



Shining Victory

KC Kendrick

SHINING VICTORY

...He stood still, motionless, as the light from the window formed a sunburst around him. His blue eyes searched my face with silent questions, ones I knew, although I was unsure about the answers. My lips tingled with the memory of his kiss. I reached out and gave his shoulder a light squeeze. The corner of his sensuous mouth twitched into a quirky, lopsided smile.

Low and husky, his voice made me shiver with longing. "You think I bite, Stacy James?"

I trailed my hand down his arm and grasped his wrist, pulling him a step closer. "What if I do, puppy? You don't know a thing about me."

The smile on his face widened. His gaze never left mine. "Sure I do. You're the hottest old man who ever threw a punch to save my ass."

I reached out with my other hand and tucked my fingers beneath his belt to yank him against me. Heat rolled off him in tiny waves, but the skin on his arm prickled with gooseflesh as I ran my fingertips across it.

"Call me old again, and I'll show you what old can do."

Levi licked his lips, taunting me. "So show me...*old* man."

I pulled his lips to mine, until they almost touched. "You're too eager," I whispered.

His hand cupped my aching balls as his thumb ran across my bulging zipper.

“Eager? Me? You’ve got some nerve calling me eager.”
Quick as lightning, his hand snaked down the front of my jeans...

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SHINING VICTORY

BY

KC KENDRICKS

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SHINING VICTORY
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To Lee Ann, for her unceasing, unwavering, and unselfish support. I'd have given up long ago if not for you.

CHAPTER 1

Mobile, agile and hostile summed up my first impression of the young man who made a running leap and glided across the hood of a 1967 Camaro on denim-clad knees. He landed on the other side of the car—on his feet—and went nose-to-nose with a man half again his size who'd dared to cast aspersions on his sexuality.

The young man stood six feet tall, lanky, with a head full of dark, curly hair, a scruffy three-day beard, and stunning sky-blue eyes framed by the longest black eyelashes I'd ever seen on a man, gay or straight. And he was pissed off past the point of reason.

I admit I don't like it much when people refer to me as a

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“fag” either, but with age comes smarts, or so they say. I’d have ignored the beer-bellied redneck and walked on. But it’s true; testosterone poisoning is a malady of youth. I used to have it myself, and counted myself lucky it had passed. For the most part, anyway...

This young man looked to have a bad case of twenty-something and hormones.

I set my soda down a safe distance from the imminent fisticuffs and prepared to save the young man from having his beautiful, perfectly straight nose take on a different shape—that of the other fellow’s fist.

He failed to appreciate my efforts, fixing me with an angry blue gaze that drilled its way straight to my groin as I stepped between them. *Good God, what incredible eyes.*

“Fuck off, old man!”

The little puppy called me old. I resented that remark, but let it slide for the greater good of the moment.

“I’m trying to keep you from making a big mistake, boy. You punch him, and he’ll sue you. That’s what his ilk do.”

The other man snickered and grabbed his crotch in an all-too-familiar gesture in our day and time.

“Yer both fags. Ye ain’t seen a real dick until you’ve seen mine, and ye ain’t gonna see it or suck it. Ain’t neither of ye man enough...”

He dropped like a rock when my fist caught him flush on the jaw. I’d not thrown a punch like that in years. The young man’s mouth dropped open, and his gorgeous eyes took on a new light, that of a grudging respect.

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“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” I snatched up my soda and beat a hasty, less than dignified retreat from the scene. With any luck, I could disappear into the crowd at the classic car festival and exit the fairgrounds before being apprehended for assault.

How could I have done that? I’m a pacifist, for God’s sake. Well, I am now. I wasn’t always. I suppose old habits are never completely left behind. I spotted my car and picked up my pace.

My knuckles throbbed, and it served me right. I had no business punching anyone, no matter how pissed off I became over such asinine, belittling, idiotic, disparaging and crude comments. Since when had my temper developed such a flash point?

Since that sexy young man had been there to witness my display of manliness, that’s when.

Could I be shallower? I doubted it.

My shoulders slumped at the rapid thud of running feet approaching me from the rear. I didn’t turn, but it had to be the authorities. My luck didn’t run any other way.

“Hey, mister! Wait!”

Not the police then, but the young hoodlum in tight denim jeans with the healthy lungs. He wasn’t even out of breath after running to catch up to me. I didn’t slow down, still under pressure to make a clean get-away.

“I’m outta here, friend. I’ve not acted that stupidly in years and I won’t let you slow me down.”

He settled into a fast walk beside me, his strides matching mine. “I need a lift home, mister. I sold a car here. It wouldn’t

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be smart to wait around for a taxi, now would it?"

"Okay. You have a point. Get in and be quick about it." I slipped my key into the lock and opened the passenger side door for him, mentally counting the seconds lost. I knew I should have replaced the defective battery in my keyless remote.

He climbed in and leaned over to unlock my door. I settled into the driver's seat, turned the switch, and grinned at him as four hundred horses sprang to life.

My young passenger returned the smile, and my heart sank. He was just too gorgeous to ignore.

"If you're worried about going unnoticed, you do not have the right ride." The observation was made with just the right amount of sarcasm to tell me how much he liked the car.

I snorted, not caring if it were rude. "Says you. I've seen at least a dozen other Corvettes here tonight."

His laughter filled my being with its low, rich timber, now free of sarcasm and full of amusement.

"Fourteen others and only four of them ragtops. And none of them a Z06, and none of them this go-to-hell-red." He held out a business card to me. "I'm Levi. Levi Wright."

I'd managed to catch a traffic light and slowed the Corvette to a stop before accepting the card and his hand. Levi's grip was firm, his skin warm. With not some little trepidation, for I knew I risked a lightning strike, I met his gaze and told him my name. "Stacy James."

His bright blue eyes darkened. His chiseled chin with its dark, scruffy whiskers lifted. The tip of his tongue flicked over

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his lips, wetting them. Heat coiled in my belly, and the urge to get a taste of him swept through me.

I knew the stupidity of such lust. Somehow, I managed to get my hand back on the steering wheel as the light changed to green and my companion showed some manners.

“Nice to meet you. Thanks for stepping in back there. Nice punch. Did you box or something?”

“Or something.” I applied pressure to the gas pedal and the Corvette responded, smoothly accelerating through the intersection. “I used to be a black belt in taekwondo.”

“Used to be? What? They take it away from you?”

“I gave it up.” The last thing I wanted to do was discuss that part of my life with a stranger. Of course, that sixth sense we all possess about some people said Levi Wright would never be a stranger to me, or I to him. I needed to take control of this train wreck and clean it up before it got out of hand.

“Where can I drop you off, Levi?”

“I don’t want you to have to go out of your way, Mr. James. Just drop me at the first bus stop. I’ll be okay.”

Mr. James. First, he calls me old, then he calls me Mister James.

“I’m Stacy, you smartass puppy, and I’ve already gone out of my way for you. So where do you want out?”

I felt his gaze on me, but didn’t take mine off the road. Whether or not I hoped to find out where he lived, I wasn’t sure. Allowing a bad case of lust get the better of my good judgment hadn’t happened in twenty years, half my lifetime ago. I still carried the scars from that bitter experience.

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“Okay, man, you win. Drop me at Mayfield Towers.”

He didn’t need to give me directions. Everyone in town knew the way to the towers site. All you had to do was glance at the skyline and head in that direction. As part owner of the corporation that held the property, I knew how to get there.

“The Mayfield Towers, it is.” I turned right and the twenty-story building came into view, straight ahead. “So what car did you sell at the show, Levi?”

“Not one that hurt me any to part with. A 1978 Trans Am. Unrestored.”

Unrestored meant only one thing to the classic car devotee. The vehicle wasn’t in the best condition and needed a lot of expensive work to be roadworthy and even more to be show ready. I indulged my curiosity.

“Are you a trader, or do you just dabble?” If he were a trader that would explain his being about to afford the rent in such an upscale apartment complex.

He smiled. “A bit of both.”

I suddenly made the connection. “Well, hell. You’re one of the Wrights who own and operate The Chop Shop out on Mill’s Ferry Road.”

“That’s me,” he confirmed, laughing.

“I’m impressed.” And I was. The Chop Shop ranked among the top muscle car restoration outfits in the country. “The Trans Am was too bad to work on?”

“Oh, not really. It had passed through a few hands. Had some good, some bad work done to it. We had it out back waiting for a break between contracted jobs and a fellow

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drove by and asked what we wanted for it. He paid in cash. I delivered the car.”

Levi settled deeper into the soft leather of the Corvette’s cockpit. “I hope he’s honorable and drops off our dealer tag.”

So did I because no way would I go back to the fairgrounds this evening.

“I guess I can’t smoke in your car, huh?”

I shot him what I hoped was a stern glance at him. “No. You may not. You shouldn’t smoke at all.”

“So, beat me, daddy.”

“Don’t tempt me, puppy.” I’d spank him without second thoughts were he naked on my bed.

“What is it with you? You go around like some avenging angel whenever an asshole calls people fags?”

“Trust me. I do not. I witness insults being bandied back and forth all the time and I manage to stay out of it. I didn’t want to see your nose broken for no good reason.”

Levi responded by looking out the side window. I turned into the visitor’s parking lot at the Mayfield Towers complex and brought the car to a stop. I handed him one of my business cards and he pocketed it. Instead of climbing out, he met my gaze without blinking.

“You could ask me out for a beer, old man.”

I shivered at his words. I longed to do just that. I wanted the pleasure of his company on a visceral level. My chest ached with it. How stupid did I dare allow myself to be?

Apparently, very.

The Corvette leaped forward as I gave it some pedal. “You

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play pool, puppy?”

“Better than you do. Dollar a ball?”

“Fucking hell! Do I look like I have money or something?” I did, but I wasn’t going to blow it on foolish bets.

“Nope. This piece of shit you drive screams welfare.” Levi snickered. “Okay, we’ll play just for fun.”

“Damn right. You’re probably a pool hustler.”

He fell silent again, brooding, or so I thought, and I wondered if I’d pushed some button, or if I’d insulted him to silence. Or, more likely, I’d guessed correctly and spoiled his fun. I put my mind on my driving.

Levi hadn’t suggested any particular establishment, so I headed to a place where I didn’t think I’d run into any of my buddies. My luck held. I didn’t recognize any of the vehicles in the lot.

My young companion held the door for me as we entered the pub, stepping into a quiet, smoke-filled room. The pool table just inside the door was free.

“Rack ’em, Levi. Will a draft be okay?”

He nodded as he deftly arranged the balls for the first strike. I paid for the beers and selected a cue. My own stick lay tucked in its case in the trunk of the Corvette, but I didn’t want to appear showoff-ish to Levi. The car already pushed that envelope far enough. Levi tossed a coin in the air.

“Call it!”

“Heads.” The quarter landed heads up. I lined up for the break and popped it. As luck would have it, the twelve and the fifteen balls dropped into the pockets. Levi glanced slyly at me

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from under his lashes.

“That means you have to get all the striped balls in the pockets before you can hit the little black ball in, Stacy James.”

I narrowed my eyes at him and ran the highballs.

“Eight in the side.” I tapped the hole I would shoot for with the cue, then drove the little black ball home. “Rack ’em, again, if you dare,” I challenged him.

Levi set up the table again while I sipped my beer. Something simmered just under the surface of his flushed skin. I moved to break and his hand covered mine. Our gazes locked for several seconds. He squeezed my fingers, and I released the cue.

“My turn, old man.”

“Okay, puppy. Show me what you can do.”

Levi lined up and made the break. The three ball dropped in the pocket. He surveyed the table and tapped a pocket. “One ball.”

The one dropped and he tapped another hole. “Two ball.”

Again, the ball dropped.

“Four in the far corner.” Levi tapped the cue ball. It bounced off the side and hit the four. The ball dropped.

I perched on a bar stool and watched him run the table, in order, until he missed the ten. He moved with effortless grace, cool and focused on the shots. I did my best not to stare at his ass, or the bump at the base of his zipper. When he missed the ten by scant centimeters, I spoke.

“Set it up and try it again.”

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Levi nodded and reset the shot. This time, the ten dropped. He finished the table and tossed the cue stick on the vanquished field of play. I handed him his draft. He leaned against the bar and downed a few swallows. His burning gaze never left mine.

“So, Stacy James. Your place or mine?”

CHAPTER 2

Never would I let him know I'd been wondering that very thing. I didn't pick up strange boys—how old was he? If I asked him, he'd think I had some interest in him.

