zeke, to do something, but all his words had left him. Zeke didn't seem to mind, hands reaching up to release him from the cuffs. That hurt and he groaned, shoulders screaming, wrists raw. Zeke kissed him for a moment and then slipped out of him. He was turned, Zeke straddling his ass and rubbing his aching shoulders.

He blinked, surprised, muscles loving the touches. "Oh..."

A kiss dropped onto the back of his neck, those touches continuing, easing his muscles.

"Thank you."

"Anytime, baby. Anytime."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Zeke was curled up around Gary, holding the relaxed, sleeping form. His body felt stretched, used. It was amazing. His cell went off and he nearly ignored it. Groaning when reaching proved futile, he rolled carefully away from Gary and got out of bed.

A glance at the display had him immediately fully awake, body tight with awareness. "Hey, Rog. What's up?"

"Hey, buddy. That Laura chick? She's here, at the station, demanding that we give Gary's location up."

Laura. Laura. Oh, right. Gary's agent/manager/whatever. The high-powered wonder woman.

He didn't figure she was the Penny Man, or that she was in league with him, but telling anyone where Gary was simply wasn't going to work. "Put her on, I'll deal with her."

"Yeah, yeah. She'll still eat *my* balls after you tell her no." Roger chuckled, and then the phone was handed over.

"Officer Henderson? I insist you tell me where my writer is."

He headed toward the big windows looking out over the city, speaking softly so he wouldn't disturb Gary. "He's safe, ma'am, but I can't tell you anything beyond that without jeopardizing that safety."

"Look. This is ridiculous. He needs medical attention. He needs his shrink. He needs to *work*."

Oh, Gary saw a shrink, did he? Well Gary's shrink obviously needed to be slapped with malpractice -- Zeke didn't see that the man was doing Gary *any* good whatsoever. "He has his laptop with him, ma'am, so working won't be a problem."

"Come on. He's not a suspect. He's not a child. There's no reason for him to be in custody. He can come home with me." Oh, yeah. That would be charming.

"He's in protective custody, lady. And he's just fine. I'm not quite sure what your problem is." She'd let Gary live in that lunatic house with its warren of boxes sent by a psychotic serial killer stalker, just how much did she really care about him?

"My problem is that he has a five million dollar book deal and a fucking deadline."

Zeke blinked. Five million dollars? Jesus. "I'm sure he's aware of his deadline, and as I already said, he's got his laptop with him."

Gary moaned, started shifting, sliding on the sheets.

"I need to speak to him."

"He's taking a nap. I can let him know you called once he's awake." He went over to the bed and stroked Gary's thigh and back, trying to soothe the man.

He clicked the phone shut, Gary's lost little sounds fading. Five million dollars. Jesus. No wonder the Penny Man kept Gary on a tight leash. He should have been able to go anywhere, do anything he wanted to; instead he was a prisoner in a crazy house, in a crazier situation.

It was well past time Gary got to have a life. A real life.

He kept stroking Gary's back, the smooth, marked skin calling to him.

"Mmm. Zeke." Gary wasn't awake, but it didn't matter. Gary *knew* him. If he'd had any doubts, that swept them away.

He climbed back up onto the bed, curling up around Gary and sliding his hands over the warm skin. Gary's hips, the slender belly, the swollen and abused nipples: Zeke touched it all. He wasn't even trying to arouse Gary, he just wanted to touch. Craved it deep inside. Gary never tensed, body open and responsive, skin warming under his touch.

Always sexy, Gary looked even more so with Zeke's marks all over that skin. He'd worked Gary over good with the cat and there were little bruises everywhere. It made him hard and he snuggled up against Gary's ass, his cock fitting along the hot crack.

His fingers tangled in the soft, brown curls crowning Gary's cock, the tug making Gary ripple. Those bruised nipples were tight, even the air brushing across them making Gary moan. He couldn't believe someone as obviously sensual as Gary had been buried in the blank world that was Basic. He was going to do his best to make sure Gary didn't go back to it.

They moved together, Gary's ass slid against his cock, rubbing nice and slow. A low, hungry moan was pulled out of him, and he buried his face in Gary's neck, breathing in the scent of sex, of come, of Gary himself. It did nothing to dispel his arousal and he breathed in deeply again.

"Mmm." Gary stretched, hands sliding down his arms.

Smiling against Gary's skin, he began to lick it, tasting salt and sweat and Gary.

"Zeke. Feels good. Feels like magic."

"It's real, though." More real than anything.

He continued to lick and to nibble, Gary's skin hotter where the marks were, cooler where the skin was still unmarred. The scents rising from Gary's skin, the warmth it gave off, they both conspired to make his head spin, to make him want more. So much more.

Rocking his hips, he slid along Gary's crack. He'd already fucked Gary without a condom once, and now he wanted to do it again, to feel the tight, silky body gripping him, wanting him. If there was a problem, well, they'd face it together. He wasn't going back now.

"Need." Gary spread, back arching to take him in. That little hole was hot, swollen, well-fucked.

His.

"Me, too." He pressed in, Gary's body opening for him, swallowing him up. Groaning, he sank all the way in.

Gary's lips crashed against him, the kiss wild, needy. His tongue fought with Gary's, fucked Gary's mouth as he held still inside Gary's clinging body. He couldn't hold still very long, though, and soon his hips pushed, sliding his prick in and out of the silky heat. Compared to the earlier insanity, this was easy, pure. Simple.

They'd both come enough in the last few days that he thought maybe they could do this forever, and he closed his eyes and enjoyed every moment of it, reveling in Gary's kisses, the tight grip of his body. Gary brought his hand up, that hot little mouth working his fingers.

He could feel that all the way to his toes and he groaned. "Baby. Oh." He thrust harder, their bodies slapping together.

"Mmm." Each of his fingers got attention, Gary licking and lapping him.

It was such a small thing, but so sexy, adding to the sensations racing through him. Then the center of his palm was kissed, Gary moaning deep and low. He shuddered, the simple kiss rocking him.

"Gary!" He moved faster, slamming into Gary, so close.

"Yes. Yes, right here. I feel you."

"Feel me. Good." He groaned, losing himself in the back and forth, the feeling of Gary's flesh dragging along his.

Gary clenched around him, body rippling, driving him mad, driving him over the edge. A wild noise ripped from him as he came, come pushing deep into Gary's body.

"Please." Gary groaned, dragging his hand down to that long, hard prick.

"Mmm..." He grabbed Gary's prick in the circle of his hand and stroked, tugging hard on the hot cock.

"Yes." Gary's body rippled around him, worked his sensitive cock. Jerking, he tugged harder, squeezing that hot prick tight. "Need. Need, love."

"Then come for me, baby." He jerked his hips, cock pushing against Gary's gland.

"Oh." Heat sprayed, Gary's body holding him like a fist.

He leaned his forehead against the back of Gary's head, panting, slowly coming down.

"Thank you. Thank you. So good."

"I think that's my line," he murmured, lips sliding over the skin of Gary's shoulder.

"Mmm. I. Your mouth..."

"Yeah. Your skin..." He smiled against it, fingers roaming over said skin.

"I should work. I should... It's been so long since a had a hit."

"Is that a bad thing?" Gary'd never have another hit if he had anything to do with it.

"I don't know." Gary stretched, shifted. "I don't know, Zeke."

His prick slipped out of Gary's body and he couldn't help groaning. "Your agent called," he murmured, petting Gary's hip.

"Did you tell her where I was?"

"Nope. She doesn't need to know."

Gary went boneless, breathing easier. "Thank you."

"She seems pretty pushy..." He kept petting, fingers finding the marks and bruises on Gary's skin and stroking over them.

"You have no idea."

It made him growl a little. "If she doesn't treat you right..."

"She makes me money." Gary shivered, gasped a little.

"Um... baby, doesn't that work the other way around? I mean you're the one who writes the books."

"There are a million writers. She gets the deals."

"Yeah, but you aren't just some writer, you're Cole Manning. She's riding your coattails at this point, and if she's making you unhappy doing it, you should remind her that you could find someone else." He grouched and grumbled -- Gary had enough to deal with, he didn't need the people in his life who were supposed to be helping out making things more difficult.

"I should get you to do that. Then when she's digesting your balls, I'll pounce her."

He started to laugh, startled. He loved the humor that shone through here and there. Gary's laugh joined his, warm and soft. Deep. He rolled onto his back, bringing Gary with him, hands sliding on Gary's back. Gary moaned, eyes closing, rubbing and sliding against him.

"Christ, you're amazing, Gary." His hand found Gary's ass, rubbing and squeezing.

"Me?"

He could see himself in Gary's eyes. "Yes, you. You make me laugh. You make me hard. Make me want."

Long fingers brushed his lips. "I'm glad."

"I like that -- that I make you glad." He caught one of the fingers in his mouth, nibbling on it.

"Yeah?" Gary's fingers slid into his lips.

"Mmmhmm." He sucked on them, tongue sliding against Gary's fingertips. Gary wasn't very heavy, but what weight there was felt good on top of him, right.

"I should work. Shower."

"If you wanna do that in the opposite order I'll get wet with you." A little soap, wet skin, hot water...

"Oh, we haven't done that."

"My thoughts exactly." And there was his prick, perking up, saying hello to Gary. Christ, the more he had the man, the more he wanted.

Gary chuckled, fingers trailing down his shaft, stroking him. His phone started to ring, surprising him.

"Damn." He kissed Gary and reached over to the side table, grabbing his phone and flipping it open. "Henderson."

"He's mine."

He froze and then rolled Gary off him, sitting up and scoping out the room. "How did you get this number?"

"He is mine. If you leave him now, I will allow you to live."

"Zeke?" Gary stared at him and then slid off the bed, heading toward the shadows.

"He's mine, asshole. You can't have him anymore." He hung up his phone and headed for Gary. "Hey. Come on. Let's get that shower."

"No. No. That was him. He's coming, isn't he?"

"No. He's not coming. Roger has the place covered and the door is locked. You are safe here with me." Damn it all to hell, how had that fucker gotten his phone number? And why the fuck hadn't he had the presence of mind to pretend it was someone else?

"What did he want?" Gary looked surprising unpanicked, infinitely calm.

"He wanted to scare me. I don't scare so easy, baby. And I'm not going to give you up. Not for anything." He pulled Gary close, bringing their bodies closer together.

"He'll be here soon."

"He doesn't know where we are, baby." The son of a bitch had better not know. Although, wasn't that kind of the point? Weren't they hoping to draw the bastard out? Didn't they... He sighed, rubbed his hand over his short-short hair. "And even if he did, he's not going to get past all the cops, the locked door *and* me."

The Penny Man had better hope he didn't make it to Zeke, because Zeke wanted the man dead. Not arrested, not in jail, but dead. It was the only way he knew for sure Gary would be free of the asshole.

"He will. You don't understand. He's not human. He's a monster, like you read about in books."

"He's a monster, all right, but he's also human, Gary. He's evil. He's been stalking you. He's a terrible, terrible man. But he is human." Gary had to understand; the Penny Man had to be stopped.

"He's not. You have to listen to me. He's magic. I know you don't understand, but he.... he's painted, he can hide anywhere."

Zeke thought about that one, figuring there was something in it. "Painted? Like camouflage?"

"Yes. Yes. He can hide anywhere."

"Well, we're going to get him, baby. I promise you."

He didn't know what he could say to convince Gary. He had a feeling it was just going to be something he was going to have to prove.

"I want. Zeke, I'd do anything -- anything -- to know he won't hurt you."

He cupped Gary's cheeks and tilted that face up, kissing Gary until he had to pull away for a breath. "He's not going to hurt me."

"I want to believe you."

"Good. That'll do for now. And you'll see, baby. You'll see." He took another kiss before nodding toward the bathroom. "Now unless I'm mistaken, we're supposed to be taking a shower together."

"Do you think it's safe?"

"I do. The door to the room is locked. And we'll lock the bathroom door, too." He refused to let the Penny Man dictate what he did.

"You remind me of Sam. He fought the Penny Man all the time." Gary followed, fingers twining with his.

"Good for Sam. I think I might have liked him." Except for the whole part where he wouldn't have wanted Sam dating *his* Gary.

"I think you would have, too, except he wasn't into sharing." Gary's eyes twinkled.

He growled a little, for show. "Neither am I, baby."

"No? Are you sure?" This slow-growing confidence -- whether it was from the lack of Basic or from being away from that horrible house -- was fascinating. Addictive.

"Absolutely." He tugged Gary close. "You're mine. *Mine*. No one else can have you."

"Mmm." Gary leaned into him. "You'll have to fight a lot of industry people, fans. Psychopathic monsters."

"I know. I think I'm up to the task, baby. I mean I've spoken to Linda, so it's not like I don't know what I'm up against."

Gary's laugh rang out, echoing in the little bathroom, bouncing off the tiles. He locked the door, letting the sound fill him.

"How do you like your shower?" It was going to put a damper on things if they liked drastically different water temperatures.

"Hot. Wonderfully, steamingly hot."

"I can live with that." He turned the shower on and adjusted the taps until was all but too hot. Stepping in, he reached for Gary, tugging him along as well.

Gary stretched up, wriggling under the water. The beads caught in the tiny hairs along his lover's chest, the flat belly. Caught by the sight, he bent and licked at the drops next to Gary's right nipple, tasting the salt of Gary's chest.

"Tender."

Yes. Yes, he knew. He also knew that bit of flesh drew up tight, begging for him. His tongue flicked across Gary's nipple and then he blew, knowing it would be a strong contrast to the hot water that poured down over Gary's skin.

"T...tease." Gary's hand slid down his belly, fingers wrapping around his cock, thumb rubbing the shaft.

Groaning, he pushed into Gary's touch. "Who me?" he managed to mutter.

"Yes. I want to go somewhere with you. Somewhere far away where no one is watching."

"Mmm... like a holiday? Somewhere hot with water?"

"Yes. I have money. I do. I could pay."

With five million for his latest book, Zeke would bet Gary could buy an island somewhere. Still, he could pay his own way. "Sounds like a plan, baby"

"Promise me."

"I do, baby. We'll go. We'll have a fantastic time in the sun."

"I would love that." Gary's hand kept moving, stroking hard and fast.

"Yeah." His voice broke, his hips pushing into Gary's hand. "Jesus, baby. That feels good."

"It does. It feels good, touching you." Gary slid down, lips parted, heading for the tip of his cock.

Groaning, he leaned back against the tile. He spread his legs a little farther, anticipation making him shiver.

"Need you." Those eyes closed, water splashing on Gary's face, lips wrapping around his cock.

"You have me." He reached out, stroking his fingers over Gary's face, his cock throbbing between those lips.

That mouth was pure magic, sliding up and down his shaft, sucking hard and sure.

He was soon thrusting, pushing into Gary's mouth. "So good, baby. Sexy. Hot. Yeah."

Gary's mouth was hotter than the water, hotter than anything. The look on Gary's face was pure bliss, and it added to his own pleasure.

"Soon," he growled, warning Gary as his balls pulled up against his skin.

Gary's fingers rubbed his nuts, pushing, demanding.

"Gary!" His shout echoed off the tiles, his hips snapping as he came.

That mouth held him, drank him down. His fingers traced Gary's cheeks, sweet aftershocks going through him as Gary's lips cleaned him. Gary licked his prick, his balls, nuzzling him.

"Oh, baby." He slumped against the shower wall.

"Mmmhmm." Gary's forehead rested on his hip.

"Yeah." He stroked his fingers through Gary's wet hair. "What do you need, baby?"

"You. I just. I just need you."

"You've got me, baby." He tugged on Gary's arm. "Come here."

Gary slid right back up his body, leaning in, moaning low.

He sucked on Gary's lower lip before pushing in for a kiss, tongue sweeping in. He could taste himself there and it made him groan. The urgency was gone, Gary relaxed and quiet against him. Happy. The kisses continued, almost lazy, and he slid one hand to Gary's ass, fingers poking into the hot little hole.

One leg climbed up his thigh, Gary allowing him in. With his free hand, he grabbed Gary's thigh

and tugged it higher, hooking it over his hip. "Hot, baby." He slipped a second finger in, stretching Gary out.

"It feels good. I like when you touch me."