Lie to yourself all you want, Stacy. I'd lied to myself a lot, denied myself a lot. Did I want to deny the pleasure of having him? And I knew it would be a pleasure.

I really didn't know. The sins of my youth haunted me.

"How old are you, Levi?"

He met my gaze. "Twenty-five," he answered without flinching.

"I bet you're not a day past nineteen."

Levi's blue gaze smoldered with suppressed anger. He

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pulled his wallet from his back pocket and held up his driver's license two inches in front of my nose. I did the math. He was twenty-four, just days shy of twenty-five, but he didn't look it.

He flipped the wallet closed and shoved it back in his pocket. "Are you gonna answer my question?"

"You think we know each other well enough?"

Levi grinned, his smile transforming his dark, brooding features into a shining, devilish openness. "How well do you need to know me to let me give you a blowjob?"

The world spun around me with Levi as its center. The skin prickled over my body in a wave that started on the back of my neck, swept over my chest, down to my thighs, and settled in my throbbing groin. *Damn him.*

And damn me for wanting him badly enough to risk taking him home.

"I think saving your ass and buying you a beer is enough for one evening." I cursed my cowardice even as I said the words.

The smile on Levi's face faded. "Have I read you wrong? Didn't mean to offend you or anything, man."

He'd backed me into another corner. I didn't appreciate being out-maneuvered at every turn, and I wouldn't have been if I'd been thinking with my brain and not my penis.

"You're rushing things, Levi. For your own safety, you need to learn to throttle back with strangers." I downed what was left of my beer. "Come on. We're getting out here."

Levi tossed his cue on the pool table and put his hands on his hips. "And if I won't go?"

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“Then you can walk home. It’s up to you.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “You’re driving, old man.”

“Stop calling me old. I don’t like it,” I grumbled under my breath.

He heard me and snickered as he fell in behind me on the way to the parking lot. We reached the Corvette before he spoke. “You have a nice ass for an older fellow.”

I turned on him. “Now you listen to me, you puppy. I’m only forty and that is not old!”

Without warning, Levi slammed me to the car, full body, chest-to-chest, and thigh-to-thigh. Arousal roared through me. I grabbed him roughly by the scruff of the neck and took his all-too-willing mouth.

Heat spiraled through me. My cock, already halfway there, hardened in a glorious rush. I thrust my tongue past Levi’s lips. Not at all passive, he met me in a dreamlike dance of give and take where awareness of all but his mouth locked with mine ceased. He tasted of beer, cigarettes, and youthful eagerness. I’d not received such a promise of passion in many years.

Levi’s arms snaked around my ribs. His pelvis ground to mine in a slow, sinuous rhythm that sent my pulse soaring. I spun us around, pinned him to the car, and teased him as he had me. He moaned into my mouth. Laughter behind me penetrated my consciousness, and I released him.

A group of guys exited the pub, laughing and having fun amongst themselves. Whether or not they’d noticed us, or even would care if they did, I chose not to take the chance of

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having to yank my hotheaded companion away from yet another confrontation. Levi wasn't pleased.

"Screw 'em. Kiss me again." He made a grab for my belt.

"Leave off!" I smacked his hand away. "Use some sense. They aren't hurting us, and we don't need to antagonize them because they're ignoring us. You want to be a gay militant, go do it on your own time."

He cocked his head and looked at me, a wealth of questions in his gorgeous eyes, full of glittering diamonds from the floodlights surrounding the parking lot. He licked his lips and reached for the pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket. His lips thinned as he shoved the pack back in place. He sighed. "Maybe I should quit smoking."

"Maybe I should take you home." I opened the car door for him. He stepped close to me again, his hand covering mine.

"To your place?" he asked, his voice low, soft, and full of quiet hope.

I shook my head. He tempted me, but my demons were awake.

Sometimes no matter what name you put to an action, even prudence, it's still stupid in hindsight.

* * *

I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned, restless and sweating, even after lowering the bedroom thermostat several degrees. At three o'clock, I downed a shot of bourbon. Even that didn't relax me. I'd been a fool not to take Levi up on his offer.

What was it about him that got under my skin? Did I see

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my younger self in him, all brash and brave? I'd been like that at twenty, until one careless action had broken my life. It had taken me many long, difficult years to get to where I was now. Meeting him brought long-buried memories back to the light. I'd prefer they'd stayed in whatever dark corner of my mind I usually kept them buried in.

Knowing I'd never sleep, I got up, brewed a short pot of coffee, and settled at my desk to check my email. Even on the weekend my broker didn't rest. He'd turned some investments over and deposited a tidy little sum in my account. An email from my executive assistant caught my eye. Why would he email me on a Saturday?

He'd forgotten to have me sign a requisition. It was on my desk in my office just in case I stopped by the office before Monday morning.

I'd probably go and sign the form. What else did I have to do on a Sunday these days?

The cold coffee in my mug had lost its appeal. I poured it out, grabbed a bottle of water, and stepped out onto my dark patio. The quiet of the night surrounded me. In the distance, if I listened for it, I could hear the never-ceasing noise from the Interstate. Funny how it had become mere background noise within days of moving into this house.

It had not been my intention to stay here. The rambling house felt too big and empty, and the barren backyard too lifeless and sterile for me to put down permanent roots. The plan had been to let the housing market make a few gains, then sell the place at a small profit. I calculated if I bought and sold

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three times in ten years, I could bank a cool hundred thousand dollars, provided the market stayed on track.

Then a single tulip had pushed its way up from a long winter sleep and I had a vision, a flash, of what the yard could become if I rolled up my sleeves and got to work on the place, inside and out. Four years later, I called the project finished, and now no amount of money could budge me from my home.

Still restless, I paced around the house, until I noticed the blinking icon on my computer. Who would email me at six a.m.? I clicked to find out. The subject line read, "Take me out to the ballgame."

Who the hell was 'Pony2Stud'? I gave my business card, with my email addy, to a lot of people.

My curiosity got the best of me and I opened the email. It was Levi, and did I want to go to the ballgame with him? He'd be ready by eleven o'clock, and by the way, we'd go in the Corvette.

Before I'd thought about my answer, the image of Levi in a baseball cap, at the ballpark, sitting in the sunshine, drinking a beer, and smiling at me, rose in my mind.

"Cheeky little bastard," I muttered at the screen.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I zipped off a reply, accepting his invitation. Now I could drive myself into a frenzy until I picked him up. Almost immediately, I got a one-word response.

Cool.

Suddenly exhausted, I turned off the computer. I didn't want to get caught up in an Internet conversation. Now, when

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I knew I'd see him again, sleep dragged at me. I dropped my sweatpants on the floor and fell into bed, knowing the nightmare that lurked in the darkness.

* * *

"Not guilty, Your Honor."

The metallic taste of fear flooded my mouth. My life was over. I hadn't had a chance to really live and now I never would. What I'd wanted, what I'd longed to do but didn't, couldn't be forgiven. My family had abandoned me. My perversion ran too deep.

Sweat drenched my clothes and yet I was so cold I shook. The masked faces of the twelve jurors mocked me.

"He lied to me!" I cried out to them.

One by one, they turned away.

I went to my knees in front of them. "He told me he was eighteen. He approached me! We didn't do anything but kiss. I swear to you! I only kissed him."

"You will suffer for your sins." The steely voice of the judge boomed in my head, echoing over and over.

"You are an abomination, Stacy James, an aberration. You will burn in hell for what you have done!"

Blackness, such cold and utter blackness, sucked me down, spiraled around me, until no light, no air reached me.

I had done nothing! Even the kiss had been chaste. Why wouldn't they believe me?

Because they knew that I'd wanted to do more. So much more. I'd wanted him, and that desire now condemned me.

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Out of the bleak darkness, the two red eyes of the rat stared at me. His whiskers twitched as if he were smiling.

"You're a queer, and no one will ever believe you," he hissed all too gleefully.

I wept, lost.

* * *

I woke drenched in sweat, my heart pounding hard enough to jar its way out of my chest. It didn't surprise me I'd have the old nightmare again. It plagued me whenever I met someone interesting. Daylight flooded my bedroom as I rolled from the bed, stripping the sheets off the mattress as I went. If I brought Levi back here, I didn't want the scent of my nightmare on the sheets.

What had happened was a long time ago. I'd paid a high price for the only thing I'd been guilty of—gross stupidity. Twenty years, and people still remembered I'd been charged with the assault and battery of a boy younger than me. Not convicted. Charged.

It wasn't the charge they'd wanted to bring against me. They'd wanted to charge me with a sex offense. I'd gotten lucky and a gay attorney picked up my case, *pro bono*. I'd paid him, eventually, but no amount of money could express the depth of my gratitude for what he'd done.

He couldn't stop the whispers, though. Nothing could. In my mind, I still heard the low, sibilant hissing of their hateful voices as they'd branded me.

Well, I wasn't what they made me out to be—not then and

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not now.

I'd let my concern over how people perceived me rule my life for far too long. It was time I lived my life totally on my terms. There was something different about my attraction to Levi, something more than a carnal urge, although, heaven help me, that was pretty intense. I owed it to myself to figure it out.

I hopped in the shower and prepared to meet my date.

CHAPTER 3

Being forty might not be every gay man's dream, but I didn't mind it too much. The alternative to living each year as it came certainly held no attraction. Dying any time soon was not on my agenda. Nonetheless, I wondered if I were too old for someone fifteen years my junior. I suspected today would bring more questions, not answers.

I dressed for the ball game with special care, slipping into jeans that showed off my ass and a shoulder-hugging polo shirt with the home team logo on the front pocket. Levi had propositioned me so it seemed he thought I still had some sex appeal, but why take chances? I worked out on a regular basis and had a good body. Sometimes, overcome with nostalgia,

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I'd even run through the *kadas* I'd learned a lifetime ago at the *dojo*.

I had the height people noticed. Was showing it off to its best advantage vanity? Who cared if it was?

A younger man, that's who.

I put the top down on the 'Vette before I pulled out of the driveway. If I were going to show off, why not do it all the way?

Levi lounged in the cool shade of the entryway to the section of apartments where he lived. I slowed the Corvette to a stop in front of him. He flicked his cigarette away in a careless, practiced gesture before levering himself away from the concrete and sauntering towards me. He slipped on a pair of reflective sunglasses, hiding his eyes.

Though slender, his lazy swagger held confidence, and a bit of arrogance. Levi would fill out some more as he matured, but he'd never bulk up. His would be a wiry strength, deceptive in its power.

He sported a designer home team T-shirt that hugged his torso like a second skin and a pair of black denim jeans that molded the fabric to his long, lean thighs and showcased the outline of his genitals. My cock twitched, eager to lead me past my determination to take my time and get to know him before taking him to bed.

Levi pulled a ball cap from his back pocket and settled it over his unruly locks. Grinning, he hopped over the closed passenger door and landed in the seat. I refused to be baited.

Little did he know I'd jumped into the driver's seat like

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that a few times when the top was down, and I saw no reason to confess it to him. It was my car after all.

"I knew you'd say yes." He chortled gleefully.

"Just buckle your seatbelt, will ya?" I slipped the Corvette in gear and eased away from the curb. I'm sure Levi could read me like a book.

"Smoke 'em, old man."

I slowed for the turn onto the main street, eased in on the clutch, then popped it just enough to chirp the tires. Levi shook his head and peered over the top of his sunglasses at me.

"I knew you wouldn't. You're worried about the cops."

I snorted and drifted into the through lane. "I'm worried about the two-hundred dollar price tag on each tire."

Levi laughed and settled deeper into the seat and pushed his shades back up into place.

"So why didn't you email me back? Hey! You just passed the turn off!" Levi twisted in his seat, pointing over his shoulder at the on ramp to the Interstate.

"I've got to swing by my office and sign a paper," I replied, grinning at the worried look on his face.

"Mmm. Are you going to answer me?"

Maybe someday, but for now I thought the obvious would suffice.

"I'm not into computer sex. I needed my sleep. Besides, it's boring."

"So seeing me in person is just a cure for your boredom?" he shot back at me.

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“Bloody hell! Can’t you be quiet and let me drive?”

“Fuck you, Mister James.”

No, I thought, my determination to have him—today—increasing. *Fuck you, Levi Wright*. The question now became how soon? I swung onto the driveway of the little colonial house my business partner and I had converted into offices and parked the car.