"I like touching you. It's like your skin was made for my fingers." He pushed another finger in.

"I want it to. I want to be yours."

"You *are* mine." He grabbed Gary's other leg and tugged it up, taking Gary's weight.

"Don't drop me." Gary grabbed his shoulders, held tight.

"I won't, baby. Never." His grip slid to Gary's ass, spreading those cheeks wide as he lined it up with his cock.

"How... how can you want me, again?"

"I don't know. They'll probably find us tomorrow, little shriveled husks." He gave Gary a wink.

Gary gave him a weird look, then the laughter started, low and happy. "I should use that in my next book."

"God, I love your laugh." His words ended on a groan as he pushed into Gary's heat. Gary took him in, open and easy, moving on his cock. "Mmm..." He pressed a kiss to Gary's mouth, hands still holding the sweet ass, helping Gary move up and down.

The heat around him made him gasp, made him groan. It was long and slow, their bodies coming together like they were meant to be.

"So good." Gary's groan pushed into his lips.

"Yeah, baby." It was one of those moments he didn't want to ever end, but that invariably did.

He didn't know what prompted the shift, but all of a sudden the urgency was back, the need right there on the surface again.

Gary groaned, head tossing. "Your arms are going to get tired."

"Could hold you forever." He wasn't going to last that long, though.

"You've got a deal."

"Gary..." Groaning, he humped up harder, his hips punching as his orgasm spread out through him.

Gary's orgasm was sweet, quiet, those swollen lips parting for him. The kiss was just as sweet, deep and slow.

"Love." The word pressed into his lips, parting them.

"Yes. Yes, baby." He held on, the water splashing down over them.

"Mmmhmm." Gary hummed, relaxed. Holding him.

Even after the phone call.

He would call that progress. And he'd take it.

Now all they needed was for the Penny Man to overplay his hand so they could take him down.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Bent over his laptop, earphones in place, Gary buried himself in a crowd of flesh-eating zombies that were taking over the world's biggest mall.

God, this was fun.

So far he'd destroyed a Hot Topic, a JC Penney's and two bookstores, and the heroes had just broken into Sears to get to the sporting goods and lawn care sections.

Death via weed whacker, baybee.

Zeke was sprawled on the bed, watching TV, trying to 'leave him alone to work.' Of course, every now and again, the man would move, shift, catch his attention. More than the movements, it was Zeke's laughter that interrupted him, the low chuckle sending shivers along his spine.

"What's funny, love?" He saved, after he had big-boobed blonde number four get nibbled on in between women's shoes and home furnishings.

"Huh? Oh, there's a M.A.S.H. marathon."

"M.A.S.H., as in Alan Alda?" He stretched up, back popping.

"Yeah, that's the one. It always makes me laugh. 'Course it's big on the sad sometimes, too." Zeke's eyes slid over him as he stretched; he could see the admiration in them.

"It was well-done. I liked the X-Files a lot."

"Yeah, they were good. Except I could never figure out what was going on with the aliens with the ice picks." Zeke shifted, hand landing casually in his lap to cover his growing erection.

"Ah, you never know with aliens." He smiled, licked his lips. "Soldiers turn you on?"

Zeke chuckled and shook his head, looking a bit sheepish. He nodded toward Gary's midsection. "Your shirt rode up when you stretched."

"Oh..." Heat flooded him, his hand sliding down, the move instinctive.

Zeke's eyes followed the motion of his hand. "You going to keep working?"

"I got three chapters done. That's a good amount..." He shivered a little, showing off.

"Three chapters? Man, you work *fast*." Zeke licked his lips. "So you can take a break, huh?"

"Uh-huh." He had the best job on Earth.

"I'm all for that." Zeke's hand patted the bed beside him and the TV got turned off.

Gary put the MacBook on the table, crawling up on the bed.

"Mmm..." Zeke's fingers immediately went for his belly, pushing beneath his t-shirt to stroke his skin.

"You have warm hands." He liked the heat of it, the pressure.

"All the better to touch you with."

"Mmm. Are you the big bad wolf?"

"I think I'm the woodsman coming to save you from the big bad wolf." Zeke waggled his eyebrows. "Wanna see my axe?"

He laughed, leaning down to steal a kiss, fingers cupping the heavy bulge.

Zeke groaned, hips pushing into his touch as one of Zeke's hands came up to hold his head in place, the kiss deepening. They pressed together, the sounds of their wanting making him hot, making him groan. Zeke's leg slid over both of his, pulling him closer, rubbing them easily together.

His stomach growled, loud enough for them both to hear, and he chuckled into their kiss. "Sorry."

"You're hungry -- that's good. We should order something from room service."

"I'm starving. That's a nice thing about the Basic. You don't get hungry."

"I like food too much for that to be a nice thing." Zeke reached over for the room service menu.

"Now that you are hungry -- what do you want?"

"What're my options?" He leaned and looked. "Oh. Club sandwich."

"Yeah, anything with bacon is good. They've got steak, too. Burgers. Oh, I want a banana crepe for dessert." One of Zeke's hands slid across his back.

"Mmm. I like chocolate." He rested his cheek on Zeke's chest.

"Seven layer chocolate cake for you, then." Zeke shook his head. "Seven layers. Jesus, maybe we should skip everything but dessert."

"Mmm. We could get appetizers and dessert." Cheese fries and fried mushrooms and cake.

"Oh, that would be fun. Kind of naughty, too. Pass me the phone, baby."

He reached, sliding against Zeke the whole way.

"Tease," Zeke accused softly.

"Uh-uh." He was not. Really.

Zeke grabbed his ass, squeezed. Then that hand dragged up over his body, around his shoulders and down his arm to take the phone from his fingers. He closed his eyes, enjoying the way Zeke's arms felt around him.

Dialing one-handed, Zeke ordered for them, getting them one of everything on the appetizer list and the two desserts. He could hear the laughter just there, beneath the surface as his lover ordered. His fingers found Zeke's ribs, tickling and teasing, making that laughter grow.

Zeke held it in until he had the phone hung up and then he rolled back, trying to escape Gary's fingers as his low laughter filled the room. Gary pounced, searching for more ticklish spots, more laughter. The best spot, he discovered, was Zeke's knees, and Zeke was too busy defending himself to tickle back. He bent down, nuzzling the backs of Zeke's knees with his chin.

The laughter got louder, Zeke jerking, shifting. "Oh, God! Stop! Gary!"

He eased up, licking a little now, nuzzling.

Zeke sighed and chuckled now and then, panting a little. "You've discovered my weakness."

"Mmmhmm. My ticklish lover." He liked it.

"Don't tell anyone -- it'll ruin my big bad cop image."

"You have a deal." He scooted up, stretched along Zeke's body and snuggled in.

Zeke's arms wrapped around him. "Mmm... look how well you fit, baby."

"I know. It's where I'm supposed to be."

Zeke stilled, a wide smile slowly growing. "Yes. Exactly." One of Zeke's hands slid beneath his shirt, rubbing up and down along his spine.

"Mmm." His eyelids started to droop, less sleepy than relaxed.

Bending, Zeke began to lick at his neck, murmuring and moaning, making happy sounds.

"Warm." He just melted, bone-deep.

Rolling onto his back, Zeke cradled Gary between his legs and against his chest. The strong hands continued to move on him, keeping him pliant and warm. He rested on his human-mattress, eyes closed, basking in it. Every now and then Zeke's fingers would find a bruise and press against it, making him ache. He found himself pushing back, bucking up into the touches.

"Food's going to be here soon." Still, Zeke's prick was growing hard beneath him.

"Yeah. I know. They're supposed to always be late, right?" They were in his books.

"Does that mean I get to tie you up and have my wicked way with you?" Zeke rolled them suddenly, putting him beneath the solid body.

He gasped, eyes wide. "So fast."

"Too fast?" Zeke asked, rubbing the tips of their noses together, breath warm against his skin.

"No. No." He loved it, the power.

"Good." Zeke's mouth covered his, and the big hands slid along his arms. Zeke twined their fingers together, stretching his arms out to the side.

It put more of Zeke's weight on him. He moaned into their kiss, fighting for breath just a bit. Zeke's teeth scraped along the inside of his lower lip, stopping now and then to leave sharp, little bites.

"Zeke." He rubbed, eyes rolling a bit. Fuck, he loved the man.

"Mmmhmm..." Zeke rolled his hips a little, grinding the thick erection against Gary.

The pressure made him catch his breath, made his head swim a little.

"Sexy," muttered Zeke, taking one kiss after another, leaving him breathless.

"No one's thought so in so long."

"I do. And I don't think it, I know it." Zeke bent to lick at his neck, lips closing around his skin and sucking. His chin lifted, gasps coming fast and hard. "So responsive. *That* is sexy." Zeke bit at the skin just beneath his chin.

"Yours. All yours. Do it again."

"Okay, baby." Zeke bit again, teeth sharp and bright on his skin.

"Fuck." The word tore from him, surprising him.

"After we eat," murmured Zeke, continuing to bite and nibble and suck, working beneath his throat and along his neck.

His hands were still held out to the sides, his fingers wrapped in Zeke's. "Gonna look like a leper..." Not that he was complaining, he was just saying.

"I could stop." Despite the words, Zeke made no effort to do so.

"No. No, please."

Zeke chuckled, tongue sliding across his Adam's apple before the skin in the hollow in his throat was worried between Zeke's teeth. His nipples ached, throbbing for Zeke's touch. Zeke wasn't getting there anytime soon, though. Each lick, each nibble and bite was so slow, as if they had all the time in the world to fill.

He sank into it, into Zeke's odd, slow rhythm, into that heat all around him. Every now and then Zeke would moan around his skin, making it vibrate. But more than that, he could feel those moans in his own chest, where Zeke lay on top of him.

"Zeke. Zeke. I... I need you, need this."

"I'll give you what you need, baby. I'll make you fly, yeah? Take care of you." The words were spoken in between peppered kisses, Zeke's lips moving closer to his right nipple.

"Yeah. Yeah, Zeke." He started shaking -- his nipples burned, ached.

Zeke blew across his abused flesh and then licked at the tip of one hard nub.

"Mmm..." Don't bite. Don't bite.

Zeke's teeth snapped closed just above his nipple, breath sliding over the sensitive flesh. Then those lips wrapped around his flesh, tugging hard.

"Fuck. Fuck. I. *Please!*" Don't stop. Don't stop. I need this.

Zeke's tongue flicked back and forth across the tip of his nipple, the suction increasing.

"Mmm." His toes curled, hips bucking up, every nerve firing.

"God, I want you." Zeke's teeth nipped, the pain sharp and sudden.

"Yours. Hurts. That hurts."

"You like that it does." Zeke kissed his way slowly to the other nipple.

"Yes. Yes. I like it. Is that wrong?"

"No. And I like doing it. I like making you gasp and cry out, baby. Love making you scream."

"It stings. I want it. So much." As soon as the flush of pain faded, he craved it.

"I know." Zeke bit his other nipple, teeth lingering this time, making it last.

He groaned, soft cries becoming needy sobs. The knock at the door sounded like a shot, making Zeke jerk and roll over and up out of the bed. He sat up, tugging his shirt on, his nipples screaming as the cotton scraped over his nipples. "I'll get it." He bounced toward the door, opening the lock and pulling the door open. "Come on in."

A tall man nodded, pushed the cart in. The plates rattled and shook, the smells so good.

Gary smiled over at Zeke. "Looks like there's plenty, huh?"

Zeke took the receipt, signed it, and he reached for the first covered tray, fingers tipping over a...

A penny.

A penny.

"Oh."

One hand wrapped around his arm. "Beg me. Beg me to stop."

"Please. Please." He was jerked back, the hot food going over with a crash and a weird bang, smoke filling the air. Then the Penny Man moved with him, slipping out the open door and down a stairwell.

"Beg me. Beg me to stop."

Something sharp pressed into his neck, a dull heat filling him, leaving him limp and heavy, the shadows crowding around him. "Please."

Please.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

By the time the smoke cleared and he could see again, Gary was gone. The sprinklers had gone off and everything was wet, the alarms going like crazy. Zeke roared, going to the stairwell at a run, but there was no one there. Fuck. Jesus fucking Christ.

"Beg me. Beg me to stop." The words repeated over and over in his head until he threw up. Then he went for his phone, calling Rog.

"S up, man? You doing okay?"

"Have you got him? Our guys at the hotel -- have you got them?" Where the fuck was hotel security? That alarm had to have been going for over five minutes and how the hell had the Penny Man gotten Gary out so fast?

"Got who? What the *hell*?"

"Fuck! The Penny Man. The killer. He was here. He's got Gary. Are you fucking telling me you didn't pick him up leaving the house or getting to the hotel? Leaving it?"

"What the *hell*? No one's left. I got a guy in the fucking lobby, three cars in the parking lot."

"Then they're still here. Get some people over here. Forensics, too. I gotta go."

The hotel security guard came off the elevator and Zeke flashed his badge. "No one comes in or out of this room and nobody touches anything -- not even you, got it?" The guy blinked and Zeke shook him by the shoulders. "Got it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, okay man. Nobody comes in, nobody touches anything."

Zeke headed down the stairs, cursing. *Hold on, Gary. I'm coming for you.* He hit the stairs running, eyes searching for something. Anything. A single fucking *clue*.

He saw the syringe on the second landing.

Christ.

He called Rog back, barely waiting for the man's "What?"

"He's drugged Gary. So you're looking for one man carrying another. He was tall. Maybe 6'4" maybe even 6'5". How the hell does a freaking giant of a man carrying another man around not get noticed?"

"Jesus. He hasn't left the building, man. I swear. Not unless he's a fucking miracle worker."

"I want everything covered, Rog. *Everything*. You look at every car coming out of the parking lot. Oh, Jesus, he could have Gary in a suitcase. Everyone, Rog. No one leaves the building."

He hung back up and kept moving down the stairs, telling himself the Penny Man wouldn't hurt Gary. Not physically. It wasn't what he wanted. The fucking staircase was dark, not much used and there was a fucking door on every landing. The son of a bitch could be anywhere.

He checked each door, scanning the halls. The damn siren didn't help anything, people were out of their rooms, milling about, waiting for the elevator.

Christ.

He stopped at the third floor, the landing having a window. He stared out, looking for movement, life. Something. *Baby, where are you?* All the times Gary told him the Penny Man was magic came back to him. He couldn't be seen. He was painted. Camouflage. The Penny Man hid himself in plain sight.

The bastard had delivered their food. Not even Gary'd known until it was too late.

Zeke called Roger back. "Tell me someone's on the employee entrance."

"Yeah. Yeah. I... Somebody check on Grainger. Now. Move. I'm checking it out."

Zeke pocketed the cell phone, taking the stairs two at a time. He hit the employee door, nearly tripping over Grainger's body on the ground. Fuck. Oh, Fuck. The son of a bitch had taken the time to put pennies on Jake's eyes.

Roger came around the corner, eyes wild. "Oh, no. Oh, *fuck* no."

"He fucking got past us. God damn it, Roger, I promised Gary I'd keep him fucking safe and I let that monster walk out with him."

"Okay. Okay. Back to the house? Is that where they'd go? I have forensics upstairs. They're taking prints."

"I want this guy, Roger. I want him in the fucking ground."

"I know. What do you want to do, man?"

"Help me get the bastard, Rog. Where's your car?"

The keys were handed over. "As soon as I hear anything from forensics, I'll call."

He could hear the wail of the ambulance. "You've got people at the house, right?"

"I do. I've warned them, sent back up. You think he'll stay on foot?"

"I have no fucking idea." He shook his head. "He's got to carry Gary. I think he's in a car."

"Okay. Go. Go, look for him."

"Stay in touch." He made sure he had his cell phone in his pocket and hoofed it around the corner, spotting Roger's car right away.

Jesus fuck.

He had to find Gary.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Beg me."

He sobbed, pulling at the ropes on his wrists. Please. Please. Anything.

"I'm going to tear his heart out and feed it to you, Tsipotchka. You must understand who you belong to."

The gag was wet and bitter in his lips, the room so dark that he couldn't see anything.

Please.

A rough hand slid down his stomach, the touch light, terrifying.