“Quaint, Mr. James.”

It was actually. “It’s a very quiet neighborhood. Very private. We like it this way.”

I climbed out of the Corvette with Levi close on my heels. My pulse spiked. We were alone here, and temptation rode me hard.

Hard. That, too. He’d notice the bulge for sure. Maybe I hoped he would.

I unlocked the door and stepped into the stillness of the house. Levi closed the door behind us. I heard the deadbolt snick into place. My office was on the upper level. I motioned for Levi to follow me.

At the top of the stairs was a full bath. My business partner had the right side of the second floor, and I had the left. Each office was spacious, comfortable, and fully equipped. Mine had a work area, sitting area and the electronic boy toys of my choosing. The requisition was on my desk, as promised. I found a pen and signed, aware of Levi standing behind me. The crisp spice of his cologne wafted to me, borne on the cool air from the vents. I turned and met his gaze.

He stood still, motionless, as the light from the window

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formed a sunburst around him. His blue eyes searched my face with silent questions, ones I knew, although I was unsure about the answers. My lips tingled with the memory of his kiss. I reached out and gave his shoulder a light squeeze. The corner of his sensuous mouth twitched into a quirky, lopsided smile.

Low and husky, his voice made me shiver with longing. “You think I bite, Stacy James?”

I trailed my hand down his arm and grasped his wrist, pulling him a step closer. “What if I do, puppy? You don’t know a thing about me.”

The smile on his face widened. His gaze never left mine. “Sure I do. You’re the hottest old man who ever threw a punch to save my ass.”

I reached out with my other hand and tucked my fingers beneath his belt to yank him against me. Heat rolled off him in tiny waves, but the skin on his arm prickled with gooseflesh as I ran my fingertips across it.

“Call me old again, and I’ll show you what old can do.”

Levi licked his lips, taunting me. “So show me...*old* man.”

I pulled his lips to mine, until they almost touched. “You’re too eager,” I whispered.

His hand cupped my aching balls as his thumb ran across my bulging zipper.

“Eager? Me? You’ve got some nerve calling me eager.”

Quick as lightning, his hand snaked down the front of my jeans. His fingers closed around my erection. I struggled for breath as he teased me with a squeeze. Who really needed air?

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I grasped the back of his head and pulled his mouth to mine. The contact jolted through me, ripping a moan from deep in my chest that Levi echoed.

My arms went around him. His fingers tightened around my shaft. I squirmed, arching my hips to him in a silent plea to move his hand on me. The fiend refused, thrusting his tongue into my mouth instead. I answered in kind, delving into his heat. Stars danced behind my closed eyelids. Sweat broke out on my chest, under my arms. After what seemed an eternity, he moved his hand.

Slowly, oh so slowly, he stroked my shaft. I sucked in a lungful of air and unsnapped his jeans. No way was there room to slide my hand under his tight waistband without making space. Levi mumbled a “Yes” into my mouth. I found the tab of his zipper and eased it down.

His rigid cock dropped free into my waiting hand. I laughed in spite of the intensity of the moment. He’d forgone underwear, and I did know why. He’d hoped to surprise me to good effect, and he had. I wrapped my fingers around his cock and gauged his length and girth. Levi was a good eight inches, medium girth, and, to my surprise, uncut.

“How’d you miss the knife?” I asked, breathless, as I tore my lips from his. He blinked at me with eyes gone wide and black.

“What?”

I chuckled at his dazed expression and repeated my question.

“Does this matter? Take off your pants.” Levi pulled my

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shirt up. I released him to tug it back down. His quick fingers had my jeans unzipped and sliding off my hips.

“Not so fast. Weekend or not, four different people could stroll in here at any moment.”

Levi grasped my upper arms and backed me towards the sofa. My jeans dropped to the floor as the back of my knees made contact with the couch and I tumbled back onto the cushions. He went to his knees in front of me. He looked me in the eye.

“Do you care?” He wiggled his tongue at me and the blood surged hotly into my already straining cock.

Unable to form the words, I shook my head. He hooked his fingers under the waistband of my low-rise briefs, freeing my erection. Levi caressed my shaft. Pleasure rippled through me. I jerked as my arousal grew.

“Nice cock, Stacy James.” He pressed his thumb into the soft skin at the base and stretched his hand up my length. “Hmm. That’s a good eight, and I see you got the knife.”

I snorted at him and replied, using what little breath I had at the moment. “They didn’t ask me first.”

Levi rolled his thumb over the tip of my cock, then teased around the rim. God, it felt so good. He cocked an eyebrow at me.

“So, um, are you going to let me have my way with this?”

Every molecule of my being screamed yes. I ached to feel his mouth on me, to let him send me flying. And then I could do the same for him. Getting better acquainted was the purpose of the day after all. The problem, as I saw it, was that

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I wanted more than a quickie blowjob. I hesitated a moment too long.

His hand released my cock. He looked away, his eyes shadowed by what he must have perceived as a rejection. I pulled him up to me, sprawling out beneath his tense frame. I wrapped my arms around him and found his lips. Levi refused to return my kiss.

“Listen, Levi, I’m not kidding that my business partner could walk in. If he happens to drive by and sees the ’Vette, he’ll stop. I want you, and I don’t want to be interrupted.”

He levered himself up. His gleaming gaze held promise and desire.

“I’ll take that chance, Stacy James.” With that, he went to his knees again. The moist heat of his mouth enveloped me. I closed my eyes and gave myself over to him, needing what he offered more than I wanted to admit to myself.

With soft lips and teasing tongue, Levi tortured me. His calloused hand wrapped me in its secure grip. The first pleasure a man knows is at his own hand. It is never forgotten and is well learned. Levi took me there, rolling the soft outer skin of my shaft over its iron core and mixing practiced memories with the soaring excitement of a new touch.

His lips brushed my belly button, then trailed kisses to my nipples. The slow, easy movement of his hand never ceased. I floated higher, seeking release, yet delaying it to savor each stroke. His lips found mine, hot, demanding my surrender. I moaned into his mouth, the threshold racing upon me.

Levi went down on me again, laying his tongue flat against

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the mushroom of my glans, moving his lips in tandem with the skilful pressure of his hand. My muscles clenched to the point of pain. I buried my fingers in his dark locks and crossed the line into bliss.

My orgasm ripped through me, spiraling out from under Levi's touch. He stayed with me as I came in his mouth, never flinching, never giving me any quarter.

I didn't want any. I wanted the waves to batter me until there was nothing left but his mouth on me. Without warning, in the way of Mother Nature the Trickster, it was too much.

"Oh, God! Enough, Levi. Enough." My hand fell limply away from his neck. He chuckled, a low, wicked, self-satisfied sound. His palms caressed my thighs.

"Like that?" he asked, his voice low and rich.

I opened my eyes and blinked him into focus as I tried to catch my breath. "Not at all. Try again."

Levi chuckled again. "So do we go to the ballgame or back to your place?"

"You decide." I dragged him up into my arms. His body pressed to mine sent my thoughts away from mundane things like baseball. I hoped he'd opt for my place.

"I'm so hard it hurts," he mumbled against my lips. He met my kiss eagerly, and I let him taste my renewing desire for him even as I tasted his for me. I slipped my hand between us and wrapped my fingers around his erection. Laughter drifted up the stairs.

"Shit!" Levi rolled off me with the speed of a sprinter. "What the fuck are you? Psychic or something?" he snapped

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at me.

His hands shook as he zipped and straightened his clothing. My partner, Jeremy, called up to me as I snapped and zipped.

“Hey, Stace. Anything wrong?”

Hell, no. I'm just up here with my dick hanging out. I'd never tell him that. Jeremy had saved my life when the lynch mob had been ready to string me up. He'd taken me under his wing when my family cast me out. He was mentor and friend, and even though he might counsel me to be cautious with Levi, he'd laugh his ass off when he figured out just how deep my attraction to a younger man ran.

“I just stopped by to pick up something, Jeremy. We won't be long.”

Shit, indeed. I'd not intended to let him know I had Levi with me. Sure enough, the stairs creaked under his weight as he came up. I hopped to my feet and hastily tucked in my shirt. The air held the musk of semen, but I couldn't do a thing about that.

All wide-eyed curiosity, Jeremy paused in the doorway, leaning on the frame and absorbing the scene in front of him.

“Who's this?” he asked me.

Levi glowered at my side. “My name's Levi Wright. I'm a friend.”

Jeremy almost managed not to smile. Almost. His gaze met mine, full of amused concern. “I can see you're a friend. A very good one.” He laughed and turned away. “I'll talk with you later, Stace,” he called over his shoulder. He was still

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laughing when he closed the front door.

I had no doubt he'd talk to me—once he finished howling with glee that he'd caught me with my pants down.

“Who the fuck is he?” Levi pulled me to him and kissed me again. Already kissing him was natural, second nature, but no less exciting.

“Jeremy Mayfield. He used to be an attorney; now he dabbles.”

“Dabbles? In what?”

He deserved honesty, so I gave it to him. “Money and men.”

“So, you have an agreement with him?”

“He's my business partner. I have all kinds of arrangements with him. What are you getting at, Levi?”

Levi closed his eyes for a moment, then released me and backed away. I took in the tense lines of his body, the tight lips. His gaze slid past mine nervously, twice. He took a deep breath.

“Is he your lover?”

CHAPTER 4

In the twenty years I'd known Jeremy, no one had ever asked me that question about him.

"No, he's not. He never has been. Jeremy is a friend." I cupped Levi's chin and ran my thumb over his lips, and he finally looked at me. "I don't have a lover. If I did, I wouldn't be here with you."

"Trusts are broken every day, man."

"No shit." I kissed him, a light brush of my lips to his, relieved at the way he relaxed against me. His arms came around my waist and his head dropped to my shoulder. I held him, hoping he'd touch me again and wondering what he thought.

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High ideals are fine, but I would worry about them another time. The fact of the matter was, I was still horny, and so was Levi. What should have taken the edge off had instead left me wanting more—a lot more.

Levi gave my ribs a squeeze. “We should, um, go if we want to see the game.”

Damn. He didn’t believe me. Only time would show him the truth of my statement. I cupped what little ass he had and squeezed.

“Is that what you really want to do, Levi?”

“For now. Let’s go. You can tell me all about Jeremy at the ballpark.”

“I did just tell you all about him.” I held my arm out, motioning him to the door.

Being on our way was the best thing to do. If he needed to back off and make up his mind about my business partner, I’d have to allow it. I wanted to make a good start on...what? A relationship? A friendship? Whatever it developed into, right now I ached to have him, not see a ballgame.

I placed the signed form and a note that I might not be in the office tomorrow, but not why, on Stuart’s desk as we went out. Like any good executive assistant, he could pry the truth out of Jeremy.

Levi plopped his rock hard butt in passenger seat of the Corvette and crossed his arms over his chest. The flush that stained his cheeks could be embarrassment, but I doubted it. It was more plausible he still believed I’d lied about Jeremy. I leaned over and kissed him.

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“There’s your public show of affection,” I teased. He glared at me. Annoyance stirred inside me. “Okay, Levi. No balloons for you.”

“Fuck you.”

“Later, puppy.” I turned the key and the engine settled into a throaty purr.

“Stop calling me ‘puppy’ or your ass is going to hurt when I’m done with it.”

That comment didn’t sit well with me, even though I heard in his voice that it was an idle threat, the kind a friend would make, but never carry through on. I’d not been that intimate with a lover in a long time, rarely bottoming, and I didn’t think I’d give it up to Levi on our first date, no matter how strong the attraction to him. I could be wrong, though. It wouldn’t be the first time I was.

I stared at him until he looked at me. “I don’t know what you hope for, Levi, but you’d better lower your expectations of who is going to fuck whom.”

Those sharp blue eyes of his darkened to the color of smoke. “We’ll see, old man.”

“Yes, we will.” I checked out the front of his jeans, then grinned at him. He glanced at my groin and rolled his eyes. I started the car, glad to be back on better footing with him.

The give and take of our banter soothed my spirit in surprising ways. I realized that I’d never been able to engage in verbal sparring with most of my former sex partners. I’d not wanted to let down my guard that far. They’d sensed it and moved on after a few weeks, leaving neither of us with too

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many regrets.

Levi snugged his ball cap down tighter as the Corvette gathered speed. We merged into the sparse Sunday Interstate traffic. I loved the open highway and let the speed climb to just over the posted limit. Maybe one afternoon we'd take a drive north, where the traffic was even lighter, and let the 'Vette top out. What was one little speeding ticket?