No.

No, please. Don't touch me. Go away.

"You need to think, Tsipotchka. You need to decide whether you will be good, be my eyes, or whether I need to remind you of your place." The touch pushed into his belly, his legs tugging up to try and ease the agony.

No. He would be good. He would. He would never see Zeke again, just don't hurt the man. Don't damage him.

There were noises, a siren and banging.

They're coming.

Zeke was coming.

"Shh, now." A heavy rag was placed over his nose, the scent overwhelming, gagging him. "They mustn't find us. Not after we've worked so hard together to hide."

The room tilted, his heart pounding furiously.

Please. No. Zeke. Zeke, love. Run.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Zeke wasn't sure how he'd gotten to Gary's place other than as fast as he could. The siren kept the cars moving out of his way, and he didn't even slow down at the lights.

"Nobody's been in or out. They're not here." Watson said, meeting him at the gate.

He shook his head. He didn't believe it. "Maybe you just weren't watching closely enough."

"We've searched the house, sir. There's no one in there."

"Well search it again." He just didn't believe it.

He headed in, the damn warren of boxes making him growl. That fucker was all over the place. He knew Gary was here. He knew it. He. Wait. Wait. Zeke spun around, storming out into the yard. The statues. One of the fucking statues was gone.

"Watson! Did you move any of the statues? There was one..." He walked through the yard, trying to match it up with his memory. "Here. Right here." Tall, that had been one tall statue.

"No one moved anything."

"Damn it, he was right here -- no one saw anything either!" Christ.

He went back into the house, calling for Gary. "Baby! Come on now. I need you to hear me!" He looked at the boxes, trying to see if something had changed, shifted. Something. His gun was heavy in his hands. Christ, he wanted this guy dead, wanted Gary to be safe. Even if the man didn't stay with him, he was going to make sure Gary never had to worry about the Penny Man again.

Zeke went all the way to the back of the house through the warren of boxes. He'd just about give up finding any clue on the ground floor when he noticed a couple of boxes weren't lined up as nicely as the ones around them. When he went to check he found the dust disturbed -- the middle three boxes had shifted, like someone had pushed past them with something too wide to fit the passage so narrow it would have been easy to miss. Something like a body.

When he pushed beyond them, he found a door. A fucking door. Pushing it open, he discovered it led to the side of the house, the outside the same material as the rest of the house -- it was virtually invisible from the outside.

Son of a bitch.

He had that fucking bastard now. Knew for sure Gary was here.

Zeke closed the door and explored the room carefully, pushing past the stacks of boxes, and nearly shouted in triumph when he found the tiny set of stairs leading upward.

He dialed up Rog.

"Yeah, buddy?"

"I know how he got in. There's a hidden door on the west side of the house. There's a staircase heading upstairs back here, too. All hidden away behind all these stacks of fucking boxes. I'm going up. Get Watson and his team in here, back room past the red living room -- but for God's sake, tell them to be quiet. As long as the Penny Man thinks we haven't found this hidden door and staircase, we've got an advantage."

"God damn. You be careful, man."

"I'm going to get this asshole, Rog. Twenty-five years he's gotten away with murder and stalking and God knows what all. Today that stops." He hung the phone up and put it on vibrate.

Then he started creeping up the stairs.

Jesus, it smelled bad -- greasy and sour. He could hear soft muttering, the sound of a low voice murmuring in a language he didn't understand. It occurred to him that it was entirely possible that the Penny Man lived back here, like a cancer right in Gary's house and that, coupled with the smell, had him working hard not to gag.

He had to force himself to keep going slowly and steadily, to stay calm so that when the time came he just needed the one shot to get done what he had to.

Zeke heard motion, then the sound of flesh on flesh. "I told you, silent. Do not make me hurt you further."

He saw red and charged up the stairs toward the sound. Gary was *his*.

A blow caught him as he hit the open door, hard enough to knock him back, almost send him down the stairs. He heard Gary's scream, saw his lover bound and tied, bleeding on the bed. Then the sight was covered by a huge man, body half painted to look like the walls downstairs. Jesus.

"He is mine."

His head was spinning and he fought for balance, fought to keep from falling, even as the heavy door slammed closed in front of him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

"No!" Gary threw himself at the ropes, fighting. "You leave him alone!"

That face turned to him, stared. Gary could feel the shadows encroaching, feel himself start to fade away and he fought it, fought the instinct to cower.

"I see you! Don't you get it? I see you!" The old cot started creaking. "I see you!"

A shout came from outside, the door handle turning back and forth. "There's nowhere to go!"

Zeke.

His Zeke.

He screamed as the Penny Man turned, headed toward the door. "Nyet! Nyet! Ya mogu vidyetb vas!" The words came to him in a rush, along with the scent of gunpowder, copper. Blood. His momma. Katya. Papi. Dead and splayed on the floor, the man from the deli. The man from the circus. Ygevny, they'd called him. Ygevny the Penny Man. "Ygevny! Ya mogu vidyetb vas!"

The man spun with a growl, the moonlight hitting the blade as it came down, slicing at his face. Gary jerked and spun, pulling away so that the blade bounced off his shoulder, slicing into the rope. His scream rang out as the knife fell again and again.

One hand came free as the knife grazed his wrist, and Gary slapped out, beating the monster with the rope. "I see you! Zeke! Help me!"

His hand swung back, the oil lamp on a stack of boxes crashing to the floor, the flames spreading like a wave.

A shot rang out, and then a second.

Zeke's roar broke through everything. "Gary!"

"Run! Run!" He wasn't sure what he was saying, but his one arm was too heavy and the other one was caught and there was fire. "I love you! Run!"

Zeke roared and the Penny Man screamed and he couldn't see them, but he could hear them,

flesh on flesh, their bodies hitting the wall. His knees buckled, the walls with their horrific pictures of death and bodies, of him -- him sleeping and screaming and bathing and...

Sam.

His sweet Sam.

The flames caught the edge of the photo, the paper curling.

"Run, Gary! Get out of here!"

"I can't! I'm tied!" He pulled, the rope just beginning to blaze.

"He's mine!" screamed the Penny Man.

"No. Mine." Zeke's words were snarled and there were more thumps and he couldn't see them, couldn't see what was going on.

Another shot rang out and all the noise stopped.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The sound of his last shot rang in his ears, time seeming to stop as the long, lean body suddenly became heavier. Zeke grunted and pushed, and the Penny Man crumpled to the floor at his feet. Flames licked at his gun and he dropped it, the metal suddenly burning hot, and time snapped back into place.

"Gary! Baby!" The flames were everywhere. "Baby, where are you?"

"Zeke..." He saw something moving toward him, bloody and burning, swaying. "Run."

"Not without you, baby." He nearly tripped over the body at his feet, but he managed to keep his balance and he grabbed at Gary, burning his hands as he smacked at the flames. Finally, he just picked Gary up and headed down the stairs. He met Watson on the way down.

"Get everyone out! This place is going to go up!"

"HE IS MINE!" They all stared up at the huge man standing at the top of the stairs, burning. Jesus fucking Christ. Melting. The bastard was... Blisters started forming, as he just stood there, the paint on the body warping and swelling, shifting just like the wallpaper flaking and peeling off the walls in the...

Oh.

Oh, god.

Just like the wallpaper. Zeke groaned as the fake wainscoting painted at the man's waist seemed to buckle.

"MINE!" Burning hands were held out, flames dropping from those outreached fingers.

Zeke couldn't think about what was feeding those little, dripping flames.

"I am NOT!" Gary's words rang out like a shot.

"That's right, baby. You tell him." He held on tight. He wasn't letting that monster have Gary. No fucking way.

They turned the corner even as the burning, bloodied mass of flesh toppled forward, almost like it was chasing them.

He kept running, Watson just ahead of him, Gary clutched tight in his arms. "I've got you," he said, repeating the words over and over.

"Zeke. Zeke. Run." Gary's eyes were huge, pupils dilated, but *there*.

"I'm running, baby." They ran through the house, the boxes beginning to catch fire, some of them exploding. It seemed to take forever to get to the door. The night was taken over by lights and sirens, the smell of smoke driving him faster and faster. They tumbled out of the door, all of them coughing and running.

There were lights and sirens, a fire truck just pulling up. Zeke didn't see any ambulances. "I need some help over here!" He needed someone to check Gary out.

Gary looked up at him, eyes rolling a little. "You came."

"Of course I did, baby. I promised, didn't I?" He pressed his mouth to Gary's and he'd never tasted anything so sweet.

A roar sounded and he spun around, meeting furious, near-black eyes. "MINE!"

The monster took a step forward and a single report sounded, Rog standing there looking pissed. "Oh, I don't think so."

Zeke stumbled the few steps to Roger's side, clutching Gary tightly against his chest. "That motherfucker just doesn't want to die."

"He's dead now. Sorry about your house, man." Rog looked at Gary, winced. "Medic!"

"Let the fucking thing burn." Gary nodded once, and then his head rolled on his neck as he passed out.

Zeke just kept on holding on, staring down at the burned and bloody body of the Penny Man. Finally he turned to Roger and nodded. "Thanks."

"Anytime, buddy. Go on, he needs help."

"Yeah. Yeah." He nodded and headed for the fire trucks and the ambulance that had just pulled up behind them.

It was over.

It was really over.

He watched the chief's car pull up across the street, the man hauling his bulk out of the car, slamming the door closed.

Oh.

Except for the ass-reaming he had coming, it was over.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

It was the sound of beeping that woke him and he coughed, shoulder and arm screaming with pain as he did.

Oh.

Oh, ow.

He.

Wait.

"Zeke?"

"Right here, baby." Something warm and good squeezed his hand on the side that wasn't hurting.

"Oh. Oh, you're okay?" He coughed again, moaned, his eyes blinking open. "You're okay?"

"Yeah. I've got sore ribs and sore lungs from the smoke, but I'm okay." Zeke's other hand slid over his cheek. "How are you feeling?"

"I hurt. What... My shoulder hurts."

"Yeah, he cut you, and you've got some second degree burns, too. As well as too much smoke inhalation. You're going to be okay, though. Make a full recovery. And we got him. The Penny Man is dead and you're still here."

"I want to go home."

"Yeah, I want you home, too. As soon as the doctor gives you the all clear we're out of here." Zeke paused for a minute. "Um..."

"What? What's wrong?"

"I want you to come live with me. And... well, your house burned down, baby. All those boxes caught on fire just like that."

"Oh." He closed his eyes, took a deep breath. Thank God. Thank God it was gone.

Zeke's fingers felt good against his cheeks, the touches gentle. "I'm sorry, baby. Well, no, that's a lie. I hated that house. I hated that you were trapped in it. But I'm sorry you lost your home, you know?"

"I'm not. I hated that fucking place. I hated it. It's all gone; you swear?"

"Down to the ground. I had them take those horrible sculptures away to the scrap yard."

"Thank God." He started shaking, his breath coming quick and hard.

"Shh. Shh. Gary. You have to calm down, baby, or the nurses will come." Zeke's voice was soft and calm.

"I... I can't. I don't know. I. Help me." Free. Free. He was free.

Zeke's lips closed over his, but the kiss wasn't calm, it was hard and so real.

Oh.

Oh, please. Yes.

He met Zeke's eyes, begging for that strength.

Zeke growled and rubbed their noses together. "Wanna do things to you I can't do here, baby. Wicked, wonderful things."

"You'll let me come home with you? He's really dead? You saw the body. You *saw*?"

"Roger shot that motherfucker dead, Gary. I swear to you he's dead." Zeke sealed the words with another hard kiss. "And yes, I want you to come home with me. I love you, baby."

"He's dead. His name was Ygevnny. He killed them. I remembered." It was so horrible. He hadn't wanted to remember, to keep seeing it in his mind.

Zeke nodded. "I saw the file. We got him now, though. He's not going to kill anyone else. And he's not going to follow you around or make your life miserable."

"I..." He used his whole arm to tug Zeke closer. "I don't know how, love. I don't know how to live without him watching me."

"That's okay, baby. I'll help you." And then Zeke was kissing him again, hard and strong and undeniable.

"Oh my God! Oh. My. God. Gary Short! What are you doing?" He winced as Linda stormed in, hands waving. "You have a deadline and you get mixed up in a MURDER!"

"Make her go away, love."

"My pleasure," growled Zeke. Lips pressed against his a moment more, and then Zeke got up and took Linda's arm in one big paw. "You know, he 's just not ready for visitors, yet. You'll have to come back later."

Yes. Gary thought maybe much later.

Once he'd taken Zeke and run.

"But. He's my writer! I need to see him!"

"You've seen him," growled Zeke. "Now it's time to go. Don't make me literally throw you out of here."

He waited until the door was closed, locked. "I don't suppose you want bodyguard work? I know this former junkie author who needs a firm hand."

Zeke turned around and grinned at him. "I want to guard more than just your body, baby. I want the whole package."

"It's a deal. Name your price."

"That's easy, baby. I just want you, for the rest of your life."

"It's a deal." He held one hand out, fingers shaking.

Zeke took his hand and shook it, and then came back in for another hard kiss.

"Tell me I can come home now. Please."

"Yeah, baby, let's go."

He nodded, pulling the IV from his arm, reaching for Zeke's neck. Zeke grabbed him, making sure to bring the sheet as well, holding him close to the broad chest.

"My hero."

"Just wait 'til we get out the door. The nurses are gonna scream." Zeke grinned at him.

"I don't care. I need to be home with you." He'd been a captive long enough.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Zeke pulled up into the driveway. Home. They were home and he couldn't help but grin at that. "Welcome home, baby."

They'd made it out of the hospital by just going, ignoring nurses and doctors alike. They'd been lucky to have a cab dropping someone off at the door and off they'd gone. And now here they were.

"Home. I... I don't have any clothes or anything, Zeke. I mean, there's insurance, I'm sure, but..."

"Oh, baby, you aren't going to need clothes -- I'm going to tie you naked to the bed and keep you there for a very long time."

"Okay, but be gentle. I'm still chafed."

Zeke came around, lifted Gary from the car and took him in, careful of the stitched arm and shoulder. He chuckled, bringing Gary into the bedroom. "Roger picked up a few things for you, but we are doing the naked in bed thing for now."

"I like naked in bed." Gary looked comfortable in his house. Good

"Oh, good, because once that shoulder's well, I do plan to keep you here an awful lot." He slipped the hospital gown off Gary and arranged the pillows under that poor arm. The little scattered burns were already trying to heal; the bits of new skin pink and shiny.

"I thought I was going to die in that room, but I was terrified I wouldn't, you know?"

He nodded, stripping down quickly so he could climb in with Gary. It felt good, just the two of them, the whole world shut out. "I'm glad you didn't, baby."

"Yeah. Yeah, I am, too. Now." Gary held a hand out for him.

He took it and climbed in, curling up around the slender body. God, he wanted to fuck Gary until neither of them could see straight.

"We should go to the Bahamas. Mexico. Somewhere with a beach." Gary's cheek rested on his shoulder, the stubble tickling.

"Yeah, baby. As soon as your arm's better, yeah? Traveling'd be a bitch with that laid up."

"Yeah. Yeah, Zeke. After I've rested some, loved on you a bit."

"Oh, I like the sound of that." His cock proved it, too, beginning to take an interest in the smooth skin it rested against.

Gary reached down, fingers just brushing the length of his cock, teasing him. Groaning, he bucked, his hips moving automatically.

"Love your touch."

"Good. You weren't hurt? You're okay?"

"Breathed in smoke and bruised my ribs. That's it, though. I was lucky." They both were. If he'd had a gun, the Penny Man could have killed Gary.

"I'm feeling pretty lucky, too." Gary looked a bit shocky, a little scared.

"Lucky?" The word surprised him.

"That I got out. That you got out. That you didn't just shoot me or turn me away."

He growled a little. "I wouldn't do something like that."

"No. No, you wouldn't, but so many people would, and it was you."

"I'm glad it was me and not someone else." Growling again, he pressed his lips to Gary's.

Gary opened up, eyes staring at him. His. His lover. His hand wrapped possessively around Gary's hip, holding on, tugging Gary's lower body against his own.

"I don't think I can..." He hushed the worried words with a kiss.