Maybe I'd behave myself because if I got a ticket, Levi would laugh his ass off and I'd never hear the end of it.

I kept one eye on the road and one on Levi. He put the seat back as far as it would go and stretched out those long, lanky legs. Then, to my surprise, he leaned my way and rested his left hand on my thigh. I dropped my right hand off the steering wheel and slipped my fingers between his. He didn't look at me, but the corner of his mouth twitched.

We held hands like schoolboys until we reached the off ramp. I enjoyed every moment of the connection with him. When I'd been his age, I'd shied away from involvements, suffering from what I now thought of as a sort of post-traumatic stress induced numbness. I longed for the little things, the small touches, as much as I craved making love to Levi.

Every few minutes he squeezed my fingers. I wondered if the simple act of holding hands affected him as deeply. It wasn't a question I'd ask, though. Such information needed to be volunteered.

The ballpark was a few short city blocks from the highway, and in minutes I'd parked the car and we'd made our

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way through the gate. I pointed at one of the national brand concession stands. Levi nodded, pulled a twenty from his front pocket, and told me what to get him before he jumped over into the line for drinks.

Not wanting to injure his pride, or start an argument, I allowed him to spring for the food and beverages. He had asked me out after all.

We found our seats just as the first pitch struck the catcher's mitt. I didn't mind that the seats around us were vacant. We could talk without worrying about eavesdroppers on our little island.

Levi ate with the peculiar ravenous appetite of a fast metabolism, wolfing down his sandwich and fries in a few quick gulps. I shook my head. Gone were the days I could get away with that. I crumpled up my napkin and handed him all the trash to dispose of. When he returned, he draped his arm over my shoulders. Unaccustomed to indulging in public affection, I gave him a stern look. He smiled and left his arm where it was.

His arm resting along the back of the seat evoked something new in me. Always before I'd been the aggressor, the pursuer, the one to sit with my arm outstretched in a protective gesture. Now, I thought of it as a gesture of the equality I hoped that, in spite of his youth, we would share.

If the truth didn't scare him off. He burned to ask me questions. I saw it written all over him in the way he watched me, the quick tilt of his chin in my direction.

He could ask what he liked. How well I could answer, I'd

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have to discover along the way.

“So what’s your story, Stacy James? Are you going to tell me or am I going to have to extract it from you in pieces?”

The roast beef sandwich I’d consumed turned to lead in my stomach.

“That depends on your extraction methods.”

Levi ran his tongue over his lips. My cock twitched. That was one method that would work for sure. He winked at me.

“Let’s start with something interesting. You have a black belt.” Levi let out an ear-splitting whoop as the batter hit the ball to center field for a stand-up double.

“I used to practice taekwondo. I gave it up, except for the stretching exercises. They feel too good to quit.” I preferred not to tell him I’d given it up because the state’s attorney had used my martial arts ranking to charge me with assault and battery of an underage student. The same student who’d wrecked my life with false accusations.

But the only fair thing to do was tell him.

“You’re good at being evasive, old man. That was a ball, asshole!”

“Like the umpire can hear you,” I muttered.

Levi flashed me what I took to be his best, innocent look.

I laughed. Levi might be many things, but I bet he’d not been innocent for at least ten years.

“You might as well tell me, Stacy. I’ll just keep asking.”

“So, my only recourse to get you to shut you up is to confess my sins?”

A slow grin spread across his features. “A person’s sins are

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so interesting, you know. There is one other way to keep me quiet. Wanna go to the men's room?"

I tried to look stern, but his proposition struck me as amusing. I laughed again. It had been a long time since I'd laughed like this.

"No, I don't want to go, and my sins, such as they are, don't need to be shared."

Levi took a drink of his beer. "They must be some pretty goods ones since you refuse to talk about them."

"Let me just say I've not done one-tenth of the things I've been accused of."

He pounced on that, but I knew he would. The fact was, sooner or later, he had to know. Why not now, in a neutral setting? I could just get it over with and see how he reacted.

"So what have you been accused of?" He squeezed my shoulder.

"Are you sure you want to know my sordid history before I have my way with you?"

"Before is better than after. Stacy, are you HIV positive?"

A ball cracked on a bat. We rose with the other fans, clapping and shouting, as the baseball sailed into the upper deck seats for a homerun. When we sat, I put my arm around him.

"No, I'm not positive. Do you think I'd have allowed you to give me a blowjob like that if I were? Are you?"

"I just had my first test. Negative." He bumped his knee against mine. "I was scared."

I pressed my knee to his. "Yeah, my first test had me

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bouncing off the walls.” I jostled his shoulders. “They still do. Every fucking time, no matter how careful I am.”

He relaxed, almost imperceptibly. If I’d not been touching him, I wouldn’t have known it. Had he thought that was my hesitation? Relieved to have that conversation handled, I knew it was time just to blurt out the truth. Levi deserved to have his mind put at ease.

“Here it is, Levi. When I was twenty, I taught at the *dojo*. A buddy asked me to take his Saturday morning class because he was sick. One of his students came on to me. He told me he was eighteen. He wasn’t. He was sixteen. When I turned him down, he accused me of forcing him to have sex. They arrested me.”

Levi stared at me, his expression unreadable, blank. “Did you fuck him?”

“No! I did not!” I leaned forward, turning toward him in my seat. “I tried to be kind, tried to explain to him even though I was interested, it wasn’t proper for me to become involved with any student and I wouldn’t cross that line. We talked. I thought he was okay with it. Just before he left the *dojo*, he put his arms around my waist and gave me a hug. I hugged him back. I kissed his hair—I don’t know why.”

“They don’t arrest people for that,” Levi stated flatly.

He didn’t believe me. No one had, except Jeremy. The old familiar blackness roiled inside me. It was hopeless. I’d lost Levi before I’d had a real chance with him. The words stuck in my throat, but I forced them out.

“His father just happened to walk in right then, saw it, and

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went crazy. The boy couldn't admit to his parents that he was gay, so he said I'd...forced him. The parents rushed him to the hospital for an examination. They didn't find any evidence of any sort of sexual activity—surprise, surprise—but they did photograph the bruises on his ribs and back.”

“They did that right after a karate class?”

“Yeah. Of course the kid had bruises. You don't earn your next belt without a lot of bruises. To keep your head and defend yourself, you have to learn to ignore being hit.”

Levi looked out over the ball field. I hadn't a clue to what he thought or felt, of what the strange vibe coming off him meant.

“So they charged you with...”

“Assault and battery, thank God. It started out a lot worse. And Jeremy won a dismissal of all charges.”

He nodded. “But if you were innocent, how'd it get to trial?”

How indeed? Innocent until proven guilty didn't exist for anyone—straight, gay, male or female—suspected in a crime involving a minor.

“Life isn't fair, Levi. It never will be.”

CHAPTER 5

Levi fell silent after my confession. I didn't sense any withdrawal or distance in him. He kept his thigh against mine, applying subtle pressure to keep me aware of him. It left me grateful to any and all higher powers that cared, but something had changed. The constant fidgeting stopped. I attributed it to the fact it would take time for him to absorb the implications of my tale. At least he'd not have nightmares over it.

He watched the ball game and sipped his beer, letting loose the occasional whoop over a good play. At the top of the ninth inning, he turned to me, his expression unreadable. "We're gonna win the game. Do you want to head out?"

I wanted to know what he thought, if his attraction to me

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had dampened. Most of all I needed to know where he wanted to go from here. I brushed my fingers across the back of his dewy neck. I nodded. “Yeah, let’s go.”

He stretched with that catlike grace that seemed at odds with angular way he was put together, then rolled to his feet in a smooth, controlled motion. Levi held his hand out to me, offering to pull me up. I accepted his hand, which brought the smirk back to his face. It made me realize again the difference in our ages. What did he really want with a man so much older than himself?

We chatted about the game on the way out, stopping to listen as the announcers confirmed our home team had, in fact, won. Instead of putting the top down on the ’Vette, I opted for air conditioning. Once we were on the Interstate, I asked him where he wanted to go.

Levi’s hand snaked into my lap. “Where do you think?”

Relief washed through me, even as my body surged with renewed desire. His fingers found the tab of my zipper and tugged it down.

“You want me to wreck?” My heart raced faster than the car. The memory of his dark head bowed over me brought my cock to attention. I shifted in my seat, tacit permission for Levi to do as he wanted. He laughed, a clear, bright sound.

“Drive the car, old man.”

I grinned at him and pulled the zipper tab back up. He’d pay for teasing me like that.

Even with my confessions, I’d enjoyed the afternoon with him, reveling in the simple awareness of him beside me.

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Telling him my past had been the right thing to do. Now that he knew, I could relax and enjoy our time together, knowing he couldn't accuse me of hiding anything from him.

Levi whistled, soft and low, as the Corvette slowed to a stop in my driveway, waiting for the garage door to open all the way.

"Now this is what they call curb appeal," he said appreciatively.

I looked at the front of the house and tried to image seeing its dark brick, deep eaves, wide green lawn, and lush landscaping for the first time. It hadn't looked this good eight years ago when I'd purchased the place. Four years of hard labor had paid off.

"It's a bit much, but I like it." I switched off the engine and pressed the button to close the garage door. "I bought the place as an investment, but now, well, I like it here."

"I can see why," he muttered as he followed me into the breezeway. Glancing out at the backyard, he stopped and stared. I went to him.

"What is it?"

"I've always wondered how the other half lived. I make a good living at the shop, but nothing like this."

I slipped my arms around his waist, pulled him back to me, and pressed my pelvis to his ass so he could feel how much I wanted him.

"Don't let this place throw you. It's empty when you don't have anyone to share it with."

He wiggled his butt, then turned in my arms. "You gotta

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bed in this shack?"

"Several." I grabbed his hand and pulled him along. He grabbed the refrigerator handle on our way through the kitchen.

"Hey, I'm thirsty. What ya got in here?" Levi opened the door and snagged a bottle of water.

I didn't answer, just grabbed him and propelled him towards my bedroom. Levi kept up a steady stream of comments about the house. As soon as we stepped into my room, he stripped off his T-shirt.

He had the right idea. I flung my shirt in the general direction his had flown. To hell with my fantasy of slowly undressing him, peeling his clothes off to reveal his skin inch by glorious inch. I wanted him naked. Now.

Levi hopped on one foot as he pulled off a sneaker. I wrapped my arms around his waist and tumbled him onto the bed, pressing him down beneath me. He flipped me over and grinned down at me. I locked my legs around his hips and rolled us again.

We wrestled about, grunting and insulting each other's manhood until we'd managed to tear all our clothes off, and clear the bed of comforter and pillows. I rose above him and placed my hand in the center of his chest.

"Be still. Let me look at you."

His chin lifted. Male pride flickered in his eyes, and his body was something to be proud of. Young and strong, he'd received some good genes. The center of his chest sported maybe twenty darks hairs, if that, but below his navel a thick,

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narrow line led my eyes down to the wiry nest at the base of his penis. His lean thighs were sparsely pelted and spread with a loose, careless abandon. I paused to admire his perfect proportions.

With most of him browned by the sun, a paler swath across his pelvis showed his skin was fair for someone with such dark hair. I traced the path of several visible blue veins across his hips. His cock, full and rosy against that white strip, rose to coax me, as if asking me to trace the prominent veins that traversed its length. I touched the only scar I saw on his tanned torso, a raised welt just above the pale skin across his pelvis.

“Barbed wire. I rode my bike right into it when I was nine,” he told me, rolling his eyes.

Those eyes closed as I ran the tip of my index finger down his erection. I moved to cover his body with mine, finding his mouth again. Levi opened to me, our tongues dancing, seeking, and moving us to the moment where I would claim him.

I tore my lips from his, able to bear the loss by the knowledge of his need and mine. I trailed kisses down his neck and across his chest. The scent of male musk, so unique to him, burned itself into my being. Levi murmured my name, and I slid my mouth down over him.

His long fingers cupped the back of my head as I pleased him. I took him in, deep throat, and hummed, feeling the answering vibrations rumble through him. His foreskin pulled back nicely and I teased the sensitive spot on the underside of the head. He mumbled something incoherent. I slipped my

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hand between his thighs and teased beneath his sac. I tasted the sweet-sour drop his body released and changed my approach to slow him down.

Breathless now, Levi called me a few names. It didn't matter. His reprieve would be short-lived. I knew what he liked. He'd given me a guide in my office. I wrapped my fingers around his shaft and used my tongue on him as he had on me. It didn't take long.

His body tensed. The pressure of his fingers on the back of my neck increased. His cock pulsed in my hand, and without a sound, he came in my mouth. I stayed with him until his hand dropped away, and with one last flick of my tongue to his glans, released him.

The late afternoon sun poured across the bed, turning his skin golden, highlighting the subtle lines of his muscles. His breathing slowed. The carnal need simmering in my groin bubbled up. I crawled over him, reached in the nightstand, and grabbed what I needed. His eyes opened and he levered himself up on his elbow. Levi held his hand out for the condom.

"Let me put it on you."

I handed it to him and he rose up to kiss me. His nimble fingers rolled the latex down over me. I kissed him again.

"Roll over, Levi."

He flashed me a lopsided grin, flipped over and wiggled his butt at me. I smacked his flat ass and he howled.

"Oh, baby! Beat me!"

I spanked him again. "Oh, baby, be careful what you ask

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for.”

He snickered until a glob of cold lube landed on his butt. Levi grabbed a pillow off the floor and eased it under his chest as I spread the gel where we needed it. I pushed his knees open.

“Levi, you have bottomed before, haven’t you?”

“Now you ask me?”

I tapped his ass again. “Just tell me.”

“Would you just hurry up!”

This wasn’t something that could be rushed, no matter how eager both of us were. I slid my cock into the dark crevice between his flanks. He jumped; his muscles quivered. I applied a bit more lube and tossed the tube on the bed where I could reach it if necessary. I pushed against the constricting ring of muscle. I felt him respond, a backward pressure. His hips lifted, and I slipped past the first barrier. Levi moaned as his body danced around my invading flesh. I grasped his hips and told him to relax. He did, and I slid into him.

Hot and tight...it was all I could do not to howl my victory. Sweet, fresh arousal jolted through me, stealing my breath and hazing my awareness to everything but those few inches where my body claimed his. I gathered my wits and began to move, with Levi’s whispered words of encouragement guiding me.

Within moments, my climax hovered. My balls drew up. My cock pulsed and swelled, growing even harder. Levi urged me on, his voice hoarse. The words were lost to me, all but the fact he wasn’t telling me to stop. I pulled him to his knees and

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braced myself over his back, one hand on the bed and one hand around his dick. His hand covered mine, jerking him off in a short, fast rhythm. My hand and body moved together, driving us. He moaned, his body shuddering under mine. It was all I needed to fall over the edge. I reached for the blackness and the stars, borne upward into bliss, but aware I didn't go alone.

I dropped back into myself, preternaturally aware of the texture of his back against my chest, of his body fisted around mine. He trembled in my arms. We were both drenched with sweat. The sharp tang of semen rose around us. Levi groaned, a spent, tired sound. I kissed the back of his neck.

"Go down," I urged him, easing to the bed with him and pulling him with me to lie on our sides. I spooned around him, reluctant to give up his body, savoring the feel of him in my arms. "Are you okay, Levi?"

"Yeah," came his muffled reply. He took a deep breath, then blew it out. The quivering muscles in his arms stilled. He inched his sweaty back away from my just as sticky chest. I carefully withdrew from him and rolled away. I tapped his hip.

"C'mon. Shower time."

"Fuck off. I can't move," he grouched, crawling to the edge of the bed.

He'd join me, I knew it, but I didn't linger to coax him to move faster. I got the shower started and stepped under the hot spray. I lifted my face into the stream and let it beat on me. Levi's arms slipped around my ribs. His head dropped against my shoulder blade. A contented sigh drifted out of him.

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Like all shining victories, I knew the moment wouldn't last. They never did, so I would savor this moment, committing everything about it to memory. Whether the feeling would last a day, a year, or only a few seconds, was unimportant. For now, my world sparkled with contentment and hope.

For a moment, I might even be willing to confess I'd fallen in love with Levi.

If I believed in love.

CHAPTER 6

Showering together brought new tendencies of Levi's to light. He hogged the spray and he did it with a big smile on his face. We jostled about, going round and round like chickens on a spit. Of course, we had more fun than the birds.

Levi grabbed a washcloth and lathered me up. My chest, back and ass all got his special treatment, but no amount of coaxing cajoled him to wash my cock until I'd promised him dinner. He grinned and shook his head, sending water and shampoo suds flying, then dropped to his knees to give me the most comprehensive cleansing I'd had in a long time.

I managed to scrub him down a bit, but he seemed in too good a mood to stand still. By the time we finished cavorting,

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the bathroom floor resembled a floodplain. I pointed at the linen closet and Levi tossed a stack of towels on the floor so I could kick them about.

We left them to soak up the water. My housekeeper would mutter at me, but I didn't care. The shower had been worth it. I felt clean and new. And happy.

God, when had I been this happy? I couldn't remember. I didn't even flinch when Levi requested pizza for dinner. I would have taken him out to eat, but he had a point that getting dressed again would be a waste of time. I tossed him a pair of sweatpants, noting with some private amusement that he looked sexy, even in fleece. I grabbed two beers out of the refrigerator and led him to the media room to relax and wait for the delivery person. Levi whistled at the sight of all the electronics before he snatched up the first remote control he saw and started pushing buttons.

"What's this to anyway? Nothing's happening."

I plucked it from his grasp. "Nothing will happen with that one. No batteries."

He shook his head. "You're battery challenged, aren't you? First the keyless for the 'Vette and now this."

"No, I'm not, smartass. Rechargables. On the shelf. Get two."

Levi leered at me. "Bossy guys turn me on."

I blew out an audible sigh. He laughed and retrieved two charged batteries, as requested. We found a sports recap show on the television and got cozy in the middle of the sofa. My body thrummed with awareness of him, how his thigh lay

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against mine, of his dark head resting on my shoulder as he crunched down.

When had I ever felt this at ease with anyone? I knew the answer—never—so why did I keep asking myself that question? Why couldn't my subconscious be at ease? Had I grown too jaded, too cynical, to believe I deserved a shot at happiness? Levi squeezed my knee.

“So what's a rich dog like you do for a living?”

“First off, I'm not a 'rich dog.' Comfortable, yes. Rich, no.”

Levi downed a few swallows of his beer. “I'm a mechanic. That's not in your league.”

“There's nothing wrong with being a mechanic if that's what your passion is. I love working on engines. I just never seem to have the time.”

“Because you're busy making money?”

“So it seems, apparently. Jeremy and I control a holding company that has myriad vested interests.”

“Doubletalk, old man.”

Correct, to a degree. I wondered at Levi's interest in my business.

“The details of my businesses will bore you out of your mind. Do you really want to know?”

He looked up at me. “Hey, I'm showing interest in what's important to you. I thought that's what I'm supposed to do to show you I care.” He grinned. “Other than sucking you off, that is.”

My heart stuttered at his words. Did he care? It was too

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soon to question him closely on it. His last comment struck me as funny and I laughed softly. “Okay. Here’s a tidbit for you. I’m part owner of Mayfield Towers. Just don’t expect your rent to go down.”

“No more blowjobs for you.” Levi snickered as his fingers dipped below my waistband. The doorbell rang, saving me from showing him the error of that threat.

I paid for the pizza and we ate in front of the television, discovering we were fans of different stock car race teams. To my amusement, Levi assured me that I was perfect in every other way.

He took the leftovers to the kitchen and brought us each another beer. I wasn’t sure I wanted another one and set it, unopened, on the coffee table. He set his bottle beside mine. His gaze met mine, then flicked towards the hall, and the bedroom beyond. My pulse quickened.

I grabbed his hand and pulled him behind me, unresisting. He hopped along, shedding the sweatpants as he went.

I laughed. “Are you in a hurry?”

The pants sailed past my head.

“Do you know how difficult it is to get laid properly in this town?” Levi landed on the bed, bouncing. He was already hard, his cock bobbing.

I stepped out of my sweats and kicked them aside. “Yeah, I know. It’s damned near impossible.” I flopped down beside him.

He threw his leg over me, pinning me to the bed. “Look, Stacy, my family doesn’t know. I’m not ready to tell them yet

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either.”

“That you’re gay? It’s not my place to say anything, Levi.” I kissed him, savoring the increased awareness that sparked between us. I nibbled my way along his jaw line. “Nor am I going to encourage you to tell them if you don’t want to.”

Levi pulled away. “Are you all the way out?”

“I don’t walk up to people and introduce myself and say, ‘Oh, by the way, I’m gay,’ if that’s what you’re asking. I don’t deny or confirm—unless asked. Then I’m honest about it.”

He looked pensive, then unsure. “Your family?”

My family. The pain welled up inside me. I knew it always would when I thought of them. Telling Levi wouldn’t help my situation, or his, but he should know. The unimaginable might happen in that we could meet a member of my family out somewhere. I didn’t want to thrust him into a certain unpleasant situation without background information.

“Levi, I’ve not seen my parents in twenty years. After my arrest, they disowned me. Totally. How could their only son be homosexual? They couldn’t handle it.”

His arms came around me. “I’m sorry, Stacy. Jesus, that’s cold.” He hugged me. “So Jeremy is a father figure?”

I kissed him, laving his lips with my tongue. I suspected he was just young enough to have a lot of insecurities about the various kinds of relationships gay men had.

“Jeremy is a friend. You know—f-r-i-e-n-d. Just because we’re both gay doesn’t mean we turn each other on.” I rolled towards him. My fingers closed around his shaft. “Don’t you have any gay buddies?”

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He snorted. "In this town? I don't think so." His hips moved sinuously against the pressure of my hand on him. His eyes fluttered closed. A low moan rumbled in his throat.

I knew what he meant about the difficulty of finding gay friends locally. Our county was by and large rural, and the gay community was small and very tight-knit. Levi had some sexual experience, so it seemed obvious he'd found someone to his liking. But it could be that he'd gone to one of the nearby metro areas, about an hour's drive east or south, to the gay clubs.

I nibbled on his earlobe and teased his cock, rolling the velvety skin over his glans. "You like that?"

"You'd better do it a few more times so I can decide."

"Ha. Ha." My money said Levi wanted more than a hand job. I knew with a sense that had developed in selecting sexual partners that he didn't bottom often. He wanted me—needed me—to keep things between us on an even keel.

I also knew that as he matured such keeping score mentality would cease. I wondered again what he wanted with someone so much older than himself.

Did he need a teacher? A guide? I had no reservations fulfilling that role for him, but it cast a pall on my hopes for a future with him. A young stud like Levi would someday leave the aging stallion for green pastures. It was our base nature. His softly asked question brought me out of my reverie.

"What's wrong, Stacy?"

My gaze flicked to his worried blue eyes. It would behoove me to remember he had great instincts and even

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better powers of observation.

“I’m thinking of things to do to you is all.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I’m thinking the same thing.” Levi reached out with a long arm and opened the nightstand drawer, pulling out a string of foil packets.

I laughed at him. “That’s ambitious, puppy! Six times?”

He twisted around and bit my ass. I howled in surprise and brought my hand down firmly on his. Levi yelped and smacked my right buttock with some force.

“This isn’t a good idea, Levi. Someone could get hurt.”

“Yeah, old man. You!” He pinned my arms down and straddled my hips. He reached for the condoms, and I flipped him onto his back. He growled at me, doing his best to sound menacing.

“Get off me, Stacy.”

I grinned at him, then licked his lips. God, he tasted good, like pizza, beer, and everything right in the world. I released his arms, reached for a packet, and sheathed him in latex.

“Go easy, Levi. It’s been a while.”

He nodded, lifting his arms to me. “Come down here.”

I stretched out on top of him, slipping my arms beneath his shoulders. His legs locked with mine as our lips met. I shuddered with anticipation as Levi thrust his tongue into my mouth. Sweat broke out on my body as he teased me with unhurried kisses.

With an easy tensing of muscle, Levi rolled us to the center of the bed. With his hands and his lips, he caressed my body, finding spots that made me sigh with longing. My cock

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throbbed with each beat of my heart. My sac was tight against my body. I slipped my hand between us to grasp his erection. He pulled away, whispering in my ear that if I touched him, he'd come. The knowledge he was so aroused jolted through me, stealing my breath. I kissed him roughly, as he shifted his weight. When he rose above me, I looked at his features, sharpened with his arousal.