"All you have to do is relax and get better, baby."

He dove back in for another kiss. Gary opened for him, lips parted, eager. He swept his tongue through Gary's mouth, ignoring the taste of hospital, concentrating on the taste of Gary himself hiding behind it.

"Love." Gary brought one leg up, rubbed it along his thigh.

Christ, Gary made him hard, made him need.

"Tell me this is forever. Tell me this is love."

"I love you, baby. And I'm going to hold onto you forever."

They'd already done the hard part, loving Gary was easy.

## EPÍLOGUE

Dude.

Dude.

"Zeke!" Gary moved through the cabin, heading through to the porch. "Zeke!"

Number one.

Number one on the NYT bestseller list.

*The Penny Man.*

Linda had to be screaming with joy.

Zeke was lounging on a chair, looking buff and tanned in a pair of swimming trunks, sunglasses perched on his nose. "Hmm? Everything okay, baby?"

"Yeah. Yeah, look." He dropped the paper on Zeke's lap, waiting. Watching.

Zeke straightened up and picked up the paper, reading. "Number one! Baby, that's awesome! Congratulations!" Zeke's arms opened for him.

"We can stay. You and me. As long as we want." Linda had said, if he could make this work, he'd be set. He was.

He landed in Zeke's arms, laughing, face turned up toward the sun. Zeke tugged him close and nuzzled into his neck before kissing him hard enough to take away his breath. Oh. Oh, yes. Love. He stretched, rubbing against Zeke eagerly. One of Zeke's legs slid over his, trapping him against the solid body.

Gary met Zeke's eyes, so happy, so alive and here. Free.

"Mmm, you look happy. You should always be the number one bestseller."

"I agree. However, that would mean writing twenty-four-seven and you wouldn't like that."

"No, I wouldn't," Zeke growled. "If you're going to do anything twenty-four-seven it should be naked and tied to my bed."

He loved that sound. "No tying." He grinned and got ready to run.

Zeke's mouth dropped open. "Oh, I think there's going to be some tying."

"Nope. You have to catch me." Take me. Make me fly.

He took off, running down the sand, feeling stronger than he ever had. Zeke's laughter was low and soft, following him as he ran. He could hear Zeke's feet against the sand, too, coming after him. He chuckled, ran faster, knowing the reward at the end would be worth it.

Zeke kept coming for him, fingers brushing against his arm. He slowed down, his laughter making him short of breath. He was suddenly swept up, Zeke grabbing him and lifting him.

"Zeke!" His cry rang out, his legs kicking.

Laughing, Zeke kept hold of him, but went down, making sure he was on top when they landed. He rubbed and pushed, nipping at Zeke's lips.

"I caught you." Zeke tried to catch his lips, too, mouth following his.

"Yeah. Yeah, caught me." Just like he needed.

Zeke's cock was hard, pushing at his trunks, at Gary's belly. "We oughta take this inside, baby. I'd hate to get arrested."

"Especially given how we play..." He reached down, hand sliding in Zeke's shorts.

"Gary!" Zeke's eyes went wide, and he looked around, making sure they were alone on the beach. Still, Zeke's hips bucked, pushing the hot prick through his hand.

"Mmmhmm?" He offered Zeke a wide-eyed look, going for innocent.

"We're *outside*. And you know it, so you can put that butter wouldn't melt in your mouth look back." Zeke's words were at odds with that big body, which continued to respond to his touch.

"Are we?" He blinked, kept working harder, tugging, demanding, knowing that Zeke would repay him.

Zeke's sun-bright eyes shone for him, and the swat caught the top of his right thigh along with his ass cheek. "You don't stop and I'm going to give you more where that came from."

"Swear it?" He pulled harder. "What will you do if I make you come right here?"

"The whole works, baby. Cuffs and clamps and vibrating plugs and the flogger and fuck!" Zeke jerked as his thumb slid across the top of Zeke's cock, digging in.

"Yes." He nodded, biting Zeke's throat. He needed that. Needed it all.

Now.

Please.

"Christ, baby, I want you. So damned bad." Zeke's hands grabbed his ass and squeezed, legs parting slightly. "Soon. Fuck, right here on the beach. Fuck."

"Yes, Zeke. Right here. Love you. Come for me."

"Baby!" Zeke shouted and bucked, humping up against him. Come spread out over his hand, hot and musky.

He groaned, spreading the seed over Zeke's prick, gentling his touch.

"Jesus Christ, baby, we're on the beach!" Zeke stared at him, panting, eyes dark with arousal.

"You noticed." He grinned, stole a quick kiss.

"I did. I can't believe we just did that." Zeke groaned and sat up, belly muscles working hard, bunching and flexing.

"It was hot." Those muscles fascinated him.

"Yeah, baby, it was." Zeke chuckled and buried his face against Gary's neck. "The whole time I was worried someone would catch us."

"You're okay? It wasn't too much?" He started fluttering a little, worried.

"Baby, you made the top of my head come off -- I'm fine." Zeke stood and growled, pulling him close. "Of course I'm going to make you pay for it."

"Promise?"

"Yeah, baby. I promise." Zeke began hustling him back up the beach to where their private cabin overlooked the shore. "And I know you know I can deliver on that promise. You haven't seen half of what I packed in that extra suitcase." Zeke's hand slid to his hip, fingers unerringly finding the dark hickey that had been drawn up just that morning and digging in to it.

"Ex...Oh..." He arched, leaning back, body aching.

"Jesus, you're sexy, baby. Making me hard all over again." Zeke's sped up, not running, but moving them more quickly.

"I just want you." Simple as that. Well, maybe not simple.

"Feeling's more than mutual." Zeke's hand grabbed his, running with him up to the porch. Instead of going to the bedroom, though, Zeke led him to the cabin's little kitchen.

"What are you doing, love?"

Rummaging through the fridge, Zeke looked rather pleased with himself. In a moment, Gary saw why. "There it is!" Zeke pulled out a bottle of champagne from the fridge. "I had a feeling we'd need this at some point."

"Are we celebrating?" He chuckled, grabbed a couple of glasses.

"Baby, number one on the New York Times bestseller list -- of course we're celebrating!"

He grinned, jumping as the cork popped, whacking the ceiling.

Laughing, Zeke filled the glasses he'd found, and then held one of them up. "Congratulations, baby."

They clinked the glasses together, drank. Oh, man. Bubbles.

"I wanted to celebrate something else, too." Zeke spoke softly, voice serious. "I want to celebrate us. You're the best thing to ever happen in my life."

Gary's cheeks heated, eyes on the table. "Oh. Zeke. I." What could he say? Zeke was his hero.

Zeke's fingers slid beneath his chin and tilted his head up until he met Zeke's eyes. "It's the truth, baby."

"Love you, huh? For real." God, for a writer, he was *so* not articulate.

"Yeah, me too, baby. I love you." Zeke nodded and drank the rest of his champagne, and then his hero wrapped him up in a tight hug. "Okay, enough mushy stuff. It's time to tie you up and get my revenge for not only getting sand in my shorts, but getting sticky in them, too."

"You liked it." He dared to pat Zeke's cock, to wink.

He did love Zeke's laughter. Zeke drew him into the bedroom, eyes intent, growing heat. Their little house was bright, full of light, sunshine. The bedroom was open, the bed soft. Everything was right here. Real.

Zeke laid him out on the bed, fingers sliding beneath his t-shirt and skimming it up and off. "Mmm... look at you."

"Why, when I can look at you?" Zeke had left the force almost immediately after Ygenvy had died, and Gary had the pleasure of the man's attention full-time.

"You do my ego good, baby." Zeke bent and kissed his belly, lips warm and soft, tongue hot and wet. Teeth... not there yet.

"Mmm." He stretched and hummed, licking his lips. "Your mouth."

"Uh-huh. Gonna taste every inch of you, baby. Every. Single. Inch." Zeke's tongue swirled around his navel, circling it teasingly, stabbing into it with the tip. That tickled, made him pull away and gasp. Made him want. "Stay still, baby, or I'll have to make you."

This time Zeke's teeth got involved, scraping along his skin. His legs drew up, his gasps coming again and again. Zeke ignored his prick and his balls. The man didn't go anywhere near his nipples.