I grabbed the lube and shot a generous amount into his palm. He rubbed his hands together, warming the gel, then spread it over my erection, teasing me. My eyelids fluttered closed on the wave of pleasure that rolled up through my belly, then sprang open as his fingers spread the gel around my balls, and lower.

When had I ever ached to be penetrated like this? I couldn't remember a time. I'd tolerated the act, even enjoyed it when it had been done with skill, but I'd feared the intimacy of opening myself that much to another person. Like everything else about my budding relationship with Levi, this was different. I wanted to know him every way possible.

"Do you want to roll over?"

I touched his face. "No. I want to see your face when you come."

Levi moaned, a low, tight sound that made me wonder if he was going last long enough to get inside me. I lifted my legs to his shoulders and forced myself to relax. He came to me then, slowly pressing into my flesh. Dozen of tiny muscles rippled around his invading hardness as the tip of his penis slipped past the tight barrier. Inch by inch he took me, and bit

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by bit I yielded to him, until I thought I could take no more of such incredible sensation. I blew out a deep breath and he was inside me.

Using more care than I would have thought possible for him, he began to move. The pleasure of it about undid me. I held my hands up to him and he laced his fingers through mine. I watched him climb, each step higher echoed through me. His chest flushed red as a single bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face.

The room seemed stifling around us. Only the sounds of our lovemaking broke the still air. Every time he withdrew, he ripped a moan from my throat. I could no more stop the noise than stop his rhythmic movements within me. Nor did I want to.

How long we embraced, I couldn't judge. A few minutes, an hour, or a fleeting few seconds, it mattered not. I came alive, reveling in the give and take of it, in the masterful control he exerted over the act. He was mine to command, mine to demand surrender. And I was his.

Levi's gaze locked with mine. He shook as his lips formed my name. His hips thrust faster. Those gorgeous blue eyes glazed over. He jerked into me, his body pulsing within mine. I pulled my right hand out of his grasp, wrapped it around my straining cock and fell into bliss with him. My climax slammed my system in waves and carried me into that welcomed, fleeting darkness.

I ceased to feel the sheet beneath me, or hear anything but our strained breathing. He filled me, and I held him safe in a

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tiny world that held only those few inches of flesh that joined us. We created a new realm just for us, yet one we could never truly own. The real world was too powerful, and awareness always overpowered those fleeting moments of living outside the body.

Levi groaned, the sound of a man so spent he doubted his ability to move. He looked at me, concern evident in his gaze as he withdrew from my body. I eased my legs down to the bed and took a deep breath. I needed oxygen. He sat back on his heels, staring at me, a dazed expression on his face.

“What is it, Levi?”

He shrugged and swallowed once, hard.

“I never did that with a man before.”

CHAPTER 7

Of all the things he could have said, I never expected that. He looked at me. Sheepish didn't begin to describe the look on his face. *Good Lord*. I shuddered to think what he'd be like when he learned a few things. Could my body take it? I did hope so.

I was surprised, but I wasn't speechless, not by a long shot.

"You little puppy. I should beat you. Are you lying to me? You didn't do that like a first-timer."

Levi perked up. His eyes lit with questions. "So I did okay?"

"Go start the shower." I closed my eyes.

Gentle, questing hands caressed my thighs. "Stacy, I need

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to know if you're hurt."

I opened one eye and looked at him. "No, I'm not hurt." I pointed at my groin. "I'm limp."

"Oh, fuck. Be stubborn."

I grabbed him before he hopped off the bed, pulling him down to me. He struggled against me for a moment, then collapsed on my chest.

"I'm fine, Levi. Better than fine, but I wonder if there's anything else you'd like to tell me?"

He tensed. Something akin to premonition slithered down my spine, chilling me. The pretty bubble I'd let my imagination form around us—an "us" I'd hoped would be—burst. I was so flattered a younger man would give me a second look, I'd lost sight of the real world. Today would be nothing more than a nice interlude highlighted by great sex, not the foundation for a future together.

I mourned the loss of it. I craved having someone in my life, although I knew myself well enough to know not just anyone would do. Call me particular or call me snobbish. The connection to Levi was what I'd hoped for during the long, lonely years. The truth hurt, but I'd survive the disappointment.

I knew that about myself, too.

My years of quick fucks without expectations or attachments were behind me. Levi's time for that was now.

Levi's gaze slid nervously away from mine for a moment before returning.

Damn. I smiled at him, determined not to ruin what

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remained of the day. I squeezed the back of his neck. “Go start the shower, Levi.”

He nodded and rolled off the bed. I waited until I heard the hiss of the spray before I joined him. Turning, he backed me to the wall, all eager young male.

“Wanna go another round?” His soapy hands traveled over my genitals.

I snorted. “Sure. Give me an hour.”

Levi grinned and fondled my cock again. I responded to his touch, lengthening, but I knew after our day it wouldn’t get far.

“You don’t tell time well, do you, old man?”

“It’s time to relax a bit, Levi. We need to have a chat.”

The smile faded from his face replaced by something else—guilt. He offered no argument, just nodded. I lathered and rinsed, then stepped out of the shower leaving him there. I made my way back to the kitchen and grabbed the beer I hadn’t wanted earlier. Thunder rumbled to the southwest, so I stepped out into the screen porch instead of the patio. Levi found me there a few minutes later. He took the chair across from me.

“What do you want to talk about, Stacy?”

I saw no reason to dance around it. “I know you’ve lied to me, Levi. I just don’t know about what. Perhaps you should enlighten me.”

“Listen, Stacy, it’s not what you think.”

“Oh? You know what I think?”

“Okay, here it is. I was afraid if you knew I didn’t have,

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you know, much experience with men, you wouldn't wanna fuck around."

"For God's sake, Levi, answer me now. Had you done *any* of this with a man before tonight?"

The look on his face could only be described as the classic deer caught in the headlights expression.

The little son-of-a-bitch. Spanking him grew more appealing with each passing minute, and it wasn't the kind he'd enjoy. He looked worried, and he had good reason.

"Are you pissed off at me, Stacy?"

"What the fuck do you think?" I thundered at him. At least he had the smarts to look surprised, and wary. "I want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Now!"

"Can I get a beer first?"

"No!" I slammed my half-empty bottle down in front of him. "Drink that. It's not anywhere near enough for what I need."

"I'm not, um... I mean I, um...wasn't a virgin before we..." His voice trailed off.

All at once, the whole thing struck me as funny. I refused to let it show. Levi needed to suffer a bit for almost breaking my heart.

Okay, my silly insecurities weren't his fault, but, damn it! I'd have wooed him differently and used a bit more romantic approach to it for his sake.

"Not a virgin, huh?" I noted the splash of red across his cheeks. "So you do girls, too. You want to tell me about that?"

He squirmed in his chair. "There's not much to tell. I had a

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girlfriend for a while.”

“Did you like sex with her?”

“Yeah, I guess. It was nice enough.” His gaze met mine, full of uncertainty. He swallowed, hard, then took a quick sip of his—my—beer. “She liked to try different things, but she didn’t turn me on. Not like guys do.”

I wondered if she knew, and if he still maintained a relationship with her. I didn’t know if he needed my advice, or if he’d even listen to me, but I’d give it regardless. The girl deserved the chance to get on with her life, and I wouldn’t share him.

“Levi, do you still see her?”

He shook his head. “No. Someone else screwed her better, and she liked it more.”

“It happens, gay or straight.” The devil on my shoulder chortled with glee in my ear. Straight-faced, I listened and asked my next question. “So, Levi, how do you feel about someone screwing her better?”

Annoyance flashed in his eyes. “Like an ass. Like she’s a nice girl and I didn’t do right by her. How do you think I feel?”

That guilt was something I couldn’t help him with. I shrugged. “I don’t know. I never made it with a woman.”

His mouth dropped open. The expression on his face, a mix of surprise, irritation, and realization I teased him, broke the control I had on my laughter. I roared. Levi was not amused.

“Fuck you!” he managed to sputter.

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I reined in my laughter, but I couldn't wipe the grin off my face. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry I teased you, but not very. We still need to talk about a few things."

The high color returned to his cheeks. Levi's voice was tight with carefully controlled emotion.

"Is this where you tell me I'm too young for you and you take me home?"

It was far too late for such prudence, and I knew it. I held out my hand to him, palm up. Did he understand what I asked with that gesture, that it was invitation...and offering? It seemed like forever until he lifted his troubled gaze to my mine.

"Levi, this is where you tell me what you're doing here, and what you want from me."

"I don't know how to answer you, Stacy."

That didn't surprise me. "There's a big difference in our ages. You're an adult, but it will concern your parents if they find out we're seeing each other. Someday, that will matter to you."

He bristled at that. "Is that all you see when you look at me? Some young kid? So I'm younger than you. So what?"

I shook my head. "Your age isn't all I see, but it's there. I see a sexy young man I'd like to know better, who I'd enjoy spending time with. What do you see when you look at me?"

Levi looked at my hand, still outstretched to him. "So you're not dumping me?"

"There's something between us, Levi. Call it chemistry for now. I want to explore it, but you have to want it, too."

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He looked out over the darkening back yard. The last rays of sunshine slipped under the approaching storm clouds, casting the remaining daylight in an almost eerie golden-green glow. “And when you’re tired of ‘exploring’ me? What then?”

“If you want guarantees, buy a new car because you don’t get them with relationships.”

The words came out brusquer than intended, but I wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t know. Maybe he hoped I had some sort of magic wand. I wished I did. I’d zap him with it and make his fears go away.

Hell, I’d hit myself with it while I was at it.

“I don’t need a guarantee, Stacy.” With those words, he finally laid his hand in mind. I closed my fingers around his and I lifted his knuckles to my lips. Surprise suffused his features.

“Levi, you can stay the night, if you like, or I can take you home. You’ll have to let me know what you need to do. I don’t have to be anywhere in the morning for business, but I suspect you might.”

His hand tightened around mine. “And if I spend the night?”

He didn’t have to say the words. I knew he would stay, and we’d make love again. It wouldn’t be as intense, we both needed to back off, but it would be great. I squeezed his hand.

“Then you spend the night.”

Levi nodded and reached for the beer, finishing it in three swallows. I reluctantly released his hand and stood, motioning for him to lead the way. I wanted him again. The urge heated

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my blood, but I did wonder if I could get it up again. I'd had quite a day already.

He rolled to his feet without a word and headed back inside the house, while I made sure the screens were secure against the gusting wind. Lightning flashed as I closed the door.

Pausing long enough to get two bottles of water, I ushered Levi to the bedroom. He flopped on the mattress and looked at me expectantly. I flipped off the hall light and joined him on the bed. Rain pounded the windows as the storm broke over us. We inched to the center of the bed, getting comfortable in a jumble of arms and legs. My body responded, my erection steadily growing as arousal flowed through me.

I touched every bit of his smooth, dewy skin that I could reach. Levi's hands were on me, learning all the lines and angles of my frame, exciting me as his touch promised bliss.

There were so many things I wanted to say to him, reassurances that might be helpful to him. I said nothing, not wanting to influence his decisions, save one, and that was immediate. I wrapped my fingers around his stiff cock.

Levi mumbled something into my mouth before trailing kisses down my neck. Lower he went, all the way down, encasing me with soft, moist lips. I tugged on his hair to get his attention. He released me with a little pop. I shifted around to where I could reach him, idly fondling him as he pleased me in the midst of the thunderstorm.

The pressure in my groin built as he sucked me. I murmured encouraging words, but he would not be hurried.

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This exquisite torture would be done to me at his pace. Every time my arousal jolted up a step, he changed the rhythm until I finally could take no more. I came, blinded by the stars that danced behind my closed eyelids. I floated back to reality and the desire to give him what he'd given me.

He cried out as I slid my wet lips over his cock. I teased the tip, running my tongue around the rim and over the sweet spot underneath. As he'd done to me, I altered my approach every time I sensed his arousal growing. When my name was a mere whisper on his lips, a low moan begging me for release, I gave it to him. His body arched off the bed and his semen filled my mouth. I stayed with him until he stilled, then gathered him into my arms.

The storm ended. The night grew quiet. We lay still in the middle of the bed, sated, drifting toward sleep. What the morning would bring remained a mystery, but tonight I slept with hope.

CHAPTER 8

“Fuck off, will ya.”

With that little growl, the object of my affection pulled the sheet over his head and inched away from me. It didn't surprise me to discover Levi was not a morning person. I pulled him into the curve of my body and nibbled his ear. It didn't help. He remained surly.