"I think you should turn over, baby. I have a plug in that suitcase with your name on it." Zeke came up and gave him a quick, hard kiss. "It vibrates. It's going to make you crazy."

"Are you sure I need help with crazy?" God knew, he was getting better, but he was still a bit of a nutcase.

Zeke's chuckles slid against his lips. "This is a good crazy, baby."

"Yeah. I'm getting better at that good crazy stuff."

"Mmm." Zeke murmured and then blew a raspberry against his neck. "Hands and knees so I can plug you up, baby."

He rolled, ass up, almost begging for it. He loved Zeke's touch, Zeke's need. Groaning, Zeke rubbed against his ass, Zeke's cheeks rough as they dragged over him.

He dropped his cheek to his hands, eyes closed. "You have good hands."

"Made for touching you." Those hands fondled his buttocks with broad strokes and then spread him, Zeke's breath on his hole teasing him.

"Zeke!" He tensed, chuckling and gasping all at once.

"I could stop." Zeke didn't, though, and the breath of warm air came again before Zeke's tongue slid along his hole, wetting his skin.

The sound that came out of him could have been 'no'; he just wasn't sure. It didn't matter anyway, as long as his lover didn't stop. Hot, pointed, Zeke's tongue pushed into him, wriggling just inside the guardian ring of muscles. Gary began moving -- rocking back before pulling away, low cry ringing out.

Zeke's tongue kept pushing, his lover's face pressed hard against his ass. His cock drew painfully hard and he reached back, started stroking it, good and hard. The tongue fucking stopped immediately. Zeke growled. "That's mine."

He groaned, shivered. "I need."

"But you don't know *what* you need. I do." Two fingers pushed into his hole, the stretch burning just right.

"Oh..." He rippled, moaning deep and low, head tossing a little.

Zeke added the thumb, stretching him wide. "This is a big one, baby. Gotta make sure you're ready."

"How big?" He almost came, just from the thought.

"Bigger than me." Zeke's teeth grazed the skin at the small of his back. "And it does stuff."

"Fuck." He jumped, jerking, coming up off the mattress.

"Mmm. So responsive, so sexy. You make me need, baby. Gonna make you need, too." Another graze of Zeke's teeth accompanied a hard push of those fingers, Zeke hitting his gland.

His eyes flew open, muscles going tight. "I need. I do. More."

Zeke held up the plug, the thing life-like and large. "Here's your more, baby."

"Oh..." His hand slid back toward his cock as he stared and swallowed.

Zeke shook his head. "No touching, baby. I can see I'm going to have to tie your hands to the headboard." Leaning back, Zeke grabbed the leather cuffs, dangling them near his face.

"I just... it feels so big." He stopped, blinked at himself. "Man, that was punny."

Zeke chuckled, fingers moving his wrists into the cuffs and then attaching them to the headboard. He watched, the old worry trying to creep up on him and fading back.

"I'm going to take care of you, baby." Zeke settled between his legs, eyes hot on him.

"You always do. Will, right?"

Zeke stilled, the plug resting against his opening. "You're mine, baby. For always. Always."

"Yours. Yours, Zeke. I'm free now." He pressed down, the plug started to spread him, to fill him.

"Free to fly, baby." Zeke pushed, helping it move into him.

"Yeah. Yeah, Zeke. Free to fly." Fuck him.

That plug pushed right in, tip rubbing against his gland. His toes curled and he jerked against the cuffs. "And we haven't even turned on the vibrations yet." Zeke winked, twisting the plug and then making sure it was seated.

"I. Full. Full, Zeke." He shifted, pulling away with a gasp.

"Yeah, just like you like it, baby." Zeke tapped the bottom of the plug and then held up a small, black box. "This is the remote."

"Don't. I'm not ready. It's too much. I can't." His ass rippled, squeezed around the plug.

"You want a ring, baby?" Zeke didn't wait for him to answer, just grabbed a leather cock ring from the suitcase sitting by the bed and wrapped it tightly around the base of his prick.

"Oh." His legs drew up, knees bending as a dull need filled him.

Zeke grabbed his foot and kissed his ankle, mouth moving slowly up the inside of his leg. His eyes rolled, the soft, hot touches enough to drive him into babbling. Every now and then Zeke's teeth would sink into the tender skin, the pain sudden and sharp and just about perfect. Gary groaned, legs shifting, sliding on the sheets.

All of a sudden, the plug inside him began to vibrate. Gently, almost imperceptibly, it began to move.

"Zeke?" He gasped, intrigued, but also unnerved.

"Right here, baby." Zeke settled on him, legs between his, their cocks sliding together. "Right here."

"It's weird..." He arched up, moving them together.

Groaning, Zeke pushed back against him, pressing him into the mattress. Zeke touched the remote again and the vibrations increased, moving up his spine. All he could do was jerk, reach up for Zeke, rub harder. Each of his nipples was taken into Zeke's mouth, kissed, licked, bitten. Little cries poured out of him, the burn and sting enough to send him flying. Large, warm fingers counted his ribs, pressed against his skin, the touches firm, constant.

"Love you." He was ready to come, to let the growing pressure and hunger inside him go.

Zeke stopped what he was doing to look at him, into him. "I know, baby. I love you, too."

He couldn't hide his smile, or the way he melted into the sheets, happier than he'd ever been. A low growl tickled against his belly, and Zeke took the head of his cock in, teasing him mercilessly. He held onto the cuff chains, hips bucking up, trying to get in deeper. But Zeke shook his head, the motion moving him inside Zeke's mouth. A moment later the delicious heat was gone and the vibrations inside him got stronger, faster.

"Zeke!" His asshole clenched tighter, squeezing hard.

"Yeah, baby?" Zeke grinned up at him, and then came in for another kiss.

Their tongues slid together, and then he started fucking Zeke's lips with his tongue. Groaning, Zeke started fiddling with the plug, jostling it as he grabbed hold of the end. Oh. Oh, Zeke wanted him. Wanted in him.

Breath panting warmly against his neck, Zeke finally got a good hold of the plug and yanked it out, the sound of the motor loud now that it was out of his body. More fumbling, this time with the remote, soon turned off the sound of the motor, and then Zeke rose up between his legs and pushed right in.

"Oh." Yes. Better. More. "Love."

Zeke's answer was a groan, forehead pressed against his as Zeke started to move, to fuck him with strong, hard strokes. He met each stroke with one of his own, their bodies slapping together. His cock was pressed between their bellies, dripping on Zeke's hard abs.

"Going to let me come, love?"

"I am. I want to feel you do it. I want to watch your face." Zeke's fingers drifted between them and then slid away again. "Not quite yet, though."

"T...tease." He groaned, squeezing Zeke's cock as tight as he could.

"Jesus!" Zeke swore and bucked, and was soon panting.

Oh. Oh, that was... He closed his eyes, focusing on squeezing, over and over, again and again.

"Baby. God. Fuck." The words poured out of Zeke, one for each squeeze, for each hard thrust into him.

"Uh-huh. Yours. All yours." He worked it hard, needing Zeke to fly.

"Mine!" Zeke pulled off the ring, the snap loud as it came undone. The leather wasn't even pulled away, just allowed to loosen and rest against his skin as Zeke's hips went wild, thrusts fast and hard.

His eyes flew open and he jerked, balls drawing up tight. Zeke's lips closed over his, eyes right there, staring into him. His orgasm hit him hard, making the room go a little grey around the edges. He could feel Zeke, though, still pounding into him, murmuring all sorts of things at him. The big fingers dug into his shoulders, pulling him down onto Zeke's cock.

Then his Zeke shouted, come pushing deep into his body. He watched every second of Zeke's orgasm, fascinated. Caught by the look in Zeke's eyes.

Panting, Zeke sank down against him, body hard, hot, heavy. Perfect.

"Love, huh? Promise." Go incoherent him.

"Me too, baby." Zeke kissed him, hard, but lazy at the same time, just right. Just good.

He turned his face, looked out the window at the sunshine pouring in. Zeke peppered his exposed neck and jaw with kisses, a low, happy sound filling his ears. Gary leaned closer, closed his eyes, knowing that Zeke was watching him.

Zeke and no one else.