“Bugger off, I said!”

“My, my. What an idea.” I caressed his buttocks on my way to tease his sac from behind. He whined louder.

“Let me sleep. I need rest. You kept me awake half the night, you old perv.”

I chuckled and kissed his bristly cheek. “What time to do

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you have to be at work?"

Levi groaned. "Seven."

It was almost eight. I didn't remember hitting the snooze button, but obviously I had—several times. I tapped his hip. "Oops, lover, you're late."

"Bite me." He rolled and bounced around until he faced me, glaring at me with bloodshot orbs. "Got a phone in this dump?"

I didn't comment that for a young man he looked rough in the morning, merely handed him the cordless receiver. He proceeded to climb over me on his way to the bathroom. I heard him talking to someone. Levi reappeared a few minutes later, phone still at his ear, his turgid penis leading the way.

"I'll do it for two grand. Final. And no, that head does not need machined, but it will be. Inside the tolerance may work for you, asshole, but I want that bitch perfect. Noon."

He switched off the handset and tossed it on the bed. I pushed the sheet down to show off my morning hard-on. Levi rolled his eyes and leaped over me to land on his back on the mattress. He grinned at me, his smile brighter than the morning sun that lit the world outside our window.

"I'm all yours, Mr. James."

I pinned him beneath me. "You think I'm your teacher?"

His chin lifted. "Yeah. So instruct me."

"First you put your mouth on me, then you..."

Levi snickered, holding up his hand to stop me. "I got it."

With that, he licked my nipple and slid down to my belly button, tickling me with his wet tongue. I urged him lower. He

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didn't disappoint me, licking the length of my cock, lapping at me until I couldn't lay still. His moist lips slid down over the rim of my cock.

I smacked his firm butt cheek as Levi settled down to the business at hand. I closed my eyes and marveled at how he instinctively knew what pleased me the most. For someone lacking experience with men, he knew what he was doing. I let the sensations rippling out from under his touch rule me. It didn't take long.

The orgasm grabbed me, lightning fast. It surged up and spilled over, leaving me panting and damp. Levi gave my penis one last swipe with his tongue and flopped down beside me. I slipped my hand between us and found his erection. His hand covered mine, moving in long, slow arcs. I took over the movement. Levi's eyes closed.

He lay against me, then grew restless as his arousal heightened. His breath caught in his throat. His body tensed. I moved my hand faster. A raspy moan rolled out of him. I kissed him, a light touch of my mouth to his, and he came without making another sound. I held him until he relaxed in my arms. He sighed and nuzzled my neck.

The stillness of the morning surrounded us. Muted sounds from the street reached us, but we lay cloaked by some invisible shield protecting us from the world outside. The only sound that mattered to me came in the form of Levi's easy breathing.

Where we touched, our skin warmed, but neither of us moved. The air conditioning cycled on, cooling us and

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bringing the scent of our lovemaking to me, and still we remained motionless, holding each other. He lay so still I wondered if he'd drifted back into sleep.

I savored the perfection of the moment, of just being able to have my arms around him. Levi personified energy in motion, and such inertia probably didn't happen often. He sighed, a soft, contented sound so at odds with the brash, ballsy young man who'd soared across the hood of that 1967 Camaro two nights ago. I knew then what I had to offer him—experience, stability, understanding—attracted him as much as the great sex we'd shared.

The cold ball of fear hovering under my heart dissipated. Whether or not Levi was aware on a conscious level he searched for those things didn't matter. Someday he would, for better or worse, and I would put his fears at ease that I understood. I liked the idea of being lover and mentor.

One sound did manage to intrude on my peaceful idyll. Levi's stomach rumbled, several times. I kissed his damp forehead and rose to face the day, leaving my companion snoring while I showered.

* * *

Levi sauntered into the kitchen, nose in the air, sniffing like a hound hot on the trail. I put a plate in front of him and took in his astonished gaze.

"You cook?"

"I live alone, puppy. It's cook or starve."

He shrugged and picked up his fork. His hand shook.

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“What’s wrong with your hand, Levi?”

He drilled me with an icy blue glare. “I need a smoke.”

I’d not seen him with a cigarette since I picked him up yesterday. The wisest thing to say was nothing.

“Put that in the sink when you’re done. I’m gonna go get dressed, then I’ll drive you home.”

I left the kitchen so he could go out back and indulge his addiction, if he needed to. I hoped he could tough it out, but I made up my mind not to nag at him if it proved hard for him to permanently quit the habit.

Take him home. I didn’t want to do that. Everything in me rejected the idea of letting him go. It was my fear talking, and I knew it. What if I took him home and never saw him again?

What if that did happen? My world would be duller somehow, grayer. I’d lived through much worse, but I didn’t want to live through the disappointment lurking in my kitchen. I plopped down on the bed and surveyed the wrecked sheets.

Since when had I indulged in such pessimism? Years ago I’d been given a second chance to have a life, and I’d vowed not to squander it. So what was my problem?

Levi was a handsome stud...and much too young for me. That was my problem. I couldn’t seem to move past it, and if I didn’t, I’d lose my chance of having him in my life.

“Penny for your thoughts.” Levi lounged against the doorframe. He pushed off and came to sit beside me on the bed. “So is this where you tell me to have a nice life?”

“No, this is where I ask you to come back tonight, if you’d like.”

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He smiled and nodded. "I'd like."

I shivered even as my skin flushed hot. He'd come back, and I'd hold him again. The day loomed long and lonely. I'd get through it—somehow.

Levi motioned over his shoulder at the pillows. "I could call the shop. Blow off the day. We could fuck like rabbits all morning."

"Don't tempt me too far, Levi. I've got responsibilities today. So do you. I'm not going anywhere. I'll be home after seven."

He sighed, but I sensed his agreement. His gaze met mine, open and honest. "You're gonna work yourself all nuts over this, aren't you, Stacy?"

"Can't fool you for a moment, can I?"

"No. And don't forget it." He draped his arm around my shoulders. "You're not too old for me. Your so-called record doesn't bother me, and the size of your bankroll can't buy me. So it must be the sex that'll bring me back."

I leaned over and kissed him. He tasted of strawberry jelly and orange juice without any trace of tobacco. He smiled against my lips, then hopped to his feet.

"Stacy, we need to go. If we don't, we're going to have to get naked again."

He had a point. I took his hand and led him from the bedroom.

We didn't talk much on the drive to his garage. I suspect his mind had moved on to whatever job he had waiting for him. I didn't mind, as I was guilty of much the same. He

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didn't kiss me, or even touch me, when I pulled up in front of The Chop Shop. Levi climbed out, thanked me, and disappeared.

I understood completely. He wasn't out to his family and didn't want to raise any suspicions. I wondered how he'd keep the secret if our relationship turned serious. Maybe that concern would be enough to keep him from getting serious. I'd have to accept it if that was the case. I'd borne the weight of my family's rejection and I'd not be a part of causing such a rift for anyone else.

My office was in total chaos when I arrived. One small crisis after another kept my mind off Levi—mostly—until after six o'clock. Jeremy stuck his head through the door and said he was leaving. I'd been so absorbed in reading a proposal, I'd not realized the time. I waited until I heard his car pull away, then shut down my computer and called in an order for take-out.

I pulled in my driveway just before seven o'clock. I'd hoped to find a strange vehicle already there, but no such luck. Levi mentioned he often drove whatever car the shop was working on home in the evening to gauge how the engine performed and what tweaking he needed to do. The car lover in me was curious to pop some hoods and take a look at his work. I stowed dinner in the fridge to microwave later, then settled in front of the television to wait for him.

I gave up waiting for him at midnight and went to my cold bed, alone.

CHAPTER 9

One day and night of good companionship and great sex does not a foundation make. I knew this, and yet my heart ached for what could have been. The undeniable chemistry between Levi and me wasn't something that happened often. I'd had countless flings, one-night stands, and the occasional borderline relationship. I knew how rare what we shared was. I also knew I'd survive, but it would take a while for any sort of contentment to return to my life.

It was better for Levi to move on and find someone closer to his own age. He needed to have a few relationships and learn some things about himself before he considered settling down into an exclusive arrangement of the kind I wanted. If he

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ever settled down.

There was no reason why he should look for that type of commitment if he wasn't emotionally geared to handle it. Not everyone was. I certainly had not been at his age.

I did the best thing I knew to do for myself—I went to my office, arriving before noon, and buckled down over the most pressing contracts. Jeremy asked a few questions, and I brushed off Levi as a nice little interlude in my life.

Jeremy didn't buy it for a second. He knew me too well. And knowing me, he let it go. We had a tough negotiation on the table, one that would occupy my mind for the next several days, and I concentrated on that. The work helped, but Levi was never far from my thoughts.

Each evening as I left my office, I debated the wisdom of trolling the local bars for him. Sheer force of will kept me from going to The Chop Shop and obtaining an explanation from him. I didn't want to let him go, but he had to want to be with me, and if he didn't, I couldn't change it.

By Friday, the papers were signed and Jeremy invited our clients to dinner on us at the local steak house. I had enough time to drive by the large tract of land we'd just purchased, make it home, take a shower, and meet my party at the restaurant. An unfamiliar car was parked in my driveway. Heart in my throat, I pulled the Corvette in behind it.

The extremely rare 1977 Pontiac Can Am, sporting about a hundred pounds of rust, no rear bumper, and dealer tags, could only have been driven here by Levi. The rush of excitement racing through me gave way to a spike in my temper. He'd

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better have a compelling explanation if he wanted to continue seeing me, if that's why he was here. I wasn't into being jerked around, regardless of my feelings for him.

The gate beside the garage stood open. I closed it before unlocking the breezeway door and stepping through. Levi lounged on the patio, face to the sun, his eyes shielded by sunglasses.

"Levi."

He jerked upright at the sound of my voice, standing in a swift, controlled motion. He yanked the sunglasses off his face and blurted out an apology. "Stacy, I know you're pissed. I'm sorry."

"You seem to know a lot," I replied, keeping my voice neutral. I took a good look at him. His face appeared older, even haggard. His shoulders slumped tiredly. He didn't look like the same energetic young hoodlum I'd met a few days ago. "Rough week?"

He blinked, nervously licking his lips. "You could say that."

I motioned over my shoulder. "Come sit in the shade and tell me why I shouldn't be upset with you for standing me up like that, and why you think you can just waltz back in here."

Levi didn't move. "You can tell me to go, if you want."

I looked him up and down. He fidgeted under my stare. "I can, but I'd rather find out what's going on here, Levi. I think I'm entitled to that before I make any sort of decision."

He nodded. I turned to go inside the screen porch, out of the hot sun, knowing he'd follow. I sat on the glider and patted

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the spot next to me, and he dropped gracelessly onto the seat, stretching out his long legs. His foot fidgeted.

I wanted to reach for him, to put my arms around him, anything just to touch him, but that wouldn't help either of us. I could see he struggled with whatever it was he had to say.

"Levi, just tell me what's wrong."

His gaze locked with mine. "I told my folks."

The blood in my veins turned cold, an icy blast that lasted a split second and left unease in its wake. I almost hoped I'd misunderstood, but knew I'd not. He'd come out to his parents. Told them he was gay. I prayed silently they loved him enough to not throw him away.

But why tell them now? He had a lot to learn about himself, experiences to gain. I'd walked the path to self-discovery and knew there were myriad pitfalls along the way. Coming out to family for the first time was a huge hurdle to overcome. Levi couldn't yet know that the process never really ended. Every time he came out to someone for the first time, he'd feel the same uncertainties about being accepted.

I offered him my hand. He grabbed it and held on tightly, as if he expected me to run away.

"What did they say?"

Levi swallowed again. His voice was low, hoarse. "They...they didn't know what to say." He looked at me helplessly. "My uncle recognized you when you dropped me off at the shop."

Oh, Lord. My heart sank. The beginnings of despair stirred in my chest. "He knew me?"

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“Stacy, he remembered you from high school. He told my dad you’d been arrested and what for. They asked me what I was doing with you. I didn’t lie to them.”

“Well, I agree. You couldn’t lie to them.” I squeezed his hand. Thank all the powers above I’d told him about my past. If they wanted to blame me for our involvement, for Levi’s sake, I would bear it and not break.

Levi looked at me, the bleakness of winter in his eyes. “I should have, Stacy. I never expected...”

I put my arms around him, drawing him to me. He slumped against me. Fine tremors coursed through him under my hands as I stroked his damp back.

“Levi, did they say they never wanted to see you again?”

He shook his head. “No. They said they needed some time to absorb it.”

Relief for him swept through me. I didn’t want him to lose his family as I had mine.

“So give them time, however much they need. Did you tell them the truth about me?”

Levi pushed up to look at me, his blue gaze intent. I was glad to see a flash of the arrogant young stud return to his eyes. “Of course I told them. You think I’d let them think the worst about you?”

“I’m glad you did, but you’ve got to realize they’ll blame me for corrupting you.”

He snorted, melting against me again. “No, they won’t, and I thank my uncle for that, too. He sat there and told them he’d pegged me for gay by the time I turned twelve.”

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I rested my cheek on top his head. There was little I could say to him tonight. He was still too raw, still had too much to come to terms with to hear my suggestions. I hurt for him, for the week he must have endured—alone. I understood that, too.

A man had to make his own way, sleep in the bed he'd made. Not coming to me had been a test of self. I wondered if he thought he'd passed it. I burned to give him advice, but knew it unwise, at least for tonight.

He'd listen to me, in time, and I needed to be patient. One thing I had to ask and it wouldn't wait.

I dreaded his answer, but I had to know. If he needed time to settle things with his family, I'd bow out. "Where do you want to go from here, Levi? Where do you think this leaves us?"

"I don't know, Stacy. What I feel when I'm with you... I've never felt like this before..." He made a strangled sound, deep in his throat. I didn't push him. He had to get it said in his own time.

"I didn't want them to know, but I knew I couldn't keep being gay secret all my life. I never thought they'd find out quite like this. God, what a mess."

My cell phone rang. *Damn it.* It was Jeremy. I knew what he wanted.

"I've got to take this, Levi." I flipped open the phone and explained to my unhappy partner I had to miss dinner. Levi shook his head vigorously, mouthing at me to go take care of business. I closed the phone and turned it off.

"You're more important," I told my companion. "The ink

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is on the contract. This was only dinner. But we need to eat, too. Let me take you out somewhere quiet.”

He turned green in front of my eyes. “I can’t eat,” he replied, one hand covering his mid-section. I refused to be deterred. He needed food.

“Well, come along and keep me company then.” I guessed once he caught a whiff of the red sauce at Ruggerio’s he’d change his mind. “You can tell me all about that junker you parked in my driveway.”

Levi snorted. “I rebuilt that engine myself. It’s sweet.”

I didn’t doubt it for a moment. Nor did I doubt he didn’t have an answer to my question of where our relationship stood. I tipped his chin up and kissed him. Knowledge and desire, heady in its power, arced between us. I sensed his surprise, heard his sharp intake of breath and knew he felt it, too.

His mouth opened under mine. His tongue swept over mine, questing, seeking reassurance and a meeting place. I answered with everything I had, pulling him to me. The kiss lasted a glorious fleeting moment in which the answer to my question transformed my life and made the world new for both of us.

Levi ended our embrace, pulling his lips from mine with a reluctance that equaled my own. The taste of him lingered. I released him and stood, motioning for him to go inside. Without a word, I followed him to my bedroom.

We shed our clothes silently. Words could not express my longing for his touch, even if my voice worked, which I

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doubted. I stood naked before him, my body ready to make love to him. His gaze locked with mine as he closed the distance between us and dropped to his knees.

His hands snaked up the back of my thighs as his tongue licked down the length of my cock. Levi rolled to his feet.

“You asked me where we stood. I gotta know, Stacy. I need you to say the words because right now, I don’t know much.”

I squeezed his shoulders. “I want you in my life, Levi. What I feel for you is real. It’s more than physical, but that part is pretty strong. I want to make love to you tonight, and let everything else go until the morning. Can you do that?”

“I don’t know. I mean, yeah to the sex, but the morning is a long time off.”

Maybe I’d misjudged the depth of his turmoil. It was a hazard of having more experience. I’d learned that, no matter what, life went on. My sense of things said this was his first real trial by fire. He didn’t know his life would continue, much as it had, the shock and pain lessening with time.

“Lay down, Levi.” He did as I’d asked, stretching out his lanky frame on the mattress, the fingers of his right hand curving around his erection. “Roll over.”

He looked surprised. “Just like that? Roll over?”

I grabbed a bottle of massage oil out of the closet and held it up for him to see. “Now. On your belly.”

Levi flipped over and buried his face in a pillow. I poured a generous amount of the vanilla-scented liquid into the small of his back and started to work it over his skin.

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He moaned, loudly, as I dug my thumbs in along his spine. Up and down his backbone I worked until he started to relax. I applied another portion of the oil and worked it into his neck and shoulders. Levi stopped groaning. His breathing deepened. My hopes of making love—and my current state of arousal—faded with the sunset.

I didn't mind. I suspected he needed sleep as much as he needed food. I'd let him nap for a little while as I cleared my calendar for the weekend and grabbed a protein bar.

And when I woke him, I'd keep him awake until dawn.

CHAPTER 10

“I don’t get you, mother fucker. Why’d ya let me sleep like that?”

Oh, yeah. The smartass hoodlum puppy was alive, well, and standing in the middle of my study—naked. My cock twitched hopefully. I motioned carelessly at my computer.

“I wasn’t expecting you this evening. I had to tie-up a few loose ends.”

Levi’s eyes narrowed. “Bullshit. You’re trying to baby me. Well, don’t.”

“Let’s not go that far, puppy. Allowing you to get a little shut-eye is to my benefit in the long run, if you know what I mean.”

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His right eyebrow shot up. “So you’re not brushing me off?”

I blew out a deep breath and tried to remember his week had been more stressful than mine. I pointed back down the hallway. “Get your very fine ass back in bed and wait for me, Levi. I’ll bring us something to drink and we can get comfortable.”

He glared at me for several seconds, then crossed the floor to stand beside me. “I’m sorry, Stacy. I’m on edge.”

“No shit.” I shut down the power to the monitor and closed the file folder I worked from. I held out my hand, and he pulled me to my feet. I slipped my arms around him, reveling in the heat of his body. He hugged me tightly. I found his lips, kissing him, keeping my desire in check.

“Go on. I’ll be right there.”

For once, he didn’t argue. I watched him walk down the hall, smiling to myself as I stared at his firm butt. I was done worrying about Levi being so much younger than I am. It was time to enjoy him at my side, and to hell with what anyone might think. I grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and followed him to bed. He’d probably get a buzz from the alcohol on an empty stomach, but it might do him good.

“Take your hands off yourself,” I ordered him as I walked into the bedroom.

He shook his head and pumped his erection a few times. I handed him the brown bottle, which he accepted with murmured thanks. Dropping my sweat pants to the floor, I stretched out beside him. My heart stuttered at his nearness,

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then beat faster. My cock swelled.

I never thought I'd hold him again. This time I would keep him closer. I took a swallow of his beer and let the spicy cold brew flow down my throat. Levi lifted the bottle from my grasp and drank. He set the beer on the nightstand and rolled onto his side, facing me. I rolled to him, settling thigh-to-thigh.

"Levi, I never expected anyone like you to walk into my life. I lost a lot of years, years where I forgot how to live. Being with you makes me remember how to do that."

"I'm really sorry I didn't call you all week. I couldn't...hell, I couldn't even think straight. The whole way over here today, I kept thinking you'd kick me to the curb."

"I'm not about to do that. I do understand that you were upset, but you have to get it through your head you can trust me. Lean on me, if you have to."

He buried his face in my neck. "You're older. What do you need with some kid who doesn't know jack shit about anything taking up your time?"

I draped my leg over his hips. "I wonder what you need with a guy my age who's been around a few too many blocks. I'm cynical, sarcastic, and grouchy."

"You're perfect." Levi's fingers closed around my cock. "So's this."

"Well, you're not so bad yourself." I slipped my hand between us and found his firm erection. I wanted him, but some sense of him stopped me from pouncing on him. I braced myself and asked the question that burned in my brain.

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“Levi, do you see us as a couple?”

The nipping at my neck stopped. His head popped up. “Don’t you?”

I grinned at him. “Convince me.”

His gorgeous blue eyes narrowed, taking on a cool glint. My pulse spiked as he rose over me, pinning me to the bed with his body. Levi’s mouth came down on mine, hot and greedy. I opened to him, letting him plunder. A fine sheen of sweat dewed his back under my hands. I entwined my legs with his and rolled us. His thighs locked around my ribs, squeezing. I pinched his ass and his legs dropped back to the bed. I reached for supplies in the nightstand.

The need to stake my claim to him rode me hard. Tomorrow lay in mist, but the way tonight was clear. Levi was mine, for however long, it didn’t matter. If we came to a fork in the road, so be it, but we weren’t there now, and it wasn’t anywhere on the horizon.

My fingers fumbled at the foil packet. Levi picked it up, bit the corner, and ripped it open. I grabbed the lube and smeared a liberal amount over him. He hissed in surprise as the cold gel landed on his balls. I grinned at him.

I spread the lube over him, making sure to use enough. I thought him a bit tense again, but that would soon ease. I shifted to kiss him, teasing his lips with my tongue. He was in a hurry. His hand moved between us, pleasuring himself. I met his gaze.

“Do you want to roll over?”

He nodded, and we moved together as I coaxed him onto

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his side. I pulled him into the curve of my body, probing carefully for entry. His flesh yielded, fistng around me, as I pushed into him deeply. Levi moaned, a low sound of pleasure. I wrapped my hand around his cock, rolling the outer sheath of soft skin to and fro, even as I moved within him, my arousal climbing as I stroked in and out of him.

Levi said my name, a strained whisper on his lips. His hand fell away from his erection as I murmured in his ear, giving me total control over him. I didn't toy with him. His cock pulsed in my palm. I increased the tempo of my hand and he came, delighting me with the huskiness of his cries and the clenching of his muscles around my cock. He sucked in a deep breath and stilled. I reached for the orgasm that bubbled ready in my groin and let it take me down into dark bliss.

I floated back to awareness, my lips kissing his salty neck. Levi's hand patted my ass. I held him, breathing in the mixed tang of his sweat and semen, knowing I had but a few moments until I had to move. Reluctantly, I eased away from him. "I need a quick rinse. You coming?"

"Sure," he replied, inching toward the edge of the bed. I rolled to my feet and got the lights on.

Levi's stomach rumbled nosily as we stepped into the shower. We took a quick wash and headed to the kitchen. I dropped some leftovers onto a plate and stuck it in the microwave, then started coffee. He wolfed it down, leaned back on his chair, and rubbed his flat belly. I set a cup of coffee in front of him. He looked up at me.

"Now what?"

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“We go back to bed, fuck like minks, and sleep in tomorrow.”

He sipped his java. “I need a cigarette, but I’m not giving in now. I picked the perfect fucking week to quit, let me tell you.”

I was delighted to hear he’d not picked them up again, but I kept my mouth shut. “Give your folks some time, Levi. They didn’t turn their backs on you, so it’ll work out.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Me, too. What do you say we drive up north tomorrow to the winery? I need to restock.”

He leaned forward, elbows on the table. His blue gaze drilled mine. “On one condition.”

I knew what it was. What else would a fellow motorhead want? “Oh, let me guess. You wanna drive the ’Vette.”

Levi grinned and the sun came out for me.

The disappointments of my life faded. I’d weathered the storms and emerged victorious. I’d bent, but not broken. Every experience, good and bad, had brought me to tonight and to Levi.

Had I met him even a year ago, would I have been ready for a relationship with him? Probably not. I’d struggled to find myself in the face of what the world had branded me. It had not been easy, but it had given me strength.

I’d not ask him for any promises or guarantees. He couldn’t give them any more than I could. All I would ask of him was that he be honest with me every day. And I would be honest with him.

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The joy is in the journey, so they say. I planned on a long one—with Levi.

My future smiled at me over his coffee.

KC KENDRICKS

Multi-published in the arena of romance fiction, KC Kendrick is the pen name under which the author focuses on the interactions of men falling in love with men. Novels by KC Kendrick are adult in nature. Graphic without being vulgar, KC's stories are a celebration of love and hope for mature readers.

Writing more traditional romance under a different pseudonym, the author is an EPPIE Finalist and a CAPA nominee. With one contemporary best-selling title, and several other top-ten list titles, the author has established herself as a storyteller who delivers rich, satisfying romantic stories that feature strong themes of love, hope and redemption with positive, upbeat endings.

* * *

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